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The Importance of Leadership in the Time of Covid-19: The Example of Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca's Youtube Shares

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ABSTRACT

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Leadership is an important parameter in the healthcare field. The need for a leader with digital skills in the context of social transformation and digitalization has become more important, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study discusses the leadership of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Turkey, Fahrettin Koca, in the context of digital environments during the pandemic. The reason for choosing Minister Koca as the leader is that he undertook the responsibilities of informing, persuading, and guiding citizens about the Covid-19 Pandemic. Koca has impressed the citizens of the Republic of Turkey with the shares he made from digital media at regular intervals with his rhetoric, knowledge, and vision. The aim of the study is to reveal how transformational leadership in the field of health is applied in digital environments after the Covid-19 in Turkey. Press meetings held by Minister Koca were evaluated based on transformational leadership categories to raise public awareness in the digital environment. In this qualitative research, the data were obtained from the official Youtube account of Minister of Health Koca. The data were evaluated by content analysis method using the MAXQDA program. The phenomenon of digital leadership after Covid-19 was discussed through digital transformation and leadership theories. As a result of the study, it was seen that Health Minister Koca have transformational leadership capability at both individual and organizational level.

Theoretical Framework and Propositions: Digital Transformation and Leadership in the Healthcare Field

The digital age has brought significant developments and transformations in many areas. The rapid transformation of digital technology, especially media tools, has also led to discussions about how to have a vision suitable for this field. Even though digitalization is not a new phenomenon, its challenges and opportunities constantly change (Almeida et al., 2020). The 21st century has brought a completely different industrial revolution in which production based on cyber-physical systems can be made, and objects can be communicated and managed via the Internet, autonomous interaction and digitalization can be adapted to almost every sector. The limits of digital have expanded when social networks and data science are added to the process defined as Industry 4.0. Discussions on digital transformation mainly focus on the concepts of Industry 4.0, the Internet of Things (IoT), and Web 4.0 (Pflaum & Gölzer, 2018).

The digital world demands new behavioral patterns from both leaders and society. In this direction, redesigning management and cooperation models has also come to the agenda so that they are not excluded from the digitization process. In order to keep business models operational during the Covid-19, it is essential to have a leader who will ensure the realization of the digital transformation process. The digital leader has a functional role in making this transition successful. Leaders need to have a digital mindset to recognize and properly assess the opportunities and challenges associated with digitalization (Hensellek, 2020).

The healthcare industry is highly dependent on digital technologies. Therefore, the healthcare industry leader should be at peace with technology. A leader in this field should have a broad perspective on the digital world beyond being an expert. Sahyaja and Rao (2018) highlight the qualities that must be possessed to demonstrate strong leadership in the digital world. They indicate that the world must be grasped with an objective understanding to exhibit strong leadership in digital environments. The concept of the digital world refers to the global. In a digital world, borders are lifted. It is, therefore, essential to grasp the world with broad insight. The digital world is a much more democratic environment than the current reality. Data control is also an important issue in becoming a digital leader. Especially big data is one of the most important issues in today's world. The world is transforming, and the digital world is transforming faster and is leading this transformation. A leader in the digital world must be able to control change in order to maintain leadership and implement it successfully.

Many researchers agree that strong leadership is needed to control change in the context of digital transformation (Bolte et al., 2018; Sainger, 2018; Scheninger, 2019; Sow & Aborbie, 2018). Digital leaders are expected to have the necessary skills to manage this transformation. It is noteworthy that traditional leaders who lead digital transformation in many institutions have significant deficiencies in technology dominance and process management. Bennis (2013) states that leaders at all organizational levels should understand the digital world and be able to use its tools, and their relationships with stakeholders should be restructured in accordance with these new needs. It is imperative that organizations have leaders who are able to adapt effectively to change, support a diverse organizational culture, and have challenges at the implementation stage (Sow & Aborbie, 2018).

A successful digital transformation depends on leaders' appropriate use of SMACIT technologies (social, mobile, analytics, cloud and IoT) (Sebastian et al., 2017; Yokoi et al., 2019). Hughes (2018) states that successful digital leaders not only have digital knowledge and

skills, but they are also skilled in directing their organizations to digital transformation and strengthening their business partnerships. Digital leaders are expected to act quickly and flexibly in networked and distributed organizational structures (Klein, 2020). It is important for a digital leader to be able to manage different types of information and integrate them into activities.

