


IRANIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CORE CONCEPTS OF CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

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Abstract

Media has an important role in socializing Iranian women into sexism and patriarchy. The women have been indoctrinated to believe that gender inequality is natural and neutral, so they do not challenge the existing power structure. Given the power of media in shaping Iranian women's identity, it is imperative to be analyzed critically. The current study investigates how Iranian women's rights activists understand the core concepts of critical media literacy. Through a qualitative approach and conducting semi-structured interviews with 15 Iranian women's rights activists, this study reveals that the activists know the five core concepts, non-transparency, audience interpretation, politics of representation, media motivations, and social justice. However, they know little about other core concepts, languages and techniques, and how the media could subordinate women further through employing these techniques.

Keywords; Critical Media Literacy, Gender Ideology, Women's Rights Activist, Oppression

Introduction

"The message of media texts never simply mirrors or reflect 'reality', but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as reality" (Carter & Steiner, 2003, p. 21). Therefore, the ruling groups in society try to control representation and encode the world in formats that continue their own power, remain their privilege, and preserve the status quo in society (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1995). Thus, social and political inequalities and injustice are maintained and legitimized by creating and employing oppressive and negative representations.

With respect to gender, the media serves the dominant gender ideology, patriarchy, and makes it appear as "non-ideological," "objective," "neutral", and

“non-gendered”. “Sexist messages socialize people into thinking that dichotomized and hierarchical sex-role stereotypes are natural and normal” (Carter & Steiner, 2003, p. 2). By representing women as inferior and associate gender discrimination with human genes and nature, the media could perpetuate male domination and patriarchal values.

Iranian women have been struggling for equality for at least a century since they have been deprived of many of their basic rights and have suffered from sexism and patriarchy (Fazaeli, 2016; Rostami-Povey, 2013; Vogel, 2018). Although Iranian women movements over the last century have made notable achievements in educational, scientific, literary, artistic, economic, and socio-political participation, they still have not succeeded in gaining equal rights in many areas, particularly in matters of the family (inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody)"(Tohidi, 2016).

In addition to oppressive gender politics (*World Report* 2021), Iran’s state TV perpetuates gender stereotypes and patriarchal values by portraying women as submissive, obedient, dependent, and emotional — in contrast to men, who are active, pioneering, rational, prominent, assertive, and intelligent (Ahmadi, Agili, & Mehdizadeh, 2015; Chanzanagh & Haghpor, 2010; Navabakhsh & Ghomi, 2011; Rahmani, 2016). Depicting women as mothers and housewives, and men as fathers, employed outside the home, and being the breadwinners normalizes the dominant sexist ideology and gendered divisions of labor in Iran (Bashir & Parvaneh, 2018; Habibpoor Getabi, Talebi, & Ahangran, 2013; Khoei, 2016). Besides, by attributing specific tasks and behaviors to femininity and masculinity, TV series and advertisements construct and maintain gender identity within the dominant male-controlled system. Iran’s national TV further manipulates women to reject emancipation and feminism by portraying those resisting normative behavior as deprived of family, having no personal life, aggressive and unsuccessful (Murray, 2014; Rahmani, 2016).

The portrayal of women as inferior and subordinate, and men as dominant and superior, Iranian TV seeks to stabilize and continue male supremacy and the unfair gender relations inherent in the existing discriminatory laws and culture. In this way, TV serves to legitimize sexism and patriarchy and describe them as common sense and concrete reality that cannot be changed or challenged.

Given the power of media, particularly Iran’s national TV, in shaping Iranian women’s identity, reproducing, reinforcing, and legitimizing gender ideology, it is crucial to read media messages critically. Otherwise, oppressive representation leads to perpetuating gender oppression. Through learning critical media literacy, they can be empowered to reveal latent messages in the media and learn to resist the messages (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Share, 2009).

This paper examines how Iranian women’s rights activists understand the core concepts of critical media literacy. This paper is divided into four parts, in-

cluding review researches on media literacy in Iran, the study's theoretical framework, the method used, and Iranian women's rights activists' views on core concepts of critical media literacy.

Media Literacy among Iranian Women

Despite the important role of media in reinforcing dominant gender ideology, media literacy education has not yet been developed to empower Iranian women. There is also inadequate research in the area. The relationship between media literacy and the impact of commercials on female students was studied by Zendehtoodi and Zendehtoodi (2011). By questionnaires, the findings show that commercials less influence students (at Allame Tabatabaei University) with more media literacy. Besides, the students who consume media more, their media literacy level is lower. Similarly, the positive effect of media literacy is revealed by Bahmani and Bostani (2015), studying 410 women in Shiraz city. The research demonstrates that improving media literacy decrease consumption.

Fazelian Dehkordi and Mohammadi (2017) find out how there is an association between media literacy and reading newspapers, books, journals, listening to music, watching TV, and using the Internet among women in Kurd City. By questionnaires, the study demonstrates that the women consumed the media products more with increasing media literacy. Knowing the owner of the media also influences the consumption of the media.

