

SEMINAR SERIES

*Social-Psychology of Vaccine Intentions:
The Mediating Role of Institutional Trust
in the Fight Against Covid-19 in Polarized Societies*

Asst. Prof. Ayşenur DAL
Bilkent University

Ayşenur Dal is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Design at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. She received her PhD from the School of Communication at the Ohio State University. Before attending OSU, she completed her bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, Turkey. Her research centers upon the social-psychological determinants of online political activities. Specifically, she investigate how individuals interact with contextual dynamics that influence their biased interpretations about, and responses to, activism-related risks. In her work, she adopt a quantitative approach using survey methodology, experiments and social network analysis. Her works thus far has appeared in Communication Research, Human Communication Research, Oxford Handbook of New Social Movements, International Journal of Communication, and Social Science Quarterly.

Asst. Prof. Efe TOKDEMİR
Bilkent University

Efe Tokdemir is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University. Previously, he was a postdoctoral fellow of ISA James N. Rosenau Fellowship, and a visiting scholar at The Ohio State University's Mershon Center for International Security Studies. He received him Ph.D. (2017) in Political Science from Binghamton University, SUNY. He got him B.A. (2012) in Political Science and International Relations at Bogazici University in Istanbul, Turkey. His works have so far appeared in Journal of Peace Research, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Conflict Management and Peace Science, International Interactions, International Political Science Review, and Electoral Studies. In 2019, he received Young Scientist Award (BAGEP) from The Science Academy, Turkey (Bilim Akademisi) in 2019; Outstanding Young Scientist Award (GEBIP), from Turkish Academy of Sciences (TUBA) in 2020, and The Sakip Sabanci International Research Award in 2021 .

Abstract

This paper examines the social-psychological mechanisms behind how citizens deal with uncertainties stemming from the COVID-19 vaccine developments in societies with prominent social/political cleavages. We argue that existing social/political tensions influence individuals' trust in institutions that are responsible for coping with crises through a motivated reasoning mechanism, which eventually shapes citizens' COVID-19 vaccine intentions. Using a nationally representative survey conducted in the pre-vaccination period in Turkey, we demonstrate that both self-identifying as a Kurd or feeling close to an anti-government party are associated with lower trust in institutions actively dealing with the pandemic, which in turn, results in weaker intentions for getting vaccinated. Testing our full theoretical model reveals that while ethnic and partisan identities do not directly influence vaccine intentions, they exhibit an indirect negative effect via institutional trust impeding the fight against the pandemic. We show that it is difficult to tackle a sudden collective threat that requires public cooperation with health policies if the society is strongly polarized. Our findings offer key policy implications for the vaccination phase of the pandemic, and contribute to the domains of public health, conflict studies and individual judgment and decision-making about social risks.

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