



Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

The Importance of Gastro Public Relations in Turkey

Türkiye’de Gastro Halkla İlişkiler’in Önemi

Lale Barçın AKA¹

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 22 October 2024

Accepted: 31 October 2024

Keywords:

Public Relations

Communication

Gastro Public Relations

Social Media Campaigns

ABSTRACT

Food is a means of communication. It is a tool for the transmission of a thought, an emotion and even a culture. While the relationship between human and food from past to present is based on meeting a biological need, the change in the process of providing food over time, the invention of fire, the beginning of cooking food and the need for various tools while cooking, and the change in the way food is consumed and the behavior patterns that emerge accordingly, eating with humans It has taken the relationship between us out of a biological need only and assumed the identity of a cultural interaction. This relationship and cultural accumulation that people establish with food and the table has begun to be examined in fields such as anthropology, communication, literature, sociology and cultural studies. Although the history of food and beverages goes back to ancient times, it is possible to say that the concept of gastronomy is a new and developing concept. From a diplomatic perspective, gastro diplomacy activities are not only carried out by the state; it is seen today that different institutions and organizations operating in this field are also actively involved. The fact that public relations in the field of communication focuses on gastronomy reveals the importance of gastro public relations. Today, it is possible to define the promotional activities of brands, non-governmental organisations and even the relevant departments of universities through food, cuisine, food products and services as gastro public relations. Today, social media has also become an important tool in all areas of promotion and communication. Content and comments that affect individuals' decision-making processes positively or negatively exist on social media platforms. In this context, food festivals and promotional activities organised by companies, institutions, municipalities and universities can be given as examples. This study aims to examine the public relations strategies used in food festivals in Turkey by revealing the activities of public relations in the field of gastronomy.

MAKALEBİLGİSİ

Makale geçmişi:

Başvuru tarihi: 22 Ekim 2024

Kabul tarihi: 31 Ekim 2024

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Halkla İlişkiler

İletişim

Gastro Halkla İlişkiler

Sosyal Medya Kampanyaları

ÖZ

Yemek bir iletişim aracıdır. Bir düşüncenin, duygunun ve hatta bir kültürün aktarımında araçtır. Geçmişten günümüze insan ve yemek arasındaki ilişki biyolojik bir ihtiyacı karşılamak üzerine kuruluyken zamanla yemeği temin etme sürecinin değişmesi, ateşin icadı, yemeğin pişirilmeye başlanması ve pişirirken artık çeşitli araçlara ihtiyaç duyması ve yemeğin tüketim şekli ve buna göre ortaya çıkan davranış şekillerinin de değişmesi, insan ile yemek arasındaki ilişkiyi sadece biyolojik bir ihtiyaçtan çıkarıp kültürel bir etkileşim kimliğine büründürmüştür. İnsanın yemekle sofrayla kurduğu bu ilişki ve kültürel birikim antropoloji, iletişim, edebiyat, sosyoloji ve kültür çalışmaları gibi alanlarda incelenmeye başlanmıştır. Yiyecek ve içecek tarihi eski zamanlara kadar gitse de gastronomi kavramının yeni ve gelişmekte olan bir kavram olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. İletişim alanında Halkla ilişkiler’in gastronomi üzerine eğilmesi gastro halkla ilişkilerin önemini ortaya koymaktadır. Diplomatik açıdan bakacak olursak gastro diplomasi faaliyetlerini sadece devlet uygulamamaktadır; bu alanda faaliyet gösteren farklı kurum ve kuruluşların da aktif olarak yer aldığı günümüzde görülmektedir. Artık markaların, sivil toplum kuruluşlarının hatta üniversitelerin ilgili bölümlerinin yemek, mutfak, gıda ürünleri, hizmet aracılığıyla yaptığı tanıtım faaliyetlerine gastro halkla ilişkiler şeklinde tanımlamak mümkündür. Günümüzde aynı zamanda sosyal medya da tanıtım ve iletişimin her alanında önemli bir araç haline gelmiştir. Bireylerin karar alma süreçlerini olumlu veya olumsuz şekilde etkileyen içerik ve yorumlar sosyal medya platformlarında var olmaktadır. Bu bağlamda şirketlerin, kurumların, belediyelerin, üniversitelerin düzenlediği yemek festivalleri, tanıtım faaliyetleri örnek olarak verilebilir. Bu çalışma Halkla ilişkiler’in gastronomi alanındaki faaliyetlerini ortaya koyarak; Türkiye’de gerçekleşen Yemek Festivallerinde kullanılan halkla ilişkiler stratejilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

¹ Öğr. Gör. Dr., Ege Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, lale.barcin.aka@ege.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0003-3420-3802.

