

Visual Journalism on YouTube: Emotion, Representation and Platform Logic

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Citation (APA 7): Ercebe, Ö., (2026). Visual Journalism on YouTube: Emotion, Representation, and Platform Logic. *Akdeniz İletişim*, (51), 44-62. <https://doi.org/10.31123/akil.1792700>

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how YouTube thumbnails and titles operate within the platform's attention economy and algorithmic visibility in digital news. It focuses on three Turkish news outlets—Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope—to show how editorial positioning is translated into visual and textual packaging.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative design combining visual framing analysis with a broader interpretive framework drawn from platformization, affective publics, and Chouliaraki's aesthetics of witnessing. Rodríguez and Dimitrova's four-level model structures the analysis of 77 thumbnail-title pairs published between 28 April and 4 May 2025. Thumbnails and titles are treated as a single visual-textual unit and examined in terms of descriptive content, stylistic features, emotional cues, and ideological messages.

Findings: The findings reveal distinct outlet-specific strategies. Sözcü emphasizes conflict, urgency, and oppositional tension; A Haber foregrounds national unity, security, and threat through symbolic and emotionally charged framing; Medyascope adopts a more restrained aesthetic and analytical tone that encourages interpretive distance.

Research limitations/implications: The short sampling period and focus on highly viewed videos limit generalizability. Future research should expand the timeframe and include audience reception and video content.

Practical implications: The findings offer practical insight for digital news producers, editors, and platform-based journalism practitioners by showing how visual design choices carry editorial, emotional, and ideological consequences. They also highlight the need for greater awareness among journalists and media managers regarding the tension between visibility-driven optimization and editorial integrity.

Originality/value: The study contributes to the literature by bringing together visual framing, platform logic, and affective publics in the analysis of YouTube news presentation in Turkey. Its originality lies in treating thumbnails and titles as a single unit of analysis and in showing how platform affordances, emotional intensities, and ideological positioning intersect in routine news representation. In doing so, it offers a context-specific contribution to debates on platformized journalism and the visual transformation of news.

Keywords: Visual Framing, Affective Publics, Platformization, YouTube, Turkish Media

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Introduction

Digitalization has profoundly reshaped traditional media structures, shifting journalism away from a model centered primarily on information delivery and toward a visual and affective mode of communication shaped by competition for visibility. As van Dijck and Poell (2013) argue, platformization reorganizes news production around visibility, user engagement, and aesthetic appeal. The movement of news into platform environments therefore represents more than a change in channel or format. The economic, technical, and cultural arrangements embedded in platforms have altered the infrastructural conditions of journalism itself (Hartley et al., 2023; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). Under these conditions, affective publics, as conceptualized by Papacharissi (2015), also take on a different form. Digital publicness no longer refers simply to a space where users encounter content and respond emotionally; it increasingly operates as an interaction regime in which emotions are algorithmically ordered, made visible, and sustained through continuous circulation. As news production and distribution become more deeply dependent on platform infrastructures, journalism's operational logic is reconfigured at multiple levels. YouTube provides one of the clearest examples of this transformation, reshaping both the circulation of news and its visual and discursive design.

Within this platformed visibility regime, two elements structure the audience's first encounter with content: the thumbnail and the title. The thumbnail condenses a video into a single image, while the title acts as an immediate cue that can arouse curiosity and prompt a click (Lee, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). Existing research shows that facial expressions in thumbnails, emotional emphasis in titles, and the informational density of textual elements directly influence viewership rates (Shimono et al., 2020; Tafesse, 2020). As central mechanisms organizing the relationship between media and audiences, thumbnails and titles make it necessary to examine news representation together with the interactional logic through which engagement is generated.

Although international scholarship has increasingly examined the visual framing of news content on platforms such as YouTube (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Thurman et al., 2019; Trilling et al., 2017), the visual strategies of news videos remain underexamined in the Turkish context. Existing research in Turkey has focused largely on self-presentation, popular culture, and bodily representation (Güler & Uludağ, 2020; Yılmaz, 2019), leaving the relationship between news imagery, platform logic, affective representation, and ideological orientation insufficiently explored.

To address this gap, the study adopts a three-part theoretical framework for analyzing the layered structure of news thumbnails. Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics provides the main framework for understanding emotional circulation and attachment, but the study revisits this concept by emphasizing its entanglement with algorithmic flow and mechanisms of continuity. Chouliaraki's (2006) approach to the aestheticization of media helps explain how images are shaped through aesthetic choices, while Rodríguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-level model of visual framing provides an analytical basis for unpacking layers of meaning within visual content. Taken together, these

perspectives move the analysis beyond visual discourse alone and make it possible to examine how visual discourse is shaped through the combined effects of platform affordances, algorithmic reward mechanisms, and editorial choices.

