

## REFLECTION ON THE THEORETICAL JOURNEY OF MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM, FEMINISM, AND MASS COMMUNICATION IN A RELATIONAL CONTEXT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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### ABSTRACT

Theoretical developments in the literature of social sciences have enriched scientific knowledge. As social developments, changes, and transformations shape social theories, it is possible to articulate that social theories that share the same period actually feed each other, even if each approach diverges within itself. This study argues that the chronological periodisation of pre-modernism, modernism and post-modernism is similarly applied to mass communication studies and feminist theories, and that each period has a theoretical perspective that feeds into each other. In particular, issues of gender equality and social development are included in the study, and it is expected that the perspective of what periods they cover in terms of historical periods, what mass media they are in active relationship with, and what wave of feminist movement they correspond to will develop and enrich this study in general. In this sense, this study is designed as a theoretical study; for this reason, by following a chronological historical narrative within the study, taking into account digital feminism, which is accepted as the fourth wave of feminism, how different waves of feminism and especially approaches to television and the Internet affect and feed each other are discussed within the framework of mass communication theories. As a result of the study, it is suggested that while a theory can be considered in a vacuum, the consideration of theories together, on a relational level and within their own periodicity, will contribute to the enrichment of both theoretical and practical studies. In this sense, the mentioned information will be particularly useful in studies on gender equality and social development.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism, Mass Communication, Development

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## SÜRDÜRÜLEBİLİR KALKINMAYA YÖNELİK ÇALIŞMALAR İÇİN MODERNİZM/POSTMODERNİZM, FEMİNİZM VE KİTLE İLETİŞİMİN İLİŞKİSEL BAĞLAMDA TEORİK SERÜVENİ ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNME

### ÖZET

Sosyal bilimler yazınındakiteorik gelişmeler bilimsel bilginin zenginleşmesini sağlamıştır. Her bir yaklaşım kendi içinde ayrılsa da aslında birbirini beslemektedir. Toplumsal gelişmeler, değişim ve dönüşümler sosyal teorileri şekillendirirken; aslında, aynı dönemi paylaşan sosyal teorilerin de birbirini beslediği ifade edilebilir. Bu çalışma da özellikle modern öncesi, modernizm ve modernizm sonrası (postmodernizm) şekilde kronojik olarak yapılan dönemselleştirmelerin, benzer şekilde kitle iletişim çalışmaları ve feminist teoriler için de yapıldığı ve her bir dönemin kendi içinde birbirini besleyen teorik düzleme sahip olduğunu savunmaktadır. Özellikle yapılacak olan toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve kalkınmaya yönelikçalışmaları da ele alınan konunun hangi döneme ait olduğu, o dönemin kitle iletişim aracının hangisi olduğu ve hangi feminist dalgaya karşılık geldiğine yönelik perspektifin, çalışmayı genel çerçevede geliştireceği ve zenginleştireceği düşünülmektedir. Bu anlamda teorik bir çalışma olarak şekillendirilmiştir. Çalışma içerisinde modern öncesi, modernist ve postmodernist dönem, birinci dalga feminizm, ikinci dalga feminizm ve üçüncü dalga feminizm ve kitle iletişim teorileri özellikle televizyona ve internete yönelik yaklaşımların birbirlerini nasıl etkilediği ve beslediği ele alınmıştır. Çalışmanın sonucunda hem teorilerin nasıl birbirini beslediği hem de her bir teorinin tek başına düşünülmesinden bir arada, ilişkisel düzlemde ve kendi dönemselleştirmesinin içerisinde düşünülmesinin gerek teorik gerekse pratik çalışmaların zenginleşmesine katkı sağlayacağı ortaya konulmuştur. Bu anlamda özellikle toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve kalkınmaya yönelik çalışmalarda kullanışlı olacağı ifade edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Modernizm, Postmodernizm, Feminizm, Kitle İletişim, Kalkınma