The impact of media literacy on students' attitudes toward self-medication with slimming supplements was investigated by Solhi, Jormand, and Gohari (2016). The authors studied 98 students in female dormitories at the University of Medical Sciences in Iran through a questionnaire technique. They found that mean scores for attitudes about body image, self-esteem, and media literacy dimensions in both a test and a control group were moderate, with no significant differences between groups before a quasi-experimental media literacy education intervention. However, one and three months after the intervention, mean scores for body image attitudes, self-esteem, and media literacy were significantly improved in the control groups. The results reveal that the attitudes about slimming supplements could improve by media literacy education.

The influence of media literacy on female students' beauty surgery was examined by Khazir, Dehdari, Majdabad, and Tehrani (2016). By applying questionnaires, the authors studied how media literacy education could impact on the attitudes of female students about cosmetic operations at two female dormitories at Tehran University of Medical Sciences. The research indicates that the female students' opinions on cosmetic surgery were significantly affected by media literacy education, increased self-esteem, and reduced body dissatisfaction.

Given the high consumption of the Internet by Iranian women, the role of critical media literacy in Iranian women's virtual activities was studied by Montazerghaeim and Sahabn Kasegar (2015). Based on the completed questionnaire of 429 Iranian women identified as active in cyberspace, the research

demonstrates that women with higher critical media literacy used the Internet more to motivate others, influence people's views, share knowledge and skills and express themselves creatively.

Reviewing the researches reveals that the harmful effects of media usage, such as overconsumption, could be decreased by media literacy. In other words, in most of the studies, a protectionist approach was applied to media literacy to demonstrate how media literacy may lower the damaging impacts of media messages. The review also reveals the despite the vital role of media in shaping identities, there are insufficient studies about media literacy, particularly the critical approach of media education. Thus, the current study intends to explore the critical perspective on media literacy among Iranian women's rights activists by a qualitative method.

Theoretical Framework

Critical media literacy and feminist standpoint guide the researcher to formulate a question, choose a method and participants, collect and analyze data. Feminist standpoint theory represents a way for women, as an oppressed group, to become empowered (Harding, 2004). Based on the theory, women "need to understand the conceptual practices of power through which their oppression was designed, continued and made to seem natural and desirable to everyone" (Harding, 2004, p. 7). To struggle against women's subordination, they require to realize how the subordination works in diverse ways and how gender discrimination is made not only to seem natural but indeed desirable.

According to feminist standpoint theory, it is easier for oppressed groups and marginalized people to understand oppressive situations and positions than those who do not experience oppressive structures (Narayan, 2004). However, just experiencing the subordination does not result in critical consciousness automatically. "The moment of critical insight is one that comes only through political struggle for it is blocked and its understandings obscured by dominant, hegemonic ideologies and the practices that they make appear normal or even natural" (Harding, 2004, p. 9). Raising critical awareness and revealing the structures of oppression needs collective, intellectual, and political struggle (Van Heertum & Share, 2006).

Considering the important role media plays in sustaining gender inequality and making it seem natural, women need to acquire knowledge to comprehend that oppressive structure, thereby empower themselves to struggle against gender oppression collectively and individually. They require to discern how the marginalization of women is designed, sustained, and naturalized through media representation.

Since critical media literacy aims to liberating individuals by critical understanding of media (Engstrom & Beliveau, 2021) it could empower women to discern hegemony and power in media representations. Critical media literacy

exposes the structure of oppression and power in media materials and analyzes dominant ideologies. As Kellner and Share (2007b) point out:

Critical media literacy focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, and pleasure (p. 8).

Thus critical media literacy includes a critical analysis of ideologies in media texts and scrutinizing representation of gender, race, and ethnicity in media messages (Kellner & Share, 2009). Discerning ideologies inspires “readers to perceive that all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests, and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominant social groups” (Durham & Kellner, 2009, p. xiv). Thus, “notions of ideology and hegemony, as well as the politics of representation in media (which includes dimensions of sexism, racism, classism and homophobia, to name a few) are central concerns” in media literacy (Hammer, 2009). This is a vital step in reading media critically; otherwise, oppressive representations can maintain inequality and injustice.

In terms of gender, critical reading of media focuses on representing gender, sexism and critical questions that dispute specific depictions of gender (Iyer & Luke, 2011). It helps women question the social construction of gender and sexist ideology and rebut the claimed connection of gender with biology and genetics (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016).

Critical media literacy has six core concepts (Funk et al., 2016; Kellner & Share, 2007b, 2019). The first concept is non-transparency, which indicates that media products are not unbiased and transparent but are instead socially created and shaped. Thus, they represent reality by offering a biased selection of a socially created reality. Languages and techniques of media materials are the second concept and involve discriminating languages, genres, codes, and conventions used in media messages.

Audience interpretation is the third one, which implies that audiences are active in the meaning-making process and how groups understand media messages similarly or differently, depending on multiple contextual factors.