Within this framework, the study offers a comparative analysis of the thumbnails and titles used in current YouTube content published by three Turkish media outlets with distinct ideological orientations: Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope. The sample is also important to the comparative logic of the study. Whereas Sözcü and A Haber extend journalistic practices associated with traditional television broadcasting into the YouTube ecosystem, Medyascope began publishing directly within that ecosystem. In this respect, the sample also speaks to Ertuna and Aşık's (2025) argument that YouTube functions in Turkey both as a space of escape from the constraints of mainstream media and as an alternative site of journalistic production.

The study is guided by three questions. First, which figures and settings are foregrounded in the thumbnails of Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope, and how do these representations relate to the operational logic of the platform? Second, how do formal and aesthetic choices vary in response to YouTube's attention economy and algorithmic flow? Third, what kinds of affective associations and ideological cues are embedded in these thumbnails, and through which visual strategies are these attachments constructed? By pursuing these questions, the analysis shows that news thumbnails on YouTube function not simply as visual thresholds, but as representational interfaces that shape affective relations with audiences and structure ideological positioning.

1. Theoretical Layers of Representation in Digital Journalism

1.1. Platformization and the Restructuring of Journalism

In the digital age, transformations in media production extend beyond changes in content form and involve broader shifts in the infrastructural and economic organization of media systems (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). One of the key concepts for understanding this transformation is platformization. van Dijck et al. (2018, pp. 2-4) define platformization as a socio-technical restructuring process that exceeds the technical sphere and operates simultaneously across media, the economy, politics, and culture.

News production and presentation are increasingly shaped by platform logic (Gillespie, 2018). This logic emerges through the interaction between the mechanisms identified by van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) —datafication, commodification, and algorithmic curation—and what Bucher (Bucher, 2020) describes as algorithmic flow. As Bucher (2020, p. 65) argues, algorithmic flow is not a fixed ranking system but a dynamic structure that is continuously updated in response to users' prior interactions, pauses, and reactions. By determining which content becomes more visible, it functions almost like an "invisible editor." At the core of this process is an infrastructural logic that rewards content capable of keeping users on the screen longer, generating engagement through likes and comments, and, above all, increasing clickability. In an environment that privileges visual and textual strategies designed to attract attention, provoke emotional response, and arouse curiosity before accuracy or

depth fully enter the frame, news organizations are increasingly positioned as content providers that must adapt to the platform's attention economy (Carlson, 2020; Napoli, 2019). In this sense, the attention economy is not simply a matter of capturing user interest; it operates as a structural regime produced through the interaction of reward and visibility mechanisms embedded in algorithmic flow (Terranova, 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Hartley et al. (2023) place this dynamic in a more specific analytical frame with regard to news media, emphasizing the ongoing tension between the editorial autonomy of news organizations and their unavoidable dependence on technological infrastructures. This does not mean that editorial control has disappeared in a linear or one-directional process. Rather, it points to a shifting power relation in which editorial values repeatedly come into conflict with platform logic and are continually recalibrated in response to it. As news organizations adopt the codes of the attention economy in pursuit of visibility, they are also compelled to adjust their institutional values to this emerging structure (Hartley et al., 2023, p. 1381). Nielsen and Fletcher (2023) make a similar argument, suggesting that growing structural dependence on technology companies has reduced publishers' capacity to operate as autonomous actors controlling their own channels of distribution and has left them increasingly subject to platform rules and formats.

YouTube provides a particularly clear example of how this structure reshapes the formal and aesthetic organization of news. Through its audiovisual architecture and algorithmic recommendation system, the platform configures news videos not only as informational content but also as attention-generating forms designed to produce affective intensity and aesthetic impact. Existing research suggests that this aesthetic transformation gives rise to an economy of affect shaped by user engagement (Ballejo et al., 2021; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). In adapting to the logic of visibility, news organizations increasingly rely on recurring color palettes, dramatic compositions, striking facial expressions, and emotionally charged headlines in their thumbnails. These choices are not merely stylistic. They also contribute to the ideological positioning and affective framing of news (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Rogers, 2021). On YouTube, such visual strategies—and the presentation of news as a “product” aligned with algorithmic visibility—transform thumbnails from simple attention-grabbing devices into strategic signifiers competing within the attention economy.

1.2. Affective Publics and Aesthetic Representations

The development of digital media has diversified access to information while also transforming how information circulates, generates effects, and acquires social meaning (Deuze, 2008; Papacharissi, 2015). Social media environments have given rise to a communicative regime in which news derives meaning not only from informational content but also from emotional force. Moving beyond the classical view of news as an instrument of rational deliberation, Papacharissi (2015) proposes the concept of affective publics to describe forms of public engagement that emerge through the interaction of emotions, identities, and personal experience in digital environments.