Leaders create corporate unity by setting goals, encouraging cooperation, and strengthening commitment. They set and solve problems, motivate, and inspire. Every leader is expected to have a manner of approaching suitable for the field of authority (Narbona, 2016). Leadership on social media platforms includes the above-mentioned features, but the relationship between leaders and followers plays a primary role. Therefore, social media offers valuable tools for analyzing relational leadership. A leader who is selective about what to share becomes an online reference point and a good source of information (Hwang, 2015; Narbona, 2016, p. 95). George (2018) summarizes the components of digital leadership. According to him, it is essential to focus on people, build trust and cooperation, and share leadership role. Koen (2019) states that leaders must have five basic characteristics in order to increase leadership effectiveness in the digital world. These are innovative thinking, staying current and up-to-date, collaborations and connections, and agile and data savvy. Promsri (2019) lists the digital leader qualities for a successful digital transformation: digital knowledge and literacy, vision, understanding of customers' agility, risk-taking, and collaboration. Corporate culture should support digitalization (Sahyaja & Rao, 2018). Oberer and Erkollar (2018, p. 408) define digital leadership as “a fast, cross-hierarchical, team-oriented, and cooperative approach, with a strong focus on innovation”.

Especially in times of global crisis, leaders are needed to positively influence the public behavior through the media. This research focuses on the Minister of Health, Dr. Fahrettin Koca, who is one of the decision-makers in the field of health during the pandemic process in Turkey. The study discusses the function and role of leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic and evaluates how various forms of leadership are implemented. Crises are an important part of the modern world. The complex structure of the capitalist system that connects cities, countries, and even continents has forced people to live in an extremely fragile reality. This fragile structure can become inextricable even when faced with a simple problem. In such periods, “a proactive approach becomes important” (Stoller, 2020, p. 77). Although the future is not foreseen, making various plans on possible scenarios is extremely important. However, even the corporations that implement the most successful proactive approach against possible crises can make a plan regarding the corporate, regional, or national effects of the crises at most. It is often unpredictable to know how to behave in an unprecedented crisis such as Covid-19.

Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on a global level. It affected all the world's people economically, socially, and psychologically (Nangia & Arora, 2021). In such an environment of mass hysteria, leadership quality turned out to be a critical phenomenon. Staying strong cannot be achieved with leaders who do not have enough qualities in a situation that can be regarded as the biggest crisis faced by the complex structure of the global system. Strong leadership in the healthcare field has become even more important as the current crisis is a health crisis. The lack of clear information on how to cure those infected and information pollution made it difficult to manage the situation in a controlled manner in the first period of the crisis. This has made such topics very difficult to manage, as the slightest mistake would

have lasting effects on public health. For this reason, the most basic criteria for leaders in the field of health during the Covid-19 period have been dedication and transparency. Skepticism about the changes brought about by the pandemic can be very high and limit the successful implementation (Kolbjørnsrud et al., 2017). Crises periods such as Covid-19 allow us to test models and hypotheses about leadership (Stoller, 2020).

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, a combination of digital and social skill sets is expected from leaders, especially the ability to communicate effectively on digital media. In addition, in the health field, this expectation brings with it the expectation of the ability to take the initiative and adapt to overcome many complex problems and processes. Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transformation in public and private organizations of all types and sizes. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are central to this rapid transformation. These organizations must adapt the necessary regulations to their structures (McCarthy et al., 2021). Organizations, work environments, and systems are transformed by digitalization, and new challenges are emerging for leaders to solve. This means adapting the characteristics of the old-order leadership to the new era and renewing itself according to the rules imposed by new technologies.

Dr. Fahrettin Koca, as a Digital Leader

Bass (1960) defines leadership as bringing a certain part of society together for a certain purpose. On the other hand, Koontz et al. (1986) consider leadership as the ability to influence others. Yukl (1986) states that leadership influences people by developing various discourses. Northouse (1997) defines leadership as the management of people who come together for certain purposes. According to Bennis (1986), leadership is the driving force for keeping up with the globalizing world where change is essential.

