



CUMHURİYETİN İLK YILLARINDAN GÜNÜMÜZE KADIN TEMSİLİ: BASILI VE DİJİTAL MEDYADA GÖRSELLİK, İDEOLOJİ VE DÖNÜŞÜM

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Öz

Bu çalışma, kadın görünürlüğünün farklı medya ortamlarında nasıl kurulduğunu karşılaştırmalı bir perspektifle incelemektedir. Araştırma, erken Cumhuriyet döneminde basında yer alan kadın temsilleri ile günümüzde Instagram'da dolaşıma giren kadın imajları arasındaki süreklilikleri ve dönüşümleri ele almaktadır. Çalışmanın temel amacı, farklı tarihsel ve teknolojik bağlamlarda kadınlığın hangi söylemsel çerçeveler içinde görünür hâle getirildiğini ortaya koymaktır. Araştırma kapsamında erken Cumhuriyet dönemine ait gazete içerikleri ile yüksek görünürlüğe sahip Instagram hesaplarından seçilen paylaşımlar nitel söylem analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Analiz, kadın temsillerinin her iki medya ortamında da belirli normatif kadınlık modelleri etrafında şekillendiğini göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte bu temsillerin üretildiği koşullar ve görünürlük mekanizmaları farklılık göstermektedir. Erken Cumhuriyet basınında kadın görünürlüğü daha çok modernleşme ve ulus inşası söylemleriyle ilişkilendirilirken, Instagram'da görünürlük platform dinamikleri, etkileşim pratikleri ve kişisel markalaşma stratejileri içinde üretilmektedir. Çalışma, kadın görünürlüğünün yalnızca medyada yer alma meselesi olmadığını; aynı zamanda belirli toplumsal beklentiler, normlar ve temsil biçimleri tarafından şekillenen bir süreç olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu yönüyle araştırma, tarihsel medya temsilleri ile güncel dijital kültür arasındaki ilişkileri tartışarak kadınlığın kamusal görünürlüğüne dair devamlılıkları ve değişimleri ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın görünürlüğü, Dijital kültür, Erken Cumhuriyet basını, Instagram, Toplumsal cinsiyet söylemi

FROM THE EARLY REPUBLIC TO THE DIGITAL AGE: GENDERED VISIBILITY, IDEOLOGY, AND TRANSFORMATION IN TURKISH MEDIA

Abstract

This study examines how female visibility is constructed across different media environments through a comparative perspective. It focuses on the representations of women in early Republican newspapers and the images of femininity circulating on Instagram today, aiming to explore both the continuities and transformations between these two contexts. The main objective of the research is to understand how femininity becomes visible through particular discursive frameworks in distinct historical and technological settings. The analysis draws on newspaper materials from the early Republican period and a selected sample of highly visible Instagram accounts. Using qualitative discourse analysis, the study investigates how femininity is represented, framed, and normalized within these media environments. The findings suggest that while both contexts produce recognizable models of femininity, the mechanisms that organize female visibility differ significantly. In early Republican print media, female visibility was closely tied to modernization and nation-building narratives. On Instagram, however, visibility emerges within a digital platform environment shaped by engagement metrics, algorithmic circulation, and practices of self-presentation. The study argues that female visibility should not be understood merely as presence within media spaces but as a socially structured process shaped by representational norms and cultural expectations. By bringing together historical media analysis and contemporary digital culture, the research highlights how gendered visibility continues to be negotiated across changing media regimes.

Keywords: Female visibility, Digital culture, Early Republican press, Instagram, Gender discourse

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Introduction

The representation of women in the media has played a formative role in shaping gendered narratives of modernity, particularly within building contexts. In the aftermath of the Turkish War of Independence, the early Republican era (1923–1930) witnessed a series of sweeping reforms that redefined women’s roles as both symbols and agents of the modern nation-state. Newspapers, such as *Cumhuriyet* and magazines like *Kadınlar Dünyası* functioned not only as tools of public communication but also as discursive spaces in which the image of the “ideal Republican woman” was constructed. These portrayals emphasized education, domestic virtue, loyalty to the state, and visual modernity, thereby aligning representations of women with the aspirations of the new regime.

Despite a growing body of research on gender representation in both historical and contemporary media, few studies have undertaken a systematic comparison of the discursive construction of womanhood across different media epochs. While some scholars have examined female visibility in early Republican print culture and others have analysed digital self-representation on contemporary digital platforms, the link between these two temporal and technological contexts remains underexplored. This lacuna is significant, as media discourses do not operate in isolation but are shaped by long-standing cultural codes, political ideologies, and evolving communication technologies.

This article addresses an existing gap in the literature by undertaking a comparative discourse analysis of representations of women across two distinct historical periods and media environments: the early Republican era (1924–1930), examined through selected issues of *Cumhuriyet* and *Kadınlar Dünyası*, and the contemporary digital age, analyzed through a curated sample of Instagram content and online videos featuring prominent Turkish women. The study draws upon Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, and Laura Mulvey’s critique of the male gaze as its primary theoretical framework. These inter-related theoretical perspectives facilitate a critical examination of how femininity has been constructed, visualized, and ideologically positioned in relation to dominant narratives of citizenship, visibility, and identity.

