

## **The Complex Relationship Between Capitalism, Medicine and The Media: Function of Corporate Websites in The Commodification of Health**

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## **Abstract**

Health communication has emerged as a significant instrument during the process of the commodification of the health care services under the influence of the neoliberal policies. In this process, the concepts of health and disease have been transformed into instruments that serve accumulation of capital and the communication channels also played a determining role in this transformation. Instruments of mass communication have been influential in the marketing of the health-care services and shaping the society's perceptions related to health. Especially, the internet-based communication platforms are widely used by the health care providers to reach their target audiences and market their products. In this study, the websites of IVF clinics operating in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus were examined using the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis method, and the effects of health communication on the commodification process in the field of health were investigated. The analysis results have revealed that the communication practices deepened class-based inequalities and contributed to commercialization of the health care services. It has been also identified that such practices encourage individual solutions and do not sufficiently focus on social problems. In this context, importance of a critical perspective in the field of health communication has been emphasized. The analysis showed that commercialization of the health care services has negative impacts on social health, and more comprehensive research is needed in this field. In this context, there is a need to discuss the existence of health communication independent of the mainstream communication approach and the public relations paradigm. This study aims to lay the ground for more comprehensive research in the field of health communication.

**Keywords:** Critical health communication; commodification of health; public relations; multimodal critical discourse analysis; Ivf centre

## **INTRODUCTION**

The neoliberal economic policies implemented on a global scale since the 1980s with the promise of increasing human welfare also led to a major transformation in the field of health services. As a result of neoliberal practices that cover rules such as reducing public expenditures and restricting the public services, health, which is a fundamental human right, is commodified under the dominance of capital. The social health system has been gradually abandoned and health services started to be produced for the objective of exchange-value rather than use-value. Healthcare has been transformed into a globally organized industry as a highly profitable commodity, suitable for capital accumulation. While the responsibility for the causes and solutions of health problems is increasingly placed on the shoulders of the individuals who make up the society, the responsibility of the public institutions has been restricted to warning and informing the society, and the connections between the health problems and their political origins are severed. Humanity has been caught in a global pandemic on a scale it has not experienced before with a hollowed-out health system resulting from the neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism which is a theory of political economy practices, asserts that the best way to increase human welfare is an order based on strong private property rights, free markets and free trade, and that individual entrepreneurial skills and freedoms should be liberated for this objective. The state should be responsible for creating the necessary institutional framework for the implementation and subsequent protection of this system. In these regulations, changes can be made in military and legal structures if necessary to ensure the protection of the markets and capital. And even in the public spheres such as health, education and social security, which are not yet included in the market economy, a private sector should be created by the hand of the state (Harvey, 2015, p. 10). The capitalist class uses information technologies, which are the privileged technology of neoliberalism, in the creation of these new sectors (Harvey, 2015, p. 177). At this stage, Internet-based applications, which are today's popular mass communication technology, played a central role in the process of implementing neoliberal policies on a global scale, where global financial centres create radical political, cultural and social changes on the local societies (Pekman, 2001).

The communication activity, which is the basic action of human life, which makes human beings different from other living creatures on earth and enables them to build a culture, is organized and structured today under the domination of the capitalist form of production in

order to direct and control societies in line with the interests of capital and to enable capital accumulation (Erdoğan, 2014). Health communication too, as it is in the production of all other material and intellectual life, is theoretically and practically produced on the axis of two different worldviews. The communication activity, the content of which consists of health and diseases, is as old as the human history. Healing shamans on the cave walls and Asclepius' snake wand are examples of human communication using images and symbols related to health. And the health communication practices, which are conceptualized as organized communication activities today, emerged in America in the 1970s and have accelerated in Turkey as well as in the whole world since the beginning of the 1980s, when neoliberal policies were implemented on a global scale (Atabek, Atabek, & Bilge, 2013).

The World Health Organization (WHO), considered as the global umbrella organization in the field of health, defines health communication as a key strategy to inform the public about their health concerns and to keep important health issues on the public agenda. It is claimed that health communication raises awareness of certain aspects of individual and collective health, as well as the importance of health in development, through the use of mass media, multimedia, and other technological innovations to disseminate useful health information to the public (Nutbeam & Kickbusch, 1998).