According to Papacharissi (2015), content shared on social media helps organize and circulate collective feeling, often generating publics shaped around polarization, belonging, anger, or empathy.

These publics do not operate according to the classical public-sphere ideal of open debate and shared reason. Instead, they take shape through forms of social participation structured by feeling (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 16-20). From this perspective, the form, tone, and expressive language of news imagery are selected not only for aesthetic reasons but also for their capacity to activate particular affective orientations (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 56). Wahl-Jorgensen (2020, p. 172) similarly treats emotion as an epistemic resource in journalism that helps make sense of complex social realities. Under contemporary platform conditions, however, user interaction is increasingly steered by systems of algorithmic flow and visibility (Bucher, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Emotions therefore become more than momentary responses; they take on a structural role in sustaining the continuity of the attention economy.

Nielsen and Fletcher (2023), in their comparative study, show that although platforms are globally widespread, the degree of platformization in news varies considerably across contexts. Their findings suggest that platform logic does not operate as a universal model but takes shape through interaction with local media systems. In the Turkish case, this process becomes more pronounced as media organizations produce affective representations that consolidate communities aligned with their political positioning, moving beyond the level of individual engagement. Polarized media actors repeatedly reproduce emotional tones such as anger, threat, and pride in order to sustain audience attachment and strengthen ideological belonging, and these strategies align easily with YouTube's algorithmic reward mechanisms. In this sense, affective publics function not merely as spaces of audience interaction but as representational fields that reinforce the platform's visibility regime and sustain continuity through a mutually reinforcing dynamic.

To interpret the visual manifestations of this representational field in practice, Chouliaraki's (2006) concepts of aestheticization and spectacular representation provide a complementary framework. The notion of the spectatorship of suffering addresses the dramatic and aestheticized presentation of themes such as war, crisis, and victimhood in media discourse. This study does not limit its analytical focus to crisis-related themes. Instead, it approaches spectacular representation as a broader strategy of aesthetic and affective coding that cannot be reduced to images of suffering alone. From this perspective, the principles of aestheticization and visualization developed by Chouliaraki (2008) offer an additional lens for interpreting the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of visual news representations. In this broader sense, aestheticization refers not only to the presentation of suffering but also to a more general media strategy through which emotions are organized by formal and visual codes.

Chouliaraki (2008) deepens this discussion by conceptualizing the affective shaping of news in terms of "regimes of pity." Within this framework, modern journalism places audiences in particular affective positions, guiding them at ethical, political, and aesthetic levels. Two aesthetic regimes are especially relevant here: the pathos formula and the tableau vivant. The pathos formula seeks to produce strong moral resonance through dramatic imagery, close-up framing, dense metaphorical cues, and emotional triggers. In this formulation, witnessing means more than visually observing an event; it

also involves being directed toward an ethical response. As Chouliaraki argues (2008, pp. 520-522), the news object is coded within an atmosphere of “moral urgency,” inviting viewers into a position oriented toward action. On visually driven platforms such as YouTube, the pathos formula becomes visible through high-contrast imagery, exaggerated facial expressions, striking headlines, and colors that evoke urgency.

By contrast, the tableau vivant stages moments of suffering or crisis, aestheticizes them, and generally reflects a regime of visualization marked by emotional restraint. This narrative form presents the reality of war or social conflict within a compelling yet distanced aesthetic, positioning the viewer less in a reactive mode than in a reflective one. In this case, witnessing is grounded not in emotional involvement but in aesthetic observation (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 522). The distinction between these two aesthetic regimes is shaped not only by visual choices but also by the imagined communities into which viewers are invited. The pathos formula positions audiences within a distinction between “us” and “them” through the affective representation of national or political belonging, whereas the tableau vivant privileges individual reflection and critical distance over collective action. This perspective offers a productive framework for evaluating the thumbnails analyzed in this study not only in terms of their aesthetic features but also in terms of the forms of witnessing and belonging they seek to construct. At the same time, affective frames can generate empathy and attachment while also carrying risks of manipulation and polarization (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020, p. 177).

In sum, Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of affective publics provides a central theoretical basis for understanding how news imagery establishes emotional relations with audiences, while Chouliaraki’s framework of aestheticization and regimes of witnessing makes it possible to analyze how those emotions are organized visually and discursively. Considered alongside arguments that digital platforms accelerate the circulation of emotional expression and turn emotional storytelling into a normative feature of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020, p. 175), platformization provides a broader analytical ground for examining the emotional and aesthetic choices of news organizations in relation to both visibility strategies and editorial positioning.

