

A Netnographic Study of Iranian Users' Reactions to Dubbing Censorship in Instagram Posts

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Abstract

Social online platforms offer a user-friendly venue for individuals to voice their opinions on virtually any topic, including dubbing. Naturally occurring data, such as Instagram comments, are valuable for their ecological validity, as they reflect authentic interactions beyond controlled settings. A few studies have leveraged such data to advance research on the reception of audiovisual translation. Adopting a netnographic approach, this study examines how Iranian viewers perceive censorship in Persian dubbing, as reflected in users' comments on Instagram posts and sheds light on their reactions and perspectives concerning dubbing censorship in Iran. Findings show strong opposition among Iranian users to the censorship of dubbed content. Many users expressed that censorship distorts the storyline and narrative of the original product, resulting in a less immersive and enjoyable viewing experience. Nonetheless, some users acknowledged the potential benefits of censorship in certain contexts, such as foreign audiovisual content aimed at children and young adults, to safeguard their mental well-being. The paper underscores the need to reevaluate censorship policies in Persian dubbing.

Key words: netnography, dubbing, censorship, reception, Iranian viewers, Instagram

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Introduction

Nearly two decades ago, Gambier (2003) and Chiaro (2004) noted the lack of empirical research on viewers' attitudes and reception in audiovisual translation (AVT). However, reception studies have now become relatively well-established within AVT (Mangiron, 2022). The booming of research in this area cannot be ignored, as Díaz Cintas asserts in an interview, "areas like accessibility to the media, cybersubtitling and reception studies will continue to be trending topics" in AVT (Bogucki & Díaz Cintas, 2020, p. 30). Despite a wealth of AVT reception studies, there are still some areas that merit more attention, and certain research methods have been overlooked. Notably, reception studies on taboo translation and censorship remain limited, with only a few recent studies (e.g., Briechle & Eppler, 2019; Chen, 2022; Moura, 2024; Pavesi & Zamora, 2022) available, and netnography has not been extensively used. This lack of research highlights the opportunities for further development of this phenomenon. The importance of this research area lies in the fact that most studies on taboo, offensive language, censorship and translation have been primarily descriptive¹, with little attention to audience reactions (Pavesi & Zamora, 2022).

Therefore, the dearth of research into viewers' reactions to AVT censorship is particularly noteworthy, especially considering that the translation of taboo items, such as culturally or politically sensitive terms, presents significant challenges in conservative countries like Iran, where a strong censorship apparatus governs television and streaming services². In Persian dubbing, content involving sexuality, profanity, extramarital relationships, violence, certain political references, and insults to religion, especially Islam, is removed or altered due to religious, socio-cultural and political reasons (Pakar & Khoshsaligheh, 2021). Although "[institutional] censorship determines what is to be considered acceptable aesthetically, socially and culturally" (Billiani, 2020, p. 56), viewers may have a different understanding of what is acceptable in translation and simply reject any ideologically-driven content alteration as confirmed by previous studies (Briechle & Eppler, 2019; Hjort, 2009; Moura, 2024). Due to strict state dubbing norms, many Iranians turn to fansubbing for translations that better reflect the original content (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2023).

Many audiences are increasingly adopting activist roles, freely expressing their views on social networking platforms like Instagram and Twitter and challenging the censorial norms in the AVT industry. In addition, we argue that examining viewers' reactions to AVT censorship is especially important within political systems which have restricted accessibility to foreign multimedia content. Against this backdrop, this study examines how Iranian viewers perceive censorship in Persian dubbing, as reflected in users' comments on Instagram posts and sheds light on their reactions and perspectives concerning dubbing censorship in Iran. The current paper aims to advance our

¹ See, for example, a recent special issue edited by Bucaria et al. (2024).

² The oversight of translation and censorship of film and television content on Iranian television or streaming platforms is generally carried out by a combination of government bodies and related organizations (e.g., the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and Iran's Cinema Organization).

understanding of Iranian users' reception of dubbing censorship, with implications for the dubbing and AVT industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Accessibility

Although media accessibility has traditionally been linked to assistive forms of AVT, such as audio description, recent developments have called for a more universalist definition of media accessibility. There is a growing recognition of the importance of media accessibility for everyone and everywhere, regardless of ability or disability (Greco & Jankowska, 2020; Greco, 2022). The universalist understanding of media accessibility avoids limiting access to specific barriers and certain groups of people, as it centers on how users' distinct needs, abilities and capacities intersect with their specific contexts (Greco, 2020; Greco & Jankowska, 2020).

Therefore, media accessibility can extend to include various AVT modalities, including dubbing and subtitling, with the overall goal of making content accessible to a broader audience (Greco & Jankowska, 2020). More importantly, the field of media accessibility has shifted towards user-centered approaches, where the needs and expectations of users are prioritized in developing accessible products and services (Greco & Romero Fresco, 2023). Relatedly, as Bucaria et al. (2024) posit, in a world increasingly pushing the boundaries of taboo accessibility, it is important to examine how taboos are reinforced or broken across languages and cultures. Overall, this research is grounded in a universalist understanding of media accessibility, which embraces dubbing.

