

## ***The Intersection of Visual Culture, Politics, and Eating Disorders in Turkish Media: A Case Study on Hayat and Elele Magazines***

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### **Abstract**

In this research paper, I aim to explore the intersection of visual culture, advertising, and eating disorders, specifically focusing on Turkish media and magazine culture viewed through a feminist lens. I will examine how visual culture in Turkey perpetuates unrealistic body standards and contributes to eating disorders with a case study focusing on Hayat and Elele magazines. I will also discuss how feminist theory provides insights into these dynamics, drawing on academic research. Aside from feminist theory, I will be grounding my research on multiple theories, such as intersectionality, affect theory, objectification theory, and social comparison theory. Additionally, I will share some of the archival material I collected and some of my field notes to support my research.

Keywords: Eating Disorders, Feminist Theory, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Visual Culture

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## Introduction

Women's lifestyle magazines create identities and collective meanings, influencing everyday practices and social and cultural environments. In the rapidly changing world, the roles and social positionality of women have transformed through media outlets such as women's magazines. In the weekly publication of women's magazines, women are oriented towards consuming desired images and products in accordance with their appearance and personality through diet programs that target patriarchal ideal beauty standards. This phenomenon has drawn the attention of social science researchers and some academics. It is claimed that "The impact of women's and lifestyle magazines on the body, beauty images, and the development of eating disorders in women is significant." This advertisement revenue in magazines such as *Elele* and *Hayat* has allowed the formation of a media sector that has controlled, through the articulation of food, diet, and the ideal body, to create many women's lifestyles and needs and then offer solutions. In doing so, it produces subjectivity and, as such, has become an important way of conveying the media's power to affect women's relationship with their bodies and their eating patterns. Thus, looking into how these diet columns in women's magazines in Turkey offers a perspective on the historical construction of how patriarchal strategies have been shaped and constructed, especially after the political changes in the country with the election of Neoliberal president Turgut Özal.

In this research, I aim to bring a broader understanding of eating disorders as a symptom of the gender regime and its strategies reflected in magazines and advertisements while looking at eating disorders not simply as a mental illness diagnosis linked to eating patterns but as a form of disciplining and punishing the female body that is mostly seen as self-inflicted. I try to create a multi-disciplinary baseline, looking at ideologies and attitudes towards the female body through examples of visual culture in a historical context.

Throughout this research paper, I will focus on *Hayat* and *Elele* magazine's diet columns as well as other articles focusing on weight loss and their connection with the development of eating disorders and/or disordered eating patterns. With a focus on issues printed after Turkey had undergone the effects of neoliberal politics in the 1980s, this research also critically aims to approach the relationship between the economy, politics, capitalism, and the media messages in women's magazines. One of the main factors contributing to changes in the role of women in identity construction is the content presented in these magazines, which are strategically organized and influenced by dominant discourses of patriarchal forces. Through diet, celebrity interviews, makeup, sex, recipe pages, fashion, house, horoscope, and "problem-solving" columns, these magazines serve as tools for the gender regime, attributing to the control over the female body, desires, and appetites.

## Defining Eating Disorders

First, to introduce a background to current knowledge presented to us by psychological studies, we can look at the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychological Association), which is recognized worldwide to diagnose mental disorders by medical professionals and used by psychology scholars. There are three specified eating disorders listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychological Association: Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder (Moore & Mycek, 2014).

## Historical Context

Understanding the history of eating disorders involves exploring the historical view of the female body and desire. Misogyny's power mechanisms are rooted in desire, evident since the 17th Century, with Puritanism restricting female sexual desire. This led to disciplined eating behaviors and restricted relationships with food. In the 19th Century, women were limited to eating for nutrition and avoiding spicy foods due to their perceived impact on sexual desire. The 20th Century introduced restrictions on both pleasure from sex and food, unsuitable for late capitalism's consumption demands. As the suppression of all desires led to reduced consumption, the methodology evolved alongside the rise of capitalist movements such as commodity fetishism. This phenomenon has redefined the female body as a commodity, shifting from oppression to reorientation. Consequently, the concept of controlled hedonism has surfaced through advertising, aiming not to stifle but to stimulate, direct, and regulate desires (Turner, 2008). Women's magazines are perceived as manifestations of commodity fetishism, promoting the notion that beauty, fashion, physique, nutrition, intimacy, and domestic bliss can be attained through the products and lifestyle choices they endorse. These values are upheld as indispensable for women to command significance within society.