The next concept, politics of representation, examines the process of representation in media to reveal issues of bias, point of view, ideology, omission, power, privilege. The fifth concept, media motivation, indicates that “all media texts have a purpose (often commercial or political) that is shaped by the creators and/or systems within which they operate”(Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 8).

Social Justice is the last core concept of critical media literacy and points out that media messages are not created in a vacuum; they influence people within societies. It helps to question racism, classism, and sexism, and how some people and groups benefit more than others from media messages, as well as how some groups are further marginalized.

Feminist standpoint theory guides the study to select Iranian women's rights activists for interview. As a marginalized group, perceiving the structure of gender oppression in media representation is easier for them and also being engaged in the political struggle against gender oppression. Critical media literacy, which could empower Iranian women to develop critical insight and dissect gender ideology, is applied to analyze data and findings.

Method

The purpose of this study is to explore how Iranian women's rights activists understand the core concepts of critical media literacy. A qualitative approach and a semi-structured interview are used for achieving the purpose. The interview helps to explore people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions, all meaningful parts of social reality (Mason, 2002).

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants of the study. In the sampling, the researcher purposefully choose individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). As mentioned earlier, Iranian women's rights activists were selected to interview, as they are engaged in political struggles against gender inequality and discrimination in Iran. As a result, they have a critical view of women's subordination and marginalization. According to feminist standpoint theory, they also understand oppression more easily than dominant groups. Therefore, in this study, participants were Iranian women's rights activists with at least three years of experience in the struggle against gender discrimination in Iranian society. By a snowball sampling, 15 Iranian women's rights activists were selected for the study. In the sampling, key participants were requested to suggest other suitable subjects for the research (Creswell, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen women's rights activists to explore how they understand the core concepts of critical media literacy. Data analysis and discussion subsequently followed with using a critical media literacy framework, and with an emphasis on its core concepts. All names used here are pseudonymous.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses how Iranian women's rights activists understand the core concepts of critical media literacy. As the findings reveal, the Iranian women's rights activists perceive the principle of non-transparency, audience decoding, politics of representation, media motivation, and social justice. However, most of them do not know the techniques of media representation used to attract audiences and deliver messages. The activists did not discern how media and Iran's state TV productions could subordinate women further by employing particular techniques.

Principle of Non-Transparency

According to critical media literacy, one important concept is understanding the relationship between media and reality. The media does not present simple reflections of external reality; they present productions with specific purposes (Silverblatt, 2013). This concept helps in understanding that although media productions appear to be natural, they are, in fact, constructed and include a range of decisions. Accepting media representations as “real” is highly problematic, and it allows harmful stereotypes to become naturalized (Share, Jolls, & Thoman, 2007). Most women’s rights activists believed media do not show reality because media have their own interests; gaining money and reproducing the dominant ideology. In this regard, Melina, a 44-year-old activist, explained: “In the Islamic Republic [of Iran], media are controlled by the ruling system, and they should follow its interests... . They must then represent things that support its [dominant system] interests.” And Tarannom, 34 years old, expressed:

“Each medium promotes its sponsor’s interests. When you watch Gem TV [you can see] that the jewellery, [which is presented] in the *Harim Soltan* series, is on the market or advertised with the highest price, you can conclude that the series is not made based on historical documents ... but they want to sell the jewellery which the actresses wear.”

Melina mentioned that since Iran’s political system controls media, they must follow the system’s interest and show things that support its interests. Tarannom also believed that media make reality based on their interests, including gaining money and economic benefit. She argued that every medium has its sponsor, then it looks out for its (sponsor’s) financial benefit. For example, Gem TV (a satellite channel) showed a historical series in which the actresses wore certain jewelry. The jewelry was also sold in the market for a high price. It demonstrates that the series is not based on historical documents and real events but is designed to sell the products. In other words, they (the TV) did not represent reality (in history); they just made programming for financial advantage.

Ava, 33 years old, stated that another interest of the media is maintaining the dominant system’s power and ideology;

“[Iran’s dominant system] uses many tools to maintain its power, and media is one of the most potent tools One of its [Iran’s dominant system] aims is perpetuating the subordinated status of women They use media for their purpose, and as a result, do not portray reality and truth.”

According to her, the media try to sustain the dominant system’s power, so they do not show reality. Reinforcing the dominant patriarchal structure and perpetuate the subordination of women is the purpose the ruling group is looking for.

Similarly, Armita, 30 years old, noted that media does not show reality because reality does not exist. Everybody sees reality based on their ideologies and perspectives. “It is clear media does not show reality. Reality does not exist.

I show reality based on my camera and view ... If I am a feminist, I show it in one way ... and liberals show it in another way.”

Parnian, a 28-year-old activist, thought media not only does not show reality because of their ideology but also, they make and represent a version of reality based on the worldview they want their audience to adopt. “The message of media texts never simply mirrors or reflect 'reality', but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as reality”(Carter & Steiner, 2003, p. 2).