2.2. Reception Studies

Examining audiences has become increasingly important within AVT since the early 2000s, with pioneering reception studies in Italy and Spain laying the groundwork for more studies worldwide (Di Giovanni, 2020). Reception studies explore how viewers process, consume, appreciate, interpret or understand translated multimedia products (Gambier, 2018). Understanding audience attitudes towards translation can provide insights into the broader impact and function of translations in media (Tuominen, 2019) and can illustrate how audiences "understand, engage with and appreciate translations" (Di Giovanni, 2020, p. 398). Gambier (2018) presents three approaches to AVT reception studies, known as the "3 Rs": response, reaction and repercussion. It serves as a guide to understanding how viewers engage with translated audiovisual content. In his framework, "Reaction" refers to the inference processes that happen while watching a translated film, while "Repercussion" pertains to the viewers' attitudes.

Drawing on Gambier's work, Tuominen (2018) introduces "context-oriented reception studies", whereby reaction includes "the immediate context of viewing and of individual interpretations",

while repercussion examines “the broader context of audiovisual translations as a factor in their viewers’ lives and in society overall” (Tuominen, 2018, p. 70). Although a variety of research methods can be employed in reception studies, including experiments (see Kruger & Doherty, 2018), new qualitative approaches, such as netnography could be valuable for understanding real-time user reactions online.

2.3. Audience Reaction to Taboo Translation/Censorship

Research on audience reaction to translated films or TV shows often centers around a particular theme or feature (e.g., humor) to gauge their interpretation and perception of that translated feature (Tuominen, 2018). These thematic studies examine how they react to specific micro-level elements, such as humor in translation (Suojanen et al., 2015). They focus on user experience (Suojanen et al., 2015) and underscore the variety of interpretations that arise, emphasizing individual reception while simultaneously identifying areas of common understanding (Tuominen, 2018). In this context, one element that has received scant attention is the attitudes of AVT viewers towards taboo translation and censorship.

An early study by Scandura (2004) surveyed audience reactions to the censorship of subtitling in Argentina. Participants mentioned reasons, such as child protection, audience respect, legal constraints and socio-cultural norms for softening taboo content. Some viewed these changes as harmful to the original, while others considered them necessary to protect vulnerable audiences. Hjort (2009) also examined viewers’ opinions on subtitling and swearwords in Finland. Most respondents felt that swearwords should be translated as faithfully as possible in subtitles, even if it may demand stronger language than in the original. They noted that Finnish subtitles generally do not feature excessive swearing. Overall, most viewers were either satisfied with the current treatment of swearwords in subtitles or preferred stronger language, with only a minority believing the swearwords were too strong.

Briechele and Eppler (2019) tested the belief that swearwords are perceived as stronger in subtitles than in dubbing. Their online survey found no such difference, challenging this long-held assumption. Their respondents perceived the swearwords in the subtitled videos as less offensive than those in the dubbed videos. In their cross-cultural study, Pavesi and Zamora (2022) analyzed the acceptance and tolerance of swearwords in dubbed films compared to domestic (original language) films among Italian and Spanish viewers. Their results indicated that both groups generally exhibited high tolerance for swearing, with Spanish viewers demonstrating greater leniency toward offensive language.

Focusing on non-professional subtitling in the context of “danmu”, Chen (2022) investigated the reactions of Chinese viewers to the translation of taboo language by non-professional subtitlers. Viewers often praised the creativity and quality of subtitles, especially in the playful or culturally adapted renderings of taboo language. Neutral comments often involved linguistic and cultural

knowledge-sharing, helping other viewers understand the taboo language or context. In addition, constructive criticism focused on mistranslations or inappropriate renderings of taboo language, such as instances where an unnecessary taboo was introduced in the translation.

Finally, using a pilot experiment, Moura (2024) examined the acceptability of swearing from English into Portuguese in subtitles in three experimental conditions: softening swearing, maintaining swearing and intensifying swearing. Most participants were dissatisfied with the softening or omission of swearwords in subtitles. They indeed preferred translations that maintained the original intensity of the swearwords. Discomfort only arose when swearwords were unfamiliar to them or when subtitlers softened their impact. This study highlighted audience expectations for faithful translations, especially among those more proficient in the source language. Overall, the study concluded that viewers who watch content with violent or taboo themes generally accept stronger language in subtitles, as it aligns with their expectations for such genres.

To the best of our knowledge, the few existing studies on audience reception in Persian AVT have not focused on audience reactions to dubbing censorship. While some studies have mentioned these reactions in passing (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2018; Ameri et al., 2018), no research has systematically studied this topic. To address this research gap, the present work uses netnography to examine Iranian viewers' reactions to dubbing censorship and the handling of taboo content in Persian dubbing on Instagram.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Method

This research adopts a constructivist epistemology, which holds that reality is not objective but instead socially constructed and interpreted by individuals, thereby acknowledging the subjective nature of knowledge and experience (Cohen et al., 2018). As a qualitative research method, netnography empowers researchers to observe and examine individuals' online behavior in digital spaces, such as online communities, blogs or forums, hereby minimizing researcher influence (Kozinets, 2015). Indeed, researchers can examine naturalistic user reactions in online environments thanks to the method's ability to capture rich and unfiltered data (Kozinets, 2020). For Xi (2024), netnography, through virtual observation of participants' spontaneous attitudes, offers invaluable insights into emerging trends and social phenomena. Qualitative studies generally provide insights into viewers' underlying motivations, attitudes and reasoning (Chaume, 2018).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Netnographic data are typically collected in three forms (Kozinets, 2015):

- **Field notes:** researcher's notes and reflections about the community, its members and interactions.
- **Archival data:** pre-existing content, such as posts, comments, discussions, etc., by the users.
- **Elicited data:** interviews, text messaging and online chats with active users.