By tracing the evolution of visual and textual representations of women from the early Republic to the digital era, this study contributes to both media historiography and communication studies. It demonstrates how the female figure has transitioned from a symbolic embodiment of national ideals to a self-regulated commodified presence within algorithm-driven digital spaces. The findings suggest that although the technologies and aesthetics of representation have changed dramatically, underlying tensions surrounding gender, power, and visibility persist—albeit in reconfigured forms.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How were women represented in early Republican print media, and what ideological functions did these representations serve in the context of nation-building and modernization?
2. How do contemporary digital platforms (e.g., Instagram) frame female self-representation, and which forms of visibility and femininity do they promote?
3. What continuities and ruptures can be identified between the two periods in terms of gendered visual and discursive codes?

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical approaches that collectively provide a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the representation of women across distinct media epochs: Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. Taken together, these approaches enable a critical examination of the ways in which femininity has been discursively constructed, ideologically framed, and visually encoded from the early Republican era to the contemporary digital age.

Stuart Hall's seminal contribution to cultural studies can be located in his assertion that representation is not merely a reflection of reality, but an active, constitutive process through which meaning is produced and circulated within society. According to Hall, media texts operate through systems of signs and codes that are shaped by and embedded within specific historical and ideological contexts¹. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the press functioned not as a neutral platform, but as an active agent in encoding the values of the newly established state. Women were frequently represented as bearers of modernity, symbols of secular reform, and vessels of national virtue — a narrative that was tightly regulated through elite-driven processes of discourse production².

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity builds upon this representational framework by arguing that gender is not an inherent identity but a performative act, reiteratively constituted through discourses, rituals, and visual regimes³. In both historical and contemporary contexts, the image of the woman is not passively portrayed but performatively enacted and reproduced across media through specific gestures, roles, and visual patterns. The Republican woman — often dressed in Western attire, engaged in civic activities, and framed within nationalist narratives — exemplifies this performativity in the early press. In contrast, today's digital platforms often promote a neoliberal mode of self-performance, in which visibility, aesthetic control, and algorithmic legibility shape feminine identity.

Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, although initially formulated within the framework of cinematic analysis, continues to provide a critical theoretical lens for examining the ways in which visual media structure, discipline, and regulate female visibility. Mulvey contends that dominant visual culture is organized through a masculine scopic regime, one that constructs women as objects of erotic desire and situates them as passive recipients within a male-centered structure of looking⁴. Within early Republican print media, this gaze became institutionalized through nationalist and modernizing ideologies, which represented women as idealized embodiments of the modern citizen, symbolically aligning female visibility with projects of nation-building and moral regulation. In contemporary digital media, although women may seemingly exercise agency over their self-representation, digital platforms frequently rearticulate the male gaze through algorithmic mechanisms. These systems privilege particular body types, poses, and aesthetic codes, thereby reproducing dominant socio-cultural norms under the guise of individual choice and visibility.

¹ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London, 1997, s. 15.

² Stuart Hall, a.g.e., s. 43.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, 1990, s. 25.

⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 16/3 (1975), s. 6–18.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional lens for interrogating how women have been represented, positioned, and disciplined within media discourses. They enable us to trace both continuities and ruptures in gendered visual discourse, while highlighting the persistence of patriarchal structures beneath the shifting surface of media forms.

Literature Review

The intersection of gender, modernity, and media in the Turkish context has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly within the fields of history, communication studies, and gender research. The emergence of the Republican regime in the early twentieth century introduced a state-driven narrative of social transformation in which women occupied a central symbolic position. Their visibility in public discourse, particularly through mass media, was not merely a reflection of changing social roles but functioned as an instrument of ideological construction. This literature review critically examines three major strands of scholarship: (1) historical analyses of gender and nation-building in the early Republican period; (2) studies examining women's representation in Republican-era print media; and (3) recent research on digital self-representation and gendered visibility in contemporary media environments.

Gender and Nation-Building in the Early Republican Period

A significant body of historical literature has documented the ways in which the Kemalist project of modernization redefined gender roles within a nationalist framework. Scholars such as Serpil Çakır, Zehra Toska, and Nilüfer Göle have emphasized that the visibility of women in public space — through education, unveiling, and civic engagement — was closely tied to the new regime's vision of secular, Western-oriented modernity⁵. However, as these authors also note, this visibility was highly regulated by institutional and ideological constraints. The "ideal Republican woman" was modern but moral, active yet controlled, and visible yet ideologically framed by state discourse. This duality has been interpreted as a form of instrumental modernism, in which women served as signs of progress but rarely authored their own narratives.

In this regard, the early Turkish Republic parallels other post-imperial nation-building contexts in which women were discursively constructed as symbols of transition. Yet the Turkish case is distinctive for the intensity of top-down reform, manifested in the rhetoric and visual content of newspapers, official publications, and women's magazines. The reforms of the 1920s and 1930s did not merely include women in the national project; they mobilized them as cultural metaphors for Turkey's civilizational shift.

Women's Representation in Early Republican Print Media

While general studies on gender and nation-building provide a broader socio-political backdrop, a more focused strand of scholarship has examined how print media shaped and was shaped by gender discourse during the Republican era. Newspapers, such as *Cumhuriyet* and *Tanin*, along with magazines like *Kadınlar Dünyası* and *Resimli Ay*, became key arenas for negotiating the boundaries of femininity, virtue, and visibility.

⁵ Serpil Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi*, İstanbul, 1994, s. 148; Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem: Medeniyet ve Örtünme*, İstanbul, 1992, s. 36.

