


Chapter 8

Culture and Arts in Pandemic Times: COVID-19, Strategic Communication, and the Case With SALT Initiative

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 outbreak took over the world population, artists and institutions who contributed to the production and dissemination of arts and cultures had to give a break to their professional activities. It was March 2020, when Turkish government decided to stop arts and culture related activities, in order to prevent the spreading of the disease. Actors of arts and culture scene quickly adopted themselves to the “stay at home” days, and continued their productions while in self-isolation. As a result of this unexpected incident, many domestic and international arts and culture institutions have opened their archives on digital media platforms. As the epidemic broke out in the beginning of March 2020 in Turkey, SALT quickly reconstructed and updated their online historical archives and art collections by making 1.840.000 documents accessible to individuals via the Internet. The current study aims to analyze communication strategy of SALT initiative during the COVID-19 outbreak.

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INTRODUCTION

On December 31, 2019, China Office of World Health Organization (WHO) was informed about the first report regarding an unknown virus (later identified as the Coronavirus disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus), that caused a number of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, located in Eastern China, whose population is approximately 11 million (Reynolds and Weiss, 2020). What was then unknown, turned out to be a global epidemic in a short period of time. By August 2, 2020, the confirmed cases were known to be approximately 18 million in the world, while the death cases were around 670.000 in total (World-o-meter, 2020). Despite there were more than 10 million cases that were closed due to recovery, COVID-19 created anxiety global level with high death rates and challenges in the recovery processes. As a consequence, the majority of world cities, with high number of COVID-19 cases had to take restrictive measures to prevent further spread of the disease to the rest of the populations.

Turkiye announced its first case of novel coronavirus on March 11, 2020, as the Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca stated the infected person contracted the disease while returning from a trip to Europe (Zorlu, 2020). As a result, schools and universities immediately shut down and online education activities started. The majority of companies encouraged their employees to work from their homes. Nightclubs and playgrounds were closed down, while social events were postponed to later dates to prevent large number of individuals from meeting in social spaces.

The COVID-19 cases and the death rates have reached its peak in late April 2020 in Turkiye, while the number of daily cases started to decrease gradually until late July the same year. The restrictive measures taken to limit everyday life practices positively impacted on combatting the virus during this period. As a consequence, the government enacted its normalization plan, starting from May 11, 2020, by opening shopping malls and beauty centers such as hairdressers (Anonymous reporter, 2020).

As the opening of arts and cultural organizations and events were positioned at a later stage of normalization, the majority of arts and culture initiatives transferred their activities into online platforms in Turkiye. One of these initiatives was Zorlu Performing Arts center, which started online concerts via Instagram Live broadcasts. The artists included recognized local and international musicians such as Mark Eliyahu, Alexis French and Erdem Tunalı (Zorlu, 2020). Another online project, titled *Drama after 6* was initiated by Kumbaracı 50, which is a contemporary performing arts and dance venue in Beyoğlu district of İstanbul. The artists associated with the initiative announced that actors would perform live via YouTube after 6 pm every day throughout the self-isolation days (İçözü, 2020).

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