To collect the research data for the present analysis, a preliminary observation was conducted on roughly 200 posts from various Iranian Instagram pages focused on cinema, dubbing and other related topics. This helped us obtain a good understanding of the research data and how they can be related to the reception of dubbing censorship. Five pages with a high number of posts related to dubbing censorship were chosen, including @AniMotionArtz (1.2m followers)³, @Anifaction (131k)⁴, @AniMotionDub (164k)⁵, @Tooonz80 (129k)⁶ and @AnimoDub (74.7k members)⁷. The primary reason for selecting these pages was that they featured posts displaying two or more versions of a scene excerpted from a film, TV series and animation. The cross-comparison of these parallel scenes—one from the original and the other(s) from (different) dubbed versions—enables users to see how they differ, encouraging some to share their reactions in comments. As shown in Figure 1, various dubbings of *Deadpool* and *Wolverine* have been shared, along with users' reactions, particularly comments containing the word "censorship".

³ <https://www.instagram.com/animotionartz/>

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/anifaction/>

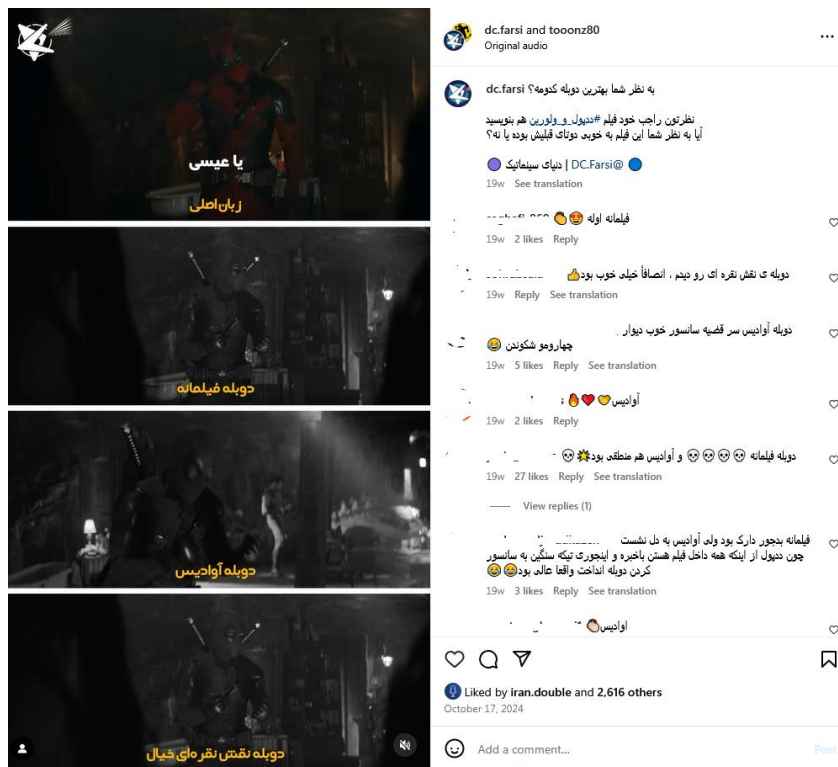
⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/animotiondub/>

⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/tooonz80/>

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/animodub/>

Figure 1

A Screenshot From An Instagram Post



Source: Instagram. Note: Followers' usernames were anonymized.

The posts also had a caption inviting user interaction, often explicitly or implicitly mentioning “change” or “alter”. The comments were written in Persian or Penglish/Finglish, and the users were Iranian. Collecting and analyzing the comments took over four months (June to October 2024) to ensure sufficient and accurate data for the analysis. One of the challenges we encountered was the large number of irrelevant or repetitive comments, prompting us to analyze additional posts and comments to gather new and rich data. While collecting and analyzing comments, we also recorded our field notes to capture the context and dynamics within the pages, as well as to see how users engage with one another's comments. We examined comments in approximately 63 posts with 678 relevant and rich comments. The number of comments in all the analyzed posts exceeded these numbers, but they were excluded from the analysis.

To complement the archival data, online semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 users, carefully chosen from those who commented on the posts. Although we reached out to more users on Instagram, our invitations either went unanswered or the users were not interested in contributing to the study. The interviews included five questions probing their attitudes towards dubbing censorship in Iran, presenting a comprehensive examination of the scenario already illustrated through archival data. The interviewees represented a diverse range of ages, education levels and genders.

The data analysis was guided by “thematic analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) following a six-step approach for identifying patterns or themes within the data, namely: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, naming the themes and reporting the analysis. We had three forms of data for this paper, where only the interview data demanded transcription. The transcription phase was then followed by the repeated reading of the data to obtain a holistic understanding of them and to discard any irrelevant data—anything unrelated to the research purposes. To yield the initial analysis, the interesting features—related to users’ reactions to censorship or handling of taboo translation—were identified and coded without giving any weight to the codes. We then discussed the preliminary codes, agreeing on those that best represent the data’s meaning or align with the research goals. To extract the overall themes, the connections among the codes were carefully examined and discussed through further readings of the codes. Similar codes in the data analysis sheet were then grouped into broader themes that encapsulate the key patterns and insights in the users’ reactions.

