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Trusting food supply chains during the pandemic: reflections from Turkey and the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

We share in this reflection a selection of our own daily experiences and observations from Turkey and the U.S. of how Covid-19 has affected people's relationship to shopping for food. We aim to show the multiple shifts that occurred in the mechanisms of trust that used to define how food is procured. We illustrate how disruptions in conventional and alternative food supply chains in both countries have had different effects on consumers. Our experiences, when juxtaposed, suggest that even in the case of abundance of food supply, shorter food supply chains prove to be more resilient against disruptions during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; food supply chains; alternative food networks; Turkey; the United States

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected food systems globally, resulting in logistical slowdowns, food waste, and empty grocery shelves (Held 2020). Disruptions in the different parts of the supply chain, from primary production to processing, distribution, and sales, have had varied effects on consumers' daily habits. We share here a selection of our own daily experiences and observations from Turkey and the U.S. to explore the multiple shifts that have occurred in the mechanisms of trust that used to define how food is procured.

Scholars have long documented how food scares and food scandals have shaken consumer trust (Kjaernes et al. 2007; Degreef and Scholliers 2019) and provoked anxieties (Jackson 2010). Yet the Covid-19 pandemic seems to pose unprecedented challenges by amplifying uncertainties in the food system. Our observations of consumer attitudes toward food shopping suggest a disruption of trust at two levels. First, interruption of supply chains severed the taken-for-grantedness that often defines daily encounters with food, such as the expectation to find supermarket shelves full of products. Panic buying and speculative hoarding emerged as a result (Hobbs 2020); food prices set new relative highs with global disruption risks (Long and

Khoi 2020). Second, fears related to the transmission of the virus, such as going out in public, using cash, and touching possibly contaminated surfaces, created new habits that felt more secure and “trustworthy” under the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. For instance, the proliferation of online grocery shopping provided comfort for some, perhaps reinstating the belief that capitalism will find the cures to its self-inflicted wounds. For others, the alternative food networks (AFNs) that had emerged in response to and as criticism of the economic, environmental and health impacts of the globalized and industrialized food systems (Fraser 2017) proved a more reliable avenue for procuring food. Through reduced physical and emotional distance between producers and consumers, direct marketing and food purchasing venues (Jarosz 2008), AFNs have established strong mechanisms of personal and organizational trust that consumers continued to depend on during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the first author has mostly lived with her parents in a household of three in Istanbul, a city of 15+ million people in Turkey. The second author lives with her spouse and daughter, also in a household of three, in a town of 30,000 in upstate New York. At a time when the whole world simultaneously succumbed to a health crisis, we compare our experiences in Turkey and the U.S., two upper-middle-income countries that are regionally and globally integrated into food markets. The fully industrialized agri-food system in the U.S. involves a few essential crops, lengthy food supply chains, and a few multinational corporations in control through vertical and horizontal integration (Conkin 2008). Turkey has followed a U.S. type of agricultural model since the aftermath of World War II (Aydın 2005). Yet, despite every intervention toward industrialization, small producers have been critical for Turkey’s agri-food system until the early 2000s (Karapınar, Adaman, and Özertan 2010). Currently, shorter supply chains and a heavier reliance on domestic sources differentiate Turkey from the U.S. When juxtaposed, our observations demonstrate that shorter supply chains have an advantage in times of crisis. Turkey experienced fewer disruptions in the supply chain, and in both countries, AFNs that rely on strong mechanisms of consumer-producer trust proved more resilient during the pandemic.

Author Bürge reporting on Covid-19 in Istanbul: The first case of Covid-19 in Turkey was reported on Wednesday, March 11th. That day, we witnessed a record volume of sales at Kadıköy Cooperative, a volunteer-run, nonprofit consumer cooperative that works to transform processes of agricultural production and consumption and to support, without seeking organic certification, small producers who use heritage seeds and who refuse to apply chemicals and exploit labor. Within the first hour of the store’s opening, nearly half of an average day’s worth of products was sold.

We made almost double at closing by 9 pm. Perhaps news about empty store shelves in the U.S. and elsewhere triggered people's rush to shopping. That the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic the same day may have exacerbated the sense of catastrophic anticipation. Although nothing had yet empirically necessitated change in the flow of daily life, the unpredictability of what was to come had shaken systemic trust in supply chains (Thorsoe and Kjeldsen 2016).

Three days after the announcement, I traveled for fieldwork from Istanbul to Bayramiç, a town in the countryside of Çanakkale, where I stay with a local family. Sabiha¹ farms with her husband and sells her produce grown with traditional methods and processed products at the open-air markets in nearby towns (Figure 1).² On Sunday, I accompanied them to the market, where despite talk of the virus, daily life had not lost its normalcy. By the end of the week, however, the closure of non-essential businesses, the cessation of the community prayers at mosques, and a total curfew for those over 65 had highlighted the seriousness of the situation. As the country was adjusting to a new normal, I stopped frequenting the markets with my hosts. They, however, were keen on keeping their routine.