In summary, the findings demonstrate that media, particularly Iran’s national TV, are not transparent and do not show reality because they have their particular interests; gaining benefit and money, maintaining power, and reinforcing the dominant ideologies, such as sexism.

Drawing on critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007b, 2009), the findings indicate that Iranian women activists challenge media power to present transparent messages. They perceive that media has interests that could be economic or ideological; so, they do not represent reality. They comprehend media messages are created by people who make decisions about them, so all messages are influenced by bias, ideological positioning, and the interest of those who create the messages. In a similar way, media in Iran controlled by the ruling group are influenced by that system’s interests and ideology. As a result, they do not show reality.

Techniques of Representation

Another key concept of critical media literacy is representation techniques, including words, music, color, movement, camera angle, and other techniques that influence the meaning of media messages. Most of the women’s rights activists have little knowledge about techniques such as music, camera angles, and lighting in media representation. Even when the researcher explained the techniques further and gave them examples, they remained unclear. Some believed that techniques are professional, and it is not their job to know them. For example, Mitra, a social facilitator, stated: “I do not know [about the techniques] much, it is professional.” Only a few knew about colors and a little about music. Armita, a 30-year-old activist, said, “In [Iran’s] national TV advertisements, music, fast cutting, strange jump cuts, strong color ... happy music in series are used.”

As a result, most of the women’s rights activists do not know and understand how media such as Iran’s national TV could legitimize women’s subordination by using the techniques of gender representation. Mitra, 38 years old, said: “I do not know how much techniques can impact [on the subordination of women], I do not really know, because it is professional.” However, she recognized how the use of music relates to the oppression of women: “Soft music is used to represent the weakness of women ... Harsh music is deployed for bad, evil women.”

A few activists knew a little about how the techniques are used to oppress women further. They understood how particular clothing or dress contributes to meaning. For example, women who have chador and care about hijab are portrayed as good and acceptable, while the women who do not care about these things are presented negatively. Melina, 44 years old, noted:

For example, in series and movies [on Iran's national TV], at most times, good women wear a chador. It means a good woman wears a chador; while rarely seeing positive representations of women in a series wearing a manto [a long dress]. Characters in negative roles also do not wear chador most of the time.

Women are identified as "good" by wearing chador on screen, while "bad" women are those who do not care about it. In this way, Iran's national TV service constructs a value on the hijab and legitimizes the dominant system ideology and repressive laws concerning it.

Mahnoosh, a 38-year-old activist, explained that red and colorful dresses are used for divorced, bad women, and this is how TV contributes to the subordination of Iranian women. She continued by identifying how media impose special codes for women:

I have to wear colors which are not my choice Iranian women usually wear black because the media shows it. In our media, bright and attractive colours are not used for good peopleIf I wear a red color, I do not feel comfortable, and people look at me badly the media produces it . . . and men are allowed to annoy me [since I am considered a bad woman]. Then it [the representation] affects my choice . . . the verbal violence leads me not to wear red . . . because I do not want to be harassed.

Mahnoosh explained why most Iranian women wear black. On Iran's national TV, good women do not wear bright and colorful attire, as that is what bad people wear. As a result, if women wear colorful clothing, they do not feel comfortable, and people consider them bad. Besides, the representation allows men to annoy those who wear colorful dresses, as they are marked as not being good women. It affects Iranian women's choices, as they cannot wear any color they like without facing verbal and nonverbal violence and harassment.

Portraying bad women via costuming in the media has influenced public opinion and how women are recognized. In other words, society judges women based on the color of their dress, with those wearing bright or colorful dresses considered to be bad women. In contrast, those who wear dark colors are known as good and respectable women. This representation causes limitations for women and restricts the choices available to them.

The current findings demonstrate that most of the Iranian women's rights activists did not understand the techniques used by media to represent social and cultural values on the screen. Further, they do not discern how TV programs, along with other media, subordinate women more by employing different techniques.

A significant observation is the women's rights activists failed to perceive the technical and creative aspects of media products, including the choice of camera angles, and the effects of color schemes, and the visual and audio effects. The techniques could create specific impressions and ideological statements. For example, camera angles can make products appear larger, or women appear smaller and more diminutive (Luke, 2003). A high camera angle, looking down on actors, could make a woman appear less powerful and less significant, or even submissive. In contrast, a low camera angle causes them to appear more powerful or dominant. The findings demonstrate that the Iranian women's rights activists did not identify how media techniques and languages play an essential role in the women's marginalization and reinforcing dominant ideologies.

Audience Interpretation

The next concept is related to audience interpretation. As Kellner and Share (2009) point out, understanding this concept helps develop democracy. "The perception of different audiences means there are multiple interpretations, which enhances a pluralistic democracy when its citizenry embraces multiple perspectives as a natural consequence of varying experiences, histories, and culture" (Kellner & Share, 2005a, p. 376). Hearing multiple interpretations can build respect for different cultures and an appreciation for minority and divergent opinions (Share et al., 2007). In this regard, all the Iranian women's rights activists believed gender, ethnicity, religion, class, and experiences could lead to different interpretations of media messages.