The data analysis was performed in MAXQDA software (version 24). To ensure ethical practices for respecting users’ privacy and anonymity, we anonymized usernames and removed identifying details from comments during the analysis and report. The interviewees were also assured of the confidentiality of their talks with us. The English quotes in the results were translated from Persian by the researchers.

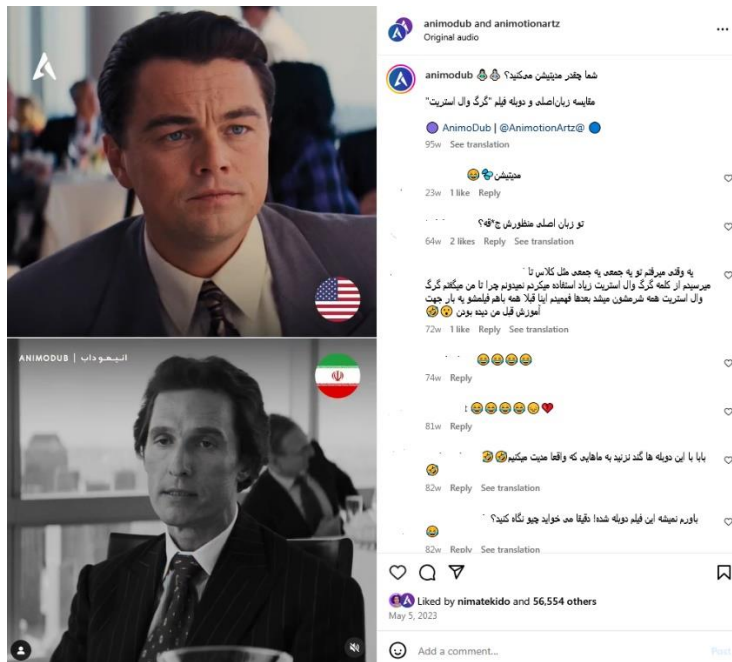
4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Field Notes Results

Field notes are an important component of the netnography process. They contextualize the field and offer insights into online interactions (Kozinets, 2015). As hinted earlier, this study focused solely on dubbing; therefore, the data were extracted from Iranian Instagram pages that generally shared carefully selected 1 or 2-minute video excerpts from professionally dubbed films or animations, juxtaposed with their original versions, at times with Persian subtitles. This provided the users with an opportunity to compare the dubbing with its original and identify any deviations in the translation. It appears that the users sharing their views in the comments are not ordinary viewers but avid fans with an interest in both dubbing and original films. Alternatively, other users may be prompted to share their opinions due to factors, such as nostalgia. Most of these posts are accompanied by a Persian caption from the page administrators, who often share their opinions on censorship, either directly or indirectly, with a humorous tone or simply invite the users to share their opinions. Figure 2 shows an example of these posts, taken from the film *The Wolf of Wall Street*. In the shared scene, the two characters are discussing masturbation, but in the Persian dubbing, this has changed to meditation. As can be seen, the users have reacted to this awkward censorship of a taboo topic in Iran.

Figure 2

A Screenshot From An Instagram Post



Source: Instagram. Note: Followers' usernames were anonymized.

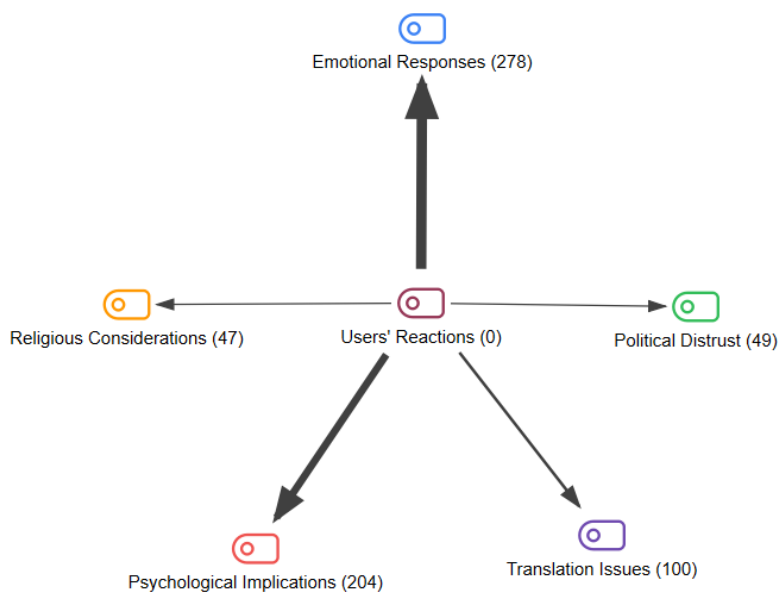
4.2. Archival Data Results

The analyses of the comments revealed five themes with their subthemes (codes) capturing the users' reactions to or attitudes concerning the videos:

- **Emotional responses:** A spectrum of negative feelings including anger, regret, distrust, and mockery toward censorship practices.
- **Psychological implications:** Advocating for censorship in children's content, negative implications of censoring language and scenes in children's content, and counterproductive censorship.
- **Translation issues:** Concerns regarding mistranslations, highlighting differences in the original and dubbing.
- **Political distrust:** A pervasive skepticism towards government actions, characterizing authorities as regressive and condemning totalitarian regimes.
- **Religious considerations:** Concerns surrounding Islam, including outdated religious principles and respect for religious figures.

Figure 3

Thematic Analysis of The Data



Source: Author's own work. *Note:* Indicated by arrow thickness, with thicker arrows representing higher frequency.