In addition to selling at markets, Sabiha received orders from urban customers. Through her involvement in AFNs and thanks to her outgoing personality, she has acquired a broad clientele who regularly asks for shipments via phone. During the week I spent with them, phone calls poured in at a greater volume than usual. Now urban consumers, who were staying at home, more readily entertained the idea of deliveries,



Figure 1. Sabiha's summer stand at the Bayramiç open-air market, featuring fresh vegetables, eggs, sour dough bread made out of landrace wheat, dried medicinal herbs, bulgur wheat, legumes, olives, jams, and medicinal oils. (©Bürge Abiral).

instead of going out for grocery shopping. Sabiha's customers, ecologically conscious consumers in Istanbul and Çanakkale, trusted her to continue to provide clean and healthy food rather than resorting to online shopping. As Galt et al. (2012) highlight, trust in AFNs goes both ways; as consumers expected her to provide for them, Sabiha trusted that she would receive their payments in her bank account. Days later, when a new regulation restricted their access to only the market of their own town, Sabiha and her husband were able to partially switch to door-to-door delivery in the Çanakkale province, taking advantage of other means of direct marketing.

Author Nurcan reporting on Covid-19 in New York State: On March 9th, 2020, the first day of spring break, the College I work for announced that the break would be extended by one week. I decided to go to a wholesale club to buy some essential supplies, as many news stories suggested keeping two weeks' worth of essentials stocked in the house. There were about 150 positive Covid-19 cases documented in New York state at the time. The day before, I sat down with my 92-year old neighbor, who lives alone and has nurse-aides check on him. I asked him what he wanted in case he were to get stuck in the house for two weeks, and his aides might be unable to come. We made a list: Ensure meal replacement shakes, some canned items, frozen ravioli, and frozen meatballs. He assured me that he has "enough toilet paper for the army."

That afternoon I went to the wholesale club, which we usually visit every three months. Once I started shopping, I noticed many empty shelves. I couldn't find any toilet paper or bleached sanitizing wipes. Frozen meatballs were all gone. There was no flour, no pasta. There were only a few bags of rice. The store was much busier than usual. I saw some customers with several boxes of sanitizing wipes in their carts (then I knew who got the last cleaning supplies).

I delivered my neighbor his "essential items" and unpacked my own at home. I felt guilty spending \$280—without cleaning items. I felt like one of the doomsday preppers I had watched on TV. A couple of years ago, I taught an independent reading class on cannibalism. The guiding question was around humans' relationship to food and technology: If we rely so much on technology (e.g., genetic engineering, ultra-processed food) and trust that it will ensure plenty of food, why did environmental apocalypse movies assume we would lack food and become cannibals at the end? We watched two episodes of National Geographic's *Doomsday Preppers* and took their quiz. It turns out, neither my students nor I would have made it more than three days in case zombies attacked or the world faced a pandemic. Yet, seeing these results, none of us had felt the urge to become a prepper. We trusted the food system to continue providing the bounty we were accustomed to in the U.S. through the supermarket system, farmer's

markets, and online delivery systems. After all, hadn't Amazon acquired the biggest organic food store chain in the U.S., Whole Foods, three years ago, and started grocery deliveries, making life more convenient? Yet, I had a sense of loss upon seeing the empty shelves at the store: a loss of the things I have taken for granted. I realized I was a few years late to prepare for the end of the world.

Bürge: I left Bayramiç one and a half weeks later. By this time, at Kadıköy Cooperative where I am a volunteer, we had reduced hours of operation to two hours a day. Under the pandemic conditions, customers were not allowed in the store and ordered their groceries from the open door. This set-up allowed the cooperative to continue providing food for the neighborhood while ensuring the safety of both customers and volunteers. Since our producers mostly relied on household labor, they were able to ship products when stocks diminished. Despite limited hours, neighborhood interest in shopping from the cooperative continued, if not grew, attesting to the trust that had developed toward the organization among the consumers of the cooperative.

Meanwhile, many of my friends in Istanbul were working from home, and shopping for groceries online. At a popular supermarket, sudden increases in online demand led to problems in reserving delivery time slots. "They say they can deliver three-four days later," one friend complained in a Whatsapp group, adding, "You have to order between midnight and 12.30 am to reserve a slot." A novel routine was emerging: midnight was her new shopping time. My friends often talked about items missing from orders and late refunds, which resulted in lots of time on the phone with representatives. Markets were adapting quickly to the societal and economic changes with supermarkets emphasizing their online sales and non-food businesses (such as clothing company) starting to sell food on their websites. Yet my friends' complaints attested that market transitions and technological solutions that supposedly provided relief were creating their own problems.