Hora, a lawyer, Arina, an unemployed, Kiana, a director, Anahita, a news reporter, Diana, a public relations officer, and Parnian, a social facilitator, explained how gender could influence our interpretation of media messages. Parnian said:

For example, many women ask why most TV programs on Iran's national TV are about polygamy or concubines. A man may not think about it. It is not because he is a proponent of the issue, but it is not his issue and does not affect his interests. [While it impacts on women's lives], so women think about it a lot.

Parnian believed when Iran's national TV broadcasts shows and films involving polygamy, many Iranian women questioned it, while men did not. It is because polygamy is not a men's issue and interest. Women who suffer from gender oppression think about the representations of polygamy more than men who do not suffer from that oppressive law.

Their views are more in line with feminist standpoint theory in which recognizing oppressive situations and positions for subordinate groups are easier and more achievable for those who have experienced the oppressive structure (Narayan, 2004) because those people have experienced and suffer problems and issues which are produced by the structure.

Hora, a lawyer, and Arina, an unemployed, mentioned the impact of gender awareness in interpreting media messages. If women do not have gender

awareness, they interpret media messages in line with the dominant sexist ideology. This also confirms feminist standpoint theory. Being an oppressed group, itself may not affect the understanding of gender oppression; critical insight into the structure of gender oppression is required to comprehend the structure. In other words, although being a woman makes it easier to understand oppressive gender representation in media, it is not enough; a critical view is necessary to understand women's subordination in media texts.

Melina, a journalist, and Arina, a 54-year-old activist, believed that besides gender, ethnicity also significantly impacts on people's interpretation of media productions:

Ethnicity is also like that [gender]. For example, when Azari people are represented as stupid or a Mazandarani is portrayed as naïve, those ethnicities react to the representationsIf ethnicity would not impact [on interpretation] when they [Iran's national TV] mocked Lours, all Iranians should protest, but we saw only Lours protested. Then the ethnicity affects the interpretation.

Melina remarked ethnicity has influences the interpretation of media messages because when an ethnic group is represented negatively on Iran's national TV, only the ethnic protests against the negative representation, not others. It also indicates how experiencing oppression makes it easier to understand the oppressive structure.

Nevertheless, Mana, 31 years old, pointed out that the influences of gender, religion, and ethnicity on the interpretation of media messages depend on how a person has been brought up and matured. In the same way, Mahnoosh, an organization officer, believed the conditions of one's upbringing, such as environment and tradition, impact on the understanding of media texts. Mahnoosh argued that people's situations and environments are as important as gender, ethnicity, and religion in people's interpretations of media materials.

Aysan, a journalist, mentioned the role of different cultures in the interpretation of media products, in addition to the other factors. Amrita, a social facilitator, cited the importance of background, level of knowledge, and culture, besides class and gender sensitivity, in interpreting media materials.

People's experiences, such as marriages, are also remarked by Mahnoosh, a 30-year-old activist, as a factor impacting on the interpretation of media messages. For a woman who experiences domestic violence, the interpretation of watching violence in movies is different from a woman who has not experienced it. Portraying domestic violence may not be typical and not surprising to a woman who experiences violence in her marriage, while it is strange to someone who does not experience domestic violence.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the Iranian women's rights activists understand how gender, ethnicity, class, and religion can influence different interpretations of media texts. Some of the activists believed that those are not the only factors leading to varying understandings of media messages. Peo-

ple's upbringing, culture, knowledge, literacy, and life experiences can also influence the interpretations. Some thought these aspects are more important than gender, ethnicity, age, class, and religion.

As mentioned earlier, one significant concept in analyzing media is that "individuals and groups understand media messages similarly and/or differently, depending on multiple contextual factors" (Funk et al., 2016, p. 7). Considering this concept, the Iranian women's rights activists understand how gender, race, ethnicity and different cultures and backgrounds can impact on the interpretation of media texts. They discerned how differences bring various interpretations of media messages and how similarities generate common understandings.

Politics of Representation

Politics of representation is another core concept of critical media literacy, which involves examining ideology, bias, and point of view in media messages. The study mostly focuses on examining gender ideology as it is represented on Iranian national TV. All the women's rights activists believe that Iran's national TV represents a sexist ideology. It reinforces the dominant gender ideology through portrayals of gender roles and stereotypes, misrepresentation and omission of feminist women, the portrayal of religious patriarchy, and legitimizing gender discriminatory law. As Ava, a social facilitator, indicated, "it is ideology of women's subordination and weakness."