1.3. Visual Framing Theory and Discursive Representations

News images are more than illustrations; they are discursive devices that shape narrative structure, influence affective orientation, and intervene directly in processes of reception (Chouliaraki, 2006; Messaris & Abraham, 2001; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Media frames do not simply define content; they also guide audience perception (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). As discussed in the previous sections, framing on platforms such as YouTube emerges under conditions shaped by the visibility criteria that govern the flow of content (Hase et al., 2023). Thumbnails are therefore produced at the intersection of editorial practice and the platform’s own visibility logic.

Visual framing reveals not only what is represented but also which elements are selected, which are excluded, and how they are arranged (Seppänen & Väliverronen, 2003). Karki et al. (2025) show that facial expressions, object placement, and textual elements in YouTube visuals are directly related to the emotional responses expressed in audience comments. This finding suggests that news

thumbnails function as discursive devices shaping viewers' affective orientations and ideological positioning.

Rodríguez and Dimitrova (2011) systematize this approach by proposing four levels for the analysis of visual framing: descriptive content, visual style, affective associations, and ideological message. This multilayered structure makes it possible to understand not only what an image shows, but also how and for what purpose it is presented. The first level, descriptive content, includes the people, objects, and settings directly observable in the image. The level of visual style focuses on formal choices such as color, framing, angle, and composition. At the level of affective associations, analysis turns to emotions such as hope, fear, anger, or empathy that the image may evoke. The final level, ideological message, addresses the social and political meanings carried by the image by examining which values, identities, and political positions are legitimized (Rodríguez & Dimitrova, 2011, pp. 680-683).

On platforms such as YouTube, these four levels are reshaped by the visibility logic of algorithmic flow. Metrics such as watch time, click-through rates, and user engagement help determine which elements are foregrounded and which recede within the algorithmic attention economy (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Napoli, 2021). Visual framing therefore reflects not only the formal organization of representation but also the filtering processes through which platform infrastructures shape visibility (Hase et al., 2023).

The ideological effects of visual representations arise not only from their political content but also from platform logic, which structures digital circulation and generates tension between editorial autonomy and platform dependence (Hartley et al., 2023). Stuart Hall's argument that representation does more than reflect the external world and instead functions as a process of meaning production - bringing some realities into view while rendering others invisible through cultural codes (Hall, 1997, p. 15) - therefore requires renewed consideration under contemporary conditions shaped by algorithmic flow.

Taken together, platformization, affective publics, and visual framing provide an integrated framework for analyzing digital news imagery across multiple dimensions. Platformization helps explain how images attract attention, circulate, and gain prominence within the dynamics of algorithmic flow and the attention economy. The concept of affective publics clarifies how such images establish emotional relations with audiences. Visual framing, in turn, offers an analytical basis for examining how this transformation is structured at formal and discursive levels and reproduced at the intersection of ideological implication and technical dynamics. From this relational perspective, the digital news images in the selected sample are examined as an interconnected whole shaped by visibility codes, affective effects, and aesthetic choices under platform conditions.

2. Methodology

This study examines how digital news videos are visualized on YouTube and through which aesthetic and affective frames these visual strategies are organized. To analyze visual representations

and discursive codes, the study adopts a visual framing approach grounded in qualitative content analysis and informed by the model developed by Rodríguez and Dimitrova (2011).

The sample consists of video thumbnails and titles published on the YouTube channels of three Turkish media outlets that occupy distinct political, institutional, and quantitative positions: Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope. As organizations rooted in traditional television broadcasting, Sözcü and A Haber adapt an established news aesthetic to YouTube's attention economy and the dynamics of algorithmic visibility. Medyascope, by contrast, is a digital-born outlet that uses the platform as a central space of journalistic production. It is marked by more restrained typography, lower affective intensity, and a more analytical mode of presentation. These institutional differences make it possible to compare how the platform reshapes news production not only at the technical level but also at aesthetic and discursive levels.

Within the sample, Sözcü and A Haber stand out as high-reach actors on YouTube. At the time of data collection, the YouTube channel of Sözcü Television had 2.2 million subscribers, while A Haber had 1.2 million. Medyascope, by contrast, operated as an independent digital outlet with 565 thousand subscribers. Despite its more limited audience reach, it uses YouTube not merely as a distribution channel but also as a space for editorial autonomy and alternative journalistic production. It is further distinguished by its effort to preserve professional journalistic norms and to maintain a publishing style that offers an alternative to the pressures of algorithmic visibility. Taken together, these three channels occupy distinct positions that reflect both the structure of Turkey's media system and different manifestations of platformization, while engaging with YouTube's attention economy and visibility logic in markedly different ways.

The dataset was constructed from videos published on these channels between 28 April and 4 May 2025. This period was selected because it represented a relatively typical week without an exceptionally intense news agenda, making it possible to observe routine news flow. The aim was to facilitate comparison across the routine publishing practices of the selected outlets while limiting the distortions created by extraordinary developments.

