Woman in Development and Politics

Images of Women and Hegemonic Media Discourse in the 1980s Iran

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article **Article history:** Received: 26 January 2025 Received in revised form: 2 May 2025 Accepted: 25 June 2025 Published online: 23 July 2025	**Introduction** Newspapers were instrumental in the transmission of sociopolitical messages and the shaping and representation of ideological values, as they were key instruments of discourse. The representation of women in newspapers not only reflects social and cultural transformations but also functions as a reflection of the structures of power, cultural norms, and prevailing discourses. From this perspective, the primary focus of the current investigation was the portrayal of women in newspapers during the 1980s. It also aimed to investigate the messages that these representations conveyed regarding the sociopolitical status and functions of women. Therefore, this study, drawing on Foucault's discourse theory and the social semiotic framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen, examines the representation of women in the 1980s Iranian newspapers, focusing on their social, political, and familial roles, in order to uncover the discursive messages embedded within these images. Many studies have investigated the media's portrayal of women, utilizing both social semiotics and Foucault's discourse theory as analytical frameworks. Their results suggest that the media can significantly contribute to the perpetuation of gender norms, as images are utilized as instruments of social control. This investigation concentrates on the newspapers of the 1980s, with a particular emphasis on the impact of revolutionary and Islamic ideologies on the portrayal of women. It also introduces a novel method for visual representation analysis.

Methodology

It also introduces a novel method for visual representation analysis. This qualitative research was founded on the social semiotic framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen, which entailed the examination of the images through three distinct dimensions: representational, interactive, and compositional. The research sample included 431 images of women that were published on the front pages of the most extensively circulated Persian-language newspapers in Iran during the 1980s. A comprehensive analysis was conducted on 15 images that were intentionally chosen from this collection. The inclusion criteria were determined by the presence of women in the images, their conformance with dominant discourses, and the representation of their social, familial, and political roles within the sociopolitical context of the 1980s. Images that were deemed extraneous, such as those that were depicted in a full-face view without additional contexts or those that featured non-Iranian women, were excluded from the analysis. The investigation concentrated on the portrayal of individuals and their roles at the representational level. The analysis examined the relationship between the audience and the images at the interactive level, taking into account various factors such as distance, gaze, and viewpoint. The research examined the visual arrangement of the images and the discursive messages they conveyed at the compositional level. The discourse analysis was conducted using Foucault's discourse theory, which enabled a more profound comprehension of the discursive and ideological dynamics that were at play. Feedback was solicited from scholars with expertise in sociology, women's studies, and linguistics to improve the research's validity.

Results

The portrayal of women in Iranian periodicals during the 1980s served as a mechanism for the reproduction of dominant discourses, reinforcing revolutionary and Islamic values and portraying women as fervent advocates of the revolution and its core ideals. Additionally, they emphasized the supportive role of women during the Iran-Iraq War. In addition to these representations, there were depictions of women's participation in scientific and managerial disciplines, which indicate a

degree of acceptance of new roles for women within the revolutionary society, albeit within the framework of Islamic values. Although the images depicted women as active participants in a variety of domains, they restricted their roles to predefined social and cultural expectations within the Revolutionary-Islamic framework, thereby reinforcing and stabilizing these discourses. The sense of mass mobilization and active participation of the population was emphasized by the social distance depicted in the collective images, particularly those depicting protests. Long-shot images were primarily used to depict collective events and convey a sense of observation in terms of spatial distance. Conversely, close-up images cultivated a sense of empathy and intimacy. In the documentary images, the indirect gaze was employed to accentuate the activity and event, rather than to establish a direct connection with the audience. Nevertheless, specific images where the subjects gazed directly at the audience facilitated a sense of empathy for the women depicted, encouraged engagement, and aligned the viewer with the discourse message. A stronger sense of interaction was facilitated by images in which the subject's gaze was directly engaged with the audience. These images were primarily used to illustrate specific themes, including the supportive role of women during the Iran–Iraq war and the Islamic Revolution.

The visual compositions and their ideological messages were deliberately designed to communicate specific ideological messages. Typically, dynamic and intricate compositions were used to accompany images of women in social and occupational roles, while representations of women in familial and traditional roles were presented with more simplistic compositions. The portrayal of women who adhered to the Islamic dress code, as well as their familial and revolutionary activities, emphasized the reinforcement of religious values and Islamic and revolutionary discourses. The ideological messages that supported Islamic and revolutionary discourses were emphasized by the strategic use of visual elements such as open social spaces, dividing lines, the Islamic hijab, and specific illumination in the composition of the images. The representation of women in Iran during the 1980s was influenced by three primary discourses: the revolutionary discourse, which emphasized the revolutionary identity of women through their involvement in the Iran–Iraq war and support for the revolution; the religious discourse, which emphasized the familial and maternal roles of women within the framework of Islamic teachings; and the traditional discourse, which emphasized family-oriented values, traditional roles, and the social constraints placed on women.

Conclusion

The sociocultural regulation and ideological dominance of prevailing discourses concerning women's roles and identities are reflected in the depiction of women on the front pages of newspapers during the 1980s. The newspapers of that era actively constructed women's roles and identities within the ideological framework of revolutionary and religious values, despite the meticulous regulation of visual content and the deliberate exclusion of imagery inconsistent with prevailing discourses. Women were conceived as the emblematic figures of resistance, embodying familial and Islamic values. These depictions were restricted to the ideological frameworks of conventional, religious, and revolutionary paradigms. Visual semiotics, such as the representation of familial roles, simplistic compositional elements, and adherence to Islamic dress codes, served as a means of articulating the Revolutionary-Islamic identity of women. Women were primarily depicted in traditional or revolutionary characters at the representational level. The images endeavored to cultivate a sense of empathy and establish an emotive connection with the audience at the interactive level. Nevertheless, visual semiotic elements and structures were strategically employed at the compositional level to articulate and transmit discursive messages. Moreover, the visual composition of the images was designed to restrict the roles of women within specific social and cultural contexts.

The results of this study are consistent with those of previous research, indicating that the media can be instrumental in the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses and the reproduction of gender norms. This study introduced a novel methodological approach to the examination of women's representations in Iranian media by incorporating Foucault's discourse theory and the social semiotic framework. The in-depth analysis of power dynamics and the representation of women within the context of prevailing discourses was facilitated by the application of Foucault's discourse theory and the social semiotic approach of Kress and Van Leeuwen. Future research should employ a comparative approach to further investigate the impact of diverse discourses on the roles and identities of women, thereby identifying both analogous and divergent models, in order to achieve a more nuanced comprehension of the representation of women in the media.