Armita, Mitra, Parnian, Mana, Aysen, and Tarannom mentioned the representation of a gender division of labor and stereotypes based on patriarchal values. Parnian, a social facilitator, noted how women are relegated to the domestic sphere and men are celebrated in the public sphere;

It [Iran' state TV] reproduces traditional gender roles and represents them as good and positive. It shows women are at home, do housework, and [shows] this is right. Men are outside, the breadwinner, and this is right. Moreover, if it changes, some problems will be created.

She mentioned how Iran's national TV promotes traditional gender roles and a gender division of labor. Based on this division, women do housework while men work outside and are breadwinners. As Parnian pointed out, the TV not only represents the division of labor based on gender, it also portrays the division as the right and the most suitable and effective way of life. If these patriarchal gender roles change, supposedly, it will create problems to families and society.

These findings support the studies of Bashir and Parvaneh (2018), Khoei (2016), [Ahmadi, Agili, and Mehdizadeh \(2015\)](#), [Habibpoor Getabi, Talebi, and Ahangran \(2013\)](#), Azin and Heidari Tabrizi (2015), Ravandrad and Mohammadi (2016), Mousavilar & Sh. Leylian (2015), Mehdizadeh and Azar Baragozaz (2016), Aslani and Kianpour (2016) and Kosari, Azizi and Azizi (2015). Each study shows that Iran's national TV reinforces gender division of labor and male domination.

Some of the women's rights activists, Arina, Armita, Tarranom and Shafiqeh, believed that gender ideology of Iran's national TV comes from Islamic ideology on gender which is patriarchy, and also comes from the Qur'an and the hadith in Islam. As Navabakhsh and Ghomi (2011) and Delap (2007) also demonstrate, in this ideology, good and acceptable women are represented as religious women.

According to Tarranom, 34 years old, wearing hijab and caring about it is a part of this Islamic ideology about gender, which is represented on the national TV. "One part [of gender ideology] is religious value ... and it promotes a special kind of hijab and clothing." On the one hand, the state TV represents good women as religious and veiled women; on the other hand, it depicts non-religious women negatively. In this regard, Shafiqeh, a social facilitator, remarked "[The gender ideology is portrayed] through representing good women with hijab and bad women without hijab..."

Armita, Arina, Taranom and Mana identified through misrepresentation of feminist women, the omission of women who reject male domination as other ways Iran's national TV tries to indoctrinate Iranian women with its sexist ideology. Armita, a social facilitator and researcher, explained the negative representation of feminist contrasts with the positive representation of traditional women. In this way, Iran's national TV promotes a sexist ideology:

A woman who is feminist or thinks about herself is bad. There are a bad one and a good one which tradition defines ... and in the tradition, women may be educated, and even this [education for women] may be sanctified Still, a good woman is one who could take care of her family and work outside simultaneously, and a woman who only works is not a successful woman.

Armita pointed out, similar to Navabakhsh and Ghomi (2011) and Chanzanagh and Haghpor (2010), Iran's national TV tries to portray feminist women as selfish and only think about themselves. Armita mentioned how Iran's state TVs defines traditional women as good and acceptable. Although in the traditional belief women may be educated, their primary role is taking care of children and family. Those who work outside the home are not represented as successful women. As Damean (2010, p. 93) observes, "media manipulates women into rejecting the 'emancipated' model by portraying intelligent or successful women as deprived of family or personal life."

Mana and Mahnoosh asserted that the gender ideology of Iran's national TV precisely aligns with gender discriminatory law passed by the ruling group in Iran. Mahnoosh, a 38-year-old activist, stated that the system employs national TV for perpetuating and legitimizing gender politics, which are oppressive and discriminatory. As an example, according to Mahnoosh, gender politics of the dominant system support polygamy, and men have the right to marry more than one woman. The discrimination is enshrined in the law and supported by Iran's national TV via representing polygamy as good and pleasant. In the same way, hijab is a law and women should have full hijab, so TV series portrays the hijab

as good and that everyone who does not care about it is not an acceptable person/woman.

Overall, according to the viewpoints of the Iranian women's rights activists, gender ideology of Iran's national TV is sexism. The ideology, as represented on the national TV, tries to portray gender division of labor and stereotypes in which women are best suited to a domestic role, while men are located in the public sphere. To reproduce and normalize its gender ideology, Iran's national TV misrepresents and omits women who are feminist and those who are successful in their career and their life, and resist patriarchal values. In contrast, women who are traditional and follow patriarchal conventions are depicted as good and acceptable. Besides, the gender ideology comes from Islamic ideology, in which women should wear the hijab and be religious; otherwise, they are not acceptable and decent women. They are good mothers, wives, and women as long as they are religious and covered. Non-religious women, however, cannot be kind and responsible mothers.

Regarding the findings, Iran's state TV, which is controlled by the dominant system works as an ideological state apparatus to legitimize and internalize gender discriminatory politics and male domination. Iranian women are imbued with patriarchal beliefs through gender ideology represented on the national TV. They are indoctrinated to believe that gender discrimination and inequality is natural, and it originates in their sex. As such, they may have internalized subordination and marginalization to the extent that they cannot change it.