The reflections of this phenomenon are evident in the evolving visual culture of Turkey, which commenced in the 1970s and became notably pronounced following the 1984 elections when the Neo-Liberal politician Turgut Özal assumed the presidency. Thus, starting in the 20th century, the female physique transitioned into a commodified entity, with control, discipline, and labor invested in its construction, which served as emblematic of power and value within society. This phenomenon of commodification, stemming from capitalism, ascribed social significance to the slender female form (Gilman, 1999). Attaining a slender physique was deemed as the sole pathway for women to cultivate a sound psyche, thereby gaining societal acceptance and evolving into a 'high-value woman.' Subsequent to Özal's election, issues of the *Hayat* magazine consistently feature sections spotlighting empowered, emancipated, and accomplished women under the rubric "Young and Successful Women," accompanied by segments delineating Hollywood dietary regimens.

In the 1980s, Turkey entered a brand-new era in both economy and politics. Economic trends direct societies' diets the same way they direct people's lives. Foods are like physical and sensory representations of cultural and natural features of societies, and at the same time, the dietary practices of these societies reflect constantly changing views in terms of nature-culture relationships. There is a permanent order in which nature and culture exist within people's diets. Meals display familiarity, stability, power, and relationships, which we see reflected in the "recipe" columns in these magazines. It's possible to say that *Hayat* and *Elele* magazines especially aimed to bring "modernity" into their readers' kitchens in their diet pages. How were body and diet approached by those magazines, under which promises they targeted women? Or rather, did these diet programs serve to transform the female body into a prospective, flexible, and active subject favored by neoliberal politics through the growth of the "liberal, autonomous individual" and ideal "consuming subjects"?

It is almost normal to feed the capitalist production, and it is an essential part of the patriarchal system itself. The selected programs are designed from head to toe, from hair to makeup, from fashion to sports, to diet lists. Indeed, in a society based on product consumption, new trends of body-based commodification, development, and propaganda emerged. The media organs like magazines, whose task is to show what is happening in the social and economic dimensions of society, are, therefore, great tools for feeding the market.

At the time, the magazines, especially *Hayat*, targeted all the people, regardless of their level of political understanding, religious beliefs, and ideological rules, who came across music, sports, art, personal and sexual life, and all this with an impetuous package. As a result, appearance becomes a product that is humiliated and used by commercials and magazine columns.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### ***Feminist Theory***

Feminist theory shifts the lens beyond the individual in recognizing the effects that culture can have on how women perceive their bodies and the changes in their relationship with their bodies outside of the direct relationship of mental illnesses and trauma. One of the many examples is the *Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf, where she analyses the patterns of self-consciousness and self-hatred caused by the "impossible to reach" beauty ideals as a control mechanism of the male-dominated ideologies and breaks down the patriarchal forces that shape those ideals (Wolf, 1995).

Feminists stress the importance of early sexual experience and propose that reproductive power can be suppressed through disturbed nutrition. However, most feminists argue that eating patterns are not only produced for control and power but also symbolize emotional and bodily coming into existence. According to Martin and George in the field, people eat as a method for dealing with separate issues like sexuality conflicts, identity problems, search for control, and emotional pain. They also argue that the excessive interest in the physical being has strengthened the categorization of human experience in relation to the body, and this attractiveness has become an obsession of self-neglect and denial.

### ***Social Comparison Theory***

The Social Comparison Theory originated from Festinger in 1954. Wood later expanded the theory in 1987, suggesting that comparing oneself with celebrities and media figures boosts self-image.

Most individuals encounter unrealistic, thin images of women in the mass media through persuasive images more than they physically encounter women in real life. People who are more exposed to the mass media by passively exposing themselves to them, and because of the already discussed persuasive influences, are more influenced by persuasive images than those who do not actively expose themselves to the mass media. Individuals become dissatisfied with the perceptions of their bodies through comparing themselves with these idealized body types (something they are aware is unachievable) and feel that if they could attain the idealized body type, they would have a better life and a better -polished image. Currently, the mass media becomes the gateway to a new world through advertisements for slimming products. Individuals who are dissatisfied with their body and feel obligated to obtain a beautiful body develop an aesthetic inclination.

### ***Objectification Theory***

Objectification theory in feminism highlights the impact of societal norms on individuals' mental and physical well-being. Fredrickson and Roberts view objectification as reducing individuals to physical appearance and judging them based on beauty standards. This theory

suggests that women, often objectified by men, internalize this experience, leading to mental health issues. It focuses on two main processes: 'other-objectification,' where women strive to conform to cultural beauty ideals, affecting mental health, and 'self-objectification,' where women view themselves as objects and prioritize physical attractiveness (Frederickson & Robers, 1997).