INTRODUCTION

The most important need of human beings to live, after breathing, is to eat. According to Maslow's pyramid of needs, an individual who completes his physical needs can move on to the next step, namely the need for security. The most important physical need to be met is the need to eat and drink. Of course, eating is vitally important. Not just to meet a biological need; It is also a vital action socio-culturally. People cannot live and exist both physically and culturally without food. On the other hand, since communication forms the basis of human relations, food is an important means of communication for people, and although there are different cultures and tastes, it is used as a powerful communication tool all over the world (Kınık, 2011:140).

Food preferences even determine distinctions such as traditions, customs, region, nation and social class. Although food is a tool for a material need, it is also an element that affects and is affected by social, psychological and cultural areas (Öztarhan, 2018:5). Food is a means of communication. It is a means of conveying an idea, an emotion or even a culture because food is a non-verbal means of expressing ourselves. Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi Strauss theorise how food is used as a means of communication. Barthes uses semiotics to explain the role and function of food. He mentions that food as a symbol, as a sign, can contain different meanings than what they are. The fact that food is a means of communication and has symbolic meanings has made it a research topic in social sciences (Çaycı ve Aktaş, 2018:712). One of the most popular topics in social sciences related to food and gastronomy is gastro diplomacy. Gastro diplomacy means the use of national cuisines for diplomatic activities. Today, the actors of gastro diplomacy are expanding as not only governments but also the private sector have started to engage in gastro diplomacy and a new conceptualisation is needed to describe such initiatives of the private sector. From Gastro Diplomacy to Gastro Public Relations Today, one of the most popular ways to connect with foreign publics is by using nations' cuisines as a means of promotion. Thus, the concept of gastro diplomacy, which means using a country's culinary delights as a tool of public diplomacy and to create a country brand, has become a popular field (Rockower, 2012: 235). In this context, gastro diplomacy is the activity of a state, under the name of public diplomacy, to promote its cultural national culinary heritage in order to create a nation brand and raise awareness, encourage investments and trade, and connect with the public.

Within the framework of this purpose, the study will first discuss food as symbol then the conceptualisation of gastro diplomacy, which is considered as a sub-form of public diplomacy. Then, gastro diplomacy activities will be evaluated within the framework of public relations and gastro public relations will be defined, and then food festivals will be discussed as an example of gastro public relations (Samancı, 2020:95).

1. FOOD AS A SYMBOL

Food is not only a collection of products used in statistical or nutritional studies. Food is also a communication system, a group of images, ways of using, situations and behaviours (Barthes, 2013:23). Food contains not only the ingredients and flavours, but also emotions such as love, excitement, anger, peace, speed and sadness. In fact, food is also a symbol of things other than itself. Roland Barthes says that since food has many sensory properties such as taste, touch, sight, sound and smell, it forms a language, that is, it communicates with us. Barthes mentions that food is not only important for nutrition, it is actually 'a communication system' (24). When a person buys a meal, he/she not only performs the function of eating and the act of consuming, but each meal contains a situation or information. For example, many activities such as leisure time, celebration, work are expressed with food. In short, food is an indicator.

The signifying value of food, the deeper meanings under the surface meaning have been analysed by structuralists. If food is a code, the message it wants to give is hidden in the structure of social relations (Brown & Mussel, 1984:12). Situations such as who eats with whom in a community, what and how they eat and cannot eat explain the social order in that society. Not only the food, but also the way of obtaining, preparing and consuming the food contains a symbolic meaning. One's

choice of food is determined not only by price or availability, but also by identity and other meanings of food (Jones, 2007:129). For example, meals eaten with the family every Sunday or festive meals are examples of this. The tables set up and desserts made during the Muslim feasts of sacrifice and Ramadan are examples.

