

7.6 **DIY in times of Crisis: COVID-19 Adaptations of Turkish Alternative Music Scene**

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× **Abstract**

In Turkey, the quarantine had started abruptly in March 2020. Combined with government restrictions, live performances were mostly canceled. The venues, bars and cafes -which played an important role as a center for both performance and musical community- remained closed. Musicians had to learn a new set of skills and new technologies to adapt and stay active during the quarantine. This study tried to understand and explain how familiar the musicians (both singer-songwriters and instrument players) to certain DIY practices were that helped them get through the Covid-19 crisis. The study focused on the 15-months-period of quarantine in Turkey. Thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 singer-songwriters was combined with the author's auto-ethnographic observations as an independent singer-songwriter. Three themes related to DIY production; Home, Expectation of Visibility and Digital Income Model, and two sub themes under Covid-19; Economical Uncertainty and Creative Anxiety were observed. Further discussion suggests a connection among each theme.

Keywords: DIY, Covid-19, Turkey, social media.

359



► Figure 7.6.1 - Soundcheck in Beykoz Kundura Fabrikası
► Source: the author.

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A great stage was constructed just next to Bosphorus, in Beykoz. The sound system was great, the view from the stage was spectacular. It was our first full band live concert after a long period of time, and we were very excited. The view from the stage was unbelievable, the sound system was great, the weather was just perfect and there were comfortable chairs placed socially distanced for the audience. Yet, we still weren't sure if we would be able to give the concert or not. A new notice by the Governorship of Istanbul was banning all concerts without exception, using Covid-19 as an excuse. The starting date and time were ambiguous, so it was still being discussed while the soundcheck was being done.

That night, we took the stage. However, due to the ambiguity of the notice by the Governorship of Istanbul, only a few people were present as the audience; people already thought the concert was canceled. The concert was really nice, but while I was singing -and I have to say my music is usually extremely calm and quiet- a coast guard boat came near the stage and yelled at the audience, who already had their masks on, to put their masks on with a megaphone. If you'd ask me how it was to be a singer-songwriter during the pandemic, I would show you this picture. This is how being an established singer-songwriter in Turkey can be described, endless uncertainty and regular disturbances. And while this description was already valid, all its elements were amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This article aims to describe how the Covid-19 crisis was experienced in the Turkish alternative music scene for the reader and to explore if a survival toolkit is possible for the musicians. Beginning from the first Covid-19 case in Turkey, live concerts and musical events were cancelled, leaving the musicians unemployed for a long period of time. However, it is possible that musicians who adopted DIY practices might be in an advantageous position during a time of economic uncertainty and social distance. They may have been able to do both musical and visual production at home and managed their tracks' promotion all by themselves, since this had always been what they did. Did they experience a faster adaptation? Did they feel like they survived through the quarantine?

1. A brief summary of what happened

³⁶⁰ The first Covid-19 case was seen in Turkey in March 2020; the announcement was quickly followed by preliminary restrictions, including cancellation of social events, curfew for certain age groups, closing of venues and bars and traveling limitations (Narlı, 2021). The curfew was extended to all age groups for every weekend later in April, however in May, a gradual normalization was announced to be applied; this normalization included the possibility of outdoor events being held. This fast normalization resulted in increased numbers of Covid cases in July and new restrictions in September. After a confusing notice by Ministry of Internal Affairs announcing that any type of concerts held in cafes and restaurants were banned (DHA, 2021), a further notice came from Governorship of Istanbul, making any type of concerts, shows or festivals forbidden (İstanbul Valiliği İl Sağlık Müdürlüğü, 2021).

March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -First case and death from Covid in Turkey -Preliminary restrictions includes event cancellations -Regulations: Curfew for 65+ and 20-, working hours for markets, travel restrictions -Erdoğan announced a donation campaign where citizens were expected to donate money to the government.
April 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Weekend curfews started suddenly (2 hours before the weekend) -Prisoners were released -Records on Dollar and Euro exchange rates -20% price increase on foods
May 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Partial normalization started: Shopping Malls and Barbers were open. -A new record for Dollar exchange rate. -New taxes (%30) for imported goods such as electronics, musical instruments, game consoles, cameras, recording and broadcasting equipment -All places except entertainment venues can be open until 22.00 -Outdoor concerts can be organized -New Support Campaigns for musicians: Festtogether, IKSV
June 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Normalization started, but entertainment venues remained closed. -No more weekend curfews -Football league started -Food prices raised again -Online concerts by the Presidency
July 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Covid cases increased -Hagia Sophia became a mosque
August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Natural gas found in Black Sea -Caria Museum also announced to be a mosque

- ▶ Table 7.6.1 - A brief summary of what happened from March 2020 to August 2020
- ▶ Source: the author.

