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Kobra M. Kachalmi
University Putra Malaysia

Lee Yok Fee
University Putra Malaysia

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The Understanding of Women's Movement Activists on the Necessity of Critical Analysis of Television Content in Iran

By Kobra Mohammadpour Kachalmi¹ and Lee Yok Fee²

Abstract

Iranian TV tries to legitimize and reinforce sexism and male domination with oppressive gender representation. The current study investigates how critical analysis of media is necessary for Iranian women from the viewpoints of Iranian feminist activists. Using a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews with 15 Iranian feminist activists, this paper contends that critical reading of media messages is essential for Iranian women. The findings reveal that critical reading of media messages could empower Iranian women to understand how Iranian TV reinforces and naturalizes gender stereotypes and roles. In addition, the Iranian feminist activists believe that because media has a purpose, critical analysis of media texts helps to discern these goals. Besides, some of the Iranian feminist activists consider critical analysis of media messages as a kind of voice for Iranian women.

Keywords: Media, Representation, Critical analysis, Sexist ideology, Semi-structured interview, Oppression

Introduction

Media is an integral part of our lives and acts as an important agent of socialization in this contemporary world. Media influences individual behaviors and personality. It provides resources to form identities and helps establish what it means to be male or female in a society (Kellner, 2011). Thus, oppressive and negative representations of gender are created and employed to maintain and legitimize gender inequalities and injustice through media. By portraying women as subordinate and making connections between gender inequalities and human genes, science, and nature, media outlets have reproduced and perpetuated male domination and patriarchy.

In Iran, women are indoctrinated into sexist ideology and male supremacy through gender representation on national and satellite TV channels. The ideology is a set of belief which discriminate based on sex. Sexist ideology also includes a set of attitudes or behavior that that promote stereotyping of social roles based on gender. The ideology serves to privilege men and subordinate women.

In most of Iran's national TV series, the important roles of women are portrayed as being at home to take care of children and do housework, even though they are highly educated (Ahmadi, Agili, & Mehdizadeh, 2015; Khoei, 2016; Mosavi & Kamalidini, 2009). Furthermore, domestic roles are depicted as women's nature and essence (Ahmadi et al., 2015).

¹ Kobra Mohammadpour Kachalmi is a Ph.D. candidate in Department of Civilization and Government Studies, University Putra Malaysia. Her major research interest is critical media literacy.

² Associate Professor Lee Yok Fee is affiliated to Department of Government and Civilization Studies, University Putra Malaysia. His major research interest is in studies related to ethnicity and identity studies.

Moreover, studies on the Iranian national TV series showed how the programs reinforce gender stereotypes. Women are represented as submissive, reliant on their husbands, and respectful of them. They are described as weak, poor in making decisions, and unintelligent (Chanzanagh & Haghpor, 2010; Navabakhsh & Ghomi, 2011). In contrast, men are portrayed as independent, influential, and intelligent (Rezaei & Afshar, 2010).

Besides representing gender based on patriarchal values and beliefs, women are portrayed as negative when they fight against their traditional roles. They are depicted as isolated so that they will not be able to have proper relationships with others (Chanzanagh & Haghpor, 2010; Navabakhsh & Ghomi, 2011). Additionally, intellectual women exhibit immoral behavior and verbal and physical abuse more than traditionally religious women and housewives (Mosavi & Kamalidini, 2009). Furthermore, women who are portrayed as positive and desirable are those who care about wearing the hijab and are religious (Chanzanagh & Haghpor, 2010; Navabakhsh & Ghomi, 2011).

In addition, when women have professional jobs such as law, they are represented as unsuitable for such work because they do not have enough wisdom and are not able to function properly, while men who lawyers are successful, showing that the job is suitable for them (Ahmadi et al., 2015).

