



CRITICAL LITERACIES AND GENDER STUDIES

NAVIGATING MEDIA, EDUCATION, AND
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

EDITED BY

INÊS AMARAL, ANA MARTA M. FLORES,
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Foundations of Critical Literacies and Gender Studies: Media, Education and Civic Engagement Throughout Social Justice

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Abstract

This chapter explores the foundational principles of critical literacies and gender studies, emphasising their role in understanding and challenging societal structures, power dynamics and representations within media and education to promote social justice. It outlines how critical literacy, influenced by Paulo Freire's theories, encourages questioning dominant ideologies and actively empowers individuals to shape their social realities. Concurrently, it broadens into gender studies through Judith Butler's perspective, examining the performative nature of gender and its complex intersections with race, class and sexuality. Intersectionality is essential for understanding the complexities of identities and systemic inequalities.

The chapter advocates integrating critical and civic literacies with gender studies in educational curricula to challenge stereotypes, promote inclusivity and enhance critical thinking. It discusses the transformative potential of such an integrated approach in fostering students capable of contributing to societal change. Additionally, it addresses the evolution of Media and Information Literacy in the digital age, stressing its importance in developing

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skills necessary for informed citizenship and democratic participation. By integrating these literacies, the chapter underscores their significance in cultivating informed and engaged citizens who can navigate complex media landscapes and participate effectively in civic life.

Keywords: Social justice; educational practices; intersectionality; power dynamics; digital age

Introduction

Critical literacies and gender studies are pivotal in understanding and critiquing societal structures, power dynamics and representation in media and education. This chapter explores the foundational principles of critical literacies and gender studies, highlighting their theoretical underpinnings, applications in education and implications for social justice. This chapter aims to elucidate how these fields intersect and contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary issues by examining key concepts and scholarly contributions.

Critical literacy, influenced significantly by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), emphasises the importance of questioning hegemonic ideologies and power dynamics embedded within texts and discourses. Critical literacy involves analysing, interpreting and critiquing texts to uncover underlying assumptions, biases and social injustices. It seeks to empower individuals to shape their social realities actively through informed dialogue and active action. Gender studies, on the other hand, examine how gender identities and roles are socially constructed, performed and contested within different cultural contexts. Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) challenges traditional notions of gender by highlighting its performative nature and how it intersects with other identity markers such as race, class and sexuality. Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) underscores the interconnected nature of these identities and how systems of power and oppression operate through multiple axes of privilege and marginalisation.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is central to critical literacy and gender studies. It underscores the interconnected nature of various social identities and highlights how systems of power and oppression operate in complex ways. Intersectional analysis is crucial for understanding the unique experiences of individuals with multiple marginalised identities and addressing systemic inequalities.

Civic and critical literacies and gender studies have profound implications for educational practices. Educators can use these frameworks to develop a curriculum that challenges stereotypes, promotes inclusivity and fosters critical thinking among students. Integrating civic and critical literacies and gender studies into educational practices has transformative potential. Educators can utilise these frameworks to develop curricula and pedagogies that foster critical thinking, empathy and social responsibility among students. By incorporating diverse perspectives and marginalised voices into curriculum design, educators can challenge stereotypes, promote inclusivity and empower students to become agents of change in their communities (Luke, 2012).

Gender-inclusive pedagogies emphasise creating inclusive and respectful learning environments that validate and affirm diverse gender identities and expressions. These pedagogies aim to dismantle binary notions of gender and address systemic barriers that perpetuate gender-based inequalities in education (Gill, 2007). By centring on gender equity in educational practices, educators can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

This chapter is structured into five sections. The first four examine the pillars supporting this book's approach, including civic and critical literacies, gender studies foundations, media and social justice and civic engagement and activism. The last section provides an overview of the different chapters of the book.

From Media Information Literacy to Civic and Critical Literacies

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is a multifaceted framework encompassing essential knowledge, skills and attitudes for critically engaging with media content and information (Mendes & Amar, 2024, p. 62). This section explores MIL's theoretical foundations, historical development and contemporary perspectives, underscoring its interdisciplinary nature and educational significance.