While events were being banned, a support package for musicians was announced by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in December 2020, 9 months into the pandemic (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2020). This package was offering 1000 Turkish Liras (roughly \$135 or €111) each month for three months, and it should be considered that the monthly hunger threshold was 2590₺ and the poverty threshold was 8436₺ for a family of four at the time being (Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, 2020). It should be also mentioned that, during these nine months period, outdoor concerts were held only for three months, and concerts were to be forbidden for the next six months.

September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Restrictions started again -Schools started face to face education partially -A complex regulation: Concerts get forbidden. Masks became obligatory. -Vaccinations would start in the first months of 2021; Erdoğan announced.
October 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Because it was suspected that the number of Covid-19 cases announced by the government were not true, the tables changed. This resulted in a lot higher numbers of cases. -All events were postponed until December 1. -Earthquake in Izmir (6,9)
November 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More restrictions and weekend curfews again. -All events of NGOs were postponed for 3 months. -Minister of Economy (Berat Albayrak) resigned.
December 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Covid case number is 5 times higher than April -Vaccinations started -4 days curfew -Financial support package for artisans and shopkeepers
January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ministry of Culture announced a financial support package for musicians (1000 ₺ a month for 3 months-then it continued for a while more)
February 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Normalization will start on March 1, the Ministry of Health announced. -Government discusses not using Meyhane or Nargile in places' names
March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Minister of Health announced that 14 million vaccinations were applied, and 100 million units will come.
April 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Because of the increased numbers, partial restrictions started again. -A total curfew was announced (April 29 - May 17).
May 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Enjoy I'm vaccinated" ads for tourists from abroad -120 million units of Biotech vaccination. -Taksim mosque opened with a huge crowd despite the pandemic
June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Partial normalization announcement had nothing to say about music or concerts; only music and venues were excluded from the regulations. -Another record rate for Dolar -All age groups get vaccinated -While announcing the new normalization process, Erdogan announcing the music bans after 00.00 by saying "No offense but no one has the right to disturb another". By musicians and the secular population, it was taken as officially accepting that music is a nuisance. -New regulations for venues make it impossible to profit from a concert for small-medium scale venues.

- Table 7.6.2- A brief summary of what happened from September 2020 to June 2021
- Source:the author.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism supported musicians for a total of 7000 ₺ until the second gradual normalization in June 2021. Yet, there was no information about musical organizations or concerts in normalization announcements, as if almost ignoring a whole sector. The long-awaited announcement came towards the end of June by President Erdoğan; the ban on live music was lifted under certain regulations; turning it off by 12 AM being one. While announcing the good news for the music industry, Erdoğan made a comment

independent from the pandemic regulations and said, “No offense, but no one has the right to disturb one another in the night” (Deutsche Welle, 2021, n/p). This sentence created a huge backlash when combined with the visible changing cultural policies of the last years and the frustration of the last 16 months.

Being a musician in Turkey is like swimming in a sea of political and social uncertainty; most musicians do not have health insurance or any guarantees, the income constantly fluctuates, and musical events are always the first ones to get canceled during crises and mournings: This uncertainty gained strength during the pandemic where the government’s approach towards the cultural industries became more visible. Covid-19 regulations mostly put the musicians and artists in a disadvantaged position compared to other fields of work. Sometimes even specifically concerts were banned while other performative arts could take stage. Also, most of the venues were closed if they didn’t have a restaurant or tourism license. Bars -as the main meeting and staging places for alternative musicians were closed for a year and a half without any financial support, making it almost impossible to stay alive. During the pandemic, while crowded political congresses were being held, a huge number of people performed namaz in cami openings or funeral rituals; cultural events, specifically live music events were canceled. Not the quarantine or the restrictions alone, but the double standards created frustration among musicians.