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considering the scientific trajectory of social sciences literature that has been shaped after the Enlightenment Period chronologically, it is undeniable that this literature has become quite robust. Many theoretical approaches have developed and enriched over time as a product of the cumulative progress of science. At times, criticisms of the approaches presented have necessitated revisions in the literature and, in some cases, even led to this literature taking on a completely new form. However, the actional form, which changes and transforms the structure of social events, has directly characterised the approaches to the social sciences. While the cornerstones that deeply affect society and initiate a new process have brought fundamental theoretical distinctions, they have also sometimes led to the emergence of relatively less effective and revisionist theoretical approaches within the processes.

The distinction between the pre-modern period, the modern period and the post-modern period is one of the cornerstones describing a new process. Although there is no clear consensus on the acceptance of postmodernism as a new process and its reality is questioned, and although there are still debates on its revision as a mere new modernism (Giddens, 2010), the existence of such a chronological distinction is obvious. A similar chronological distinction can also be seen in mass communication studies and feminist theories. While mass media studies are subject to a chronological distinction in the context of instruments and technological devices developed and produced thanks to rapidly developing technology, feminist theories are also known to be divided into four different feminist waves - with the fourth wave of feminism, which in recent years has been called digital feminism - under the influence of social developments and changes and transformations in ideas about gender roles.

The main argument of this study is that the theoretical approaches that have emerged simultaneously or in the recent past in the social science literature are mutually reinforcing and that considering them together provides a rich perspective for theoretical studies. In particular, this perspective is thought to be useful in studies of gender equality and community development. A broad theoretical framework for the issues to be addressed for social development will enrich the studies. In particular, it is observed that the chronological distinctions of feminist theories are influenced by the pre-modern, modern and post-modern periods at the theoretical level and also affect the discourses of these periods. While the digitalisation process is evaluated together with the postmodernist process, these processes also have an active role in shaping the third and fourth-wave feminism movements. Therefore, it is an epistemological idea that should be taken into consideration that this periodisation mutually

feeds each other and affects each other relationally, especially in gender studies. This study aims to formulate the aforementioned idea. In this context, it can be stated that it is a theoretical study. In the first part of the study, the interaction of modernist and postmodernist theories and feminist theories is mentioned. In the second part of the study, the relationality of mass communication theories and feminist theories is discussed. In the conclusion, similar studies and the general evaluation of the idea in question are included.

## **2. MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM AND GENDER THEORIES**

Ideas about the nature and characteristics of femininity and masculinity, and discussions about gender roles have existed from archaic times to the present. However, each period has created a set of gender norms within itself. The marginalisation of women due to their exposure to a hierarchical social order and their exposure to social, economic, legal and political inequalities required the questioning of these norms and their submission to change and transformation, and this situation led to the formation of gender theories. The first concrete criticism related to women's rights was made against the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted in France in 1789. Although the declaration mentioned concepts such as equal rights, freedom, and citizenship among people, the concept of 'citizen' in question corresponded to the concept of 'male citizen' in French. Therefore, it is known that the situation in question was primarily criticised from the perspective of women's rights. As a counter-critique, in 1791, Olympe De Douglas put forward the Declaration of the Rights of of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen, a 17-article document expressing the inherent rights of women just like men (Saygılıgil, 2016, p. 15). The Declaration shaped the motto that women and men should have equal rights before the law, which is the main argument of first-wave feminism (Gedik, 2020, p. 124).