Digital leadership, on the other hand, is discussed in the literature within the context of various themes such as technology and innovation. Digital leadership can be defined as using technology effectively in managerial processes and creating an innovative vision to make a sustainable culture of change in a particular organization (El Sawy et al., 2016; Malakyan, 2019; Narbona, 2016; Zeike et al., 2019). Goethals (2004) accepts digital leadership as guidance in the basic components of the information society (information processing, communication, content, multimedia) and states that this definition can only be functional with the contributions of the digital leader in the transition process to the information society. Westerman et al. (2014) list the competencies of digital leaders as follows; creating a transformative digital vision, turning the digital vision into reality with the participation of employees, and managing the process. Digital leadership focuses not only on the use of technology but also on a commitment to digital culture and a strategic vision for success and transformation. Transformational leadership defines multidimensional leadership that emphasizes common values and needs. In this context, innovative business models, new production processes, and knowledge-based productions are important.

Digital leaders take responsibility for implementing technological changes. Digital leadership is the strategic use of digital environments for an organization to achieve its business goals (Antonopoulou et al., 2021). Our study focuses on the leadership of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Turkey, Fahrettin Koca, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Koca was appointed as the Minister of Health on 10 July 2018 and has been the minister throughout the pandemic.

In this study, the press meetings that he held from the date of the first case of infection in Turkey until the end of 2020 were analyzed.

Fahrettin Koca is a government official. He has been the spokesperson of the state on health issues throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. However, he built his leadership on his personal characteristics. The words and style he prefers to use in press meetings shed light on his leadership qualities at the individual level, beyond his corporate affiliation. Fahrettin Koca uploaded the press meetings he held to his personal Youtube account. This played an important role in reaching the citizens of Turkey. Koca has been the name that shaped the knowledge and sensitivity of Turkish people about Covid-19 in a digital world. During the pandemic, people wanted and needed to be informed about what to do. In this context, the authorities' informative messages to those people have become more important than ever. Fahrettin Koca's use of Twitter is a good example of this. Koca started using Twitter only two days after he became a minister, 12 July 2018. From the day the account was activated until February 2020, when the pandemic had a significant impact globally, the number of his followers on Twitter did not exceed 72,255. However, a month later, when the first case was seen in Turkey in March 2020, the number of Koca's followers increased to 3,919,175. This incredible increase shows how significant the people's need for reliable information was (Bilgiç, Akyüz, 2020, p. 238). The number of followers of Fahrettin Koca exceeded 6,800,000 on January 19, 2021 (Devrani, 2021, p. 3530). These numbers show that Fahrettin Koca is closely followed by the citizens during the pandemic. As a matter of fact, Koca actively used Twitter in this process. Tweeting several times a day, Koca warned the public about the virus and listed the precautions to be taken. In these tweets, he also shared visuals, videos, and live broadcasts (Bilgiç & Akyüz, 2020, p. 239). Twitter was an important medium, and so was Youtube. Since the pandemic began, Youtube has been one of the places where people followed the developments related to Covid-19. Fahrettin Koca also actively used Youtube in the same way. In this process, Koca also activated a Youtube account and shared the press meetings he held here.

Leaders should be able to give convincing and guiding messages for the needs of the people. They should motivate them. Koca implemented management in direct proportion to this. Çağlayan (2011) stated that although health problems and negative social effects such as panic, turmoil, and discrimination were seen, Koca managed the communication process correctly and reflected a sense of trust. Koca was in charge of communication during the pandemic (Güregen et al., 2021). He has conducted this leadership through digital channels rather than conventional ones. He informed and guided the public. He prepared society against the virus during the pandemic and tried to make the people vigorous. He made references to cultural values. He often memorializes the deceased health workers. He cared about establishing a bond of communication.

Method

This study is qualitative research using the content analysis method. It is more appropriate to use a qualitative methodology to deeply understand the management of leadership processes in the field of health, especially considering the COVID-19 era and its aftermath, which has great global consequences. For this reason, a qualitative methodology in accordance with the principles of content analysis (Cresswell, 2013) was used in this research to understand and analyze the contents of the press meetings held by Minister Koca on his official Youtube