On Friday, April 10th evening, the day after I got back to Istanbul, a universal curfew in metropolitan areas was announced for the upcoming week-end without any details. As it would start by midnight that day, startled by this short notice, I thought, "Is there anything we need in the house that we can't do without in the next two days?" The answer was no. We had enough water and frozen bread, and plenty of food. Yet others must have approached this question differently, as many people took to the streets to buy items at the few grocery stores and bakeries still open at 9 pm. Visuals quickly circulated on social media. Although stores could only allow a limited number of customers according to Covid-19 regulations, these spaces were overflowing. Long lines had formed outside, and people were quarreling in line. Some were also buying non-essential items, like soda. Not

everyone wore masks. Details of the new restrictions were shared shortly after; bakeries and water sellers would operate on a delivery system, which meant no one would go hungry or thirsty. While the government's haphazard handling of the situation was troubling, people's frantic reaction proved even more startling. The thought of missing items—essential or not—for two days was so unbearable that people risked catching the virus by going outside *en masse*. Not tolerating the disruption to their taken-for-granted way of procuring things, they sought preparedness *as if* facing a disaster.

Nurcan: On Thursday, March 12th, the College announced its transition to fully-online education. Once I realized the stay-at-home orders might be extended, I decided to go to another supermarket chain to get the items we did not have. I went to our usual store: the supermarket chain that started in 1927 in upstate New York, and still controls more than 120 stores in the region. I choose to shop there because it is close to my house, and despite a recent update on shelves and aisles, I know where each item is. It also sells tropical fruits, such as dragon fruit, that my daughter likes, which travels globally to the store. That day, the place was busier than usual, with several empty shelves. I saw a family of three, a man in his early 50s, screaming and cursing hoarders of toilet paper. In my small town, with the store's calm music in the background, this was an unusual scene, suggesting unsettled communal trust.

By Friday, March 13, our city declared a state of emergency and closed non-essential businesses. As we started working from home and realized we needed to cook three times a day the whole week, my husband started to worry about rice. We had five kilos of rice in the house. Each time we went to the ethnic Middle East stores about 40 minutes away, I would stock some extra rice, along with other Mediterranean supplies, such as dried apricots. I would keep these “just in case” purchases in the basement so we had stocks until our next trip. During normal times, my husband always teased me but this time, he was the one worried about our rice.

I grew up in Turkey, and my parents are first-generation city dwellers. My family always prepared items in the village in the summer: sacks of cracked wheat from the wheat grown in my grandparents' fields, tomato paste with sun-ripe tomatoes, canned vegetables from relatives' greenhouses. The company my father worked for would give him 50 kilos of sugar. While my parents trusted the food system to be able to buy food, having lived through the sanctions in the aftermath of 1974 Turkey's invasion of Cyprus, and *coup d'état* in 1980, they felt they needed to be prepared. As a worker, my father's salary was also dependent on union negotiations, and after each visit of representatives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to Turkey, there would be periods when he was not paid. So, my parents had learned to trust their food stocks in the house, just in case things didn't go as planned.

Bürge: On Thursday, May 21st, my father came back from his weekly shopping trip disappointed. Since the outbreak, he had changed his grocery shopping habits and stopped frequenting open-air markets to avoid using cash for fear of transmission. Yet interestingly, even if they were familiar with and resorted to it while taking care of my grandmother, my parents did not prefer online shopping. They wanted to choose products firsthand. So, my father started visiting the small supermarket, a bakery, the fishmonger, a deli, and a store selling cleaning supplies in a nearby neighborhood. Despite the multiple stops, using gloves and a mask on site, and lots of hand-washing and sanitizing once at home, he found this option safer while covering the necessities for our household.

That particular day, however, happened to be the penultimate day before the lockdown administered for Eid, the celebration at the end of the holy month of Ramadan. To avoid the Friday crowd, my father went shopping on Thursday, only to find an unexpected scene. At the chain supermarket where he planned to buy fruits and vegetables, the produce section had been ransacked. Thus, he headed to the greengrocers nearby. “Can you believe [conventional] sweet cherries are 35 liras (for 1 kilogram)?” my father exclaimed when he got home.³ Although Istanbul had experienced some shopping frenzies here and there, stocks were always quickly replenished, making the images of empty shelves that circulated in U.S. media an anomaly. That Thursday, however, the situation was different. Because of the upcoming four-day lockdown, the supermarket chain had stopped acquisitions, leading to a sparse produce section. The greengrocers who had supplies were, in turn, selling the produce at outrageous prices.