Studies of some Turkish series that are shown on a satellite TV channel, Gem TV, indicated that women are portrayed in the traditional context with dominant patriarchal values. While the men are tasked to be breadwinners, the mission of women is limited to doing the housework and being a good wife/mother (Melek Sancar, 2017; Rahmani, 2016; Sari, 2016). In addition, being modern women is defined as dressing well with the money earned by their husbands, and they are content with looking neat and clean. These women are portrayed as those who prefer a successful marriage instead of a good profession (Melek Sancar, 2017). When women are not portrayed in traditional role, "devoted mother" and "loyal, good wife," they are represented as passive, easily-obtained, sexual-desire objects (Orta, 2013).

Even in some American series on satellite TV, such as those on Farsi One channel, when showing a modern family they still show a traditional family with gendered division of labor in which the mother figures reproduce the belief that women are naturally more nurturing, emotional, submissive, feminine, and family-oriented, by contrast, the father figures maintain the belief that men are naturally more masculine, authoritative, emotionally controlled, and self-oriented (Staricek, 2011).

Although some women have a professional role and job in contrast to the notions of patriarchy, it still represents male hegemony through use of sexuality to gain power (Murray, 2014). Besides, they focus on the lack of a partner, children, and happiness to portray successful, intelligent women as lonely and unhappy. In addition, by using their sexuality to gain control over men, it actually just reinforces patriarchal values in which women are considered sexual objects (Murray, 2014).

Considering the strong impact of media, and particularly Iranian TV (national and satellite), in forming Iranian gender identities and reinforcing sexist ideology, there is a need for Iranians and Iranian women in particular, to read the media messages intelligently and critically. In this regard, critical media literacy is a crucial response, especially for oppressed groups such as women, to discern these effects, to critically analyze oppressive structures and create their own oppositional representation and identities.

This paper intends to examine the need for critical analysis of media for Iranian women based on the viewpoint of Iranian feminist activists. To achieve the above objective, this paper is

divided into several parts. First, the literature about media literacy in Iran is examined. Critical media literacy and feminist standpoint theories as a theoretical framework are discussed in the second part. Third, the method for the study is described. Then, Iranian feminist activists' views on the necessity of critical analysis of media are explained and discussed.

Literature Review of Studies on Media literacy in Iran

While U.S. National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) offers a basic definition of media literacy ;“the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication, Kellner and Share (2007a, 2009) categorize media education into four major approaches. The first perspective refers to a protections approach, which comes from a fear of media and it has an inherent anti-media bias. It aims to protect people against the dangers of media manipulation and addiction.

The second approach refers to a media arts education approach that only considers making media productions and art without a critical view, and it may help reproduce hegemonic representations. The third approach is the media literacy movement, which downplays ideological critique and issues of power (Livingstone, 2013). The fourth approach is critical media literacy as proposed by Kellner and Share (2007a), which includes aspects of the three previous models but focuses on the critical dimension.

Despite the ubiquity of media in contemporary Iranian society and its prominent role in socializing and educating Iranian women, media education has not yet been developed or considered either in schools or outside the classroom. In addition, most studies used a quantitative approach such as questionnaires to understand the influence of media literacy on women's purchasing behavior, as well as attitudes about slimming supplements, cosmetic surgery, and virtual activities. As such, this section examines the existing studies conducted on media literacy among Iranian women.

Zendehboodi and Zendehboodi (2011) examined the relationship between media literacy and the impact of commercials on female students at Allame Tabatabaei University. This study investigated the extent to which media literacy influences students' purchasing behavior and their subsequent assessments of the trustworthiness of brands. Using questionnaires, the authors showed that students with more media literacy are less influenced by commercials. By studying the behavior of 410 women in Shiraz city, Bahmani and Bostani (2015) replicated the positive effect of media literacy by demonstrating that consumerism decreases with increasing media literacy.

Fazelian Dehkordi and Mohammadi (2017) examined the relationship between media literacy and consumption of products such as books, newspapers, journals, music, TV, and the Internet among women in Kurd City. Using the same questionnaire technique, the study showed that women's consumption of these media products increases with increasing media literacy. Additionally, the consumption of those products is higher among women who know the owner of the media.

