Pornography of Networked Feminism: The Case of Iranian "Feminist" Instagramers

Ehsan Shahghasemi

University of Tehran

Abstract

From the beginning, feminism was bent to shatter stereotypes and create a new vision of womanhood in the mainly male-dominated society. One important endeavor of feminism has been to oppose the objectification of the female body. In the male-dominated culture, femininity is mostly associated with young -and sexy- body of the female object. Surprisingly, in the past decade or so, we have witnessed a new wave of feminism which contradictorily tries to appeal to the old notion of the objectified young sexy female body in order to fight the very phenomena of oppression and objectification of the female body. In this study, I will have a review of four Iranian feminist pages on Instagram to show that femininity in these pages is mainly limited to young, beautiful, and sexy women. It seems older women (20% of female population) and even young women in bad living conditions who consist a majority of women in the society are systematically omitted from these pages just because this networked feminism perceives them not appealing to male audiences.

Keywords: Pornography of Feminism; Feminism; Male Gaze; Critical Sociology; Iran; Instagram

Introduction:

Over the past decade, Iranians have shown a great deal of interest in different social networking sites and platforms. After Telegram was blocked by Iranian authorities in 2017, more than 40 million telegram users looked for an alternative, and many of them migrated to Instagram. Instagram was launched in October 2010 as an image-sharing service and has gained popularity ever since. In December 2014, Instagram had over 300 million users worldwide and, in September 2015, 400 million people in the world had a presence on Instagram and shared photos and videos (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). As of summer 2020, Instagram has a user base of more than 1 billion. As Instagram is currently not filtered in Iran, the number of Instagram users has always been on the rise in Iran. Now there are more than 24 million Iranian Instagram users -roughly 30% of Iran's population. Maybe the Iranian authorities thought that the depoliticizing and consumerist nature of Instagram content will lead Iranian users to non-political spheres.

It is true indeed, but only in the short run. As soon as the users adopt the logic of consumerism, they would come back with financial requests, which the country cannot satisfy as it is economically fragile and under the heaviest sanctions (see, for example, Shahghasemi (2017) and Shahghasemi and Prosser (2019)). This would lead to other social discontents that might harass the government and this is why I think their idea was not a good one. Moreover, Telegram is mainly a text-based platform while Instagram is image-based. This means a Telegram user should first translate written words into a "meaningful" code before consuming it, while an Instagram user directly consumes the image contents Instagram provides. Therefore, Instagram content frees the brain from the burden of continuous work and this is exactly why we like Instagram wandering more than book reading.

As a result, in the past two years, we have witnessed a lowering of public taste which is manifest in the phenomenal rise of celebrities of all kinds in Iran. In our toady's economy of attention, more eyeballs mean more money and power. Therefore, the end of getting more attention justifies the mean of resorting to any possible strategy. As a result, banality spreads to ironically every sphere that traditionally challenged banality: critical discourse, political commentary, communication scholarship, and feminism, among others. My argument in this paper is that the most followed Iranian feminist pages paradoxically resort to "male gaze" in order to attract

more attention. That's why I call it "pornography." But, first, let us see what is pornography and how feminism sees that.

Pornography

In all societies, people are required to maintain seemliness. Talking obscene is perceived to be offensive, particularly in the presence of special others. Pornography, on the other hand, is something that is mainly consumed in the absence of others and through some medium. The word pornography has been derived from the ancient Greek *porne* and *graphos* meaning 'writing about whores' (Adams, 2004: 151). In ancient Greece, the porne were the lowest class of prostitute but in the present day in western capitalist society, pornography has become a multi-billion dollar international industry facilitated by developments in new media technologies (Kuper & Kuper, 2010: 648). Pornography can be in the form of videos, pictures, chat rooms, and games that incorporate sexually explicit material (Short et al., 2015).

Traditionally, and in the lexicographic meaning of the term, pornography has been about fantasizing about sex (Gorer, 1965: 50). those whose power of fantasy is weak, or whose demand is insatiable, constitute a market for the printed fantasies of the pornographer (Gorer, 1965: 50). Pornography, therefore, is not only visual depiction of copulation or sex. Whether or not a media product is pornography, depends on what that media creates in one's mind. Gail Dines defines pornography as "any product produced for the primary purpose of facilitating male arousal and masturbation" (Dines, 2003: 306). Pornography, therefore, can have many different formats. It can be a female subject talking about sex and the audiences have the illusion that she is very near and accessible.