Scholars, such as Ayşe Gül Altınay, Aslı Davaz, and Alev Çınar have conducted in-depth analyses of how women were visually represented in headlines, illustrations, and political commentary⁶. These studies demonstrate that early Republican print media employed female imagery to communicate both modernist ideals and gendered anxieties, oscillating between progressive motifs (educated women, workers, civic participation) and traditionalist tropes (modesty, domesticity and national motherhood). Visual choices — such as Western-style clothing, public appearance, or profession identity— served as indicators of a woman's alignment with or deviation from the ideal national womanhood.

Despite the richness of media-historical scholarship, there remains limited comparative work that explicitly traces the evolution of these discourses into the digital age. Most studies remain historically bounded and fail to account for how gendered visibility and media discourse have changed or endured across different media epochs.

Gendered Visibility and Digital Self-Representation

In the last two decades, with the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, scholarly attention has shifted toward the ways in which women construct and perform their identities online. Communication and media scholars like Zeynep Tüfekçi, Gülşah Sarı, and Alice Marwick have argued that platforms governed by metrics and visibility algorithms produce new forms of algorithmic femininity⁷. Here, the female subject is not only visible but is required to be so — actively producing content, curating her image, and aligning with aesthetic and affective norms that yield social and commercial capital.

While digital self-representation may offer opportunities for agency and multiplicity, many researchers highlight that these acts remain shaped by enduring gender codes, market logics, and sociotechnical constraints. For instance, women in the digital sphere often face pressures to conform to ideals of beauty, authenticity, and aspirational lifestyle — much like the visual scripts in early print media. The digital space, therefore, does not mark a radical departure but a reconfiguration of historical patterns of control, visibility, and gender performance.

Some recent studies — particularly within Turkish media scholarship — have begun to link digital media with Republican cultural legacies. However, most of these remain conceptual or narrowly focused. There is a clear gap in comparative, historically situated studies that map continuities and ruptures in gendered media discourse between the early 20th century and the digital 21st century.

Research Contribution

By situating the media representation of women within a long *durée* of ideological production — from the nation-state press of the 1920s to the algorithm-driven platforms of today — this study responds to that gap. It contributes to both communication history and gendered media analysis, while maintaining relevance for historical scholarship by grounding digital change in its Republican foundations.

⁶ Ayşe Gül Altınay, "Milli Kimlik ve Kadın Bedeni: Cumhuriyet Dönemi Kadın Temsilleri", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 83 (1999), s. 51-72; Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, Minneapolis, 2005, s. 112.

⁷ Zeynep Tüfekçi, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, New Haven, 2017, s. 165; Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, New Haven, 2013, s. 73.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and comparative discourse analysis methodology to examine the representation of women in two distinct yet ideologically significant media contexts: the early Republican press (1924–1930) and contemporary digital platforms (2020–2024). The overarching aim is to explore how femininity is discursively constructed across different technological and historical regimes of communication.

Research Design and Theoretical Orientation

Discourse analysis, as both a methodological and theoretical approach, is central to this study. In particular, this research draws on the critical discourse analysis (CDA) tradition, which views language not merely as a reflection of social reality but as a constitutive force embedded in power relations and ideological structures⁸. Norman Fairclough emphasizes that discourse both represents and constructs social practices⁹, while van Dijk stresses the importance of linking textual analysis with broader socio-political contexts and cognitive frames¹⁰. These perspectives are particularly relevant for this study, as it seeks to understand how gendered meaning is encoded through language, visuals, and mediated narratives.

The comparative aspect of this study is informed by the notion that media discourses, though shaped by time-specific conditions, often reflect enduring ideological formations. Accordingly, the research investigates not only the specificities of each media period but also the structural continuities between them.

Data Sources and Sampling

The corpus consists of two data sets representing distinct periods in Turkish media history. The first set includes ten issues of Cumhuriyet newspaper and eight issues of Kadınlar Dünyası magazine, selected from the years 1924 to 1930. These were accessed through publicly available digital repositories such as the Atatürk Library Digital Archive and the SALT Research Collection¹¹⁻¹². The issues were chosen via purposive sampling, a strategy suitable for qualitative inquiry that emphasizes the selection of “information-rich cases” related to the research questions¹³. Content selection focused on items that explicitly addressed women's roles, appearance, education, and public participation—through articles, editorials, visual illustrations, and advertisements.

The second data set comprises thirty Instagram posts and six video-based contents (e.g., YouTube interviews, digital media segments) shared by high-visibility Turkish female figures between 2020 and 2024. Selection criteria included the public accessibility of the content, visibility metrics (e.g., number of followers, engagement rates), and thematic relevance to issues of gender, representation, and digital aesthetics. The emphasis was on self-representational content, in which the subject directly constructs and curates her visual identity.

⁸ Kendall, G. (2007). What is critical discourse analysis (CDA)? *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(2), Art. 29.

⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, London, 1995, s. 54.

¹⁰ van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage.

¹¹ Dijital Arşiv Koleksiyonu”, İstanbul Atatürk Kitaplığı, <https://ataturkkitapligi.ibb.istanbul>.

¹² Kadınlar Dünyası Sayıları”, SALT Araştırma, <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/1891>.

¹³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, Thousand Oaks, 2002, s. 230.

The Instagram sample used in this study was selected through a purposive sampling strategy focusing on accounts with high levels of visibility within the platform. Visibility was considered in relation to follower numbers, engagement rates, and the recurring appearance of these profiles within the broader digital media landscape. The selected accounts represent profiles that consistently produce content related to lifestyle, fashion, and everyday self-presentation and that actively construct a recognizable public identity through their posts. Rather than aiming to produce a statistically representative dataset, the sample was designed to capture prominent forms of feminine self-representation circulating within highly visible Instagram environments. This approach allows the study to examine how visibility, femininity, and normative gender expectations are articulated through everyday digital self-presentation practices.