In addition, reaching necessary equipment during the pandemic became harder, considering the state of Turkish economy and additional taxes on electronics and musical instruments. Not only the Turkish lira lost value (Dolar from 6.33 to 8.88, Euro from 7.03 to 10.41), but also additional taxes were put on a wide range of imported products in the second month of the pandemic. These included but not limited to recording and broadcasting equipments, instruments, electronics etc. This situation made it almost impossible for musicians to obtain the necessary equipment for digital works or bedroom productions after the pandemic because none of this equipment can be found produced in Turkey.

This study aims to understand how Turkish musicians from the alternative scene experienced this period and to explore their DIY practices that helped them through the quarantine. It was expected to observe DIY practices in both audio and visual production, resulting in an effective use of new media (including digital streaming platforms and social media.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The study focuses on singer-songwriters who might have been in a more advantageous position compared to other types of musicians such as singers, instrument players or band members. The possibility for this advantage comes from being able to write their own songs and to communicate directly with their audience via social media channels. The sample consisted of 10 singer-songwriters, selected for the study via judgmental sampling; musicians were selected based on having control over musical production and promotion processes at the moment or in the past. Among them, six musicians have never had a contract with a label for their own projects, three musicians had been previously signed with major labels, and the remaining three musicians had been signed with a label at the time. The singer-songwriters were based in Istanbul and were between 23 to 38 years old. The genres embraced by the musicians varied from alternative rock to spoken word, however, a DIY approach towards music was a common trait. In addition, these musicians were selected because of the mutual experiences; being on stage at the same festivals and venues, sharing a common listeners’ profile, started being active after the 2010s and reaching popularity around 2018 based on my professional judgement as an active singer-songwriter in the scene.

2.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the subjects. Most interviews were conducted and recorded through Zoom, while two interviews were conducted face to face and recorded by a handheld field recorder. Questions focused on musicians’ production processes, DIY practices and Covid experiences as well as living as a musician in Turkey.

2.3 Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded for thematic analysis in TAMSAalyzer (Weinstein, 2010) and then transferred to Numbers for analysis. After determining the overarching themes, all sub-themes that were observed are being coded, first steps being within single interviews. As described in detail by Braun and Clarke (2006), the process continued with reviewing themes, defining them and producing a report, using sufficient quotations as evidence. The coded quotations were reread and reanalyzed for repeating patterns and keywords.

3. Results

3.1 Home (Produce-It-Yourself)

You know; where I create music is the room I live in. So it still exists, until they kick me out. Until I become homeless, at least I have the place where I make music. (Subject 6)

Musicians rarely report any loss of social connection. Instead, the sameness in the life and production was emphasized: At home, they had the equipment to record a new track from scratch. Instead of relying on a recording technician or an expert in the field, they preferred to do most of the recording by themselves. When places they meet with other musicians were asked the most common answer was “home” again. Carrying out their own production process and being able to record at home helped singer-songwriters to create and release songs during the pandemic.

3.2 Expectation of Visibility (Promote-It-Yourself)

**During the pandemic, we didn't have any materials at hand, we didn't have any concerts, anything to get excited about... Unless we are releasing a new song or there are some news about something that we are interested in, there is nothing worth sharing. So, we all became social media monkeys looking for things to do, I think. I think many musicians experienced this. (Subject 5).*

Even though singer-songwriters were familiar with promoting themselves in social media and they have given digital concerts; all musicians complained that visibility became more important than the creative output itself. Since they have the full control over the processes of promotion in social media channels, feeling obliged to share constantly is combined with the frequent exposure to other musicians' outputs in social media results in an uncanny feeling of responsibility and creates anxiety. In addition, digital concerts were despised by most subjects, especially because the pandemic made it almost obligatory. The relationship with a smartphone camera differed from the relationship with a live audience, and although sponsored digital concerts had been a serious source of income for some musicians, still, none of them was comfortable with the idea.

3.3 Digital Income Model (Operate-It-Yourself)

**I don't see music industry as a whole block. If you are more at the performance side, if you work on and around the stage, this is a lethal crisis since all the venues are closed. But if you could have created an income model that can exist in digital, and if you did it beforehand, if you have that system, it doesn't kill you, it just pauses the process. (Subject 3).*

I never expected anything like this pandemic, and if I wasn't an independent musician, I wouldn't have an income like a monthly paycheck. (Subject 5).