As shown in Figure 3, the themes and subthemes collectively suggest a multifaceted reaction from users regarding dubbing censorship. Therefore, it is not simply about liking or disliking censorship; rather, it reflects a nuanced stance.

4.2.1. Emotional Responses

Emotionally-driven comments were prevalent among members of these Instagram pages. The predominant emotions identified in the comments included anger, regret, distrust and mockery. Many users expressed strong disapproval of censorship, arguing that it is a disrespect to the audience. This supports the idea that viewers can handle taboo topics or swearwords and do not appreciate any attempts to tone them down or censor them (Briechele & Eppler, 2019; Hjort, 2009). Some users even used offensive language to convey their frustration in the comments. Below are some examples of the comments:

Due to the unnecessary censorship of this animation (*Despicable Me*), I felt enraged and decided to watch it in the original language, as the censorship showed a lack of respect for the audience's intelligence.

I'm really tired of censorship. The people who enforce it just seem to impose their stupid beliefs on everyone, and it really bothers me.

When I watch the national television's dubbing, it gives me goosebumps, and I feel like jumping out of my seat.

Members also expressed a sense of regret about dubbing censorship, feeling that, despite Iranian dubbing actors' talent, expertise and skill, censorship destroys their effort and the aesthetic quality of their works:

Iranian voice actors are amazing; it's a shame that national television has ruined everything.

The national television produces high-quality dubbing, but unfortunately, it is subject to censorship.

They also strongly criticized the Iranian national television for its poor censorship apparatus, arguing that it undermines the hard work of the original creators:

They don't know how to make animations, yet they censor the films and animations that the companies put so much effort into creating. It's really a shame.

The comments also reflected viewers' distrust and skepticism towards dubbed versions. This probably stems from their past experiences with censored content during childhood or the limited availability of subtitles in Iran. Thus, they often prefer watching films in their original versions or with fansubbing—an issue also raised by Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2023) and Magazzù (2023)—:

If there's a movie or show that's only available in Persian dub, I'd rather watch it in the original language, even without subtitles.

Ugh, I guess I'll have to rewatch all those movies and shows with subtitles to actually understand them.

The above comments suggest that viewers' thresholds of acceptability are crossed when they do not agree with ideological changes in the film's plot (Chaume, 2012). The Iranian audience seems to have a high tolerance for uncensored content, as they view censored content as unnatural and lacking originality. This issue is also observed among Italian and Spanish audiences, who are generally open to swearing in films, but show more caution toward dubbed content (Pavesi & Zamora, 2022).

Another common reaction was mockery. Poor censorship frequently results in awkward moments in dubbing, leading to nonsensical or glaringly obvious translations. Viewers often find these instances absurd, and ridicule becomes a prevalent theme in the comments:

Shame on the national television.

The worst was the *Wheely* animation. They turned his crush into an aunt in the dubbing. Every time his aunt (i.e., his crush) went out with someone, it completely ruined the nephew's mood!

They basically gave her/him a gender transition.

The third quote is particularly interesting, as it refers to the censorship of the animated film *WALL-E*, in which the character EVE was portrayed as male in the TV-dubbed version. Overall, censorship provoked adverse reactions from viewers, demonstrating that contemporary audiences are not passive or uncritical. Thanks to social media and the easy availability of uncensored internet content, they can engage with media critically and even challenge or reshape the effects of censorship (Wang, 2020). This also echoes Alfaro de Carvalho's (2012) observation that both translators and viewers often find censorship in subtitling frustrating, frequently expressing their concerns in online spaces, such as blogs and forums.

4.2.2. Psychological Implications

Our analysis also shows that audience reaction to censorship is driven by psychological implications. Initially, some users supported certain degrees of censorship, believing that some content should be altered, mainly to protect children's psychological and emotional well-being. This finding aligns with the work of Scandura (2004) on subtitling in Argentina, where some viewers argued for censorship, considering them essential for safeguarding minors or child protection. The participants of our study believed that exposing Iranian children and young adults to sexual content or taboo themes could lead to confusion and frustration, as it conflicts with their established values and beliefs. Censorship is thus seen as a safeguard against early exposure to complex ideas:

I don't understand why children should be exposed to sexual content in cartoons. I think it's right for Iran to censor sexual content in children's cartoons.

Don't you think normalizing homosexuality is ridiculous? It is actually good that they censor it.

It is better to censor so that children's minds do not get corrupted.

It's not surprising since television has a general audience, and parents often allow their children to watch it, even though many animations are not actually intended for children.

The last comment is interesting. It underscores a significant concern among viewers who are parents: not all content labeled as "animation" is suitable for children. Some of this material is aimed at young adults, raising important questions about age-appropriate viewing. Given that some audiences may favor stronger language in adult animation (Moura, 2024), clearer content labeling is essential to safeguard younger viewers.

In contrast, others strongly opposed the censorship of taboo language and scenes for children, insisting that Iranian children and young adults deserve access to the same content as their peers worldwide:

I don't understand what Iranian kids are missing compared to children in other countries. Why don't they censor things there?

Even ordinary topics are treated as taboo here in Iran. We still have a long way to go to bridge the gap between our two cultures for our children.

