

The representation of women in the digital landscape of Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini juxtaposed with the propaganda of Islamic republic of Iran

Outline:

This project aims to examine the portrayal of women on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, focusing on how women present themselves in contrast to their representation in state-controlled media, including national television, government news agencies, and official social media accounts affiliated with the Islamic Republic.

Following the death of Mahsa Amini, there was a significant increase in online content showcasing women's voices and their fight for personal freedom and rights. Iranian women utilized digital platforms to express aspects of their femininity previously suppressed by Tehran's regime, while also highlighting their calls for equality and opposition to the restrictive regulations imposed by the government for decades. These expressions became a powerful symbol of resistance among the people.

In contrast, state-controlled media adopted a different approach after Mahsa Amini's death and the ensuing protests. They began promoting an image of women that aligned with the regime's ideological framework, depicting them in traditional roles, such as mothers, and emphasizing Islamic values like modesty and the hijab. While the Islamic Republic's propaganda has consistently pushed its ideology on women, the focus on traditional Islamic womanhood became much more pronounced after the 2022 protests.

This study will analyze social media posts alongside state-run news outlets and broadcast channels to highlight the stark contrast between these two representations. The digital space serves as a platform for women advocating for justice, change, and the breaking of stereotypes, while the government's propaganda seeks to control the narrative, suppress dissent, and maintain its vision of women's roles in society. This dialectical contrast illustrates the tension between grassroots activism and the traditional, ideological views on women enforced by the government.

Introduction:

The death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 marked a critical turning point in Iran's history, igniting widespread protests and elevating women as central figures in the struggle for justice and equality (Winchester, 2022). The digital landscape became a key arena where women

expressed their resistance, using social media platforms to share their stories, amplify their voices, and challenge systemic oppression (Lamensch, 2022). At the same time, the Islamic Republic of Iran intensified its propaganda efforts, leveraging state-controlled media to promote traditional and subservient portrayals of women aligned with its ideological framework (Akbarzadeh, Naeni, Bashirov, & Yilmaz, 2024).

This study seeks to answer the following question: How has the representation of women in the digital landscape of Iran, following the death of Mahsa Amini, contrasted with the propaganda efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran? It also examines what these opposing representations reveal about the broader socio-political dynamics in Iran. Through a qualitative analysis, this research identifies themes such as symbolic resistance, digital strategies, and the cultural and generational divides that shape activism. The findings are analyzed within the context of broader transformations in Iranian society, offering insights into the role of digital media in reshaping identity, resistance, and power dynamics. This paper outlines the context of these events, presents the results of the analysis, and discusses their implications for understanding the evolving landscape of women's activism in Iran.

Goal and target:

Creating equality of rights for Iranian women with women in other parts of the world means establishing conditions where Iranian women can equally benefit from opportunities, resources, individual and social freedoms, and legal protections. This equality encompasses fair access to education and employment, active participation in social and political spheres, and benefiting from supportive laws in various aspects of personal and collective life, ensuring that no discrimination or gender-based restrictions hinder their progress or the realization of their potential. And also is to show that what the Iranian government portrays is not the reality, and we want to highlight that Iranian women are completely different and are fighting for their freedom.

Our target audience is the global community. Our aim is to amplify the voices of Iranian women and highlight their struggles and challenges within the country to women and individuals worldwide, to the best of our ability. This is particularly directed towards superpower governments that shape global policies, as well as feminist groups and international organizations advocating for women's rights, such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to raise awareness about the true situation of women in Iran.

Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze interview data from eight participants, aged 22 to 32, all of whom were from Iran. The interviews were conducted online between December 2024 and January 2025, and to maintain the security of the participants, their names were not

disclosed. The focus of this study is The Representation of Women in the Digital Landscape of Iran after the Death of Mahsa Amini, Juxtaposed with the Propaganda of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In these interviews, questions were posed in various categories, including Content of State-Controlled Media, Impact and Reception, Behavioral and Psychological Questions, Content of Social Media, and Comparative Analysis. The data were analyzed using a three-stage coding process. First, open coding was used to identify key themes and concepts, such as the use of hashtags (#MahsaAmini, #WomenLifeFreedom), symbolic acts like removing the hijab, and the use of social networks to amplify voices. These themes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, including online and symbolic resistance, multilingual messaging, media strategies, and socio-cultural dynamics. Finally, selective coding integrated these categories into a coherent narrative about the representation of women in Iran's digital landscape and its juxtaposition with the propaganda of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In addition to the interviews, data were collected from social media (Instagram, Twitter) and state-run media (IRIB, Tasnim News). Posts and hashtags like #MahsaAmini and #WomenLifeFreedom, which women used to amplify their resistance and express their identity, were analyzed. State media, on the other hand, portray women within traditional frameworks as individuals in need of protection from external threats, diminishing their role in protests.

The analysis showed that Iranian women strategically use bilingual messaging to connect with both local and global audiences, and contradictory narratives appear in social media and state media. Furthermore, women's resilience in the face of digital repression was highlighted, especially through the use of tools like VPNs and satellite internet. The study also pointed out cultural differences in resistance strategies, influenced by urban-rural and generational divides.

This methodological approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the strategies, challenges, and impacts of the representation of women in Iran's digital landscape in contrast to the propaganda of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Challenges and limits:

A significant challenge encountered in this project was the difficulty of establishing direct communication with individuals inside Iran. The limited access to Iranian journalists significantly constrained efforts to amplify the voices of those experiencing internal challenges. Furthermore, the inability to utilize domestic applications such as Soroush and Eitaa, which are closely monitored by the government, compounded the difficulties of engaging with the local audience.

Another notable limitation was the scarcity of resources and references, both in English and Persian, regarding the propaganda mechanisms of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This lack of documentation added complexity to the research and analysis process. Additionally, critical social media platforms such as

Instagram and WhatsApp were blocked from November 2022 until mid-January 2025. This prolonged restriction further exacerbated challenges in locating and establishing contact with individuals inside Iran, particularly those identified as potential interviewees.

Legal restrictions, the criminalization of civil activities, and the pervasive fear of repercussions further hindered communication with residents of Iran. Social pressures and concerns about potential legal consequences led many individuals to avoid collaboration, especially with human rights and social justice advocates. These factors not only complicated efforts to disseminate information and raise awareness but also widened the disconnect between the concerns of domestic and international audiences, posing substantial challenges to the realization of human rights and social objectives.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study examines the contrasting representations of women in Iran's digital landscape and state-controlled media following the death of Mahsa Amini. Iranian women have used social media as a tool to express their voices, challenge patriarchal norms, and defend their individual rights and freedoms. They have displayed their identity and resistance to the regime's restrictive laws by removing their mandatory hijabs and sharing pictures of themselves. In contrast, state-controlled media have presented a traditional image of women, aligned with the ideological values of the Islamic Republic, often limiting women's roles to motherhood and the adherence to hijab.

The qualitative analysis of social media content and state media reveals a stark contrast between these two narratives: the grassroots narrative that emphasizes justice, freedom, and women's rights, and the government's propaganda that seeks to impose its ideological views. The findings suggest that the digital space has become a tool for women to amplify their voices to the world and continue their struggle for equality and freedom. Meanwhile, state media continue to reinforce their narrative of women that aligns with their ideological goals.

The answer to the research question indicates that the representation of women in Iran's digital landscape is in complete contrast to state media propaganda. This contrast highlights the tension between the public's demands for justice and equal rights and the government's efforts to control narratives and maintain its ideological views. This issue is of great significance as it demonstrates how the digital space can become an effective tool for resistance and change in repressive societies. It also contributes to a better understanding of the socio-political transformations in Iran and the struggles of women for their rights. This study explores these dimensions and showcases women's resistance against censorship and state repression. Future research could further analyze the impacts of digital resistance on broader social and political changes and examine the evolution of online activism and state censorship in Iran.

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