For Sözcü and A Haber, the four most-viewed videos for each day within 48 hours of publication were selected, resulting in 28 thumbnails for each outlet over the course of the week. For Medyascope, the three most-viewed videos per day were selected in line with the channel's publishing pattern, yielding 21 thumbnails. The scale of audience reaches achieved by the most-viewed videos is also reflected in the peak figures recorded during the sampling period: a single video reached 332,930 viewers on Sözcü, 123,422 on Medyascope, and 118,303 on A Haber. The final corpus consisted of 77 thumbnail-title pairs. Only content categorized as news, commentary, interviews, or current affairs evaluation was included. Promotional videos, Shorts, fixed institutional statements, and advertising content were excluded.

For each video, the thumbnail and title were treated as a single visual-textual unit of analysis. The data were collected manually from the YouTube interface and tabulated together with publication date, view count, number of likes, and number of comments. The analysis followed Rodríguez and

Dimitrova's (2011) four-level model of visual framing: (1) descriptive content, referring to the persons, objects, and settings directly observable in the image; (2) formal features, including color, framing, typography, and composition; (3) affective associations, referring to responses such as anger, fear, empathy, and curiosity; and (4) ideological implications, referring to political and social positions as well as underlying value systems.

Each of these four levels was operationalized prior to analysis and specified through explicit indicators for manual coding. At the level of descriptive content, the coding scheme covered persons, objects, settings, and symbols. At the level of formal features, it included color contrast, framing, typography, and composition. At the level of affective associations, the indicators included anger, empathy, fear, hope, and excitement. At the level of ideological implications, the scheme focused on the representation of political figures, the framing of social identities, and the use of value-laden symbols.

The analysis was conducted by a single researcher. To strengthen coding consistency, recoding was carried out at regular intervals, and detailed observation notes were kept for ambiguous cases. Reflective memos were also used throughout the analysis to maintain awareness of the interpretive process and reduce the influence of personal judgment. This methodological structure was designed to support the systematic, transparent, and replicable production of findings.

Within this framework, particular attention was paid to recurring graphic elements in thumbnails, the use of contrasting colors, attention-grabbing facial expressions, and large-font text, as well as to striking wording, value-laden concepts, and highly suggestive lexical choices in titles. Thumbnails and titles were evaluated together as a unified meaning-making structure. Video descriptions and the audio-visual content of the videos themselves were excluded from the analysis in order to keep the unit of analysis limited to the visual-textual pair formed by the thumbnail and the title. In this respect, the methodological design further supports the transparency and replicability of the study.

3. Findings and a Layered Analysis of Representations: Visuality, Affect, and Ideology

3.1. Visibility Strategies and the Attention Economy in YouTube News Channels

On algorithm-driven platforms such as YouTube, the digitalization of journalism reshapes not only the circulation of content but also the formal presentation of news. As outlined in the theoretical framework, platformization suggests that news production is shaped not only by editorial decisions but also by platform-oriented criteria such as visibility, engagement, and shareability. In Bucher's (2020) account, algorithmic flow refers to a dynamic process continuously updated in line with users' prior interactions, whereas algorithmic visibility refers to the outcome of this process: the degree to which content is made prominent on the platform. From this perspective, examining visibility strategies associated with algorithmic flow helps clarify how news organizations position their content within platform environments.

Video thumbnails and titles function as key thresholds through which content becomes visible. Research showing that algorithms tend to privilege videos generating high levels of engagement, including clicks, likes, and comments (Bakhshi et al., 2014), suggests that formal choices such as close-up facial framing, dramatic color palettes, and large-font text operate as strategic tools in the competition for visibility. Under these conditions, news videos may, in some cases, move closer to advertising aesthetics, with content presented less as an informational object than as a visually striking package designed to attract attention.

Table 1.

Indicators of Algorithmic Visibility

Feature	Sözcü	A Haber	Medyascope
Large-font Headlines	High	High	Low
Use of contrasting colors	High	High	Moderate
Close-up facial framing	High	Moderate	Low
Engagement prompts	High	High	Low
Click-driven headlines	High	Moderate	Low

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between the visual strategies of Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope and the logic of algorithmic visibility on YouTube. Across the sampled week, Sözcü relied most heavily on the codes of the attention economy, particularly through large-font text, strong color contrast, close-up facial framing, and click-oriented headlines. A Haber also displayed a high level of adaptation to visibility logic but did so through a denser symbolic structure that combined affective intensity with political and national cues. Medyascope, by contrast, maintained a more restrained aesthetic, with lower emphasis on visual intensity and a stronger orientation toward informational coherence. The comparison suggests that the editorial lines of these outlets intersect with YouTube's algorithmic requirements to different degrees.

Figure 1.