That same evening, I joined the online meeting of Kadıköy Cooperative. One agenda item involved the question of whether we should buy sweet cherries—a seasonal favorite—from a producer we worked with before. A moment of indecision prevailed. Would we be able to sell all the produce within our limited hours of operation? A volunteer reminded us of the price: four kilograms of cherries were 110 liras, shipping included. Another chipped in, “I would buy some for myself. I saw cherries today sold for 40 liras.” While, after calculations, we came to realize the sale price of cherries at the cooperative store would be around mid-30s, I still could not help but joke with astonishment, “For the first time, we will have something cheaper at the cooperative store than the conventional market price.” Kadıköy Cooperative does not negotiate with producers to ensure fair compensation and to support ecological food production. While the cooperative does not profit from its sales, expenses such as rent are added to the price. Ultimately, prices come to be more expensive than conventional markets, and despite various efforts to keep them low, remain within a range that the urban poor cannot afford to buy. The idea that an item would be cheaper at the cooperative than in a regular



Figure 2. Farmers' Market Saratoga Springs, April 18, 2020 (©Nurcan Atalan-Helicke).

market was so unexpected that it deserved a joke. While such price changes are reflective of the demand and supply side shocks (Hobbs 2020), they also remind us how much consumers are willing to pay for preferably alternative food (Akgüngör et al. 2010).

Nurcan: My family has its vegetable share from a farmers' market from May until November. Last October, we decided to take a break, because a CSA share was challenging with a picky eater (my daughter) at home. We still went to the farmers' market every few weeks to buy our grass-fed grass-finished beef products from the French-American livestock operator. Although my daughter eats dairy-free, my husband loves the goat cheese products from the animal sanctuary one hour north, and we would also shop there for local honey. The farmers' market, which was indoors for the winter season, was closed after March 13th. Yet farmers' markets count as essential businesses; thus, the market was moved outdoors to the parking lot of the mall, with a safe distance between vendors. However, between Covid-19 and the ongoing cold, not many vendors chose to come to the market. Even by mid-April, only a handful of vendors showed up.

After it moved outdoors,⁴ we started shopping at the farmers' market every other week. My husband and I both agreed that we did not feel comfortable shopping for food indoors at stores and could not trust fruits and vegetables that could have been touched by other people. At the farmers'



Figure 3. Second author's kitchen table full after shopping at the farmers' market and bartering with neighbors (©Nurcan Atalan-Helicke).

market, every item was sold out very quickly. So, we needed to be there early. Yet we trusted the vendors we shop from regularly to save items for us. Personal relationships built on trust and commitment allowed us to access local food even in uncertain conditions (Galt et al. 2012) (Figure 2).

We have a close-knit community of neighbors. Our children go to the same schools. We like to share cookies, jams, and produce from our gardens. During the pandemic, we started to cooperate more. It started with somebody asking for an extra onion on a group text. Then each of us started asking whether others needed items before we went shopping. Between four households, we started borrowing/loaning/bartering items. Although there were reports that Covid-19 stayed on hard surfaces, we trusted each other to exchange, pick up, shop for, and borrow items from each other. Between the household food exchanges, our household would have a bounty of good food to nourish us (Figure 3).

Conclusion

Covid-19 has disrupted not only the food supply chain, but also the mechanisms of trust that used to define how and where we procure food. Empty shelves and last-minute lockdowns unsettled previous plans; unexpected

price increases strained household budgets; online shopping provided temporary relief with strings attached. While new routines emerged, shorter supply chains in Turkey proved more trustworthy and reliable for customers due to less susceptibility to disruptions. In both countries, AFNs that rely on reduced physical and emotional distance between producers and consumers, such as Kadıköy Cooperative, farmers' markets, or the networks of which Sabiha takes part, functioned more seamlessly than conventional supply chains. Even as habits were subject to change, the mechanisms of trust that AFNs had built were strengthened further under the conditions of extreme uncertainty that the pandemic provoked.

Surely, what we provide here is far from generalized experience. On the contrary, we both live in economically privileged households and faced relatively no challenge in accessing nutritious food during the pandemic. Yet we hope this brief juxtaposition of Turkey and the U.S. and of different food networks may help us reflect on the general calls from activists and scholars globally on the importance of building localized and regionalized food systems, shortening the food supply chain, diversifying actors and methods of food production, processing, and distribution for building resilience (Torrero Cullen 2020).

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Unlike the farmers' markets in the U.S., it is often middlemen who sell produce at open-air markets in Turkey. In small towns, producers like Sabiha may also market their own products.
3. 35 Lira = \$5.2. Conventional cherries in season at the wholesale distribution center managed by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality cost about 8 to 20 lira (\$1.2 to \$2.9). The prices are calculated based on June 19, 2020 sales records in Turkish lira, and converted to USD based on the exchange rate of the Turkish Central Bank.
4. Saratoga Springs, NY, has two farmers' markets that are open year-round and indoors for the winter months. Both markets are open for limited hours (9 am-1 pm on Saturdays, 10 am-2 pm Sundays).

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