channel. The researchers first determined the research topic and revealed the data. Then, they tried to understand the data and capture the meaning of the whole. In the editing phase, the researchers developed a categorization according to the model codes. Finally, the researchers explained the analysis process in the reporting phase, creating a link between the results and the data. This method provides a systematic tool to categorize and summarize the post-Covid-19 processes that Minister Koca discussed at different press conferences (Mayring, 2007). The research consists of 18 press meetings held by the Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca between March 11, 2020, when the first Covid-19 case was reported in Turkey, and December 24, 2020, when he held the last press meeting of the year. These press meetings were published on the official Youtube account of the minister, who used social media effectively during Covid-19. Only the statements of Minister Fahrettin Koca were included in the study, the questions of the press members and the answers to these questions were excluded. Within the study, only the policies he made and applied while managing the Covid-19 process were included. Other sharing and activities of Minister Koca in digital environments are also excluded.

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, 18 press conferences on the official Youtube account of Minister Fahrettin Koca were deciphered, and data consisting of 18,542 words was obtained. The data were divided into subcategories and codes (Lune, & Berg, 2017; Merriam, 2009). The data obtained from Minister Koca's press meetings were "examined, compared and classified" according to predetermined codes and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 61). The data collection process consists of revealing the data by deciphering, applying them to the determined codes, and interpreting. Three researchers watched all the videos and deciphered and categorized the conversations. When disagreements arose, discussions were held, and a final decision was reached jointly. One hundred eighty-four subcodes were obtained. These subcodes were categorized according to 5 main codes to reveal how transformational leadership components are represented in digital leadership practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis includes identifying and categorizing the obtained data according to codes that reveal the role of transformational leadership in digital environments (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The MAXQDA program was preferred because it "enables the creation of empirical types in the data-driven analysis process" (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 8). The coding process was systematized through MAXQDA to make the qualitative data analysis more valid. The data we obtained from Minister Koca's press conferences were coded according to the sub-categories that form a meaningful whole in the database. Their hierarchical connections are visualized by adding explanations to the codes (Weitzman & Miles, 1995). Finally, the data were presented in figures and tables, then interpreted (Cresswell, 2013). Fahrettin Koca's transformational leadership representations were revealed by word frequency analysis. In this context, the data were evaluated within the scope of the five dimensions of transformational leadership (vision, emulation/imitation, purpose, action, and training) put forward by Bass and Avilio (1994). Vision; statements that aim to reach public health. Emulation/imitation; implicitly encouraging statements about the fight against the pandemic. Aim; phrases that invite success in the fight

against the pandemic. Action; encouraging statements about the fight against the pandemic. Education; statements aimed at educating the people of Turkey (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Findings

Eighteen press meetings held by Fahrettin Koca throughout 2020 were analyzed. It has been seen that Koca has appropriate explanations for each leadership type. Fahrettin Koca did not have a one-sided leadership; on the contrary, his leadership was comprehensive. However, among these leadership types, he made more statements that can be included in the education and emulation/imitation categories. Koca uses expressions/language elements to attract the attention of the public. Aims for a healthy society. With this aim, he sets a vision for the maximum level of public health. He invited the public to support him in his struggle.

He emphasizes that the disease will be prevented, and the healthcare workers will win the fight; "As the health army, we will not decrease our testing capacity in this process. We will increase it. We will meticulously apply the filtration method in each new case. We will detect our cases early. Our experience in treatment will guide us. We will be more careful than before with all our teams and the health army. We expect the same from you. Our goal is to have zero patients and zero new deaths." It indicates that the measures to be taken will be effective in achieving the goal of a healthy society; "After the holiday season, the days will be freer, and our homes will continue to be a safe environment for us against the risks, but we will only have a wider social life if we follow the measures. The measures will guarantee our freedom and freedom of movement." He states that steps taken against the pandemic gave good results; "The cooperation of all sides of the struggle and the determination of people to take their own responsibility brought us success. Our fight against the coronavirus is our biggest mobilization in the last period." He gives a mission to the public to be a healthy society and asks them to see the big picture; "We have duties and obligations to each other. Our state protects its national interests as well as the health of its people in the fight against the epidemic. The virus does not only attack the human body. It also targets the state's obligations to its citizens", he says and adds; "Therefore, the criticism of some irresponsible people is no different than looking at one point of the photo and seeing a stain. I believe we have passed the hardest part of the road. When we take serious measures, fear will give way to self-confidence."