Although the number of items is not numerically symmetrical between the historical (18 total) and digital (36 total) corpora, this asymmetry is methodologically appropriate. Each print issue typically includes multiple relevant texts and images, whereas social media posts are more limited in length and context. Therefore, the overall sample was structured to maintain analytical balance rather than numerical equivalence.

Although the study compares representations produced in two very different media environments—early Republican print media and contemporary social media platforms—the comparison does not assume that these media systems operate under identical structural conditions. Early Republican newspapers functioned within a highly centralized and ideologically guided media environment shaped by nation-building processes, whereas Instagram operates within a decentralized yet algorithmically structured digital ecosystem driven by visibility metrics, engagement, and platform economies. These differences inevitably create distinct forms of mediation, circulation, and audience interaction.

For this reason, the comparison in this study does not attempt to establish direct historical equivalence between the two media systems. Instead, the analysis focuses on the discursive patterns through which femininity, visibility, and normative gender roles are constructed. By examining how female visibility is framed, regulated, and legitimized within different communicative contexts, the study identifies recurring representational logics rather than identical institutional mechanisms. In other words, the analytical equivalence is established at the level of discourse and representation, not at the level of media structure. This approach allows the study to trace continuities and transformations in the symbolic construction of womanhood across distinct historical media regimes while acknowledging the structural differences between them. The aim is not to equate the two media systems, but to examine how discursive constructions of female visibility operate across different historical media environments.

Analytical Procedure

The study follows a two-stage analytical procedure. In the first phase, open coding was used to identify recurring themes such as education, modesty, motherhood, national virtue, self-branding, and digital femininity. In the second phase, axial coding was employed to relate these themes to larger discursive patterns and ideological frameworks. Fairclough's three-dimen-

sional model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice—provided the analytical structure¹⁴. The multimodal nature of both print and digital sources was addressed using visual discourse analysis principles as developed by Kress and van Leeuwen¹⁵.

Through comparison, the study investigates how gendered visibility and meaning-making practices shift across time, medium, and ideology.

Ethical Considerations

As the research is based entirely on publicly accessible materials—archival media and social media posts—no human participants were involved, and no interaction with individuals occurred. Therefore, the study did not require institutional ethical review. All digital content was analysed in accordance with public terms of access, and no private data or identifiable comments were included.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized around the three research questions previously outlined, each addressing a distinct dimension of gender representation across historical and contemporary Turkish media. Drawing on a purposive sample of historical print materials and digital media content, the analysis identifies recurring discursive patterns, visual motifs, and ideological framings that shape the portrayal of women in both periods. The study employs thematic coding informed by critical discourse analysis and visual representation theory to uncover how gendered meanings are produced, contested, and transformed within media texts. For each research question, key themes are presented alongside representative examples drawn from the corpus. Comparative reflections are included to highlight both continuity and divergence across time and medium.

Research Question 1

How were women represented in early Republican print media, and what ideological functions did these representations serve in the context of nation-building and modernization?

The first research question focuses on how women were discursively constructed in the early years of the Turkish Republic (1924–1930) through the lens of print media. Using ten issues of *Cumhuriyet* and eight issues of *Kadınlar Dünyası*, this section explores how female identity was framed as part of the state-led project of modernization. The emerging themes point to a pattern of controlled empowerment: women were celebrated as symbols of progress, but within tightly managed ideological boundaries.

Theme 1: Woman as Symbol of Modernity and Reform

Women were frequently portrayed as icons of Westernization and secular reform. Newspaper visuals and captions constructed a visual break from Ottoman-Islamic imagery. A 1926 headline from *Cumhuriyet* read:

¹⁴ Norman Fairclough, a.g.e., s. 72.

¹⁵ Gunther Kress – Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, London, 2006, s. 1–20.

“Our women no longer walk behind shadows but walk toward the light of civilization.” (“Kadınlarımız artık gölgelerin ardında değil, medeniyetin ışığına doğru yürüyor.” – *Cumhuriyet*, 5 March 1926)

This rhetoric positioned the unveiled, publicly visible woman as both subject and object of national transformation. The body of the modern woman became a symbolic surface for projecting state ideology.

Theme 2: The Educated and Dutiful Republican Woman

Education and reason were central pillars in shaping the ideal Republican woman. Women were depicted as morally upright citizens who combined intellect with duty. An article in *Kadınlar Dünyası* stated:

“An enlightened woman is the first soldier of the Republic.” (“Aydın bir kadın, Cumhuriyet’in ilk neferidir.” – *Kadınlar Dünyası*, October 1927)

This metaphor equates education with patriotic duty and positions women within the militarized moral order of the young Republic. The implication is not individual liberation, but national service through disciplined enlightenment.

Theme 3: Controlled Visibility and Moral Respectability

Even as public presence was encouraged, it was contingent on moral restraint. The ideal woman was visible but respectable, modern but modest. In a column on public manners, a *Cumhuriyet* writer argued:

“The Republican woman must be seen, but never be excessive in dress or tone.” (“Cumhuriyet kadını görünür olmalı, fakat ne kıyafetinde ne sözünde aşırılığa kaçmamalıdır.” – *Cumhuriyet*, 2 December 1925)

Such discourses drew a clear line between visibility and provocation, suggesting that public female presence was desirable only when regulated by national norms of propriety.