Musicians who were receiving passive income from previous releases had been more comfortable during the pandemic. Besides being able to create or produce new songs, keeping the previous tracks' rights was another important aspect for survival in quarantine. Some musicians, who were signed with labels previously, even reported regret, mentioning that they were not sure if it was worth it.

3.4 COVID: Economical Uncertainty and Creative Anxiety

**We are observing how a whole culture, arts and entertainment sector vanished and how it could not gain any attention besides from the insiders of that sector. I think making art, working on art is like being a flower in the desert on this land. This is why I appreciate my fellow musicians, I love them. I'm glad I am doing this job. (Subject 7).*

**There is a little feeling of abandonment, you know... Of course, we were seeing some signs of this in other crises, I mean, disasters, bombings, etc... But I really didn't know they didn't give a single f*ck about us. It hit me like a slap on my face. You know what it's like, our parents used to say, "Do your music, of course, but you need a job". They proved them right! It's so hard to swallow, because it's something you devote yourself to. From top to the bottom, it's something you give so much from inside, from yourself... (Subject 4).*

Economic uncertainty caused by Covid regulations is not totally independent from musicians' position in Turkey or the government's approach towards cultural industries. Although most musicians who were interviewed succeeded to remain in a stable economic condition, the risks were seen as high due to new social media regulations, sudden tax policies and the visible double standards in regulations against performing arts. In addition, news about musicians committing suicide due to lack of income during the pandemic resulted in a feeling of insufficiency and despair. In their statements, the situation of these musicians acted as a proof of the government's lack of interest.

4. Discussion

The aim of the study was to reveal any possible adaptation strategies or DIY practices adopted by singer-songwriters, and to suggest a survival kit if possible. As predicted, long term strategies embraced before the pandemic, such as keeping the streaming rights, or owning sufficient equipment for recording and producing music were helpful during times of crisis. On the other hand, expected DIY activity related to visual production was found to be almost nonexistent. Musicians accepted and liked their role in the musical production; however, they pass the visual part to the professionals.

365

While observing musicians' relationship with social media, one should consider that concerts are a source for content. During the pandemic, one of the most prominent sources of content has disappeared, but the need for visibility was still there. The creative anxiety is not solitary; it is connected to economic uncertainty and also the very nature of social media. In addition, having the control means having the responsibility; these musicians who own the means of production and who manage the ways of promotion have to take full responsibility for their successes and failures. Although this level of control creates a certain advantage, it does not provide comfort; interviewed musicians either confessed a high level of anxiety originating from social media or stated that they were doing it mechanically.

Another interesting point is that what mainly helped musicians through the pandemic had not been their familiarity with social media or visual DIY practices; it was their familiarity with the recording equipment and technology. Reducing musical production to home recordings and individualistic modes of production may have two sides (besides its sheer possibility); first, the comfort and second, the economic uncertainty. As mentioned, "Home" was an important theme which frequently occurred in interviews, the ease in home recordings may be undeniably useful in especially vocal recordings, since all the subjects were singer-songwriters. On the other hand, the effect of economic uncertainty should not be underestimated; the musician, who is also responsible for business decisions, has to create a balance between expenses and income.

Thanks to the availability of user-friendly and cheap but decent equipment and software, the expenses for the musical production can be significantly reduced. These two sides are not actually apart from each other; the comfort of the home recordings partly come from the lack of time limit, which is a direct result of studio fees: It is a luxury to fiddle around a studio. Even singer-songwriters who were signed to the major labels stated that they recorded their albums in home studios or collective studios. The budgets provided by labels are also not very high.

Lastly, as mentioned before, an existing digital income model helped musicians get through the quarantine. However, although it reduced the economic uncertainty, it did not reduce the anxiety resulted from economic uncertainty. It may be even said that similar to the anxiety observed related to social media, an anxiety upon the control over business decisions is visible.

5. Limitations

This study represents a small part of a larger study on Independence, New Media and Covid, which aims to cover a bigger part of the industry in Turkey, including representatives from professional associations, digital distributors and major labels. Although a sample of ten musicians is definitely helpful in insight into a certain type of production and experience, it may be insufficient for new definitions and connections. Although a response saturation was observed for most subjects, further research is needed for a wider understanding.

In addition, the study lacks a comprehensive theoretical background. A theoretical approach would be needed both to understand and derive new meanings and to comprehend the nature of the anxiety, which had been a common theme among musicians.

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