Formal Features



The examples examined in this section show that formal choices vary systematically across the thumbnail designs of the three outlets. Sözcü (2025a) pursues visibility through some of the clearest codes of the attention economy, including large-font text, contrasting colors, and dramatic close-up facial

framing. A Haber (2025a) combines text and image with denser symbolic elements, using references such as the parliamentary chamber, prison bars, or the national flag to construct a visual arrangement that supports affective and ideological mobilization. Medyascope (2025a), in turn, adopts more restrained typography and more moderate color contrast, favoring an information-oriented aesthetic that gives greater weight to coherence than to immediate visibility.

Taken together, these differences point to the role of algorithmic flow and visibility logic in shaping digital news production alongside editorial preferences. Each outlet appears to have developed a distinct visual strategy in response to YouTube's competitive environment, and these strategies are shaped by the interaction between political positioning and platform incentives.

3.2. Visual Framing Strategies: Aesthetic Representation and Affective Layers

On visually oriented platforms such as YouTube, the presentation of news plays an important role in shaping the relationship established with audiences. Thumbnails function as communicative forms that extend beyond the capture of attention and carry affective associations, aesthetic choices, and representational priorities. Drawing on Rodríguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-level model of visual framing, this section examines descriptive content, visual style, and affective association. Dominant patterns are interpreted in relation to Chouliaraki's (2006, 2008) aesthetic regimes and Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, with particular attention to the contemporary restructuring of media and platform dynamics in Turkey. This framework makes it possible to ask what images show, how they show it, and what kinds of affective or aesthetic responses they appear to invite.

Table 2.

Affective Tones and Aesthetic Formation

Affective/Aesthetic Element	Sözcü	A Haber	Medyascope
Anger/Tension	High	Moderate	Low
Hope/Unity	Low	High	Moderate
Curiosity/Threat	High	High	Low
Aesthetic elements	Red-yellow palette, face-centered framing	Clear background, symbolic imagery	Light background, typographic emphasis

Sözcü's thumbnails present political figures within symbolically charged scenes of conflict and produce a relatively high level of affective intensity. In the context of political polarization, these patterns suggest an oppositional framing that also aligns with YouTube's click-oriented logic. High-contrast colors and striking headlines appear to serve the dual purpose of increasing algorithmic visibility and generating immediacy and tension. The resulting visual strategy positions viewers less as distant observers than as participants in a shared oppositional affective frame.

In A Haber's thumbnails, actors representing state authority, especially the President and security forces, appear together with images of crisis and disaster. Markers of victimhood, such as children or funerals, are combined with national symbols, producing a visually dense and affectively charged frame. Contrasting colors dominated by red, white, and black, dramatic framing, and exclamatory headlines create a pathos-oriented narrative that addresses viewers directly. Read through the concept of affective publics under platformized conditions, A Haber's representational mode can be interpreted as a nationally coded spectacle journalism that reinforces political legitimacy. Sözcü, by contrast, sustains an oppositional affective register organized around emotions such as anger and resistance.

At the descriptive level, Medyascope's thumbnails center less on the event itself than on commentators speaking about it. Single figures or pairs of figures usually look directly at the camera, while backgrounds featuring bookshelves, maps, or simple graphics suggest an approach that prioritizes clarity and coherence over visual intensity. The formal aesthetic is marked by restrained pastel tones and white typography. The preference for question-based headlines and analytical phrasing, rather than sensational wording, produces a more distanced and reflective visibility, one that recalls the aesthetic of the tableau vivant rather than dramatic agitation.

Figure 2.

Affective Tones and Aesthetic Element in YouTube Thumbnails



The examples summarized in Figure 2 and Table 2 indicate that the three outlets respond to platform logic in different ways. Sözcü (2025b) organizes its presentation around conflict and oppositional affect, whereas A Haber (2025b) combines national unity with the language of victimhood. Medyascope (2025b), by contrast, addresses viewers through critical curiosity rather than through anger or belonging, relying on lower affective intensity and analytical questioning. The descriptive, formal, and affective levels identified in Rodríguez and Dimitrova's (2011) model vary in line with each outlet's political positioning. At the same time, all three channels are articulated with platform logic as part of broader strategies for producing differentiated affective communities. This differentiation also corresponds to the findings of Ertuna and Aşık (2025), who show that journalists in Turkey use YouTube as a space of limited autonomy within an authoritarian media system. In the cases of Sözcü and A Haber, ideological orientations become visible through populist and national affective registers, whereas in Medyascope they appear in the form of a more analytical presentation aligned with professional journalistic norms.