The meanings attributed to food are not fixed, unchanging and universal. They may change over time and from society to society. In other words, food changes its meaning over time; it may undergo changes with social developments. In addition, food is a way for individuals to express themselves socially and culturally. Sometimes it is a symbolic indicator of a region or a country. Sometimes it is not the food eaten, but the rituals related to the food, the way of preparing the food, cooking techniques, ingredients, etc. can be symbolic. Food is both a means of nutrition and an important way of communication. The industrialisation and globalisation of food over time causes some local dishes to disappear. Therefore, food is preferred not only for its taste, but also because it represents a culture, people and region.

In addition, food is a way for individuals to express themselves socially and culturally. Sometimes it is a symbolic indicator of a region or a country. Sometimes it is not the food eaten, but the rituals related to the food, the way of preparing the food, cooking techniques, ingredients, etc. can be symbolic. Food is both a means of nutrition and an important way of communication. The industrialisation and globalisation of food over time causes some local dishes to disappear. Therefore, food is preferred not only for its taste, but also because it represents a culture, people and region.

2. FROM GASTRO DIPLOMACY TO GASTRO PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

To be able to look at gastro diplomacy activities from the perspective of public relations, to examine the theoretical differences between public diplomacy and public relations. It was made possible by the 1992 study that established the link. Signitzer and Coombs' study in question suggests that public relations and public diplomacy have common goals and use similar tools, therefore the two practices converge. According to the authors, both practices aim to influence public opinion (Signitzer and Coombs, 1992:139).

Gastro diplomacy campaigns in Japan, Malaysia, Peru, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand are of great importance in terms of theoretical and practical examples of communication skills and public relations (Soner, 2022:97). When the content of these campaigns is analysed, the messages that food is 'healthy', that there is 'diversity' in cuisines, that their cultures are 'exotic', that their cuisines are 'an important component of their national cultures', and that food is 'natural' stand out (Zhang, 2015:575-576). In the Turkish literature, the concept of promotion comes to the fore in studies on gastro diplomacy activities, but it is seen that these studies do not make an evaluation within the scope of public relations. For example, Çevik and Aslan (2020, 2310) conducted a study on how gastrodiplomacy can be used to promote the culinary culture of the country, ensure intercultural interaction and develop tourism.

There are some minor differences between gastro diplomacy and gastro public relations. Gastro diplomacy is to promote the nation through national cuisine and to communicate with the publics of other nations, to stimulate tourism and to contribute to the economy. Gastro public relations, on the other hand, aims to promote the country and establish connections with the public by institutions, agencies and chefs operating in this field. Gastro diplomacy and gastro public relations also differ in terms of their purposes, target audiences and outputs. It is the output of gastro diplomacy practices that aim to promote the nation and communicate with the publics of other nations through national cuisine (Akçay, 2024: 221). Gastro public relations includes public relations campaigns that support sustainability such as slow food and waste-free kitchens, individual initiatives on social media, projects of communication, marketing and public relations agencies operating in the field of gastronomy, and events such as food festivals, food competitions, food workshops and food fairs (Rockower, 2020:205).

3. METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

In the study, descriptive analysis was used as it was aimed to examine the strategies that make it possible to conceptualise food festivals and promotions in the field of gastronomy and thus to define

and introduce the concept of gastro public relations. The descriptive content analysis method means the in-depth examination and organization of qualitative and quantitative studies conducted independently on a specific subject or field. Thus, general trends in that subject or field are determined. The results obtained in this method are expected to guide future studies planned for targeted subjects (Ültay, 2021:188). In descriptive content analysis, the thematization/categorization method provides enrichment in terms of quality in such analysis studies (Çalık & Sözbilir 2014:35).

In the analysis, the strategies put forward by Zhang (2015) in his research were followed. These are product branding, food events, collaboration development, use of public opinion leaders, media relations and education strategies. 3rd Turkish Cuisine Week organised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Aegean cuisine flavors were introduced within the scope of Turkish Cuisine Week events organized in cooperation with Ege University Faculty of Communication and Faculty of Tourism. A program was organized at the Turkish Embassy in Baku as part of the Turkish Cuisine Week, celebrated all around the world by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. A professional delegation was formed on behalf of Ege University. The ingredients were supplied from Izmir and the centuries-old recipes were sent to the Baku Embassy and the Consulate General of Ganja. Aegean dishes were served and presentations were made to 150 diplomatic dignitaries hosted by the Embassy.