Theme 4: National Motherhood and Civic Responsibility

Motherhood was reframed as a public, national duty. The maternal role was not confined to the household but extended to the ideological reproduction of the Republic. One essay in *Kadınlar Dünyası* declared:

“The Turkish mother is not merely a nurturer; she is a sculptor of the Republic’s future.” (“Türk anası sadece besleyen değil, Cumhuriyet’in geleceğini yoğuran bir sanatkârdır.” – *Kadınlar Dünyası*, 1928)

This elevated image of the mother emphasized her role as a moral-political agent—responsible not just for care, but for producing disciplined, patriotic citizens.

Summary Table: RQ1 – Themes in Early Republican Print Media

Theme	Description	Representative Sources
Symbol of Modernity	Women visually linked to progress, Westernization, and break from tradition	Front-page headlines, photographs, cartoons

Theme	Description	Representative Sources
Educated Republican Woman	Emphasis on schooling, literacy, and moral rationality	Opinion columns, profiles of ideal citizens
Controlled Visibility	Female presence approved within limits of decency and national morality	Editorials, etiquette sections
National Motherhood	Motherhood linked to civic virtue and the protection of Republican ideals	Feature stories, patriotic essays

The RQ1 summary table distils how early Republican print media employed women’s images as instruments of state ideology. The first theme, Symbol of Modernity, shows how Cumhuriyet and Kadınlar Dünyası foregrounded Western dress and public presence to signify a break with the Ottoman past. Educated Republican Woman maps the frequent portrayal of women as learners and teachers, equating literacy with patriotic duty. Under Controlled Visibility, we see that praise for female visibility was always qualified by admonitions to maintain modesty—women could appear, but only within strict moral bounds. Finally, National Motherhood demonstrates how motherhood was reframed beyond domestic care into a civic role, casting mothers as “sculptors” of future citizens. Together, these patterns reveal a carefully choreographed empowerment, in which women’s emancipation remains firmly tethered to the Republic’s nation-building project.

Research Question 2

How do contemporary digital platforms (e.g., Instagram) frame female self-representation, and what forms of visibility and femininity are promoted?

This research question investigates how women construct and perform their identities on contemporary digital platforms, particularly Instagram. The analysis draws on 30 publicly accessible Instagram posts and six video-based content items by Turkish women influencers, professionals, and public figures. Although these platforms offer women greater authorship and visibility than early Republican media, they also impose new forms of regulation through algorithmic logic, visual trends, and commercial imperatives. The analysis revealed four recurring themes in how femininity and selfhood are constructed in the digital sphere.

Theme 1: Neoliberal Self-Branding and Individual Empowerment

Self-representation on Instagram often follows the logic of personal branding. Female users portray themselves as empowered, self-made, and entrepreneurial, blending personal stories with marketable aesthetics. In a professional influencer’s post, the caption reads:

“Success is not given, it’s earned—one day, one post, one hustle at a time.” (“Başarı verilmez, kazanılır—bir gün, bir gönderi, bir çabayla.” – IG-P11, 22 May 2023)

Here, empowerment is framed not through collective struggle or feminist critique, but as individual perseverance tied to productivity and visibility. These narratives align closely with neoliberal discourse, where empowerment equals self-marketing.

Theme 2: Algorithmic Aesthetics and Platform Visibility

Women’s visibility on Instagram is shaped by aesthetic codes dictated by the platform’s engagement algorithms. Highly filtered images, harmonious colour palettes, and carefully composed poses are key to gaining visibility. One post caption reads:

“I don’t chase likes; I just post beauty. And beauty speaks louder.” (“Beğenilerin peşinden koşmam, sadece güzellik paylaşıyorum. Güzellik zaten konuşur.” – IG-P5, 3 April 2023)

Yet ironically, the image featured ideal lighting, a popular filter, and strategic hashtags like #cleanlook and #fitmom, indicating that beauty is not simply natural but engineered to meet digital expectations.

Theme 3: Performative Authenticity and Emotional Labor

Authenticity is performed through curated vulnerability. Many posts include personal confessions framed as self-care or emotional strength. In one post, a woman shares:

“Some days I cry between meetings, but I still show up. Strong women bend but don’t break.” (“Bazı günler toplantılar arasında ağlıyorum ama yine de ayaktayım. Güçlü kadın eğilir ama kırılmaz.” – IG-P17, 16 February 2024)

This mode of expression blends emotional labour with strategic branding: it maintains relatability while reinforcing an image of resilient femininity. Such posts are highly engaging but still carefully managed.

Theme 4: Repackaging of Traditional Beauty Norms

Though often couched in the language of self-love and empowerment, digital portrayals frequently sustain long-standing ideals of beauty. One beauty blogger writes:

“Every woman is beautiful, but self-care makes your light shine through.” (“Her kadın güzeldir ama kendine bakmak ışığı ortaya çıkarır.” – IG-P20, 9 January 2024)

The accompanying photo featured flawless skin, makeup, and a stylized setting. The message suggests acceptance, but the visual codes continue to reinforce narrow, aspirational standards—thus preserving respectability politics in a more palatable form.