Rooted in critical theory and educational psychology, MIL addresses individuals' need to analyse, evaluate and create media messages across diverse contexts (Potter, 2018). According to UNESCO, MIL empowers users to interpret media content critically, make informed decisions and actively participate in media creation (Grizzle, 2011). This framework emphasises the necessity of equipping individuals with skills to navigate the complexities of modern media landscapes effectively.

The evolution of MIL unfolds through distinct phases. Initially recognised before the 1970s, media literacy was instrumental in promoting democratic citizenship by enabling informed engagement with media as a tool for social change (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Concerns over media's impact on societal values and youth development escalated attention to media literacy education from the 1970s through the mid-1990s (Fedorov & Friesem, 2015).

During this period, critical media literacy (CML) emerged in response to commercial media dominance and its potential effects on cultural norms and behaviours (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). CML aims to empower individuals to deconstruct media messages, discern underlying ideologies and engage critically with media representations.

Contemporary MIL extends beyond traditional media to encompass digital and information literacy. In the digital age, characterised by abundant and rapidly disseminated information, digital media literacy assumes critical importance. It encompasses technical proficiency, a critical understanding of media content, effective creation and communication skills and civic participation in digital spaces (Pegrum et al., 2022).

Scholars highlight MIL's role in fostering active citizenship and promoting social justice through media engagement (Kahne et al., 2014; Livingstone, 2003). By equipping individuals with skills to navigate digital platforms and media

content critically, MIL encourages democratic participation and facilitates civic discourse.

MIL draws upon a spectrum of disciplines, including Education, Communication Sciences, Psychology, Sociology, Information Sciences, Linguistics and Health Sciences, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding media in contemporary society (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2019). This interdisciplinary approach underscores the complexity of media environments and the need for integrated educational strategies that address media literacy across different academic domains.

MIL is integrated into curricula to cultivate students' critical thinking, ethical judgement and digital citizenship skills in educational settings. Initiatives such as 'teaching with television' in Austria exemplify holistic approaches to media education, where students learn media literacy and acquire essential competencies for navigating digital and analogue media (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2019).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) acknowledges the significance of media literacy education in safeguarding children's rights to access and critically engage with media content (UNICEF, 1989). As digital technologies evolve, educators confront the challenge of equipping students with competencies to navigate media responsibly and participate actively in digital society.

Civic literacy entails understanding one's rights and responsibilities as a citizen within a democratic society (Banks, 2006). In the realm of media education, civic literacy extends to critically engaging with media content, distinguishing credible information from misinformation (Kahne et al., 2014). It underscores media literacy's role in promoting informed citizenship and active participation in civic life (Peters et al., 2016).

Critical literacy involves questioning power dynamics embedded within media texts and narratives (Luke, 2012). It encourages individuals to deconstruct media representations, identify underlying ideologies and challenge dominant discourses (Freire, 1970). In media education, critical literacy fosters a nuanced understanding of media's influence on societal norms and values, empowering individuals to interpret media messages critically (Fedorov & Friesem, 2015).

Integrating civic and critical literacies into media education cultivates informed and engaged citizens capable of navigating today's complex media landscapes (Kellner & Share, 2007). Educational initiatives emphasise teaching students to analyse media messages through a civic lens, encouraging active participation in democratic processes (Buckingham, 2013). By promoting critical inquiry and civic engagement, media literacy education prepares students to address social issues and advocate for change (Peters et al., 2016).

In the digital age, where misinformation proliferates, and digital platforms shape public discourse, civic and critical literacies are indispensable for democratic participation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Digital media literacy broadens the scope of civic and critical literacies to encompass online environments, equipping individuals with skills to evaluate online information critically (Hobbs, 2010). It emphasises the ethical use of digital media and fosters civic participation in digital spaces (Potter, 2018).

Civic and critical literacies are integral to media education, nurturing informed citizenship and promoting social justice. By equipping individuals with skills to analyse media messages and engage civically critically, media education contributes to a more democratic and inclusive society.

Theory and Contemporary Perspectives of Gender Studies

Gender studies, as an academic discipline, has evolved significantly over the past decades, encompassing a broad spectrum of theoretical frameworks and interdisciplinary approaches. This section explores gender studies' foundational concepts, delving into its theoretical underpinnings, historical development and contemporary perspectives.