Similarly, Solhi, Jormand, and Gohari (2016) studied the effect of media literacy on students' attitudes toward self-medication with slimming supplements among female residents at the University of Medical Sciences in Iran. The authors presented 98 females with a media literacy questionnaire. They showed that mean scores for attitudes about body image, self-esteem, and dimensions of media literacy in both a test and a control group were moderate, with no significant differences between groups prior to a quasi-experimental media literacy education intervention. One and three months after the intervention, however, the mean scores for attitudes about body

image, self-esteem, and dimensions of media literacy were significantly enhanced in the control groups. These results demonstrate that media literacy education can be effective in improving attitudes about slimming supplements.

Using the same method, Khazir, Dehdari, Majdabad, and Tehrani (2016) also found positive effects of media education on cosmetic enhancement in females. These authors examined the role of media literacy education on female students' attitudes about cosmetic surgery from two women's dormitories at Tehran University of Medical Sciences. This study provided evidence that media literacy education can significantly impact female students' opinions about elective cosmetic surgery, as well as increase self-esteem and decrease body dissatisfaction.

Acknowledging the high rates of Internet consumption by Iranian women, Montazerghaeim and Sahabn Kasegar (2015) investigated how the virtual activities of Iranian women are affected by their critical media literacy. They investigated this link using a questionnaire presented to 429 Iranian women who were identified to be active in cyberspace. They found that women with higher critical media literacy used the Internet more for motivating others, influencing people's thoughts, sharing knowledge and skills, and expressing themselves creatively.

All quantitative research conducted to date indicates that media education can reduce the risks of media usage and consumerism. As observed, most studies have used a protectionist approach to media literacy by considering how media literacy may reduce the negative effects of media consumption.

While Iranian women are indoctrinated into sexist ideology and patriarchy through Iran's TV shows, the study of critical media literacy, which focuses on ideology critique among Iranian women remains relatively unexplored. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the necessity of critical analysis of media for Iranian women from the viewpoint of Iranian feminist activists.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs a feminist standpoint and critical media literacy theories that shape the researchers in forming questions, choosing a methodology, and collecting and analyzing data. Feminist standpoint theory represents a way for women as an oppressed group to become empowered (Harding, 2004). According to 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). In other words, women gaining power and struggling against gender discrimination need to understand how gender oppression works in different ways and dimensions, and how subordination is made not only to seem natural, but desirable.

Besides, in feminist standpoint theory, critically understanding and recognizing oppressive situations and positions for the oppressed group such as women is easier and more achievable than for those who don't experience the oppressive position and structure. This is because the people have experienced the problems and issues that are produced by the oppressive structure (Narayan, 2004).

While experiencing oppression makes for easier critical consciousness, understanding the oppressive structure does not happen as a result of only being in a situation. "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). In fact, developing critical insight requires collective intellectual and political struggle to uncover the structures of oppression (Share, 2009).

As the media play a prominent role in perpetuating gender oppression and making it seem natural and desirable to women, women must gain knowledge to understand the oppressive structure that makes sexism appear normal and empower themselves to struggle against gender oppression collectively and individually. In other words, they need to perceive how gender discrimination and subordination of women are designed, continued, and formed through media representation and how they naturalize gender oppression. Therefore, the starting point that feminist standpoint theory proposes is to reveal hegemony and domination in media representations (Share, 2009).

Then next theory which is employed for the study is critical media literacy. Critical media literacy explores the structure of oppression and domination in media messages and criticizes dominant ideology. For Kellner and Share (2007b): “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.”

Therefore, the critical media literacy approach incorporates criticizing ideologies embedded in media texts and analyzing representation of gender, race, and ethnicity in media messages (Kellner & Share, 2009). Studying ideology encourages “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, in engaging critical analysis of media texts “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” (Hammer, 2009). This is a crucial step in critically analyzing media, since otherwise oppressive representations perpetuate discrimination and injustice.

In the case of gender, critical media literacy focus on gender representation and sexist ideology, and brings critical questions to specific portrayals of gender (Iyer & Luke, 2011). It helps women question the social construction of gender and sexism and refute the claimed connection of gender with biology and genetics (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2015).