Mainstream health communication practices serve creating demand and marketing this demand by claiming to promote and give information about all kinds of services and products intrinsic to health, through classical and digital mass media. The General Health Insurance, which is an important component of the Health Transformation Programme (HTP), which was put into effect during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey in 2006, has been considered within the World Bank (WB) framework, and private health institutions have become one of the dominant health care providers in the health system (Bağımsız Sosyal Bilimciler, 2012, p. 106). In the following process, hospital serials, discussion programs, and daytime women's programs on health appeared more frequently on the television channels, and the daily life of the modern society was occupied by the health agenda. Thus, the health sector has created new markets and consumer masses thanks to its collaboration with the media (Şen, 2014). Following the introduction of the neoliberal economic policies, the privatization policies in the health services led to the need to market the health services, and the printed press was also included in this process under the name of health journalism (Atabek et al., 2013). The public relations experts and advertising agencies, while using print and visual media, on the one hand, by enjoying implicit advertising methods to persuade people to consume health

services, on the other hand, have turned to internet-supported media, especially as a consequence of the development of web1 and web2 technologies, thanks to their advantages of speed and global accessibility (Köksal, Mumcu, Şişman, Çatar, & Sur, 2012).

Advertising health services in Turkey is prohibited by a regulation (T.C. Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2004). Financial sanctions are imposed on health enterprises that do not comply with these prohibitions. However, considering the returns of the advertising activities, businesses create advertising penalty funds in their budgets to pay these penalties, and this process puts an additional burden on the cost of the health services and makes it more difficult for the society to access health services. Due to the aforementioned prohibitions and due to the moral and cultural norms in the social structure, such as the field of health, institutions and organizations prefer implicit advertising instead of open advertisements in activities that should be treated sensitively by businesses such as advertising and marketing, and it is thought that implicit advertisements are more effective on the society when it comes to health services (Giritlioğlu, 2017).

Marx and Engels stated that (2014) the state regulates the laws and rules to protect the interests of capital in the process of maintaining the functioning of the capitalist economy, by their words, *"The executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."* Critical political economy, practically and theoretically, is the examination of the social relations that constitute the production, distribution and consumption of material and intellectual resources, including organized communication activity, and the connections of these relations with politics (Mosco, 2017). Political economy is the analysis of the contemporary bourgeois society (Marx, 1976:29) and it is therefore observed within the capitalist form of production. It is noteworthy that the structure of the problems, which is directly related to economic and political decision-making processes, experienced in the field of health is ignored in scientific researches that put the concept of health, which is a fundamental right for human beings, at their center.

The main argument of this study is health communication dominated by the field of public relations, by causing commodification of the field of health care and by reducing the causes and solutions of health problems to the individual level, eliminates the public nature of health. In this context, the 2 websites of the ivf clinic that serving in KKTC analyzed using the

MMCDA method. In this study, the meaning emerging with the association of all modes will be evaluated after analyzing the visuals and the text. The signs of the process of curtaining of commodification of reproductive therapies through the idealization and naturalization of neoliberal health care service provision thanks to the association of the modes at the web sites included in the study at this phase will be followed.

Technological, biological and genetic research, which is complementary to medical applications used in health services, is developing rapidly every day. The concepts of health and disease are a grey area that contains many unknowns due to its inherent material basis. Due to these characteristics, the concept of health requires a challenging intellectual process for the studies carried out in the field of social sciences. On the other hand, the right to be healthy, which is the first condition for the continuation of human life, is equally clear, social and universal. Based on this idea, communication sciences, which develop as an interdisciplinary field, as Taşbaşı emphasizes (2009, p. 3), are responsible for observing and investigating every phenomenon inherent in humanity and society in which language, images and symbols produced audibly, visually and in writing are used for communication purposes as its problematic, based on the fact that communication is a social action.

The World Health Organization recognizes the issue of fertility as a global public health concern. On the organization's website, it is noted that the rate of seeking medical assistance is remarkably similar in advanced, developing, and underdeveloped countries. The emergence of fertility clinics, the focus of the study's analysis, coincides with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies. The technology of in vitro fertilization represents a technological advancement in overcoming reproductive challenges.