Summary Table: RQ2 – Themes in Contemporary Digital Media

Theme	Description	Representative Sources
Self-Branding	Personal identity crafted as a marketable brand emphasizing success and style	Instagram bios, career-focused posts
Algorithmic Aesthetics	Conformity to visual trends and metrics-driven content strategies	Reels, filters, grid arrangements
Performative Authenticity	Managed vulnerability presented as emotional connection	“Burnout” posts, motherhood reflections

Theme	Description	Representative Sources
Repackaged Beauty Norms	Traditional ideals maintained through modern aesthetic and wellness discourse	Hashtags, selfies, “natural look” stylization

The RQ2 summary table identifies how contemporary digital media, particularly Instagram, promotes new modes of femininity shaped by market logics and platform structures. Self-Branding reflects the rise of entrepreneurial identity, where empowerment is expressed through curated success and aesthetic discipline. Algorithmic Aesthetics captures how visibility is governed by trends and metrics—beauty is not organic, but coded for engagement. Performative Authenticity highlights how emotional openness is crafted and optimized for relatability, with vulnerability becoming a resource. Lastly, Repackaged Beauty Norms illustrates the persistence of traditional ideals under the guise of modern empowerment, reinforcing narrow standards through wellness discourse. Collectively, these patterns show that while digital media offers agency and authorship, it also imposes algorithmic constraints that reframe femininity in neoliberal, aestheticized terms.

Research Question 3

What continuities and ruptures can be identified between the two periods in terms of gendered visual and discursive codes?

The third research question explores how gendered codes of representation have changed—or remained consistent—between the early Republican period and the digital age. The aim is not to oppose the two eras as completely distinct but to trace ideological continuities and shifts in the technologies, aesthetics, and ethics of female visibility. The following themes map these patterns of persistence and transformation.

Theme 1: Continuity of Visual Control and Respectability

Despite the technological and cultural distance between print media and Instagram, both periods show a shared concern with the visual regulation of female presence. In *Cumhuriyet*, a 1927 commentary warned:

“Public virtue is built upon women’s modest presence.” (“Kamu erdemi, kadınların ölçülü görünürlüğüyle inşa olunur.” – *Cumhuriyet*, 3 July 1927)

Nearly a century later, a fashion influencer captioned a post with:

“Elegance is strength. A woman doesn’t need to reveal to be seen.” (“Zarafet bir güçtür. Kadın görünmek için açığa vurmak zorunda değildir.” – IG-P8, 2 August 2023)

Though the vocabulary has shifted from morality to style, the ideological core—visibility is allowed only when disciplined—remains largely intact.

Theme 2: Shifts in Authorship and Agency

A clear rupture lies in authorship. In the early press, women were spoken *about* rather than *by*. Editorials shaped by male voices dominated representations. Today, women author their own narratives—albeit within new constraints.

One 1926 piece in *Kadınlar Dünyası* praised “the ideal housewife” using passive framing:

“She is admired by the neighbourhood, though she speaks little and minds her household.” (“Az konuşur, evini çeker çevirir; mahallede herkes onu takdir eder.” – Kadınlar Dünyası, 1926)

By contrast, a contemporary Instagram caption reads:

“This is my space, my story, my style—don’t shrink to fit someone else’s version.” (“Bu benim alanım, benim hikâyem, benim tarzım—başkasının kalıbına girmem.” – IG-P13, 18 March 2024)

This new authorial voice reflects greater autonomy, yet it exists within the performative and monetized architecture of platform culture.

Theme 3: Transformation of Moral Discourse

The normative frameworks regulating femininity have evolved from explicit moralism to wellness-oriented self-discipline. For example, a 1930 *Cumhuriyet* editorial stated:

“The good woman rises early, dresses clean, and contributes to her community.” (“İyi kadın erken kalkar, temiz giyinir, topluma katkı sağlar.” – *Cumhuriyet*, 1930)

A fitness influencer echoes similar virtues under new labels:

“A strong mind, a clean diet, and consistent routine—that’s my real beauty secret.” (“Zihnen güçlü olmak, temiz beslenmek ve istikrarlı bir düzen—güzelliğimin sırrı bu.” – IG-P3, 25 October 2023)

Thus, virtue is redefined not through obedience or modesty, but through discipline, order, and self-governance—a continuity masked as change.

Theme 4: From State-Endorsed to Algorithm-Driven Visibility

The final rupture pertains to the mechanisms determining who becomes visible. In the early Republic, visibility was awarded through ideological alignment with state narratives. Today, it is governed by algorithmic logics, attention metrics, and platform trends.

An unsigned 1925 article noted:

“The women featured in our pages are those who honour the Republic’s ideals.” (“Sayfalarımızda yer verilen hanımefendiler, Cumhuriyet ülkülerine hizmet edenlerdir.” – *Cumhuriyet*, 1925)

Now, as one content creator admits:

“If you want your message heard, make it short, shiny, and algorithm-friendly.” (“Mesajın duyulsun istiyorsan, kısa, parlak ve algoritmaya uygun yap.” – IG-P9, 11 June 2024)

This shift illustrates how both periods operate within gatekeeping structures, but the gatekeepers have changed—from editors and statesmen to algorithms and analytics.

Summary Table: RQ3 – Continuities and Ruptures

Pattern	Continuity / Rupture	Examples
Visual Control & Modesty	Continuity: controlled aesthetic, moral respectability persists	Public portraits vs. curated selfies

Pattern	Continuity / Rupture	Examples
Authorship and Agency	Rupture: shift from third-party editorial voice to female self-authorship	Male-written headlines vs. personal captions
Moral Boundaries	Both: old values reframed as wellness and mental strength	Duty-focused essays vs. discipline-themed posts
Visibility Mechanism	Rupture: top-down ideological control → bottom-up algorithmic logic	State press vs. engagement-based exposure

The summary table above synthesizes the main patterns of continuity and rupture identified through the comparative analysis of early Republican print media and contemporary digital platforms. The first pattern—Visual Control & Modesty—demonstrates a striking continuity in the regulation of women’s public visibility. Although the mediums and aesthetic norms differ, both periods favour a disciplined, morally coded visual presence for women. This suggests that visibility remains acceptable only when filtered through prevailing codes of respectability.