The aforementioned theories are deployed for the research since “theory helps and guides the research and is a spotlight. Theory illuminates what researcher sees and explains how things work and why. It gives researchers a framework for making sense of what she or he see” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 49). In other words, they act as guide or a structure to lead research in process, collecting, analyzing, interpreting data, and even in writing up findings (Gilgun, 2013).

Feminist standpoint theory guided selection of Iranian feminist activists as participants for this study. Since they are women and oppressed group, it is easier for them to perceive the oppressive structure of gender in media representation. Besides, as the theory notes, critical understanding of the oppressive structure does not occur merely because they are women in a particular situation. In fact, developing critical insight requires collective, intellectual, and political struggle to reveal the structures of oppression (Share, 2009). Hence, Iranian feminist activists who have experienced political struggle and gender oppression are selected for the study to investigate the importance of critical insights and to reveal the structure of oppression in media representation.

As mentioned earlier, Iranian women are socialized into sexist ideology by the oppressive representation of gender through media such as Iran’s TV. As a result, critical media literacy, which mostly focuses on ideology critique such as sexism, would empower Iranian women to

dissect gender ideology and is used for the current research. The theory helps the study in analyzing data.

Method

Because of the dearth of research on critical analysis of media in Iran, particularly among Iranian women, we have used a qualitative approach to examine this topic. Study informants were selected via a method of purposeful sampling in which “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Based on feminist standpoint theory, Iranian feminist activists were selected as informants, as they are actively involved in political struggles against gender oppression and inequality in Iran.

Because of their involvement, they have critical insights about women’s subordination and marginalization. They have at least three years of experience in struggling against gender discrimination in Iran’s society. Since most Iranian feminist groups are located and active in Tehran, feminist activists in Tehran were selected for the interview. In this way, fifteen Iranian feminist activists were selected through a snowball sampling in which key informants were asked to propose other suitable informants for the study (Creswell, 2012).

We followed a semi-structured interview to explore people’s knowledge, views, understanding, interpretations, experiences, and interactions—all meaningful properties of social reality (Mason, 2002). Interviews were used to collect data and to explore how Iranian feminist activists think about the need for critical analysis of media by Iranian women. The knowledge obtained from the interviews provided a deeper understanding of how Iranian feminist activists considered the necessity of critical reading of media texts because they are involved in struggling against gender oppression and subordination in Iran. They were sent requests for interview through email and mostly social media, Telegram. The interviews were done in 2016 in any places the feminist activists preferred, such offices, at home, and coffee shops. It should also be mentioned that all names used are pseudonyms.

Finding and Discussion

Most of the Iranian women’s movement activists who participated in the study believed the critical analysis of media messages, is necessary for all members of society, particularly for Iranian women. First, they believed critical analysis of media messages is necessary for Iranian women as it can make them aware of the reproduction of sexism through media. Second, since media have an aim and purpose, critical analysis helps them realize those aims; and finally, critical analysis of media products could give them voice. Since TV series have big audiences among the Iranian women, most of the activists focus on the TV series.

Awareness of Reproduction of Sexism by Media

Most activists believed that critical analysis of media productions is necessary for citizens and particularly for Iranian women. The most important reason for this is that media, particularly TV, reproduce dominant, sexist ideology. Through representations of gender stereotypes and restrictive roles, the media effectively reinforces patriarchy and sexism. Therefore, critical analysis of media messages brings about awareness to the media’s role in reinforcing and legitimizing dominant gender ideology.

Arina, who is unemployed, noted that media such as Iran's national TV should be analyzed critically, "Because media [in Iran] convey the state ideology, then it promotes [dominant] gender ideology and reproduces gender stereotypes in all movies and programs." She pointed to media in Iran, particularly the national TV service, which is governmental and thus tries to promote state ideology. In this way, Iran's political system reinforces patriarchy through the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in movies and TV programs. Similarly, Aysan, a 39-year-old activist, stated that:

TV [Iran' national TV] represents passive women and housewives. They represent their [gender] stereotypes and pattern of ideal women through TV series. If they portray a woman as a boss, she does not have a successful private life, and these influence people's mind gradually... Then all those gender stereotypes and subordination of women are reproduced.