Feminism and Pornography

The feminist movement can claim political roots that go back many years. By the twentieth century, the political impact of the feminist movement has been widespread, for instance, in the United Kingdom in relation to suffragettes' endeavor to secure women's vote in elections (Graham, 2004: 72). The feminist movement, however, has different and sometimes opposing perspectives on different issues, including pornography.

Propornography activists say pornography provides means for freedom of sexual speech for the oppressed women. Ellis et al. (1990) hold that closing the avenues of sexual speech, at a time when women are only beginning to listen in on and participate in hitherto largely male-dominated debates seems to be to endanger the climate of cultural demystification that has made these good beginnings possible.

Antipornography activists point out that not all speech is protected (like yelling "fire" in a crowded theater) and maintain that pornography is not speech but acts. Moreover, they respond that the approach to viewing pornography as the speech was in place before pornography as we know it now existed—pornography that uses photographs, cameras, and other technology that records acts, not "ideas" (Adams, 2004: 152).

In general, feminism is against pornography because feminists see different aspects of pornography -or at least pornography that is now made in the pornography industry- mail-dominate and promoting an object-like image of the women. Also, they claim what happens in pornography is not an intimate relationship, but, a projection of hatred and anger. Using pornography to further feminism, therefore, is to defeat the purpose.

Methodology

In this study, I did a netnography. It is generally assumed that netnography has five main steps. The first is the definition of the problem or the topic of research and the social network to be used. In the second step, we choose our unit(s) of analysis. In the third step, we choose criteria to collect the data. In the fourth step, every unit of analysis is compared against the criteria. The fifth step is consisted of an interpretation of findings (see for example Loureiro et al., 2019). In this study, however, I am faithful to a more classical definition of netnography: Ethnography on social networks. Based on a classical definition, ethnography is "descriptive study of a particular human society or the process of making such a study" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019). This is what I did with four Iranian feminist Instagram pages: @feminism.everyday (Nasrin Afzali), @samaneh_savadi, @freevaar (Marmar Moshfeghi Masoumi), and @faranak_amidi. I quickly reviewed all posts on each page and then chose the last 50 posts each page had published to see how they had represented different aspects of women's issues in Iran.

Please note all screenshots in this study is subject to the "fair use" of copyrighted material on Instagram. Screenshots are reproduced here only for academic purpose, and not for "commercial or purely personal" use; I will not "transform or change the original work by adding new meaning, context or expression;" and, I will not "replace the original work such that people stop buying or viewing the copyrighted work."

Findings

I extracted some recurring themes on these pages and then reviewed the last 50 posts on each page according to those themes to be able to give a general perception of what these pages have to say about each issue.

Before that, I tried to review the profile of the manger of each page. All four women who govern these pages, live outside Iran and if they come back, they might risk persecution. All four took advantage of affirmative programs to study in some women studies program (there are currently more than 900 programs of women studies or gender studies -which is women studies too- while there is only one program on men and masculinity studies that is also governed by a group of feminists). All four people have reputable jobs in international bodies

but their academic file is very poor. The only person who has a presence on Google Scholar is Nasrin Afzali, and when you check the more reputable Scopus citation database, none of them are there. This lack of academic knowledge and ability might have forced them to take alternative strategies to become successful.

Ageism

If one reviews these pages, and many other less-followed Iranian feminist pages on Instagram, he/she will find a great omission of "older" women. The omission of older women is not restricted to these pages, however, and feminism, in general, is criticized for neglect of older women (see for example Jönson & Åkerström , 2004; Harbison, 2008; and Pearsall, 2019, among others); if feminism is supposed to help women solve their problems, those group of women who are less privileged and overlooked should receive affirmative treatment. In Western societies, it is estimated that more than 20% of women are 55 or above. This large group has more problems than other groups of women. They are less likely to attract men and therefore half of the society overlooks them. These days with COVID 19 pandemic around, people are not ashamed to see the disease positive because it will kill the elderly; in our cruel society, they are seen by many not as experienced and beloved fellow citizens and even relatives, but as a burden that should get rid off.

All four feminist pages in this study, by and large, overlook older women. Their pages are fraught with young women in their best "selves," but the problem of most vulnerable 20% of women are systematically neglected. Surprisingly, among 200 posts reviewed in this study, there is one post (0.05% as opposed to 20%) by Faranak Amidi that refers to problems of elderly women.

Figure 1post from Faranak Amidi's page shows an old woman in her most appealing possible position.