Revealing his vision of a healthy society, Fahrettin Koca also follows different strategies. One of them is emulation/imitation. He says that good days will come with the end of the epidemic. He gives at each press meeting the number of people who died, intubated, or recovered; "As of yesterday, 7186 patients, 1327 of whom are seriously ill, should be a warning for us. Every patient and every case reduces our strength, morale, and enthusiasm for life." Similarly, he warns the public to be more careful; "As of the second half of October, a rapid increase in cases seen in our country. In many provinces, there was more than one hundred percent increase. Our hospitals and intensive care units have started to have difficulties."

He also talks about negative scenarios that may happen and urges people to be cautious; "As the age of the patients' increases, the length of stay in the hospital ICU's increases with it. If we cannot protect them, we can forget about such short-term hospitalizations and mass healings. Who is ready to pay for this? Is the family at a picnic? Fans celebrating the end of the game?" On the other hand, Fahrettin Koca sets various targets. He encourages the people, and gives the message that every individual is an active soldier in the fight against the pandemic. He also

expresses his gratitude towards healthcare professionals.; “We believe that everyone is as determined as we are in this war. I think everyone is grateful to healthcare professionals who undertake patient treatments, get their tests done, give their medicines, visit the inpatients at home, and follow up on their condition.”

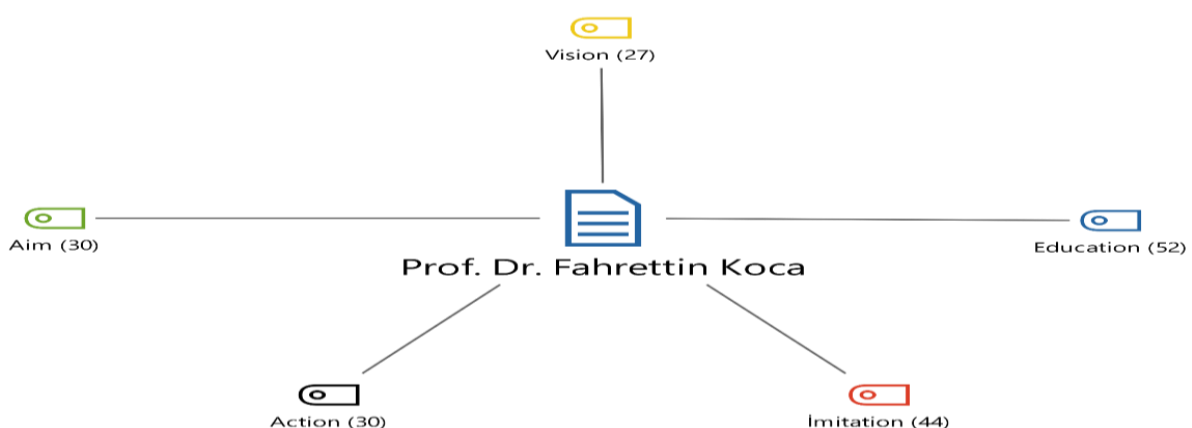
He states that citizens who take responsibility should warn those who do not, and he also expresses the necessity of a full-scale campaign against the virus; "Those who do not comply with the measures should be warned. The fight against Covid-19 is a struggle that must be fought together. The person who thinks about his health in this fight will also benefit society. The person who puts himself in danger also violates his responsibility to society."

He invites society to take action and follow the mask and distance rules; “Let us be determined to launch a mobilization to reduce this burden from the shoulders of our medical army, which works day and night. Let us all be prudent against the disease. Let's not take a step without a mask; let us follow the social distance rule. If we don't have to, let's not go into enclosed and crowded risky places." He states that everyone should take precautions; otherwise, the pandemic will not end. Emphasizes that people should not visit their families to endanger them; “Let's stay at home, not endanger our relatives. Let's call them, the talking from the heart creates a greater intimacy than kissing a mother's hand.” He also uses the scare tactic in his speeches; "Early hope does not make the measures unimportant. Remember that thousands of healthcare workers still cannot hug their children when they return home. People walking among us are being diagnosed. There is still a risk. The decrease in the number of new patients is not a guarantee for you, as we will not know who is carrying the virus.”