The above comments imply that censorship may have both supporters and opponents as Alfaro de Carvalho (2012) notes, with viewers criticizing both the excessive use of swearwords and the heavily sanitized language in translations. Other comments suggested that censorship often has the opposite of its intended effect, sparking curiosity rather than deterring interest. As one user writes, "This way, people become more curious and lewder to know what has been censored", implying that censorship drives viewers to seek out the original versions to satisfy their curiosity. This pattern is particularly relevant in the age of digital media, where access to uncensored content is more feasible. Another concern is that censorship can sometimes lead to unintended consequences, potentially undermining the morals and values it seeks to uphold. As discussed in the previous section, while this act of censorship may provoke mockery and laughter among viewers upon discovering these alterations, they can also have a negative psychological impact. Redefining romantic relationships between men and women as familial ones can create discomfort and even disturbing implications. As one viewer noted, this alteration may cause more harm than the original content.

It's more respectable to have a boyfriend or girlfriend than this. Now it's incest, which is disgusting. They want to censor it, but they make it worse.

They made it worse by censoring Audrey as an aunt. This way, it means Ted had a crush on his aunt, ew!

I always wondered why they were flirting. I thought they were father and daughter. Now I understand it was a mistranslation.

First: Step-dad, second: Step-aunt, it's better not to mention the third one.

The fourth comment was taken from a post discussing the censorship in three animations on national TV. In the first case, the flirting scene between Moto Moto and Gloria in *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* was altered to depict a father-daughter interaction. In the second case, Ted and Audrey in *The Lorax* were changed so that Ted refers to Audrey as his aunt in the dubbing. Lastly, in *WALL-E*, the character EVE was portrayed as male in the dubbed version. A similar situation occurred during Franco's dictatorship in Spain, particularly in the film *Mogambo*. Due to the censorial policies of the time, the translation version was altered in a way that unintentionally transformed an act of infidelity into incest, changing two lovers into siblings (Chaume, 2007).

Furthermore, some viewers experienced a surprising emotional response upon discovering that the films or animations they watched during their childhood were censored. This realization evoked a sense of nostalgia mixed with frustration, as they now feel that their personal experiences and memories were undermined or rewritten:

So they have been deceiving us since infancy. I will not forgive them.

All the cartoons I loved were dubbed with lies. My childhood beliefs were shattered. I was so sad, wondering why the child was punished for raspberry syrup. Now I understand they translated “wine” as “raspberry syrup”.

This perspective goes beyond the common criticism of censorship as merely negative, highlighting its potential to affect audience identity, trust and nostalgia. Chen’s work on childhood nostalgia in reception is worth noting here. According to Chen (2023), childhood nostalgia is a crucial extratextual factor in how translated children’s literature is received, as nostalgic adult readers often feel a connection to the translations they read in childhood. However, this dynamic becomes more complex when readers or viewers discover that their childhood memories are distorted by translation censorship. This realization may lead to a negative reception of the translated work, even if they once enjoyed it before learning about the censorship.

4.2.3. Translation Issues

This theme underscores Iranian viewers’ preference for accurate translations that closely follow the original content and context of the product. They specifically mentioned dissatisfaction with the translation quality, noting how altered dialogues distort the film’s original meaning and style. This reflects, in part, Chen’s (2022) findings that viewers offered criticism for incorrect translations of taboo items.

One recurring criticism involved alterations in dialogue, often to the extent that the intended narrative is distorted:

The film’s original title was “Poverty and Prostitution”. However, they changed the entire story and scenario, and also renamed it to “Years Far Away Home”. The story of the film was altered.

There is so much difference between the dubbed version and the original language. There, it says it smells like pickles. Why do they change these things?

Why do they alter the original text and change the dialogues? The whole scenario has changed.

Dubbing is believed to create a subtle suspension of disbelief, allowing viewers to become immersed in the content and, in turn, overlook the fact that they are watching a foreign production. This effect may explain why some viewers remain unaware of alterations or censorship in the dialogue (Díaz Cintas, 2019). Nonetheless, this assumption ignores the active role of today’s audience on social media, who are no longer passive consumers but rather highly critical of what they watch (Di Giovanni & Gambier, 2018). As some users pointed out in the comments, the poor and awkward translations stem from a lack of skill in creatively handling taboo content. They argue that if

censorship or alteration of the dialogue is necessary, it should be done thoughtfully and skilfully to avoid any awkward moments in the film:

The dubbing was really good, but unfortunately, the translation was not faithful, and they made it too comedic.

At least, censor it in a way that doesn't make us feel like we're being treated as stupid viewers.

Another translation-related issue often mentioned is the over-domestication of original content, particularly in animated works. Over-domestication has been a common strategy in Persian dubbing of animations, but it can at times lead to translations that unintentionally promote offensiveness. In other words, while the original content may not be offensive, the dubbing may introduce implicit offensiveness to enhance the comedic tone of the program. Similarly, Alfaro de Carvalho (2012) and Chen (2022) note that some viewers do not appreciate translations that contain offensive or vulgar language, especially when such language is neither necessary nor appropriate for the context. The over-domestication, for some viewers, is not appreciated as it deviates from the original content, compromising the integrity of the narrative and acting as a double-edged sword:

Dear, you should not replace the original text with any inappropriate or offensive words.

This dubbing has crossed the boundaries of localization.

Although dubbing is officially the dominant AVT modality in Iran, this does not mean that people do not watch subtitled materials, as subtitles are readily available online thanks to fansubbers (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2023). Therefore, some Iranian audiences quickly find discrepancies between the translation and the original dialogue as they have already watched the film or TV series with fansubbing, which closely follows the original content. Now, when they come across the dubbing of the same content, they can identify deviations or inaccuracies in the translation:

I don't understand why they reverse everything in the dubbing; it doesn't match the subtitles, and nothing makes sense.