Indeed, this is one of the sexiest images a woman this age could be shown in. Why is that? The answer is simple, talking about problems of elderly women might annoy men who came here for something else.

Self-Presentation

Any psychologist who analyzes these pages can detect a strong trace of narcissism in all these pages. These feminists claim they are there to help to solve women's issues but in effect, they are there to serve the owners of these pages. Although Nasrin Afzali's page has maintained an equilibrium of self-presentation and general argumentation, the other three pages are fraught with personal images, carefully prepared to attract the male gaze. Samaneh Savadi's page includes images of her that are modified. One might contemplate if these images are for attracting the male gaze, and not simply introducing page owners to the viewers. All self-images are in high-end environments (whether natural or urban) and any critical reading can detect an intention to guide viewers to consume images, rather than ideas. It might be called, therefore, pornography.
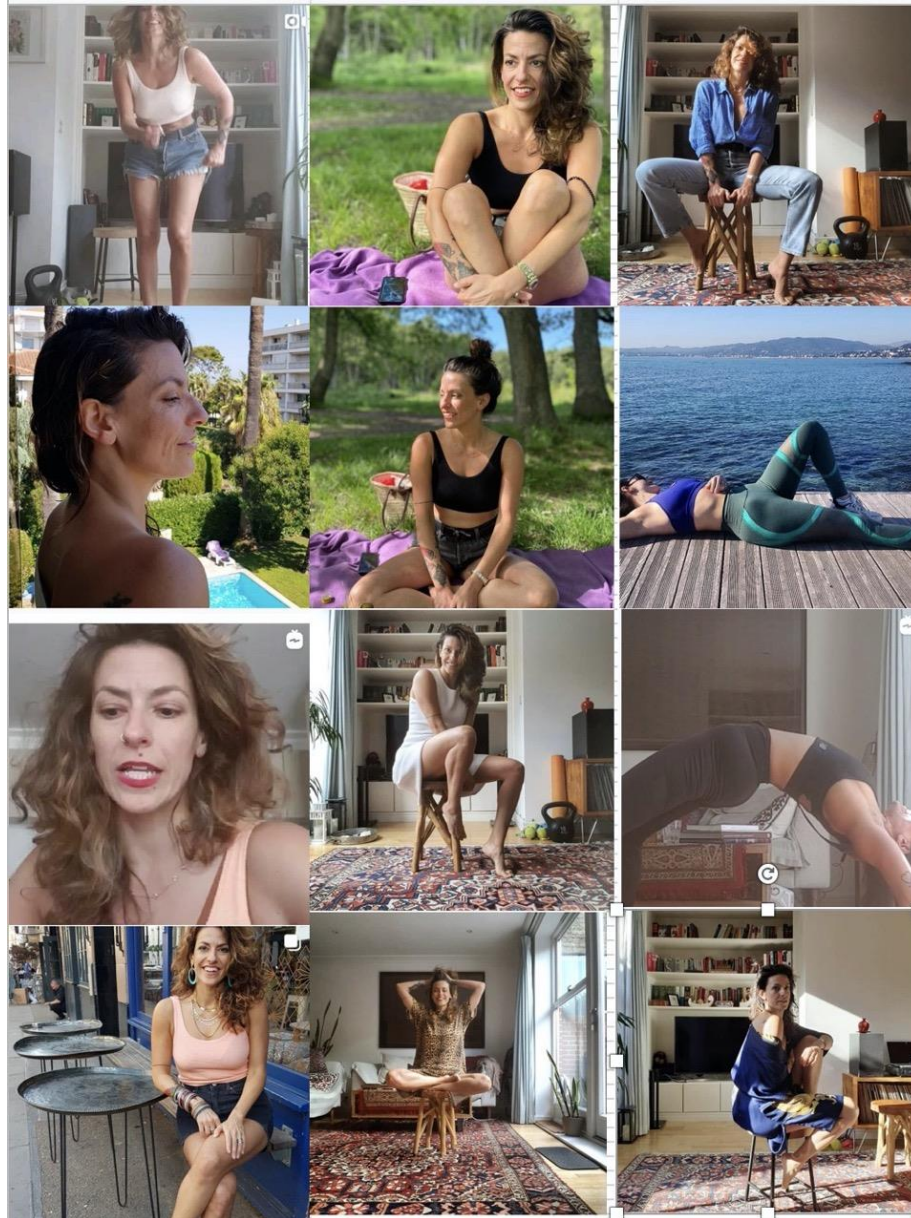
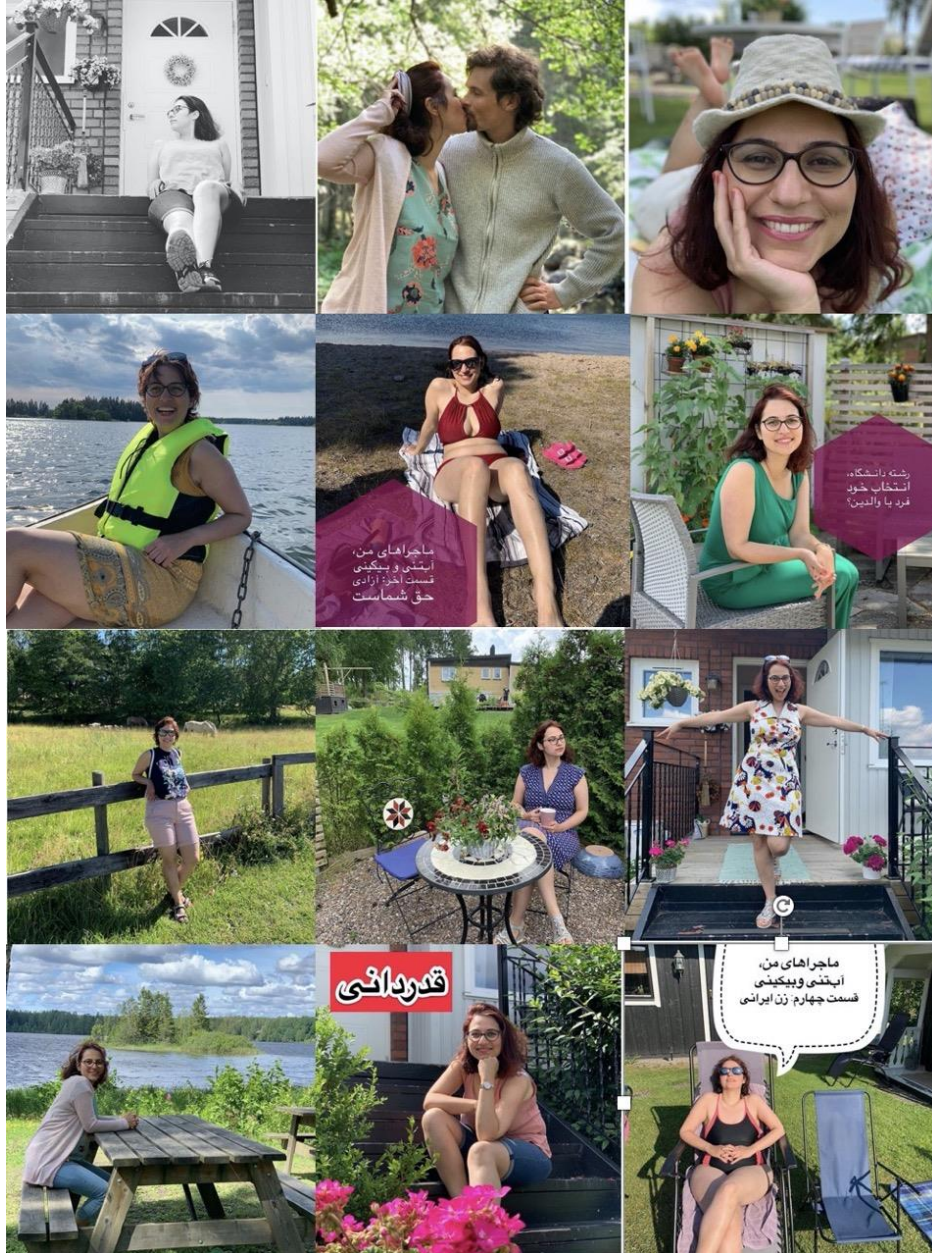*Figure 2 Images captured from Faranak Amidi's page.*