### ***Affect Theory***

Affect theory, from a feminist perspective, interrogates the intricate relationship between emotion, power structures, and social dynamics. Rooted in the exploration of how affective forces shape individual experiences and societal formations, feminist scholars delve into the nuanced ways emotions are produced, circulated, and politicized within various contexts. At its core, affect theory challenges traditional understandings of emotion as purely internal, emphasizing instead the relational and embodied nature of affective experiences (Ahmed, 2004). From this standpoint, emotions are not static states but rather dynamic forces that are inherently tied to social, political, and cultural contexts. Feminist scholars employ affect theory to scrutinize the ways in which gendered power relations intersect with affective experiences, influencing everything from intimate relationships to broader social structures (Hemmings, 2005). This lens allows for a deeper understanding of how emotions are mobilized to reinforce or resist patriarchal norms (Hochschild, 1983), offering insights into the lived experiences of individuals marginalized by gender hierarchies. By centering affect in feminist analysis, scholars aim to illuminate the complex interplay between emotions, subjectivity, and social change (Clough, 2007), ultimately contributing to more nuanced understandings of gendered experiences.

### ***Intersectionality***

Intersectionality, a concept central to feminist theory, acknowledges that social identities such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability intersect and mutually constitute each other, shaping individuals' experiences of privilege and oppression. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality emphasizes the interconnected nature of multiple forms of discrimination and inequality, challenging traditional feminist frameworks that often prioritize white, middle-class, heterosexual experiences (Crenshaw, 1991).

### **Literature Review**

There is a never-ending pressure against individuals to look a certain, predetermined way, and this pressure is at the center of body image troubles for all age and gender groups. However, the societal pressure towards body size and weight is historically targeted at women, making this a gendered issue. Roberta Pollack Seid touches on the history behind thin privilege and the societal pressure towards fatness, as well as mainstream movements of the 1960s and, by extension, the increasing size discrimination that changed how women perceive their bodies (Seid, 1989). These "developments" caused us to see our bodies as things to be improved and worked on, promoting the idea of a perfect body, which in most cases is almost impossible to achieve without going to extremes. While most people would say their need to alter their body or their dislike towards it is an internal issue, research shows that being exposed to the visual culture around thinness and beauty ideals is linked to increasing body dissatisfaction in both women and men, hence the development of disordered eating (Fernandez, Pritchard, 2012). Through internalizing such value systems, we begin developing this misconception of "self-worth" linked to our appearance. Susie Orbach

additionally invites us to see the effects of forced visual culture on people and how it's much larger and broader than we realize, embedded in our society, and our personalities (Orbach).

Payton refers to all this advertised thin privilege, and the attempts to push women to discipline their bodies quite clearly as a "war against women's bodies" and an "assault on the adult female form," using a metaphor by Wolf. (Payton, 2012) Unfortunately, we are surrounded by a visual culture that serves the same cause, and body shaming is embedded into it. These images are the weapons used in what Payton refers to as war against women. While these magazine pages, advertisements, diet programs and images of thin models are presented as motivators for women to become healthier and happier, they are "far from benign," and they feed body hatred. (Orbach, 2009) Discussing body hatred and how it is consumed unconsciously through media is critical, as research shows a direct relationship between media consumption and eating disorder symptoms. (Stice et al. 1994) This argument goes to prove my point in terms of personal being political; while eating disorders are seen as the extreme effects of these interventions, they are the perfect examples of how far patriarchy can go to preserve its power over women. This ongoing visual and verbal attack targeting the female body has a history that goes back to 1930s advertisements and has continued its streak until today, while changing its form throughout the years.

Numerous scholars view this approach as a political tactic for regulating women's bodies. Simone de Beauvoir eloquently suggests that doubting one's body equates to doubting oneself (Beauvoir, 2016). To be effective, this strategy requires internalization. Various factors like diet culture, the pursuit of a slim body, and notions of empowerment, choice, and willpower contribute to this internalization on a subconscious level. Media messages often prompt women to enhance their bodies (Orbach, 2009). The question arises: How do these mechanisms facilitate the widespread acceptance of societal ideals?