Within the framework of basic ideas about gender equality, roles and rights, one of the vital issues is fundamentally based on the distinction between biological sex and social gender. The distinction that most people make, and the idea that the sociality of gender is a social construction, is recognised by sociologists (Slattery, 2007, p. 341; Water, 2008, p. 33). While the sex of individuals is innate and inherent, gender is seen as a phenomenon that is constructed, shaped, changed and transformed within the social process. Judith Butler, one of the leading feminist theorists, underlines that gender is performative (Butler, 2020, p. 28). Ann Oakley (1972) states that sex is a biological concept, whereas social gender is a psychological and cultural concept. Deniz Kardiyoti (1997) also says that gender is classified under sex and has a dependent relationship with it. The writer and women's rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft, in developing her discourse on the characteristics attributed to women and the value given to

women in society, also underlines the inequality of rights between men and women by saying “(...) the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex” (1995, p. 76). She emphasises the importance of education for women, stressing that women are not only wives and mothers but are individuals like men and should have the same basic rights as men. With the first wave of feminism, which became influential in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women sought rights both in social life and in the law: they demanded equal rights in many areas, such as the right to education, the right to vote, and the right to work.

The production and imposition of universal values, one of the basic tenets of modernity, has also shaped gender patterns and aimed to legitimise male domination (Çelikkol& Hira, 2022, p. 44). In this respect, instead of choosing to be invisible in the modern world, women have chosen to make their voices heard, initiating a process of transformation under the leadership of the first wave of feminist movements, taking the first steps with the discourse of enjoying the most basic rights. The fact that the male-dominated society could not remain deaf to women’s demands for equal rights and criticism of inequalities in the division of labour has been closely related to the developments and transformations brought about by historical processes. As developments such as the Enlightenment, industrial development, and the rise of capitalism, which are the background to the formation of modernity, have changed the social and economic structures of society, the transition from agrarian to industrial societies and from extended families to nuclear families has necessitated a reassessment of traditional male and female roles. In the shifting economic balance, as women have sought to establish a presence in the workforce, the secondary status of women in terms of authority and employment has re-emerged as an issue. Women’s work was separated from men’s work, and the unequal division of labour, rights and wages came to the fore. In the capitalist system, women’s unpaid labour became valuable for capital accumulation (Bayraktar, 2023, p. 51), but its social significance was obscured (Fraser, 2009, p. 62).

In the modernist period corresponding to the second-wave feminist process, Simon de Beauvoir’s classic work *The Second Sex* (1949) especially shaped perspectives. The discourse in the work that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 1974, p. 249) summarises the construction of gender in society. Although individuals are born as men and women, gender and the norms it requires are shaped by the process of social construction. In this process, the ideas of women’s social rights and women’s liberation have been at the forefront (Collins, 1991, p. 165). Furthermore, the change of the sacred also revised the

perception of beauty in modernism and created a secular body perception (Şişman, 2013, p. 46; Baudrillard, 2010, pp. 172-173), and women's gender roles were also affected by these revisions. Criticisms of the hierarchical design of the body, public and private spheres, and institutional structures within society according to gender stereotypes have been treated in feminist perspectives in the process of modernism (Çelikkol& Hira, 2022, p. 44). In gender theories, second-wave feminism addresses these issues, and in particular women's exposure to stereotypes arising solely from the fact that they are women. With the second wave of feminism, the scope of the basic rights previously demanded has been expanded and many women's rights, such as family, sexuality, domestic life, working conditions, violence against women, and divorce rights, have begun to be addressed from a women's rights perspective. The idea expressed by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that women have been pacified by the roles of motherhood or wifehood imposed on them by society and the media is influential in the strengthening of second-wave feminism since women do not have the opportunity to live their own lives (1963, p. 18). Additionally, the issues faced by women from different social classes and cultures have been neglected during this period.