The strategies that make it possible to conceptualise Food Festival Week, a gastronomy festival, as gastro public relations; are consistent with the strategies used by Zhang (2015) in his research. These strategies are product branding, food events, co-operation development, the use of opinion leaders, media relations and educational strategies.

4. FINDINGS

The aim of the product branding strategy is to export food and other food-related products (Zhang, 2015: 577). Promoting the export and trade of products, opening restaurant chains and franchises abroad, their certification and providing consultancy to franchises are among the tactics of this strategy (Zhang, 2015: 578). Product branding strategy is also used in the Food Festival Week. It is possible to say that during the Food Festival Week, the restaurants participating in the festival focused on promoting their products and famous chefs' recipes, thus supporting the branding processes of these restaurants/venues and chefs. For example, in this context, the restaurants and chefs participating in the event were awarded in the fields of "Best Food" and "Best Service Person"; "Michelin style menus" were presented (Akçay, 2024:224).

Food Events Strategy

Food events strategy covers national and international events aimed at introducing food to the public (Zhang, 2015:577). Celebrations of special days such as World Food Day, exhibitions, festivals, fairs, cooking competitions, shows, parties, award competitions and raffles are evaluated under this strategy (Zhang, 2015:579-580). Food events are also heavily utilized during the Food Festival Week. In this context, various tastings, food talks, happy hours and VIP lounges were held (Sacar, 2009). Festivals and events are a great support for gastronomy education and the training of young chefs; the chefs who win the competition contribute individually to public relations afterwards.

Collaboration Development Strategy

This strategy, which enables the development of cooperation with organizations and experts (Zhang, 2015, pp. 580-581), includes cooperation with hotels, embassies, cultural programs, organizations and experts in the field of gastronomy, television programs, market chains, researchers, journalists, gastronomes, chefs, farmers. The most basic collaborations made within the scope of Food Festival Week are the collaborations made with brands for the sponsorship of the festival every year. Festival Week took place within the scope of the 3rd Turkish Cuisine in Baku and the sponsors of the event were the Faculty of Communication and the Faculty of Tourism of Ege University (Trt Haber, 2024).

Strategy Of Use Of Public Opinion Leaders

The strategy of using public leaders refers to the use of celebrities, organizations and platforms to raise awareness (Zhang, 2015:581). Tactics such as adding local and national flavors to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, collaborations with famous chefs, participation of MasterChef finalists in gastronomy tours, use of food ambassadors in campaigns and listing of restaurants in the Michelin Guide are evaluated under this strategy (Zhang, 2015:582). During the Food Festival Week, collaborations are made with famous chefs and famous people in the field of gastronomy. These events take place in the form of chefs meeting with participants and chats with experts. As part of the Food Festival Week, collaborations are also made with social media influencers. For example, conversations were held with Ayhan Sicimoğlu.

Media Relations Strategy

Media relations strategy means using traditional media and social media to promote campaigns (Zhang, 2015:583). Publishing food magazines and books, publishing interviews in newspapers, shooting documentary films, using social media accounts and websites, developing phone applications, preparing educational materials, preparing brochures/posters are among the tactics of this strategy (Zhang, 2015:583-584). During the Food Festival Week, many traditional media relations methods such as promotional films, press releases, press conferences, gastronomy and interviews, and newspaper news are used, as well as social media.

Education Strategy

This strategy aims to keep the interest in the field alive through educational programs; There are tactics such as planning educational programs, workshops and cooking classes, opening cooking schools, printing cookbooks and holding seminars (Zhang, 2015:584-585). Workshops are also frequently used during Food Festival Week. Another tactic used during the Festival Week is the Entrepreneurship, Destination and Turkish Cuisine Panel. The festival not only brings food lovers together, but also creates an area of interaction where important issues related to gastronomy are discussed with experts (Alan & Özlem, 2020: 132).