Gender studies emerged from feminist scholarship in the mid-20th century, primarily focusing on critiquing and challenging traditional understandings of gender roles and norms. Influenced by feminist movements and critical theory, early gender theorists sought to uncover the social construction of gender and its intersections with other axes of identity, such as race, class, sexuality and disability (Butler, 2002; hooks, 2000a).

Key theoretical frameworks include Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is a repeated and stylised performance that constructs the illusion of a stable identity (Butler, 2002). This idea challenges essentialist views of gender as biologically determined, instead emphasising its fluid and socially constructed nature.

Simultaneously, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights how multiple dimensions of identity intersect and interact to shape individuals' experiences and social inequalities. Intersectional approaches have been crucial in addressing the complexities of gendered oppression and privilege across diverse social contexts.

The historical trajectory of gender studies reflects broader societal shifts in understanding gender dynamics. Initially centred on critiquing patriarchal structures and advocating for women's rights, gender studies expanded to incorporate perspectives from LGBTQIA+ studies, queer theory, postcolonial feminism and trans studies. These developments broadened the scope of inquiry to include marginalised gender identities and experiences (hooks, 2000b; Spade, 2015).

In academia, the institutionalisation of gender studies departments and university programmes has facilitated interdisciplinary research and teaching. This institutional presence has been instrumental in fostering critical dialogue and advancing social justice agendas related to gender equality and human rights (Davis, 1983; Walby, 2011).

Contemporary gender studies encompass diverse themes and methodologies, reflecting ongoing societal debates and transformations. Topics such as masculinity studies, transgender rights, digital feminisms and reproductive justice have gained prominence, reflecting evolving social norms and political landscapes (Connell, 2005; Serano, 2016; Solnit, 2014).

Digital platforms and social media have become crucial arenas for feminist activism and gender discourse, enabling global conversations and mobilisations

around gender equality and social justice (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012; Clark-Parsons, 2021). The intersection of technology and gender studies has opened new avenues for research on digital cultures, online identities and the impact of digital media on gender representation. Gender studies' foundations are rooted in critical theory, feminist movements and interdisciplinary scholarship. The discipline has evolved from its early focus on women's experiences to encompass a broader spectrum of gender identities and power dynamics. As gender studies grows, it remains committed to challenging gender inequalities, promoting social justice and advancing inclusive and intersectional approaches to understanding gender in contemporary societies.

In this context, the growing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into media and communication demands a critical examination of its role in reinforcing societal power structures and biases. While AI-driven algorithms can have positive applications in daily life, addressing their limitations and proposing solutions that promote inclusivity is crucial. In particular, AI algorithms in social media and news distribution often prioritise content that attracts the most engagement, amplifying dominant ideologies and marginalising alternative voices (e.g. Noble, 2018). However, AI systems entangle this process by operating primarily invisibly, embedding bias into the fabric of digital platforms. The implications of these systems for societal power dynamics underscore the need for a critical literacy approach to AI, equipping individuals with the tools to recognise and challenge how algorithms shape their media consumption and, by extension, their understanding of the world.

AI systems frequently perpetuate gender biases, often reflecting the historical data on which they are trained. For instance, studies have demonstrated that AI facial recognition technologies have significantly higher error rates when identifying women or individuals from minority racial groups (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). AI systems, through their inherent biases, not only replicate but also further entrench these gender norms, effectively performing and reinforcing outdated notions of gender roles. Critical AI literacy, therefore, becomes crucial in enabling individuals to challenge these biases, fostering a more nuanced understanding of gender as fluid and socially constructed.

Intersectionality provides another vital lens through which the impact of AI must be understood. AI systems, which often overlook the complexities of intersectionality, exacerbate inequalities for marginalised groups. For example, Virginia Eubanks (2018) has shown how automated decision-making systems used in public services disproportionately harm low-income women of colour, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion. In addition to its role in perpetuating social inequalities, AI also significantly influences civic engagement. AI-driven technologies such as targeted political advertising and the spread of misinformation have reshaped the landscape of democratic participation. Safiya Noble (2018) has highlighted how search engines and algorithmic bias manipulate public discourse, often privileging certain political ideologies while marginalising others. Such systems undermine the democratic process by limiting the diversity of information available to citizens, thus curtailing informed decision-making. Critical AI literacy, therefore, plays a pivotal role in fostering informed

citizenship, enabling individuals to navigate AI's influence on civic life and resist manipulations that threaten democratic engagement.