Figure 3 Images captured from Marmar Moshfeghi Masoumi's page (@freevaar)

The role these depictions play in attracting men and leading them to engage and admire is more than their visual nature. Eccles et al. (1983) in their theory of expectancy-value tells us when one is motivated to achieve some goal (and sex can be the most powerful drive for men of our time) the motivation is multiplied if he/she can see that goal only one click away. Indeed, the expectation of proximity, mutuality, and engagement is only an illusion when one interacts

with celebrities on social media, but most men don't want to know that! In many of these posts, these feminists speak about women's need for sex, the right to have sex, and their own experiences. A psychologist can easily analyze these pages and conclude they belong to highly sexually active women. A communication scholar, certainly, would not believe that.

Figure 4 post from Nasrin Afzali's page (@feminism.everyday)

Figure 5 Post from Faranak Amidi's page

Aestheticization

Similar arguments can be made about what I call aestheticization of menstruation or sexualization of menstruation. The image these Instagram pages provide about menstruation is an image that is much different from reality. This aestheticization of menstruation, one might think, can serve to attract more men, so more eyeballs can be added to the followers' base, and later be translated into privilege, power, and money. Samaneh Savadi's page already capitalizes on its followers by posting advertisements. Nasrin Afzali's page also accepts advertisements. When money is involved, it is hard to determine the motivations behind one's activities.

Figure 6 Post from Samaneh Savadi's page.

Discussion

Leftist thinkers have warned about the commodification of everything in what they say is "late capitalism." Feminism which came to put an end to the humiliating situation of women in the society has now become networked in Iran and well follows the rules of power and capital in social media. People resort to every means that is available to attract more people and engage with them in order to become more powerful and make more money. This transforms the nature of the movement(s) for women's right and as a result, there are now many feminists in Iran who work with women of the most unprivileged parts of the society and yet these activists are unknown to most people; their work is not admired and their successes are not recorded simply because they are not attractive to men or they don't want to resort to all mean to become known and admired by others; or, unfortunately, their subjects live in an appalling situation, so much so that no one can anesthetize their misery and translates it to money and power and benefit on that.

References

Adams, C. J. (2004). Pornography. In Smith, M. D. *Encyclopedia of rape*. Pp 151-152 Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

Dines, G. (2003). From fantasy to reality: Unmasking the pornography industry. In R. Morgan (Ed.), *Sisterhood is forever* (pp. 306–314). New York: Washington Square Press.

Eccles J. S., Adler, T. F., Futterman, R., Goff, S. B., Kaczala, C. M., Meece, J. L., & Midgley, C. (1983). Expectancies, values, and academic behaviors. In J. T. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and achievement motivation* (pp. 75–146). San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman.

Ellis, K., O'Dair, B., & Tallmer, A. (1990). Feminism and Pornography. *Feminist Review,* 36, 15-18.

Encyclopædia Britannica (2019). Ethnography. Retrieved August 01, 2020 from https://www.britannica.com/science/ethnography.

Gorer, G. (1965). The pornography of death. In G. Gorer (Ed.), Death, grief, and mourning (pp. 192–199). Garden City: Doubleday.

Graham, R. (2004). Feminist movement. In Smith, M. D. *Encyclopedia of rape*. Pp 72-74 Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

Harbison, J. (2008). Stoic heroines or collaborators: Ageism, feminism and the provision of assistance to abused old women. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 22,* 2, 221-234.

Jönson, H. & Åkerström, M. (2004). Neglect of Elderly Women in Feminist Studies of Violence-A Case of Ageism?. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect, 16,* 1, 47-63.

Kuper, A., & Kuper, J. (2010). *The social science encyclopedia*. London: Routledge.

Loureiro, S. M. C., Serra, J., & Guerreiro, J. (2019). How Fashion Brands Engage on Social Media: A Netnography Approach. *Journal of Promotion Management, 25,* 3, 367-378.

Pearsall, M. (2019). *The other within us: Feminist explorations of women and aging*. London and New York: Routledge.

Russmann, U. & Svensson, J. (2016). Studying Organizations on Instagram. *Information, 7*(4), 1-12.

Shahghasemi, E. (2016). Human Rights against Human Rights: Sexism in Human Rights Discourse for Sakineh Mohammadi. *Society, 53,* 6, 614-618.

Shahghasemi, E. (2017). Iranians in the Minds of Americans. New York: Nova Publishing.

Shahghasemi, E. (2020). Iranian Celebrities on the Internet. *Journal of Cyberspace Studies*, 4(1), 77-80. DOI: 10.22059/jcss.2020.74782

Shahghasemi, E., Prosser, M. (2019). The Middle East: Social Media Revolution in Public and Private Communication. International Conference on Future of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw.

Short, M. B., Kasper, T. E., & Wetterneck, C. T. (2015). The relationship between religiosity and Internet pornography use. *Journal of Religion and Health, 54*, 571-583.