CONCLUSION

If the 2000s mark the years when gastro diplomacy became popular, the 2010s and beyond mark the period when gastro public relations became popular. So much so that now, not only states but also brands and non-state actors are carrying out promotional activities in the field of gastronomy. This makes it necessary to develop an alternative concept to the agreed-upon concept of gastro diplomacy, which is only carried out by states. This study is of the opinion that the concept of gastro public relations can fill the gap theoretically and practically. In the study, gastro public relations, defined as the process of developing strategic relations with the publics through food products and services or through food products of brands and institutions and strategically managing these relations, is evaluated as a sub-form of public relations.

In the study where descriptive analysis was used, Food Festival Week, the gastronomy festival in Turkey, was examined as an example of gastro public relations. It was revealed that the six basic strategies used in Zhang's research were also used in Food Festival Week. The development of connections between restaurants, brands and organizations participating in the festival and gastro publics in Food Festival Week was made possible through product branding, food events, collaboration development, use of public opinion leaders, media relations and education strategies. It can be suggested that future studies should examine which strategies and tactics are used in various gastro public relations application examples such as image management, sponsorship, corporate social responsibility, marketing-oriented public relations and corporate advertising in the field of gastronomy.

REFERENCES

- Akçay, E. (2024). Halkla İlişkilerin En Lezzetli Hali: "Gastro Halkla İlişkiler". *Aydın Gastronomi*, 8(1), 215-230.
- Alan, A. A., & Özlem, Ş. E. N. (2020). Gastronomi temalı festivaller üzerine yapılmış çalışmaların bibliyometrik analizi. *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (6), 132-144.
- Barthes, R. (2013). "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge.23-29.
- Brown, L. K. & Mussel, K. (1984). Introduction. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in US: Performance of Group Identity*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. 3-18.
- Çalık, M. ve Sözbilir, M. (2014). Parameters of content analysis. *Education and Science*, 39(174), 33-38.
- Çaycı, A. E., & Aktaş, C. (2018). Dijitalden tatmak: yemeğin "yeni" gastro mekânlardaki seyirlik gösterisinin kültürel yansımaları. *Trt Akademi*, 3(6), 710-727.
- Çevik, A., & Aslan, Z. (2020). Dünyada ve Türkiye'de Gastrodiplomasi Uygulamaları Üzerine Bir Araştırma (A Research on the Gastrodiplomacy Practices in the World and in Turkey). *Journal of Tourism & Gastronomy Studies*, 8(3), 2298-2317.
- Jones, M. (2007), "Food Choice, Symbolism and Identity." *Journal of American Folklore* 120 129-177.
- Öztarhan, E. (2018) Güncel Amerikan Etnik Edebiyatı ve Kültüründe Yemek. İzmir.

- Kımk, M. (2011). Bir İletişim Aracı Olarak Türk Halk Müziği ve Türküler. *Erciyes İletişim Dergisi*, 2(1).
- Rockower, P. (2020). A guide to gastrodiplomacy. In *Routledge handbook of public diplomacy* (pp. 205-212). Routledge.
- Rockower, P. S. (2012). Recipes for gastrodiplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 8, 235-246.
- Sacar, E. (2009, 3 Kasım). Gidilesi...Kayra Nişantaşı Restoran Haftası başlamış. Erişim Adresi <https://www.ecesacar.com/2009/11/03/gidilesi-kayra-nisantasi-restoran-haftasi-baslamis/>
- Samancı, Ö. (2020). Gastronomi: Disiplinlerarası bir buluşma. *Anatolia: Turizm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 31 (1), 92-95.
- Signitzer, B. H., & Coombs, T. (1992). Public relations and public diplomacy: Conceptual covergences. *Public relations review*, 18(2), 137-147.
- Soner, F. (2022). Gastrodiplomasi: Gastronomiye diplomasi penceresinden bakış. *Anatolia: Turizm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 33(2), 97-101.
- Trt Haber (2024, 24 Mayıs). Ege Üniversitesi Azerbaycan'da Ege Mutfağını Tanıttı. Erişim Adresi <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/kultur-sanat/ege-universitesi-azerbaycanda-ege-mutfagini-tanitti-859597.html>
- Ültay, E., Akyurt, H., & Ültay, N. (2021). Sosyal bilimlerde betimsel içerik analizi. *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (10), 188-201.
- Zhang, J. (2015). The food of the worlds: Mapping and comparing contemporary gastrodiplomacy campaigns. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 568-591.