Third-wave feminism takes these views of second-wave feminism one step further, drawing attention to the glorification and oppression that develops through existing as a majority or minority in matters such as race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. In line with modernism's concept of binary opposition, men and women have been positioned at opposite poles, and the primary force of male domination has come under serious questioning. In the binary opposition, which is a structure of thought that has found a place as an effective discourse in modern times, the characteristics of women and men, which are thought to be opposed to one another, have begun to be reevaluated. The deconstructionist point of view, especially that of Jacques Derrida, states that binary opposites must be destroyed and redefined. This makes the re-evaluation of traditional thought structures regarding stereotypes possible. The marginalisation, classification or standardisation tendency of the modernist perspective has been challenged in postmodernism and evolved into a perspective that values diversity. Zeka states that postmodernism involves a dichotomous reckoning and opposition with modernism and can be considered as a period in which the weight of critical discourses is felt (Zeka, 1990, p. 10). Jameson mentions that postmodernism has characteristics such as lack of depth, ahistoricity, and timelessness. Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) also points to the post-modern era. He refers to it as a period in which uniform meaning is lost and multiple meanings are formed, and unreal objects (simulations) replace reality. The specific social transformation processes of the post-



modern period have also affected and reshaped the perception of gender. The role of the feminist movements in history is undeniable in feeding the postmodernist development since it criticises both the essentialist and hierarchical structure of modernism (Demir, 1997, pp. 82-87). While women's quest for equality and rights was the main issue after the Enlightenment, after the 1970s and even in the modernist period and the focus was on the construction of sex and gender, in the following period, whether gender could be a choice has been opened to discussion (Ekinici, 2017, pp. 136-137). The third-wave theories of feminism have also tended to be shaped within this framework. When Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), she became one of the pioneers of contemporary feminist theory, arguing that it would be misleading to speak of a standard concept of woman. Third-wave feminism has emphasised multiculturalism, diversity, and individualism, and various terms related to feminism, such as postmodern feminism, intersectionality, and gender positivity, have emerged.

Indeed, the post-modern era opens up an unexpected social space for people. In this era, meanwhile, the main driving force of gender theories inevitably continues to be women's rights, women's visibility, and gender inequalities. The visibility of different genders- though certainly not the sole cause - led to a reduction in the dominance of patriarchal domination, albeit to a lesser extent. Women finding more space in the workplace, less space in the domestic environment, and a desire to break free from many of the traditional roles assigned to them has had a major impact not only on women's roles but also on men's roles during this period. While this has increased the demand for women's employment in the labour market, it has also paved the way for men to start working in jobs that were thought to belong to flexible and precarious female labour. As in the case of women, the individualisation of wages has begun to be applied to men as well. While these changes have revised gender stereotypes, they have led to an increase in women as the head of the household. For example, Standing states that women in the US and the UK earned more money than their husbands in 2009 and that this number is increasing day by day. Therefore, these economically based situations have revised gender roles and led to an increase in the number of men who prefer to take care of their children at home instead of pursuing a career (Standing, 2020, pp. 108-113). The increased presence of women in business, their growing influence in social spheres, and the characteristics of the postmodern era have all legitimised the empowerment of women. In this period, where ideas are put forward that women had achieved all the rights they should have and can become equal to men, based on the existence of women in social life, fourth-wave feminism underlined the violence, abuse

or marginalisation that are still being directed at women. In doing so, it is inspired by the spirit of the period. Fourth-wave feminism, closely related to digital feminism, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, continues to defend women's rights through developing technologies and changing social order. "At the intersection of digital social actions and social networks, the concepts of 'digital activism' and 'digital feminism' emerge" (Akan and Gürhan, 2020, p. 6). Especially in today's world where technological devices and media elements have developed, discourses and practices regarding women's rights, rejection of all forms of violence against women and women's empowerment have found a place on digital platforms, and fourth wave feminism has existed both in the real world and the virtual/online world. As it is underlined, "descriptions of the 'fourth wave' underscore communication technologies and highly mediated flashpoints" (Clark-Parsons, 2022, p. 4), Through a variety of media, women have been able to both empower themselves and take a stand against oppressive or violent actions against them by creating platforms for solidarity in digital environments and producing increasingly popular content.