### ***Mechanisms of Influence***

1. Exposure to idealized images in Turkish media leads individuals, especially youth, to perceive these standards as achievable and essential for success and acceptance. Cultivation theory posits that continuous media exposure molds viewers' reality perceptions (Gerbner, 1998).
2. Advertisements and magazines frequently prompt people to compare themselves with the models they showcase, fostering body dissatisfaction due to unattainable beauty standards. Festinger's (1954) theory elucidates how individuals assess their worth based on comparisons with media representations.
3. Over time, people may adopt the beauty standards from ads, believing their value relies on meeting these ideals. This can drive actions to change their bodies. Objectification theory suggests women learn to see themselves as if through others' eyes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

### ***Understanding the Turkish Context***

Turkish ads and magazines frequently depict women as beauty objects, linking their value to looks. This reinforcement of objectification leads to body image issues and eating disorders. Nussbaum (1999) defines objectification as viewing a person, particularly women, as lacking agency and subjectivity. Patriarchal beauty standards in Turkish media prioritize women's

looks over other qualities, enforcing harmful stereotypes and unrealistic norms. Despite promoting choice and empowerment, media still align with traditional beauty ideals, known as 'postfeminist sensibility' per Gill (2007). The focus intensified post-1984 with Turkey's Neo-Liberal president's election, showcasing empowered, self-disciplined women in magazines, which I will discuss in detail in the Case Study section of this paper and provide examples.

### ***Previous Research in Turkey***

Studies conducted in Turkey have shown that exposure to media images and the consumption of magazine content in Turkey is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms.

The historical significance of Hayat and Elele magazines in shaping Turkish culture and media consumption patterns is well-documented. Hayat, founded in 1956 by Şevket Rado, played a pivotal role in reflecting and influencing modern Turkish culture during its peak years. As Bozdoğan (2001) highlights, Hayat catered to the aspirations of the urban middle class by showcasing Western lifestyles and modern cultural elements, thus contributing to the cultural modernization of Turkey. Toprak (2008) underscores Hayat's role in popularizing Western norms and values, thereby accelerating the integration of Western cultural practices in Turkey. The magazine provided its readers with insights into global trends in fashion, cinema, and the arts, positioning itself as a critical medium for modern cultural dissemination. Despite its cessation in the early 1990s due to the advent of television and changing media preferences, Hayat left a lasting impact on Turkish society by fostering a modern cultural outlook and influencing the public discourse on various social and political issues (Sancar, 2007).

In contrast, Elele, launched in 1976 by Ercan Arıklı, focused specifically on the evolving needs and interests of Turkish women. Çelik (2014) describes Elele as a pioneering platform for addressing women's issues, balancing traditional roles with contemporary lifestyles, and advocating for gender equality and women's rights. The magazine tackled a wide range of topics from fashion and beauty to health and social issues, aligning itself closely with the aspirations and challenges of modern Turkish women. Arıklı (2001) highlights the magazine's successful adaptation to digital media, allowing it to maintain its influence into the modern era. This adaptability contrasts with the decline of traditional print media, as exemplified by Hayat. Research by Erdoğan (2013) and Kaya (2010) indicates that Elele and similar women's magazines have significantly impacted body image perceptions and eating behaviors among Turkish women. These studies reveal that the portrayal of Western beauty standards in Elele contributes to increased body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms, reflecting broader trends identified by Ata et al. (2007) and Doğan (2011) in their examinations of media's influence on body image. Elele's ongoing relevance underscores its ability to adapt and continue addressing contemporary women's concerns, contrasting with the more traditional media approaches exemplified by Hayat.

### **Case Study, Hayat and Elele Magazines**

Magazines, which prepare content with the target audience's interests and are defined as a mass media element that brings individuals to the main purpose of consumption, can be accepted as the most important media element that brings together various market goods. Women, on the other hand, allocate the information presented in these magazines to meet

their needs, solve their problems, and bridge their "inadequacies". From this perspective, individuals are faced with a greedy diet and exercise culture in these magazines. Thus, I was motivated to investigate women's magazines in Turkey, focusing on issues printed in the 1980s, because of the previous insight I provided into neoliberal politics' impact on media and its deep connection to capitalist trends around the female body.

At first, I was interested in Kadınca magazine. However, upon further research I realized it was a rather feminist publication compared to other magazines of the time such as Hayat and Elele magazine. One of the limitations I faced in this research was the lack of archival material. While more feminist publications such as Kadınca magazine, or openly feminist magazines such as Pazartesi had a wide collection under Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi, popular culture and lifestyle magazines like Elele and Hayat could only be found in second-hand book shops. In my short "field trip" I went to the biggest passage of second hand book shops in İstanbul, in Kadıköy. There I could only find one store with Elele magazine issues. And to my luck, they had a collectioners binned "book" of Hayat magazine containing the issues printed after Özal's election. I skimmed through all the issues of Elele magazine they had, electing the one's printed after 1980's. During my field, we had a conversation with the owner. He provided with me with some information on how these magazines were not conserved at all and the only way they could attain them was when they scavenged abandoned apartments. Additionally I attained the three edition copy of the Turkey Ad Archive, which similarly mentioned the same issues with lack of preservation over these archival materials. In conclusion, it wasn't easy to collect material for this research but fortunately I found enough to work with.