Aysan remarked that it is necessary to analyze media messages critically because media such as TV series in Iran's national TV represent gender stereotypes, which can further subordinate women. Through portraying gender stereotypes where women stay at home as housewives, they reproduce sexism that considers women are best in the private sphere (Ahmadi et al., 2015; Khoei, 2016). Furthermore, as Chanzanagh and Haghpor (2010) and Murray (2014) also affirmed, by representing women who are bosses as unsuccessful in their private lives, media reinforce the gender stereotype that being a boss is not appropriate for women. In other words, "where women are shown as successful outside the domestic sphere they are frequently portrayed as people leaving with misery in their lives" (Chandler, 1998). Aysen believed this oppressive representation influences people's minds and behavior and then subordination of women is reproduced. Melina, a journalist, also stated:

This [critical analysis of media] is necessary because it [media] has many effects. For example, in a TV [Iran's national TV] series ... there was a woman who was a writer and intellectual. She was represented as bad and hated women, while other characters who are a housewife, mother and obedient wife are represented as a good women and model. This was so influential.

Besides representations of gender stereotypes and roles, Iran's national TV reinforces dominant gender ideology through misrepresentation of women who disrupt patriarchal values and dominant gender ideology. In contrast, as Navabakhsh and Ghomi (2011) and Chanzanagh and Haghpor (2010) also demonstrated, women who follow dominant gender ideology are depicted as positive and good. Melina mentioned an example of the way Iran's national TV represents women writers negatively, and as bad and hated women. By contrast, women who are housewives, mothers and compliant are represented positively. Through such portrayals, audiences come to understand that if a woman wants to be a good woman, desirable and acceptable, she should adhere to domestic and traditional roles.

And Diana, a public relations officer, said:

It [critical analysis of media] is necessary because stereotypes are not reproduced in a vacuum ... Gender is being reproduced on TV ... in TV series and every media ... We always see the good woman is a housewife and wears a chador and obeys her husband. Even when she has a job she is a teacher. They are rarely an engineer or physician ... In media, men are active while women are passive. For example, in comedy series women are stupid, emotional, they need consultation and can be deceived easily.

Diana also mentioned that media reproduce gender stereotypes by representing women as passive, unintelligent, and emotional, while men are active (Ahmadi et al., 2015; Rahmani, 2016). Navabakhsh and Ghomi (2011) also noted that good women are portrayed as religious, and as women who care about the hijab. In addition to reproducing sexism through stereotypes, they also perpetuate sexism with women having lower jobs (they are mostly teachers) (Ahmadi et al., 2015). They are rarely presented in highly professional jobs such as engineers or physicians.

Similarly, Mahnoosh, Mitra, who are both 38 years old, Armita, 30 years old, and Mana, 31 years old, all remarked that critical analysis is necessary because it can help people, particularly women, become aware of negative representations of women and the reproduction of gender stereotypes through media products. Without critical analysis of media message, the oppressive effect of media products goes unaddressed.

Overall, some of the Iranian women's movement activists believed that critical analysis of media messages is necessary for Iranian women because media in Iran, such as Iran's national TV, reinforce the sexist ideology of the dominant group through representations of gender stereotypes and roles, and misrepresentation of women who do not comply with the dominant gender ideology, or patriarchy. In fact, the critical analysis brings awareness for Iranian women to discern the oppressive role of Iran's national TV in perpetuating and legitimizing the sexist ideology of the dominant political system and its oppressive gender politics.

As Iyer and Luke (2011) observed, mass media have long been considered a powerful agent of gender socialization for young people, primarily through representations of stereotypes. Therefore, it is necessary to critically analyze these representations. The above findings also demonstrate how women's movement activists perceive the importance of critical analysis of media texts, since they have a role in socializing Iranian women into traditional gender roles and stereotypes that originated in patriarchy. By perceiving how media produce gender inequality and sexism through oppressive representations of gender, Iranian women's movement activists see critical media analysis as a way for understanding the oppressive impact of reproducing sexism. These findings supports Kellner and Share (2007a) view that critical media literacy empowers the oppressed to understand the negative role of media in (re)producing injustice and inequality.