### **3. MASS MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER**

With modernism, several external tools have been necessary to ensure the universality of ideal typification of gender. The most important of these have been the media tools. After industrialisation, each period accelerated social change with its mass media and created its own mass culture (Özdamar-Akarçay, 2023, pp. 39). In his study, Debord states that the mass media have the capacity to create and shape society and that the laws legitimised by the continuity of the spectacle create a generation subject to itself (2021, p. 178). The tools of the mass media (newspapers, radio, television, etc.), which developed as a product of the technological developments of the time, became functional tools that supported the attempt to legitimise gender inequality. Both written and visual publications have nourished and reproduced gender roles and patriarchy. Goffman, in his study *Gender Advertisements* (1976), discusses the gender roles shaped by the media. He states that through feminist ideas, even the smallest gestures and facial expressions gain meaning in the context of gender, producing meanings concerning many social and public situations (2020, pp. 7-8). According to him, expression is not conscious, but rather socially learned. There is a social purpose in advertisements, as in other mass media, to teach and convince us of the 'how' of femininity and masculinity and to contribute to the construction of gender roles and behaviour (Goffman, 2020, pp. 9-10).

Television can be considered one of the most fundamental mass media of modernism. The invention of television has played a serious role in the production of gender roles, ideal



typification, female identity, male identity, etc. The most salient characteristic of the mainstream media in this period is that viewers have no influence; they are merely receptive to what is offered by the mass media. Even the condition of people as passive receivers is included by Noam Chomsky in his book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). Morley's study on the acts of watching television in families provides information on the gender roles of the period. Men think that the remote control belongs to them after coming home from work, and this situation is legitimate within the family. Morley states that the remote control is the symbolic property of the man. He states that even if women work outside the home, when they come home, they have to take care of domestic chores, so their relations with television are inter-work, escapist relations, and this situation is seen as legitimate. In another similar study, Lull states that 90% of the time, the program to be watched on television in the evening is decided by men (Mutlu, 2005: 146-147). In the case of developing countries, it can be stated that the mainstream media's tendency to establish a Western-oriented hegemonic cultural structure in the context of the culture industry (Konyar, 2011: 58) leads to change and transformation in the gender norms of traditional cultures. It can be affirmed that television, a powerful medium since its invention in 1925, has played an active role, directly or indirectly, in defining male and female identities and creating roles, and even in bringing about similar changes between countries. Although it is debatable whether television provides a suitable platform for feminist thought to be heard sufficiently on television, which reaches a wide audience, the use of the Internet has added another dimension to the use of technology and media tools. Er-Özden & Özden (2020) highlight the point that second-wave feminist theories have led to research, particularly on advertisements, and that there is a connection between advertisements and second-wave feminism in the literature.

The emergence of the Internet and its gradual intrusion into the everyday lives of individuals have been instrumental in reshaping gender perspectives since the second half of post-modernism. Mainstream media tools informed individuals directly, but the development of Internet technologies liberated individuals from the passive role of the recipient and enabled them to assume the role of producer. The relationship of later feminist waves with the media has been to use alternative media by being critical of mainstream media tools (Tekvar, 2017: 538). At the end of the 1990s, people of thoughts such as Eli Noam expressed that the internet was the greatest contribution to the media history of the 20th century, thereby highlighting its future power. The decentralised structure of the Internet, like the mainstream media, and the fact that it enabled bottom-up communication rather than top-down communication, made it