When people, particularly Iranian women, are being socialized into patriarchy, not only they would avoid challenging discriminatory law, but would also cease demanding equality and rights. The dominant system uses oppressive representations of women not only to make gender discrimination (in law and society) acceptable but also to depict this repression as being in the best interest of women and make them happy and redemptive. By normalizing the dominant sexist beliefs and patriarchal values as common-sense assumptions, they are presented as reality and cannot be challenged.

Media Motivation

Another core concept of critical media literacy is media motivation, in which "all media texts have a purpose (often commercial or governmental) that is shaped by the creators and/or systems within which they operate" (Funk et al., 2016, p. 7). According to the Iranian women's rights activists, Iran's national TV has three aims when showing TV dramas and commercials. The most important aim is to maintain the dominant ideology; another is entertaining people; the last one is an economic goal, to gain more money and benefit.

According to the views expressed by the Iranian women's rights activists, the most significant aim and goal of commercials and series on Iran's national TV is perpetuating and reinforcing the dominant ideology. Hora, a lawyer, Melina, a journalist, Anahita, a news reporter, and Armita, a researcher and social

facilitator, pointed to promoting and reinforcing the ideology of the dominant political system through TV series and commercials. In this regard, Melina, a journalist, said, "Overall, TV programs function to perpetuate the dominant ideology and maintain the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

An important ideology of Iran's political system is sexism, it was mentioned by Shafiqeh, Diana, Mahnoosh, Kiana, Mana, Tarannom, and Mitra. Shafiqeh, a social facilitator, indicated that: "They [the TV programs] send the message that women should stay at home, and their main goal is to be mothers...". Iran's national TV tries to perpetuate or legitimize its sexist ideology by consistently representing gender division of labor and stereotypes in which women are expected to stay at home, and their primary mission is to be a mother. In other words, the media carry on the dominant gender ideology through Iran's national TV series and commercials.

Some of the women's rights activists, Arina, Melina, Hora, and Aysan, pointed out that the national TV series and advertisements want to entertain audiences alongside disseminating dominant ideology. Aysan, a journalist, said: "In the series, people should be entertained and also be reminded of the dominant values." Aysan believed that TV series entertain people and transfer the dominant ideology to viewers at the same time. In other words, by entertaining people, Iran's national TV tries to disseminate and reinforce the dominant culture and ideology. Significantly, the more engaging and entertaining the production, the more people are exposed to the dominant ideology, which is the aim of the ruling group.

In addition to reinforcing dominant ideology and entertaining, the national TV also has an economic aim, earning money and benefit for its operation. Kiana, a 40-year-old activist, said the second goal of Iran's national TV series and advertisements is making money (the first aim is promoting patriarchy). Similarly, Parnian, a social facilitator, mentioned that the aim is both financial income and transferring its ideology: "One part is financial income, and another part is that the programs are tools to disseminate the state's ideology." Social facilitator, Ava and Aysan, a journalist, also indicated the financial aim of Iran's national TV commercials and dramas.

In sum, the Iranian women's rights activists remarked that the aims of series and commercials are reproducing dominant ideology, gaining financial benefit, and entertaining. As the interview subjects are women's rights activists, based on their views, the most important ideology for TV series and commercials is sexism. Besides, Iran's national TV also has financial goals in showing dramas and advertisements. Entertaining people is also part of the purpose of programs while the TV transfers the dominant ideologies.

Regarding critical media literacy theory, all media texts have a purpose of gaining profit or/and power shaped by the creators and/or systems within which they operate (Share, Funk, & Kellner, 2016; Share et al., 2007). Through the critical analysis of media texts, people will see beyond basic purposes of informing,

persuading, and entertaining. The current findings also demonstrate that the Iranian women's rights activists understand that media, particularly Iran's national TV, has aims beyond just informing, persuading, and entertaining. Through its programs, the state TV, controlled by Iran's ruling group, tries to legitimize and perpetuate its ideologies, such as sexism, ethnicism, and its religious beliefs, values, and culture. Furthermore, it seeks to gain profit from TV programs. Even when the state TV wants to entertain Iranians, it reinforces the dominant group's ideology and culture.

Social Justice

“Media culture is a terrain of struggle that perpetuates or challenges positive and/or negative ideas about people, groups, and issues — it is never neutral” (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 8). Since media do not operate in isolation from the world around them, some people and groups benefit more than others from media messages because information and communication have impacts and influence in different contexts. In this regard, another core concept of critical analysis of media is social justice (Beach, Share, & Webb, 2017; Funk et al., 2016; Share & Mamikonyan, 2020), which considers how some groups are marginalized and subordinated by media representation, while others benefit.

Considering the concept, the Iranian women's rights activists believed that Iran's national TV programs could oppress women further by reinforcing gender stereotypes and roles. Mitra, a social facilitator, explained:

Some women in Iran do not have financial independence, and TV series reinforces this by representing women should not work outside, or if they do, they will be deceived It means that society is not safe, then women should not work ...