Realizing the Aim of Media Messages

Some of the activists thought that critical analysis of media messages is necessary because media has certain aims, and the critical analysis of media need to help women recognize the aims. Shafigheh, a 32-year-old activist, said: "Mainstream media is a tool in the hand of someone who has many aims and it should be analyzed ... Yes, it is necessary to understand what they are giving you."

As Shafigheh mentioned, media are controlled and can serve as a tool in the hands of their owners. Therefore, they have aims in producing media messages and that is why they should be

critically analyzed. In fact, it is necessary for people to understand the aims of the media messages and why they are produced by the owners. Similarly, Parnian, a 28-year-old activist, believed that because media has messages and aims by their senders, then they should be analyzed critically.

Aysan, a 38-year-old activist, stated: “People should pay attention and be sensitive about what messages they [media] transfer. For example, in the time when polygamy was the dominant discourse, many movies supported polygamy.” As media have aims, people should be sensitive and discern the messages and goals they try to transfer to audiences. For example, when Iran’s political system wanted to promote its sexist ideology on polygamy, many productions were made to legitimize polygamy through TV series and movies. In other words, critical analysis helps Iranian women to understand the aim of the movies and TV series, which is to legitimize the dominant ideology of the time.

Thus, according to the Iranian women’s movement activists, critical analysis of media messages is necessary because media products have aims, such a reproducing a sexist ideology. This is why people, particularly women and other subordinate groups, need to realize the aims of the media. Critical reading of media can help women as a subordinate group to understand how and why those messages are produced (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007a, 2009). Since “media are organized to gain profit or power” (Share, 2009, p. 23), questions about the media’s motivation help discern and make visible the economic and ideological aims of media production. It helps Iranian women see that media representations are not natural and that media texts are not just for fun, because they have an aim and serve a purpose.

Critical Analysis of Media Messages as Coming to Voice

Two of the women’s movement activists believed that critical analysis of media messages is important because it gives Iranian women a voice that is counter-hegemonic. For example, Ava, 33 years old, explained:

It is necessary because you will have a voice against it [dominant media].

Maybe women or women’s movement activists do not have power like them [ruling group] to promote their ideas. When they do not have that [power], they should do critical analysis. They should analyse the [media] content and express it in the public sphere as much as they can.

Here Ava argued that because Iranian women (and subsequently Iranian women’s movement activists) do not have a voice in mainstream media to promote their ideas—which go against the dominant ideology—critical analysis of media messages gives them a voice that is counter-hegemonic. Thus, they should analyze media material critically so citizens (people in the public sphere) hear about it and are exposed to alternative views. In other words, when Iranian women analyze media critically, they have their own voice, which is counter-hegemonic.

Tarannom, 34 years old, also indicated how critical analysis of media messages forces the media to consider marginalized voices and transform hegemonic representations:

When media notice that many women in the society criticize them, and express their own demands, the media gradually reforms itself. It [media] will conclude that it cannot only represent its own idea and sometimes it must consider others especially those who are in the minority and have less power... [For example] there is a new program [on Iran's national TV] which deals with the sexual harassment of children. This is so strange to us that this [sexual harassment of children] is presented publicly. This [showing the issue] is the outcome of taking a critical view of media.

Thus, another reason for the critical analysis of media productions is to give voice to marginalized people. When Iranian women criticize media (Iran's national TV) representations and express their own demands and voice, the media has to gradually notice their subordinated demands and voices and represent them. As a result, marginalized people will have their voice and representation. Tarannom brought up an example of how Iran's national TV service showed programs about child harassment—a topic previously ignored on TV. She believed this is the result of critical analysis of Iran's national TV, which forces the media to transform dominant representation.

Therefore, critical analysis of media messages is necessary because it could be a counter-hegemonic voice, particularly for oppressed groups such as Iranian women. Criticism from marginalized voices also could force the media, such as Iran's national TV, to acknowledge those voices and represent their interest and issues.