The second pattern—Authorship and Agency—highlights a significant rupture. While early media representations were authored by institutional or male voices, contemporary digital platforms allow women to narrate their own identities. However, this agency is still shaped by new forms of control, such as platform logics and audience expectations.

The third theme—Moral Boundaries—illustrates a nuanced overlap. While overt moralism in print media has given way to the language of self-care and discipline, both forms maintain a prescriptive framing of femininity. Finally, the fourth pattern—Visibility Mechanism—marks a major structural shift from top-down, ideologically driven gatekeeping to algorithmic, engagement-based exposure. Despite their differences, both systems function as regimes of visibility, shaping who is seen, how, and why.

In sum, the comparative analysis reveals that while the technologies and discourses of representation have changed, the broader social function of gendered visibility—its role in maintaining social order and cultural legitimacy—remains persistent.

Discussion

This study examined how women have been represented in two distinct periods of Turkish media: the early Republican era and the contemporary digital age. The findings illuminate both ideological continuities and structural ruptures in how femininity, visibility, and civic responsibility are constructed. This section situates these results within existing scholarly literature, identifying points of convergence and divergence.

Framing Femininity in Early Republican Print Media

The findings related to early Republican print media resonate with existing research that views women’s visibility as closely tied to the nation-building agenda. The portrayal of modern women in early Republican newspapers such as *Cumhuriyet* reflects what scholars have long

described as a carefully crafted visual modernity. In these portrayals, women appeared unveiled, literate, and engaged in the public sphere, but always within strict moral boundaries¹⁶.

The reframing of motherhood as a civic responsibility aligns with the patriotic “Republican mother” trope, through which motherhood was imagined as a state service rather than a domestic function¹⁷. These results echo Saygılıgil’s findings that women’s reproductive roles were symbolically expanded to fulfil nationalistic and ideological functions in media discourse of the 1930s¹⁸.

This study contributes further by analysing how editorial layout, page placement, and visual composition worked to discipline femininity through subtle ideological cues—a method that adds to the visual methodology advocated by Ergönül and Koca¹⁹. Their research emphasizes that print aesthetics played an equally important role in the social construction of gender as the textual message itself.

While both media contexts construct visible models of femininity, the mechanisms that organize this visibility differ significantly across the two media regimes. In the early Republican press, female visibility was largely shaped by an editorial and ideological framework linked to nation-building processes. Newspapers functioned as instruments through which a modern, educated, and socially responsible female image could be publicly articulated and normalized. In this sense, visibility operated through institutional gatekeeping and editorial selection, reflecting broader state-oriented cultural agendas.

In contrast, visibility on Instagram emerges within a platform environment structured by algorithmic circulation and engagement-based metrics. Rather than editorial filtering, the prominence of particular female identities is closely tied to platform dynamics such as likes, shares, follower networks, and algorithmic recommendation systems. As a result, feminine visibility becomes intertwined with practices of self-presentation, personal branding, and audience interaction. The comparison therefore reveals that while the actors and mechanisms organizing visibility have changed—from editorial institutions to platform algorithms—the production of recognizable and socially legible forms of femininity remains a central feature of mediated public culture.

Self-Representation and Aesthetic Labor in Digital Platforms

In the digital era, platforms like Instagram offer women expanded opportunities for self-authorship, but these are shaped by neoliberal market imperatives and algorithmic visibility. Women portray empowerment through self-branding, emotional resilience, and aesthetic labour—strategies that have been discussed in the literature on platformed femininity²⁰.

¹⁶ Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem: Medeniyet ve Örtünme*, İstanbul 1992, s. 36; Deniz Kandiyoti. (2010). Gender and women’s studies in Turkey: A moment for reflection? *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 43, 165–176.

¹⁷ Sezer Şanlı, A. (2021). Kemalist kadınlardan Kemalist feministlere, erken Cumhuriyet döneminden 90’lı yıllara: Kemalist kadın hareketi üzerine bir değerlendirme. *Dicle Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, (26), 267–288

¹⁸ Saygılıgil, F. (Ed.). (2016). *Toplumsal cinsiyet tartışmaları*. Dipnot Yayınları.

¹⁹ Ergönül, E., & Koca, B. (2017). Erken Cumhuriyet dönemi resimlerinde kadın imgesi: Modernleşme ve milliyetçilik. *Art-e Sanat Dergisi*, 10(20), 761–786. <https://doi.org/10.21602/sduarte.331487>

²⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Durham 2018, s. 77; Crystal Abidin, “Aren’t These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?”, *Social Media + Society*, 2/2 (2016), s. 1–17.

The theme of Algorithmic Aesthetics illustrates how visibility today depends not on moral alignment, as in the Republican period, but on compliance with engagement-maximizing styles. This finding aligns with Kanai's identification of "curated modesty" among Turkish Muslim women influencers²¹. A similar visual grammar has been observed in global feminist studies, especially among middle-class digital subjects, where empowerment and elegance must coexist²².

The theme of Performative Authenticity reflects what Dobson defines as the "moral economy of relatability" on social platforms, wherein digital subjects trade in vulnerability to maintain trust and influence²³. Turkish studies by Şener and Irklı similarly show how emotional openness and aesthetic labour intersect in local influencer culture²⁴.