The application of reproductive technologies has brought about a profound change in traditional perspectives on sexuality and reproduction. With the capacity provided by new technologies to control all aspects of human reproduction, activities related to reproduction and sexuality, once shrouded in mystery, have rapidly secularized, leading to a shift away from traditional approaches dominated by classic solutions such as adoption. In vitro fertilization practices constitute a field that harbors numerous unresolved legal, ethical, moral, and technical issues universally and is shaped by a perspective distant from social health understanding. The IVF sector has evolved into a global market encompassing various products and services such as pharmaceuticals, technology, genetics, eggs, sperm, embryos, surrogacy, and health tourism. In

this context, corporate websites play a crucial role as a significant source of data for researchers in increasing demands and marketing services within the sector.

## **RESULTS**

While the population of the study is being determined, the data obtained by the method of purposive sampling have been reached by typing the keywords "Cyprus egg donation" and "Cyprus IVF centre" in the Google search tab. 17 websites, identified to belong to IVF centres among nearly 670.000 results that are reached in the results of the search tab on October 10, 2023, were examined in detail. Among the examined IVF centres, those websites which belong to IVF centres highlighted as paid sponsored ads were eliminated. The first two of the websites listed in the search results, which include all written, visual and moving images and contain the requirements of the multimodal concept, were selected to allowing opportunities of comparison during the phase of analysis. Screenshots of selected pages were taken on October 15, 2023. However, analyzing the first two in vitro fertilization centres, which claim to be "first in vitro fertilization centre" of Cyprus and "have the largest and most comprehensive laboratory and operating room", were deemed necessary and valuable to for they emphasized features that attracted the health care seekers.

After giving brief information about the selected in vitro fertilization centres during the analysis phase, the web pages on both websites, which have common contents: the home page, about us, the centre and our team and the treatments pages, were included in the analysis.

User traffic of the websites of the in vitro fertilization centres included in the analysis, thought to make a meaningful contribution to the sample selection, was researched using Similiarweb, a web analytics tool. According to the research results (Similiarweb, 2023), 100% of the searches made on the internet to Kibrüstupbebek.com.tr in October 2023 come from free sources that do not contain advertising. The country with the most access to the website was Türkiye, with a rate of 49.91%. Germany is the second country with 25.52% and England is the third country where the website is accessed with 21.26%. 1200 people visited the website in October and the number of visits increased by 26.28% compared to the previous month. The in vitro fertilization centre has a second website that can be accessed at "www.kibrüstupbebekhastanesi.com". 100% of the visits to www.kktctupbebek.com, which was included in the analysis and ranked second in Google search engine results, in October 2023, came from free sources (Similiarweb, 2023). Türkiye was the country with the highest

number of visitors to the website, with a rate of 48.8%. India is the second country with 25.56% and Azerbaijan is the third country with 15.34% access to the website. The in vitro fertilization centre has two websites that can be accessed at “www.elitenicosia.com” and “www.lowcostivf.com”.

Considering the scope of the study, institutional websites, as one of the internet-based communication channels, have been selected in order to be investigated. In this context, it was decided to examine the websites of two in vitro fertilization clinics, identified through the key words entered in Google search machine, that serve in TRNC. In the study conducted with this objective, while the process of commodification in the health sector has been dealt with its communication aspect, total 48 visuals and accompanying texts selected from the websites of the two in vitro fertilization centres have been analyzed with the method of multimodal critical discourse analysis.

It was observed that the visuals used in the first website included in the analysis are mostly selected from stock images that represent idealized characters. In the texts, the women and their gametes, thought to be positioned as the target audience by the clinic are described as problematic. Women over a certain age are convinced for the treatment by being alarmed, it is observed that young women are manipulated for postponing their motherhood plans with the method of egg freezing method. It is thought that no reference is made to a scientific resource in the pages of the website, and the contents of the texts do not serve to an objective as to informing the reader. It is seen that in the pages the historical and touristic features of Northern Cyprus and Kyrenia are frequently highlighted. This approach of the clinic makes one to think that they are in collaboration with the tourism sector in addition to being health service supplier. It is also observed that although gamete and embryo donation is prohibited in Turkey, the owner of the clinic often takes place in daytime programmes in the television channels in Turkey and shares these videos on their pages. The clinic is thus to make its covert advertisement although it is prohibited in Turkey. It is seen that on the website of the clinic “affordable price” emphasis is made and a competitive market language is dominant. It is observed that in the analyzed texts, problems related to reproduction are considered with their individualistic aspects, and the solutions are kept restricted to the areas of individual responsibility. In the texts, it is observed no content takes place about the relation of the problems of reproductive health to the social processes. While breaking the connection of the reasons and solutions about reproductive health



to the public institutions and organizations trigger commodification in this field, it also leads individuals to search solutions within their own means.