different from other means of communication (qtd. in Briggs & Burke, 2011, p. 329). Some thinkers, such as Neil Postman, have expressed the fear that culture would surrender to technology, while others have expressed the fear that the internet would pollute the human spirit. However, figures such as William Winston have emphasised the Internet's ability to liberate individuals, while at the same time suggesting the possibility of the people having more power (Briggs & Burke, 2011, p. 331). The accessibility of the internet to everyone has provided women with spaces where they can express themselves freely, both individually and as a whole. The power of women that has made itself felt through internet tools and digital platforms has brought about a new feminist wave - fourth wave feminism. Women have found a way to make their voices heard beyond physical boundaries and limitations; "Utilising new tools and strategies for communication, women from all over the world and from different social and cultural backgrounds continue to strive for equal rights in the face of continuing discrimination, sexism, and misogyny. From internet forums and social media platforms, they have moved back out into public space-into streets, squares, town halls, museums, and auditoria" (Lange and Pérez-Moreno, 2020, p. 1). Through the platforms created through the internet and digital environments, women have also been able to stand up against violence, discrimination, abuse and loss of rights; they have easily made their voices heard to each other and to countless internet users. McLuhan's term 'global village' also coincides with this process because women's voices will be able to resonate in a global atmosphere. Considering the social transformations after the 1990s, the idea of a society that functions through Internet technologies advocated by theorists such as Castells and Baudrillard is noteworthy (Çakır, 2018, p. 99). Thanks to digital technologies and the Internet, globalisation and intercultural communication have increasingly developed, taking human relations and the exchange of information beyond physical borders, which has led to the recognition of gender roles and community development.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In studies conducted in the social sciences, although there is a tendency to use specific theoretical frameworks such as pure feminist theories or pure mass communication theories, it can be claimed that using more than one theoretical framework together will enrich and strengthen academic studies with the effect of today's intense heterogeneous thinking structure. Based on this idea, this study presents an inhomogeneous theoretical reading and a reading that aligns with the parallel development of feminist waves and historical processes, considering their periodicity. The study is designed on a theoretical basis in this regard. Approaches to

gender equality, which were shaped as a result of criticisms of traditional perspectives before the modernist period, shaped feminist theories. Similarly, towards the middle of the formation of modernism, especially the entry of television into our daily lives, contributed to the formation of ideal genders through visuals. While this situation served gender equality, it was also a factor in shaping the feminist theory of the period.

Postmodern approaches, which have evolved with the idea with the idea that modernist theories failed to explain the period with the development of the information age. These approaches, with their association with the internet age and changes and transformations, such as the acceleration of access to information, have similarly been linked to the period following the development of the information age. The failure of modernist theories to explain this period has been cited as the reason for the shift to new approaches. Therefore, it is evident that thinking together without ignoring the theoretical periodical similarities in studies to be carried out for the development of gender equality will strengthen scientific knowledge. There are studies on the subject in the literature. Çelikkol and Hira (2022), in their study titled *Modernizm ve Postmodernizm Tartışmaları Ekseninde Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Cinsel Yönelimler ve Cinsiyetsizleştirme*, (Gender, Sexual Orientations and Desexualisation in the Axis of Modernism and Postmodernism Discussions), address gender equality in terms of modern and postmodern approaches. Ulusal (2023) in his study titled *Postmodern Dönem Romantik Komedi Dizilerinde Post-Feminist Erkeklik: “Erkenci Kuş” Örneği*, (Post-Feminist Masculinity in Postmodern Period Romantic Comedy Series: The Case of “Erkenci Kuş”) underlines that post-masculinity is a gender approach belonging to the postmodern period and emphasises the social impact of television, one of the mass media, through its changing and transforming presentation in accordance with the period. In Gökhan’s (2010) postgraduate thesis titled *Türkiye’deki Feminist Akımların Modernite ve Postmodernite İlişkilerine Eleştirel Bir Bakış* (A Critical Look at the Modernity and Postmodernity Relations of Feminist Movements in Türkiye), he presents a study on the division of feminist approaches into modern and postmodern periods and enriches his narrative by mentioning the intense influence of mass media in the study. Esma Akan and Nazife Gürhan *E-Feminism: A Study About Digital Feminism*, they talk about the new women’s discourses that have found a place in the digital world. Considering the studies, as a result, it can be stated that instead of utilizing feminist theories alone in academic studies on gender equality and community development, utilizing approaches to mass communication and modern/postmodern theories together in accordance with the subject will improve the perspective of the study and enrich it scientifically.

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