Hayat magazine is a rather well-rounded publication that does not only target female readers. Both local and political politics are part of the issues, as well as a section dedicated to health problems offering solutions. Hayat is highly influenced by political ideologies of the time, highlighting the ideal "modern Turkish woman" profile as a liberated, empowered, autonomous woman, who is in charge of her career and her body. By contrast, Elele often draws on family values and motherhood. Additionally, Elele strictly focuses on topics such as reproductive health for women, childcare, diets, and celebrities. Elele also differentiates itself from Hayat by providing a side publication focusing on adolescent girls, where most of the weight-loss content is located.



Figure 1, 2: Genç ve Başarılı Kadınlar (Young and Successful Women) and The Cover page, Hayat Magazine, 1984

In the Hayat magazine case, we see clear reflections of neoliberal politics in the sections dedicated to “Young and Successful Women.” However, by contrast, these articles are followed by Hollywood Diets, which is the obvious selling point as the cover only mentions the diet promising weight loss.

Elele, on the other hand, takes it a step further by providing exercise programs, not only diet lists, targeting a large age group of women, from adolescents to post-partum women. Articles dissecting the female body into parts and offering solutions to “alleged” problems.



Figure 3, 4, 5: “It’s trendy to lose weight by gaining muscles now”, “be ready for summer”, Elele Magazine

On the side-issue of Elele magazine, called Genç Kız (Young Girl), there are columns dedicated to questions from the readers. As previous research suggests, we see that young readers are highly self-conscious about their bodies.



Figure 6: “Can I lose weight by eating fruit?”, “Yes! Without compromising your health!”

The figure above showcases a question by a teenage reader regarding eating only fruit to lose weight. The answer reassures the reader by saying eating only fruit once a week is the easiest

and healthiest way to lose weight. Elele even gives tips on enduring the starvation and fatigue of eating only fruit by adding one to two carrots to the diet(!) As we can see in this example, Elele preys on impressionable teenage girls by advertising unhealthy eating patterns.

The problems begin when a naive reader starts asking herself questions: "if she can, why can't I? Is she more determined? More disciplined? Does she love herself more? What's wrong with me? What can I do to be more like her?" Readers twist or endure. They accept deprivation, psychological hunger, decreased energy and fatigue. Through advertising this type of weight loss advice, a mental health condition can be transformed into the latest trendy diet plan followed by celebrities in Hollywood. The pervasive diet culture has led to the acceptance and integration of unhealthy practices like starvation and using laxative teas, which are now labeled as "intermittent fasting," 'cleansing,' or 'detoxing.'

Elele not only preys on adolescent girls but also the traditional family values of Turkey. An interesting article caught my eye on one of the issues called "When My Mom Gains Weight." Where children aged between 6 to 12 were interviewed. Aside from the insulting caricature in the article, the answers provided evidence into the influence of these magazines in women's body image and even possibly causing disordered eating patterns, as well as the reflections of such patterns in the family environment.



Figure 7: "Annem Kilo Alınca..." (When My Mom Gains Weight), Elele Magazine

I will provide translations of some responses from the interviews in this article:

"My mom is a sucker for skinny. She constantly weighs and measures herself."

"Unfortunately, my mother is a bit of a chubby woman. My father sometimes tells her you can tell a woman's youth by her body. Then , she suddenly stops eating and drinking. Then she becomes weak and gets sick." "There is a scale on our dining table. My mother weighs everything she eats, even the bread, and records the calories she will consume on the piece of paper next to her."

While Hayat magazine is no longer active, Elele magazine, to this day continues its tradition, by giving out 170 page diet booklets as gifts with their newest issue.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, women's magazines in Turkey, play a significant role in understanding how the ideologies adopt media strategies to construct beauty and social ideals for women and contributing to the development of eating disorders. From a feminist perspective, these media representations perpetuate patriarchal standards that objectify women and prioritize appearance over other attributes. The historical context shows a shift from repression to controlled hedonism, where the female body becomes a commodity symbolizing societal value. Feminist theory provides a critical lens through which we can understand the broader cultural impacts on body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Studies have shown that exposure to media images in Turkey is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms, highlighting the need for diverse and realistic representations of women's bodies.

As we move forward, it is crucial to continue challenging the harmful portrayals of women in media and advocate for a more inclusive and realistic representation of all body types. By raising awareness and promoting media literacy, we can help mitigate the negative impacts of visual culture on body image and reduce the prevalence of eating disorders. Let us work together to create a society where we can work on preventing the development of these life-altering disorders as a protection for the next generations.

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