In the second website analyzed, in addition to the stock photographs, stock diagrams have been used. It is also seen on the YouTube page of the clinic, videos in English and Turkish are broadcasted and they share these videos in the pages of their website. The clinic is observed to post the fees of the services it supplies, together with the statistical success rates on its page. On the pages where considerably long written texts and scientific diagrams accompany, it is observed that health services and human reproductive cells are marketed by creating an impression of scientificity. It is also observed that in the texts, the health problems are presented generally in an individualized, individual-blaming language, supreme technologies applied by the clinic are presented as solutions. The clinic emphasized more than once that genetic examination technology is only available in its own laboratories in TRNC, and other clinics can only buy this service from them. It is thought that the monopolist structure formed in the health sector may create dangerous results in terms of the quality of the services and their accessibility by the public. On the website prepared on the claim of giving information about in vitro fertilization treatment, the clinic is observed to promote areas such as its aesthetics services which allow for capital accumulation.

On both websites emphasis is observed to be made on the prices of the services and products. While on the first website, the clinic highlights that they are more affordable compared to their rivals, on the second website all services and products are observed to be presented with their price labels. In the reproductive health market where the reproductive cells of a human being or the embryos are sold to another human being under the name of donation, it is uncertain according to what the prices are determined and affordable to whom and what.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is thought that the analyzed texts and visuals have been produced in order to manipulate individuals who have reproductive problems and seek information in the internet, and thus, to convince them for being the clients of the clinic. The texts and visuals are thought to be prepared for advertisement and marketing rather than giving information. It is also thought that these public relations studies which are conducted under the name of health communication on the

web sites where the prices of human cells are openly presented produce and reproduce the problem of commodification in the field of health. Broadcasting the price tariffs is a plain reflection of a profit, capital and consumer-oriented service policy. Presentation of human cells as marketable commodities based on the potential of probability rather than medical necessity declares that the social characteristic of health has been absolutely dismissed. The donors who are forced to sell their reproductive cells for economic reasons to individuals who need reproductive treatments are forced to be a party to a trade that is incompatible with human dignity. This market, where the boundaries between the right to life and commercial relations are blurred, prepares the ground for laying the social relations on economic basis. Presentation of human cells with price lists for exchange causes commodification of not only health but also the human body. On the other hand, while the wealthy classes get access to reproductive technology more easily, the poor classes are deprived from the services or have to produce individual solutions in order to access. Inequalities in access to the services reinforce the class discrimination. Inequalities in accessing the opportunities to have children, which means to continue its lineage for humanity, damages social justice.

This study has been carried in order to open a door for more comprehensive studies in the field of critical health communication. All kinds of communication activities, regardless of being written, visual, digital or face-to-face communication, whose content is constituted by health and disease, should be investigated in order to protect the interests of the society. Health is one of the primary fields where the results of the inequalities between the classes reflect in the most naked manner. Poverty, class-based inequality, ecological problems, social health, social policies, workers' health, problems of the health laborer's, migration waves, wars, food crises, epidemics, organ trade, monopolization in the health sector, pharmaceutical industry and many other topics wait for to be investigated with a critical perspective in the field of health communication. In this context, it should be discussed whether or not health communication has an opportunity for an existence independent from the mainstream communication perspective and public relations paradigm.

## **CONCLUSION**

The phenomenon of health, which means the continuation of life for the human beings, is today marketed as a commodity for the objective of capital accumulation. The academia has become an organisation that train labour force for the market, rather than being a social organisation

where critical and questioning thinking is produced for the benefit of science and society. Faculties of Communication, which provide education within the university structures, train health and science reporters in their journalism departments and public relations specialists in their public relations departments to meet the needs of the modern society created by industry. Today, health is a battleground in the process of deepening or eliminating the inequality between the classes. Health services are vital for the individuals who make up the society to lead a healthy and prosperous life, and therefore, in the academic studies that claim to be scientific research, intellectual production should be made by considering the interests of the society. Therefore, it is necessary to explore ways to enable the autonomous existence of health communication practices independent of the public relations paradigm. On the other hand, it should be reminded that a critical political economic perspective illuminates the way for thinkers in the academic field to conduct a thorough analysis of the content produced in communication practices organized within the capitalist production system.

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