Watching it with subtitles reveals that it's been completely censored in the dubbed version.

The dubbing says one thing, while the subtitles say another thing.

Interestingly, Díaz Cintas (2012) states that viewers who can evaluate the accuracy of a translation often criticize translators for producing milder and softened versions. It is also worth quoting Gambier's "why translate at all", if the censorship erases almost everything in the film. If translation only reproduces and imitates the norms and conventions of the target culture, it becomes a tool for cultural protectionism which erases the otherness and foreignness of the program (Gambier, 2018).

4.2.4. Political Distrust

A fourth dimension of users' reactions was political discourse surrounding dubbing censorship. Indeed, dubbing censorship can contribute to broader social distrust, leading to a growing sense of distrust toward the state. Many viewers feel they can no longer rely on the government, suspecting that censorship is being imposed across various aspects of society, let alone dubbing:

The whole country is built on lies, yet you're searching for lies in cartoons.

This very censorship shows just how easily the Islamic Republic has deceived us.

Wherever this flag appears, it means censorship—censorship of truth, dreams and the future.

In the last comment, the user suggested that when the flag of Iran appears at the beginning of a film or a dubbed film to indicate that it is Persian, censorship is inevitable. In other words, they believe that almost every dubbed production in Iran contains some level of censorship, which means viewers are deprived of the truth.

Some users also viewed censorship as a sign of the government's regressive nature. This perception is rooted in the belief that the state's values are outdated and that it tries to strictly control and monitor content to ensure it aligns with its conservative ideology:

God, please give an open mind to those stupid people who censor.

In the Islamic Republic [of Iran], even women's breasts are considered unnecessary.

Their mindset is still stuck in the Stone Age!

The above comments suggest that users' expectations for high-quality dubbing do not align with the professional standards in the Iranian AVT system, largely due to the state's excessive control over translated audiovisual content. They said that these governments censor films and cartoons to silence people and stop them from seeing different ideas and values, highlighting a broader, systematic suppression of freedom:

They censor the word "freedom" because they fear the people's awareness.

If you remove "freedom", nothing is left in the film.

Totalitarian and socialist governments are so fearful that even the word "freedom" in animations is suppressed.

Wasn't their own slogan "freedom"? So why are they afraid of this word now?

The above comments were made in a post discussing the two different dubbings of the animated film *Chicken Run*. In the original version and first dubbing, Molly says, "And that's what we want ... freedom." However, in the second dubbing, which aired on national TV, the word "freedom" was

omitted. This change led viewers to interpret the censorship through a political lens. They viewed it as a sign of fear from the government, which might worry that merely mentioning the word “freedom” could inspire people to demand it in their society.

4.2.5. Religious Considerations

We also observed responses addressing censorship from a religious perspective. The users expressed concern that religious perspectives are used to justify or inform censorial decisions. This makes sense since Iran is an Islamic country. As Pakar and Khoshsaligheh (2021) indicate, dubbed films undergo substantial adaptation and censorship to align with Islamic principles and prevailing cultural norms in Iran. In particular, some viewers expressed anti-Muslim sentiments and skepticism toward Islam in response to dubbing censorship:

It feels like we’ve gone back 1,400 years—human ignorance and foolishness are truly dangerous.

It’s ridiculous that even words in animations can offend or provoke them [sexually].

If they were honest, Islam might actually be in danger—ha-ha.

These comments raise important points. The first comment addresses the origins of Islam, approximately 1,400 years ago, suggesting that the laws and norms of that time may no longer be relevant in the modern world. As a result, audiences today may not view censorship based on religious grounds as effective. The second comment critiques censors who even view Children’s animated films as sexually provocative, implying that they themselves are easily provoked. This suggests that censorship authorities in Iran are overly rigorous, restricting content without sufficient reason. While the comments discuss religious matters, they indirectly address AVT censorship in Iran.

In contrast, a minority of users expressed concern about offensive language and insults targeting religious beliefs in the comments. They emphasized the importance of respecting all beliefs and individuals, arguing that “If we claim to be humane, we should avoid humiliating or mocking any group”. For this group, censorship on religious grounds is justifiable as a means of respecting religious values. As one user mentioned regarding the film *Dune*, some felt that it had insulted sacred religious figures in Islam.

This film was mainly made with political intentions to insult Islam and the holy prophets.

In practice, censorship refers to the alteration or removal of sensitive references related to religion, sexuality or politics (Chaume, 2012). Therefore, this is often justified on moral or religious grounds to protect societal values (Merkle, 2018), as some users support censorship to protect individuals’ religious values from being undermined.

4.3. The Elicited Data Findings

To better understand viewers' perceptions of dubbing censorship and expand on archival findings, interviews were conducted with selected users. It was found that their views were multifaceted, encompassing emotional, intellectual, cultural and accessibility dimensions.

Many interviewees felt mocked, ridiculed or frustrated by censorship as they viewed it as insulting to their intelligence. They believed censorship compromises the film's authenticity, giving it a distorted or artificial quality. This issue has led some to say they avoid watching films and TV shows dubbed into Persian. One participant, however, adopted a neutral position, arguing that there is now easy access to both censored and uncensored versions in Iran, so there is no reason for frustration when one can simply watch the uncensored version with free subtitles. Nonetheless, almost all participants expressed a preference for uncensored audiovisual products, seeing them as more accurate representations of the original. As Chaume (2012) views, contemporary audiences have little patience for AVT censorship.