Some critical theorists such Kellner (2003) pointed out that media have two dimensions: oppressive and emancipatory. Dominant groups use media for reproducing their ideology and legitimizing discrimination and subordination. Oppressed groups could use it for liberation. The critical analysis of media is important when using media as a tool for liberation. Through critical readings of media, women, as an oppressed group, are able to produce alternative representations to transform gender oppression.

In this regard, two of the Iranian women's movement activists mentioned critical analysis of media as having voice. One of them mentioned critical analysis of media as a way of expressing a counter-hegemonic voice. Neither pointed to creating media productions as alternative representation. One mentioned critical analysis as having voice, which is just criticizing hegemonic representations, and the other activist saw the critical analysis of media messages as necessary, as it could force the dominant group into considering, and not ignoring, marginalized voices. In other words, based on critical media literacy and critically reading media texts, subordinated groups such as women learn to create their own representations, while the women's movement activists did not mention creating media message, and just indicated criticism of media products.

The findings demonstrate that despite the Iranian feminist movement employing media, particularly social media, for struggling against gender inequality and challenging women's subordination (Lerner, 2010; Michaelsen, 2011; Shojaee, 2016; Zangeneh, 2015), none of them mentioned the importance of critical analysis of media messages as way of empowering Iranian women through creating and deploying media for anti-hegemonic representation of women. Only two of them saw critical reading of media texts as necessary to force the dominant system to pay more attention to marginalized voices.

Other Reasons

Anaihta, a news reporter, indicated that critical analysis of media is vital because it brings intellectual growth. Besides, through critical analysis people are not as affected by media and do not easily accept everything they see in media.

Another activist, Parnian, a 28-year-old activist, believed critical analysis is good for people, but it is only necessary for activists. Another participant Hora, a lawyer, believed that critical analysis of media messages is necessary only for those who are professionals in media. It is not necessary for every woman because it is professional. Hora said that “those ones can do analysis of media are those who work on them [media] practically and theoretically.” That is, she believed critical analysis is necessary for media professionals.

Conclusion

Most of the women’s movement activists believed that critical analysis of media production is necessary for people, and particularly for Iranian women. It is essential because by influencing people’s mind and behavior media outlets have the ability to reinforce sexism. They reproduce sexism by representing stereotyped gender roles. Media messages should also be analyzed because they have aims and goals, and it is important for an audience to understand these. It is also necessary since it gives voice to the marginalized, particularly women, by forcing the mainstream media to reform negative representations and consider marginalized voices.

One important observation in the findings is that most of the women’s movement activists, with the exception of two, failed to consider the transformative dimensions of critical media literacy. In the present study, only two of the women’s movement activists mentioned the necessity of critical analysis of media messages with respect of creating an anti-hegemonic voice while the Iranian feminist movement regularly employs media, especially social media, in the fight against gender inequality and female subordination (Lerner, 2010; Michaelsen, 2011; Shojaee, 2016; Zangeneh, 2015).

Gender representation in Iranian state and satellite TVs and viewpoints of the Iranian women’s movement activists indicate that Iranian TV tries to subordinate and marginalize Iranian women. In this regard, lack of critical analysis could perpetuate and legitimize gender oppression because Iranian women are imbued with sexist ideology through oppressive representation of gender via TV. In fact, lack of critical analysis of media texts distract Iranian women from challenging sexism and refuting the connection of gender with biology and genetics. Iranian women as an oppressed and marginalized group need to be able to analyze oppressive structures and power relations in media representation both in Iran’s state and satellite TVs and how those reinforce sexist ideology in different ways. This kind of critical thinking would liberate Iranian women to think out of gender ideology that is reinforced through both TV channels and look for new narrative.

Regarding the necessity of critical analysis of media messages for the Iranian women, they need to be empowered through learning critical media literacy. By teaching them critical media literacy, Iranian women would gain abilities to read media messages critically. Critical media literacy would help them to contest gender ideology in media and liberate them to think outside gender ideology of the dominant system.

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