Mitra explained how Iranian national TV perpetuates women's financial dependency by telling them that outside the home is unsafe. It is better to stay at home for their safety and take care of the family. The gender role sends the message to Iranian women that they have no chance of successfully changing their prescribed role as housewives and mothers.

Shafiqeh, 32 years old, and Diana, 38 years old, also pointed out that through teaching gender roles, the TV programs subordinate women further. Similarly, Melina, Mana, Tarannom, Anahita, Ava, Armita, and Kiana mentioned that portraying gender roles and stereotypes institutionalize discriminatory views on gender and marginalize Iranian women. By sanctifying some roles, like mothering, Iran's national TV institutionalizes gender discrimination and patriarchy in Iran's society. It creates obstacles for those who do not conform to dominant gender roles.

Mahnoosh, 38 years old, expressed that if women do not follow the gender roles represented and reproduced by Iran's national TV, they are blamed and teased by people and are not considered good and acceptable women. Women are not only indoctrinated to perform femininity consistent with what they see

on TV; they are also forced to be like typical versions of their gender because of social pressure. Then they oppress themselves by ignoring their own needs and following the dominant gender roles and stereotypes.

In addition to the above ways Iran's national TV marginalizes Iranian women, Mahnoosh and Aysen argued that omission, negative portrayal, and misrepresentation of women are at odds with the dominant sexist ideology also subordinate Iranian women further. Mahnoosh, an organization officer, stated:

Women who want their rights are portrayed as aggressive [in the TV]. They [are represented as women who] ignore their family ... Those representations are negative and dark. In general, the word "feminist" has never been used positively ... Then, that representation becomes society's opinion about feminists and women's rights defenders...

Chanzanagh and Haghpor (2010) and Navabakhsh and Ghomi (2011) also demonstrate how Iran's national TV represents women who struggle for their rights as aggressive and do not care about their families. Then those negative representations form Iranians' opinions about feminism and rejecting feminism. In other words, Iran's national TV manipulates women to reject those who are emancipated by portraying feminists as being deprived of family and personal life and as aggressive and unsuccessful. When feminist thought is not acceptable for society, then the dominant representations of femininity and masculinity will be the only way of being a man and woman in the community.

Arina, 54 years old, Hora, a lawyer, stated that by representing women only in traditional gender roles, the TV intends women to think media representation are natural and right, as a result; women not to be an agent for transforming inequality and injustice.

Overall, Iran's national TV marginalize Iranian women by representing gender role and stereotypes. By portraying an image of what makes a good woman, TV programming teaches women how to be acceptable and brings social pressure, which forces them to behave based on that pattern. Otherwise, they are considered strange and are "othered." Furthermore, omission, and negative representations of feminists and women who do not accept the dominant gender role and stereotypes, the TV manipulates women to reject emancipation and marginalize them.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, media play an important role in shaping Iranian women's identity and perpetuating dominant sexist ideology. Despite this fact, there is little concern and research on critical analysis of media texts and messages among Iranian women. The current research expands the literature by studying how Iranian women's rights activists perceive the core concepts of critical media literacy. The study's findings reveal that the Iranian women's rights activists understand the core concepts of critical media literacy except for one, the techniques of representation.

Iranian women's rights activists believed that media, particularly Iran's national TV, do not show reality because of its own interests in gaining money, maintaining power, and promoting the dominant gender ideology and patriarchy. They understand that media messages are not neutral or transparent, nor do they present objective reality, but only a selection of reality. Often, they actively construct reality. Besides, the women's rights activists did not have enough knowledge of media languages and techniques using in media products. As a result, they did not discern how Iran's state TV could subordinate women further by employing different techniques and languages.

According to the viewpoints of the Iranian women's rights activists, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and people's awareness, upbringing situation, culture, knowledge, literacy, and life experiences can affect the interpretation of media messages.

Regarding the concepts of representation politics, the women's rights activists think the gender ideology of Iran's national TV is sexism. The TV transfers the dominant sexist ideology by representing gender stereotypes and roles and negative and misrepresentations of feminists and women who do not follow patriarchal values. Some believe that the gender ideology is religious patriarchy, and it follows Islamic values such as the hijab.

With respect to media motivation, the aims of Iran's national TV series and commercials are to perpetuate the dominant ideologies, such as sexism, gaining benefit, and providing entertainment. Regarding the last concept, social justice, they discerned the harmful effects that media could have on marginalizing women through oppressive representations of gender. Via legitimizing and normalizing the current gender relation and structures in media texts, the media further subordinate Iranian women.

While the findings indicate that Iranian women's rights activists know about the five core concepts of critical media literacy, it cannot conclude that the activists practically incorporate the concepts into their critical analyzes of media messages. There is a gap in if and how the core concepts are deployed when they analyze media materials. Thus, future research could investigate how these core concepts are used when they analyze media materials.

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