While the interviewees acknowledged that censorship might be somewhat acceptable for content aimed at children and young adults, they opposed it when it came to adult media. It is worth noting that one problem arises from foreign animated products, such as *Frozen* that appeal to both children and adults. One participant suggested that two dubbed versions should be created for these products: one that is suitable for children and may potentially include some layers of censorship to align with local cultural norms in Iran, and another uncensored version for adults. This approach, she argued, would respect the unique style of the original work while offering options appropriate for different audiences.

Interviewees attributed censorship to cultural, political, moral, religious and social differences between the source and target culture. They argued that these disparities often result in altered content that undermines the film's meaning and makes it less enjoyable. They emphasized the importance of watching the foreign product in its proper form, as the original creators intended:

With censorship, the whole story shifts—the relationships between characters feel different, and the film ends up disjointed and confusing for the audience.

We want the film to be honest and genuine, not something fabricated or distorted.

Indeed, these viewers highlight a desire for greater authenticity and agency in their media consumption. For Bucaria (2023), audience empowerment compels the AVT industry to take accountability, driving it to adapt and localize content based on their feedback. The interviewees indicated that censorship in the AVT industry is largely ineffective, noting that many viewers can readily access uncensored or original versions, which renders censorship attempts ineffective. Relatedly, Magazzù (2023) states that censorship in dubbing may encourage viewers to seek alternative, less controlled forms of content, such as fansubbing.

Additionally, they mentioned that the rise of cultural exchanges and global connectivity makes it unrealistic to limit the transmission of different behaviors and ideas. Interestingly, they believed that the censorship apparatus could counter its effects by increasing curiosity and interest in content. Indeed, as explained earlier in this paper, some Instagram pages shared dubbed clips extracted from films or TV shows alongside their original versions to demonstrate how dubbing creates a different interpretation. Therefore, these viewers consider censorship to be ineffective:

Why censor content when technology makes it so easy for people to access uncensored versions?

In fact, censorship might even backfire by sparking curiosity, leading people to actively seek out the very content that's being hidden.

They also maintained that censorship has the potential to result in misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the foreign culture and characters portrayed in the product. For instance, censoring female characters' clothing in films and TV shows to depict them as Iranian women, based on local modesty norms, misrepresent the original cultural and its nuances. Such changes may distort the audience's comprehension of cultural diversity, creating a biased perception of the source culture:

With so much censorship in films, how am I supposed to understand the original culture?

In the dubbed version of *My Daddy Long Legs*, I thought Judy Abbott was portrayed as very composed and reserved around men. But when I watched the original version, I realized her character was actually quite different from how she appeared in the dubbed version.

Censorship violates the basic right to enjoy films unaltered, which undermines the principle of media accessibility for equitable access to audiovisual content (Greco, 2022):

Viewers have the intelligence to decide for themselves what they want to watch.

Censorship is like forgetting to watch foreign films.

Overall, the respondents expressed support for the creation of multiple dubbing versions to cater to different tastes and preferences, addressing the demands of both opponents and supporters of censorship in Iran. These "competing tensions" illustrate the differing perspectives among audience members (Bucaria, 2024, p. 58), highlighting the complexity of audience reactions to content censorship in AVT.

5. Conclusion

This exploratory study investigated how Iranian viewers perceive Persian dubbing censorship on Instagram. The main finding suggests that users generally oppose censorship in dubbing, considering it a poor media strategy for contemporary audiences. Their negative reactions, however, go beyond

the mere dislike of censorship. Indeed, they reflect a complex interplay of socio-cultural and psychological factors, which include concerns about freedom of expression, cultural identity and state control of media in Iran. This shows that attitudes toward dubbing censorship are mainly rooted—though not always—in deeper social tensions rather than only personal preferences. These perspectives advocate for AVT practices that preserve the original content’s integrity while meeting the diverse demands of viewers. Offering multiple versions and using paratextual tools like tags and disclaimers can balance cultural sensitivity and authenticity (Bucaria, 2024).

Although the findings may hold value and relevance for the existing literature, they should be interpreted within the specific context of this inquiry. This study’s Instagram-only focus restricts the generalizability of its findings. Future research should expand its scope by including larger participant groups and diverse online settings. Examining archival data presents some challenges, as it is nearly impossible to account for the demographics of users; therefore, this makes data interpretation difficult. For example, it was unclear what the users’ AVT habits are, such as whether they watch films and TV shows with dubbing or subtitles. Additionally, there was no information regarding their exposure to uncensored content. Experimental research can provide more objective insights into the correlation between users’ AVT background and their tolerance of censorship (see Briechle & Eppler, 2019). Moreover, the data in this study were limited to individuals who posted on Instagram, meaning that it primarily represents engaged or opinionated users, which may provide a biased perspective on the topic. Thus, future studies should also examine silent users who rarely comment on social media. Additionally, users’ reactions to the translation and censorship of taboo language should be examined in different socio-cultural settings. Researchers are also encouraged to consider other media platforms, especially Twitter, where activism is at its peak. To conclude, the study echoes the need for more research to better understand how viewers perceive censorship or other micro-issues in AVT on social media.

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