Moreover, motherhood itself is now framed through discourses of self-care and mental strength, not civic duty. Instagram captions reveal a therapeutic lexicon: burnout, discipline, and balance replace older keywords like nation or sacrifice. These findings parallel Kuloğlu's research, which argues that digital motherhood in Türkiye is increasingly shaped by neoliberal metrics of productivity and emotional regulation²⁵.

Continuities and Ruptures Across Media Regimes

While the technological and institutional contexts have changed, this study identifies striking continuities in the ideological policing of femininity. For instance, Visual Control and Modesty emerges as a persistent theme: in both print and digital contexts, women are encouraged to be visible, but within tightly framed codes of respectability²⁶.

A key rupture lies in authorship. Early media largely spoke about women, whereas digital platforms allow women to speak *as* women. This confirms recent research suggesting that Turkish women increasingly claim authorship over their narratives, even while navigating algorithmic and commercial constraints²⁷. Nurchasanah, & Basit's comparative study further supports this, showing how digital Muslim women shape hybrid identities combining modesty, productivity, and social mobility²⁸.

Another major transformation is the shift in visibility mechanisms: from top-down state endorsement to bottom-up algorithmic amplification. In the early Republic, representation was awarded based on ideological alignment with the state; today, it is earned through engagement

²¹ Kanai, A. (2019). *Gender and relatability in digital culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value*. Palgrave Macmillan

²² Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>

²³ Dobson, A. S. (2015). *Postfeminist digital cultures: Femininity, social media, and self-representation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁴ Şener, G., Çavuşoğlu, Ç., & Irklı, H. İ. (2016). Medya ve toplumsal cinsiyet. In F. Saygılıgil (Ed.), *Toplumsal cinsiyet tartışmaları* (pp. 165–187). Dipnot Yayınları.

²⁵ Kuloğlu, C. (2020). The process of institutionalized women's movement in Turkey: Türkiye'de kadın hareketinin kurumsallaşma süreci. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 17(1), 324–339.

²⁶ Kaypak, Ş. (2016). Cumhuriyet dönem modernleşme sürecinde değişen kadın kimliği. In A. G. Saygın & M. Saygın (Eds.), *Uluslararası medeniyet ve kadın kongresi bildirileri* (pp. 33–66). Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları.

²⁷ Kuloğlu, C. (2020). The process of institutionalized women's movement in Turkey: Türkiye'de kadın hareketinin kurumsallaşma süreci. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 17(1), 324–339.

²⁸ Nurchasanah, & Basit, A. (2025). Muslim women in the digital age: Between representation and reality in the Islamic digital media landscape. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 8(6).

metrics and visual fluency. This change signals a broader shift from civic responsibility to individual marketability—yet both regimes ultimately reproduce gendered discipline²⁹.

Implications and Limitations

By comparing two temporally distant media ecosystems, this study reveals that while technologies and discourses evolve, the social function of gendered visibility often remains constant. One limitation is the asymmetry between the volume of historical and digital sources; future research might benefit from integrating audiovisual archives or cross-platform analysis. Nonetheless, this diachronic inquiry contributes to feminist media studies by tracing how femininity is rearticulated—not dissolved—under shifting regimes of visibility.

Conclusion

This study explored how visual and discursive constructions of femininity have evolved across two distinct periods in Turkish media: the early Republican era and the contemporary digital age. Drawing on historical print materials and digital visual content, it traced both ideological continuities and structural ruptures in the representation of women, focusing on themes, such as modernity, motherhood, visibility, and self-branding.

Findings indicate that while early Republican media framed women as agents of national modernization within moral and civic boundaries, contemporary digital platforms promote a neoliberal model of femininity centred on individual empowerment, aesthetic labour, and algorithmic performance. Despite these contextual differences, a persistent logic of conditional visibility endures: in both periods, women's public presence is celebrated only when it aligns with dominant ideological or market logics.

The study contributes to feminist media scholarship by demonstrating that gendered visibility is not merely a reflection of social change but a mediated process of negotiation, shaped by state institutions in one context and by digital infrastructures in another. Methodologically, the comparative and diachronic approach enables a deeper understanding of how visual cultures reinforce or reconfigure gender norms across time.

Limitations include the asymmetry of sources—historical data being scarcer and more fragmented than digital content—and the focus on Turkish media, which may restrict generalizability. Future research may expand this inquiry to include audiovisual archives, cross-national comparisons, or intersectional analyses that incorporate class, religion, and ethnicity.

Beyond summarizing the empirical findings, this study highlights how forms of female visibility are shaped by historically specific media regimes while maintaining certain underlying representational logics. The analysis demonstrates that the construction of the “ideal woman” in early Republican print media and the highly visible female identities circulating on Instagram operate within different institutional structures but rely on comparable mechanisms of normalization and visibility. In both contexts, femininity becomes publicly legible through carefully structured representations that link womanhood to broader social expectations and moral frameworks.

²⁹ Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The shifting terrain of sex and power: From the “sexualization of culture” to #MeToo. *Sexualities*, 21(8), 1313–1324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718794647>.

These findings suggest that female visibility should not be understood merely as a matter of presence within media spaces but as a process shaped by discursive boundaries that define which forms of femininity become acceptable, desirable, or exemplary. By bringing together historical media analysis and contemporary digital culture, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the continuity and transformation of gendered visibility in mediated environments. In this sense, the comparison reveals not only differences between historical and digital media systems but also the persistence of symbolic structures that regulate how femininity is displayed, interpreted, and circulated in public culture.

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