Integrating AI literacy into educational curricula is essential for promoting social justice. The critical examination of AI's role in media and civic engagement aligns with broader educational goals of fostering inclusivity, critical thinking and active citizenship. By incorporating AI literacy alongside critical literacies and gender studies, educators can empower students to challenge systemic inequalities and develop the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of the digital age. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, an integrated approach to AI, media and civic education will be vital in cultivating informed, engaged citizens capable of contributing to societal transformation.

Media and Social Justice

Critical literacies and gender studies intersect profoundly, particularly in media analysis. This chapter explores how these disciplines provide essential frameworks for understanding media representations, challenging stereotypes and promoting social justice. By examining critical theoretical foundations and educational applications, this article highlights the transformative potential of critical literacies and gender studies in fostering a more equitable and inclusive media landscape.

Critical literacies encompass a range of approaches that encourage individuals to engage critically with texts, including media representations. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) laid the groundwork for critical literacy by emphasising the importance of questioning dominant narratives and power structures. This approach extends to media analysis, where individuals are encouraged to deconstruct images, narratives and messages to uncover underlying biases and ideological perspectives.

Gender studies, on the other hand, examine how gender identities and roles are socially constructed and represented in media. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (2002) challenges traditional notions of gender as binary and fixed, arguing instead that gender is a continual performance shaped by social norms and expectations. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989) further complicates the analysis by highlighting how gender intersects with other axes of identity, such as race, class and sexuality, creating unique experiences of privilege and oppression.

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, constructing social realities and reinforcing or challenging societal norms. Critical analysis of media representations through a gender lens reveals persistent inequalities and stereotypes. Women, LGBTQIA+ individuals and other marginalised groups are often portrayed in limited and stereotypical roles that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce existing power imbalances (Gill, 2007).

Moreover, intersectional analyses of media representations highlight how race, class and other identities intersect with gender to shape portrayals and access to media visibility. This intersectional approach underscores the importance of

examining how media representations contribute to broader inequality and social injustice (Gill, 2007).

Gender-inclusive pedagogies aim to create inclusive learning environments where diverse gender identities and expressions are recognised and respected. By incorporating diverse perspectives into educational materials and discussions, educators can promote empathy, understanding and social justice among students (hooks, 2000a).

Promoting social justice through critical literacies and gender studies involves advocating for more inclusive and representative media portrayals. By raising awareness of biased representations and amplifying marginalised voices, these disciplines contribute to challenging and transforming systemic inequalities (Freire, 1970).

Furthermore, media activism plays a crucial role in advocating for change. Activists and scholars use critical literacies and gender studies to critique media practices, lobby for policy changes and promote media that reflects diverse experiences and perspectives (Butler, 2002).

The intersections of critical literacies and gender studies provide essential tools for understanding and challenging media representations. By applying these frameworks, educators, activists and media consumers can promote social justice, challenge stereotypes and advocate for more inclusive media practices. Addressing these issues requires a critical literacy approach. This approach encourages media consumers to interrogate the messages conveyed, recognise underlying biases and advocate for more diverse and authentic representations. Media literacy education equips individuals with the skills to critically analyse media content, deconstruct dominant narratives and engage in meaningful civic participation (hooks, 2000a).

The foundational concepts of critical literacies and gender studies have profound implications for advancing social justice agendas. By equipping individuals with critical analytical skills and a deep understanding of social inequalities, these disciplines empower marginalised communities to challenge systemic injustices and advocate for change. Educational institutions, media organisations and policymakers promote inclusive practices, dismantle discriminatory structures and amplify marginalised voices (Freire, 1970).

Promoting social justice through critical literacies and gender studies requires ongoing commitment to intersectional analysis, inclusive education practices and advocacy for policy reform. By centring marginalised perspectives and challenging dominant narratives, educators and activists can contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive society where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive and participate fully in civic life.

The intersection of the principles of critical literacies and gender studies provides essential frameworks for understanding, critiquing and transforming social realities. Integrating these disciplines into educational practices, media analyses and advocacy efforts can challenge systemic inequalities, promote inclusive representation and advance social justice agendas. To move forward, continued research, dialogue and action are crucial to realising the transformative potential of critical literacies and gender studies in creating a more just and equitable world.