He aimed to increase awareness against vaccines; "Our council presented the interim results of the study to the science committee. We were satisfied with the response of our people towards the use of the vaccine. We are confident that the vaccine is effective and safe for the Turkish people." He also states, "As the Ministry of Health, we work intensively with all institutions. We will establish the necessary infrastructure to prevent the return of the high risk of spread in the period of freedom of movement. We will have a social life when we comply with the measures. The measures will guarantee our freedom of movement." When Minister Koca's statements are categorized according to transformational leadership characteristics, education and emulation/imitation themes appear to be used more (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1

Single Case Code Model



Minister Koca made statements under the theme of "education". He informed the public about Covid-19 and showed the right path. He gave information about the measures taken by the government. His statements on the implementation of "mask, distance, hygiene" measures, the development of the "Life Fits Home" Mobile Application by the Ministry of Health, implementation of restrictive measures and penal sanctions can also be evaluated under the theme of education. The emulation/imitation theme is another prominent category. Minister Koca generally emphasized negative events and spread fear to involve the public in the fight against Covid-19. He also emphasized sub-codes such as death, intensive care, intubation, and the spread of the virus. He sends the messages that people should not infect the people in their social surroundings. He also criticizes events that increase the spread of Covid-19, such as holidays and weddings. Koca's statements for a healthy society can be evaluated under the scope of the aimed theme. He says that the epidemic can be brought under control in the near future if Covid-19 precautions and measures are followed. He underlined the sub-themes in this sense, such as preventing losses and helping healthcare workers.

He used expressions to attract the attention of the public, in line with the theme of the vision. He said that the aim is to achieve a healthy society. Expressions that invite the public for a certain purpose are also included in the theme of action, such as celebrating public holidays, putting on a mask, and staying away from crowded environments like weddings, engagements, funerals, etc.

As seen in [Figure 2](#), the first five words most frequently used in press meetings in 2020 are sick, epidemic, health, case, and precaution. The figure contains the 15 most used words. Unrelated words and "Covid-19" and "pandemic" are not included. The "disease" is mentioned 101 times. "Pandemic" (98), "health" (88), and "case" (83) follow it. It is noteworthy that the word "precaution" is used 73 times. The word cloud analysis of the study is shown in [Figure 3](#).

Figure 2

Word Frequency

| Word | Frequency | % |
|---------------|-----------|------|
| sick | 101 | 0,73 |
| epidemic | 98 | 0,71 |
| health | 88 | 0,64 |
| case | 83 | 0,60 |
| precaution | 73 | 0,52 |
| social | 64 | 0,46 |
| participation | 48 | 0,35 |
| mask | 43 | 0,31 |
| big | 39 | 0,28 |
| struggle | 38 | 0,27 |
| death | 35 | 0,25 |
| science | 32 | 0,23 |
| world | 31 | 0,22 |
| control | 30 | 0,22 |
| distance | 29 | 0,21 |

Figure 3
Word Cloud



The word frequency figure is consistent in terms of the subject and purpose of the research. It can be seen that “health,” “epidemic,” “patient,” and “case” are the most common words. However, “death,” “precaution,” “struggle,” “mask,” and “distance” are the most frequently repeated words that are shown in light blue color.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has affected the whole world. Significant transformations took place in many areas. Leadership is one of them. Leadership is a phenomenon that was already undergoing a certain transformation. With the pandemic, developments on this issue have become even more important. Today, digital transformation and new forms of leadership are more important than ever. Informing the public is an important necessity. Digital media has increased its importance in this context. Digital communication tools have increased their importance in acquiring information and have become an important instrument that people use to spend time during quarantine periods (The Nielsen Total Audience Report, 2018). Youtube is one of these channels, and leaders frequently use it. In this study, the press meetings of Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca were analyzed. He has held regular press meetings since the day the first case was seen in Turkey and published them on his Youtube account. In these videos, he encouraged the public to fight against Covid-19 and shared the decisions taken by the government.

Fahrettin Koca held eighteen press meetings in 2020. When the expressions he used at these press meetings were examined, it was seen that he exhibited different leadership characteristics. Koca made general evaluations of the situation at these meetings. He shared information about the spread and effects of the virus in Turkey and around the world. Beyond that, he tried to encourage people with his messages. He set goals for the public. He stated that existing problems could be solved with both individual effort and social solidarity. He set specific goals and urged the public to take action. He made encouraging statements about what needed to be done. He made a great effort to have his statements shared online.

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