3.3. Aesthetic Codes and Modes of Affective and Discursive Representation in News Imagery

YouTube's algorithmic flow also influences which forms of representation gain visibility in news imagery (Hase et al., 2023; Napoli, 2021). The visibility regime produced under such conditions creates selective pressure for visual and discursive choices aligned with platform-specific metrics such as affective intensity, clickability, and engagement. This section examines the ideological message and implication of thumbnail frames that gain visibility through platform incentives by drawing on Rodríguez and Dimitrova's (2011) model. At this level, the model makes it possible to analyze the political and cultural meanings carried by images, the value systems they legitimize, and the imagined communities they propose to viewers. From this perspective, the ideological forms of representation found in the thumbnails and titles of Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope are compared in relation to the platform's logic of flow.

Table 3a.

Ideological and Aesthetic Differences in Representation

Theme/Category	Sözcü	A Haber	Medyascope
Leader-centered representation	Erdoğan, opposition figures	Erdoğan, the state, the public	Commentators, experts
Crisis/tension framing	High	Moderate	Moderate
Oppositional/critical tone	Explicit	Closed	Neutral/analytical
Aesthetic manipulation	Strong dramatic emphasis	Official style / dense symbolism	Restrained visual interpretation

Table 3b.

Comparison of Concrete Visual Elements

Representational Element	Sözcü	A Haber	Medyascope
Political figures	Close-up portraits, face-centered framing	Erdoğan, the state, the public	Commentators, experts
Spatial framing	Courthouses, crowds, sites of crisis	Official buildings, crowds, podiums, sites of crisis	Studios, interview backdrops
Visual symbols	Flags, buildings, slogans	Flags, uniforms, microphones	Text-overlay visuals

Sözcü's (2025c) framing style foregrounds an explicitly oppositional position. Headlines such as "The Palace Is Shaken by This Allegation" and "Claim of the Year: A Meeting of 16 AKP Deputies Saying 'This Cannot Go On Like This'" call into question the ruling bloc's image of power and stability, and this tendency is reinforced through visual coding. The presentation of ruling figures in darker tones and opposition figures in brighter ones, for example, can be read as ideological markers that sharpen the distinction between "us" and "them." Such a dramatic representational mode corresponds closely to YouTube's preference for affective intensity and engagement and helps sustain an oppositional political frame.

A Haber's (2025c) YouTube visuals present a narrative that integrates nationalist discourse with visual and affective codes. Symbols such as the flag, the military, and state officials represent the unity of the nation-state coded as "us," while headlines invoking Erdoğan's authority support affective identification with the state. Crisis, attack, and victory are staged in dramatic form, addressing viewers through fear, anger, and national pride. The red-and-white color palette, together with categorical headlines such as "Teknofest Disturbed Athens," reinforces this affective intensity. Within this structure, the power and legitimacy of the state are aesthetically emphasized, and a collective sense of belonging

Figure 3.

Ideological Framing in YouTube Thumbnails



is reproduced.

Medyascope (2025c), by contrast, foregrounds critical and analytical interpretation rather than an explicitly partisan discourse. Its visual strategy can be read as a media language that invites viewers to develop their own interpretive stance. The use of commentator portraits against simple backgrounds and with direct eye contact suggests an effort to establish a more individualized intellectual mode of contact with the audience. Distanced from dramatic agitation, this approach recalls a tableau vivant aesthetic that privileges reflection and commentary. Analytical questions in headlines such as "At What Stage Is the Process?" and "Is the Old Political Equation Coming to an End?" open space for multidimensional evaluation rather than pushing viewers toward emotional extremes. In that sense, Medyascope positions viewers more as critical interpreters than as affectively mobilized subjects. This approach may be read as one form of journalism's search for a space of digital autonomy in Turkey (Ertuna & Aşık, 2025).

Within this framework, affective association functions less as a means of intensifying the distinction between "us" and "them" and more as a basis for encouraging curiosity, informed engagement, and reflective participation. Through its visual aesthetics, Medyascope makes visible a value-oriented mode of discourse structured around analytical distance and interpretive openness.

Taken together, the cases of Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope point to the importance of the interaction between algorithmic flow and political meaning production in the aesthetic design of news thumbnails.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that the differences among Sözcü, A Haber, and Medyascope are better understood as political strategies of representation than as simple aesthetic preferences. On YouTube, news thumbnails emerge at the intersection of platform imperatives and algorithmic flow. Digital news imagery therefore contributes to a media language shaped not only by the attention economy but also by institutional positioning at the level of ideology and discourse. As van Dijck and Poell (2013) argue, platformization indicates that news content is shaped by editorial decisions together with structural pressures such as clickability and user engagement. Aesthetic and narrative choices in news imagery thus reflect an ongoing tension between adaptation to the technical rules of digital environments and the preservation of editorial autonomy (Hartley et al., 2023; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). As visibility strategies on YouTube become increasingly organized around high engagement, dramatic composition, and affective intensity, journalism appears to develop a representational language that is more closely attuned to algorithmic incentives. Under such conditions, the public-information function of news becomes more closely tied to visual performance and digital visibility.

Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics provides a useful framework for interpreting these patterns. News discourse appears to move away from a model grounded primarily in rational deliberation and toward representations of digital collectivities organized around affective response. The cases of Sözcü and A Haber show how emotions such as anger, threat, and pride circulate within a polarized media environment and reproduce distinctions between "us" and "them." Medyascope, by contrast, presents a different affective structure, one that preserves greater critical distance through analytical language and positions news through intellectual engagement rather than emotional intensity. The findings suggest that, under contemporary digital conditions, affective publics are increasingly intertwined with forms of continuity shaped by algorithmic flow.

Chouliaraki's (2006, 2008) concept of regimes of witnessing also offers a productive way of understanding the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of these affective representations. The dramatic pathos aesthetic found in Sözcü and A Haber produces a representational mode that addresses viewers through collective feeling, whereas Medyascope's more distanced tableau vivant aesthetic privileges reflective witnessing and analytical engagement. The analysis indicates that news imagery on platforms performs affective and political functions within regimes of digital visibility. This pattern points to a restructuring of news production away from information transfer alone and toward a practice increasingly organized around affect, visibility, and power, and more tightly articulated with the technical and emotional logic of digital platforms.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that news thumbnails on YouTube are produced within affective, aesthetic, and ideological structures shaped by platformization. Journalistic practices are increasingly reorganized

in line with the logic of algorithmic flow, affective continuity, and regimes of visibility. In the cases examined here, Sözcü adapts to this environment through polemic and tension, A Haber through narratives of national unity and threat, and Medyascope through a more distanced and analytical mode of presentation. The findings therefore illuminate not only media strategies but also broader transformations in public communication in Turkey.

The sharp “us/them” distinctions constructed by Sözcü and A Haber turn political polarization into affective communities reproduced in digital space, whereas Medyascope’s analytical language points to a limited yet still meaningful possibility for sustaining a more reflective mode of public engagement within the same ecosystem. At a broader level, epistemic value and objectivity in digital journalism appear increasingly pressured by affective performances optimized for algorithmic visibility. Under such conditions, the audience member is increasingly positioned less as a subject seeking rational information than as a participant who consumes and reproduces the emotional narrative of a community. This pattern also supports Nielsen and Fletcher’s (2023) argument that news organizations have partly lost their autonomy and become increasingly dependent on platform-defined regimes of visibility.

Medyascope’s case can be read as one example of the search for independent journalism emphasized by Ertuna and Aşık (2025), while actors rooted in traditional television, such as Sözcü and A Haber, illustrate how the digital environment creates a new field of competition and legitimacy within established media capital. In this sense, platformization carries the democratic potential of alternative journalism while at the same time institutionalizing journalistic visibility within an algorithmic regime organized around clickability and dramatic presentation.

The study’s main contribution lies in its multilayered analysis of political meaning production in digital news imagery through the combined use of Rodríguez and Dimitrova’s (2011) visual framing model, Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of affective publics, and Chouliaraki’s (2006, 2008) framework of aesthetic regimes, considered in relation to platform dynamics. The findings suggest that, particularly in politically contested contexts such as Turkey, affective representations call for renewed discussion of the boundaries of public information and ethical journalism.

Several limitations should also be noted. The analysis is confined to a specific one-week period, and longitudinal research across different news agendas or election periods would strengthen the broader relevance of the findings. Audience reception also remains outside the scope of the study. Future research could examine how users interpret these visuals and how they respond to them affectively. A broader analytical framework could also be developed by analyzing thumbnails together with video content and user comments, thereby offering a fuller account of the wider dynamics through which YouTube reshapes journalism.

Acknowledgements

Ethics Committee Approval: Since no human factors were used as research subjects in this study, ethics committee approval is not required.

Publication Ethics: This study has been prepared in accordance with the rules stated in the “*Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive*.” Additionally, the article has been scanned using plagiarism detection software (*Turnitin /iThenticate*), and no plagiarism has been detected.

CRedit Author Contribution Declaration: Not applicable.

AI Use and Disclosure Statement: During the language editing stage of manuscript preparation, ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with the refinement and translation of the text into academic English. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed, revised, and validated by the author. Full responsibility for the accuracy, originality,

Conflict of Interest: The author(s) of the study, the institution(s) they are affiliated with, or their financial supporters do not have any direct or indirect financial, commercial, legal, or professional relationships/interests with other institutions or employees of these institutions that could influence the research.

Academic Financial Support: The study has not been supported by any academic financial support organization (TÜBİTAK, BAP, European Union, United Nations, etc.).

Author Declaration: The study has not been derived from any thesis and has not been presented at any congress/symposium/conference.

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