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## **Coping with the present crisis: the perception of online communication in the case of cultural brands**

**Abstract:** In the field of culture, a lot of events had to be postponed or even cancelled throughout the world due to COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the organization of regular editions in 2020 and 2021 in the case of traditional events proved to be a very difficult task. Nevertheless, in many situations the organizers embraced the latter task having in mind the idea of keeping the event alive and not letting its tradition slip away. This type of approach was undertaken by the managers of George Enescu International Festival, a consistent cultural brand that spans for more than 50 years. In this vein, my paper focuses on the way the organizers dealt with the sanitary crisis induced by COVID-19, the forms of online communication related to the regulations and to the festival as a whole and the perception of the online users concerning the discursive hybridization between the cultural content and the sanitary announcements. To accomplish my goals, I analyzed a corpus comprising of posts made by the organizers and comments made by online users on the Facebook page of the event.

**Keywords:** cultural brands, online engagement, sanitary regulations, George Enescu International Festival, online communication.

### **Introduction**

In the present times characterized by a sanitary crisis that affected almost all of the domains of activity, the cultural sector had also to fight for its survival. Many adaptive strategies were put to work, from online spectacles to festivals or exhibitions organized in special frameworks, with many restrictions and regulations. The George Enescu International Festival is one of the most prestigious cultural events that this year is taking place between August 28 and September 26. From the first edition, held in 1958, many personalities (conductors, orchestras, musicians) have participated in memorable concerts. If from begging the festival was launched together with his competition, since 2014 the George Enescu International Competition represents a separate event, a unique and authentic launching

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platform for the young artists, organized once every two years. Thus, the visibility and importance of this cultural nucleus grown constantly.

The 2021 Enescu Festival has been considered the largest international music event of its kind. From the statistics made by organizers (<https://www.festivalenescu.ro/en/george-enescu-international-festival-the-worlds-largest-classical-music-festival-in-2021/>), the concert halls hosted over 3500 artists, 100 soloists and conductors and 32 orchestras. Celebrating Enescu's 140th birth anniversary and Stravinsky's 50th commemoration of his death, the festival comprised 78 concerts, three of them being world premieres. The concerts were physically held in music halls from Bucharest and other important cities from Romania, and also broadcasted online, free of charge. The communication strategy for this edition emphasized the direct attendance, so the online transmissions were not promoted heavily. In this context, the health regulations had to be clearly communicated and mandatorily integrated in the messages transmitted to the public: limitation of the number of seats, wearing a mask, presenting the Digital Green Certificate that should attest the vaccination, the negative test or the recovery from a SARS-CoV-2 infection. All these measures had to be communicated, visually and textually, through many media. In this vein, I am interested in observing the place occupied by this kind of posts in the digital media, specifically on the Facebook page of the festival, and in analyzing the online comments and reactions from the users. The reception of these announces provides significant clues for the understanding of the present mixture between sanitary and cultural registers. At the same time, in terms of branding, their inclusion could affect the verbal and visual identity of the festival, and, in this respect, they challenge the creativity of content managers.

### **Crisis and brands – brief remarks**

The consumers manifested a wide range of mechanisms of coping and adapting to the pandemic situation (Kirk and Rifkin 2020). Edelman Trust Barometer (Rogers 2020) presented the results of a survey of 12000 consumers worldwide, showing that people want to see how brands are involved in coping with the pandemic. In other words, the promises of a certain brand should now include a specific social dimension and a level of adaptability in order to act differently than before crisis. Thus, 62% of consumers think that brands must play a critical part in the fight against COVID-19. A very interesting finding, somehow counter-intuitive, is the preference of consumers regarding the channels of communications used by brands to communicate virus-related information. Thus, social media are not the favorite platforms of communication for these issues, but traditional media are (at least for the last year).

The pandemic shaped the ways in which brands communicate and function in such a great degree so that researchers asked: “whether corona virus has become recognizable as a brand” or if “should a pandemic be branded?” (Mogaji and Nguyen 2021). The managers had to co-create their businesses’ strategies with the COVID-19 regulations and restrictions in mind, formulating clear statements in order to protect their reputation. In this respect, changing the communication practices in relation to the pandemic is one strategy that brand managers do, and the cultural sector do not represent an exception. Moreover, when we investigate how the pandemic shapes cultural brands, we could notice a “research gap”, especially for classical music concerts and theater spectacles (Krajnović, Vrdoljak Raguž, and Perković 2021). The state of festivals has been studied a little more (Davies, K. 2020; Szatan 2020); the overall strategies were the cancelation or the postponing of the events, their moving in online or the construction of hybrid events, with special health requirements. The 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the George Enescu International Festival belongs to the latter category of events.

In general, brands succeeded to fit their communication to pandemic (Mangiò, Pedeliento, and Andreini 2021), seen as a veritable “black swan” event (Taleb 2007). Using the specific framework of rhetoric, Mangiò, Pedeliento, and Andreini observed how brands used the emotive appeals of social pathos with positive effects, seen in a growing social media engagement with the respective brands. Regardless of the type of brand, the rhetorical appeal made on social media and the ways in which brands communicate are changing in the pandemic.

Brands have an important role in the present times and the cultural ones are also very important in maintaining our “normality”. As for any kind of brand, a brand situated in the cultural segment has an established multi-layered identity (conceptual, verbal, visual, sensorial). All these layers are important ways of communicating the brand philosophy, its significant set of values and promises. The ways in which some of these components are adapted to a crisis are proof of the versatility of the respective brand. Nevertheless, the public could resonate or not with the new modalities of communication, and in this respect analyzing the public’s dominant directions of understanding and interpretation could offer some relevant insights.

## **Online topics and debates**

### *Methodology*

In order to analyze the perception of a heterogeneous public about the “intrusion” of sanitary messages into the accustomed messages

published by the festival organizers, I chose to examine the posts and comments made on the Facebook festival page. The Facebook page has 81.390 likes and 84.269 followers, being a useful platform for the brand. The language used is Romanian, while on other social media platforms, such as Twitter or Instagram, the usual language is English. Thus, by choosing Facebook, it is obvious that the study is referring to Romanian people that read and comment the things related to the intersection between festival and pandemic. Moreover, this year most participants to the concerts were from Romania, the number of foreign participants being very low compared to previous editions. In this vein, it was natural to target this specific audience and platform.

The content generated is various, from photo albums to presentations of concerts or interviews. As specific methodological steps, I formed a corpus of data comprising only the messages that contain announcements about pandemic measures, posted by the organizers on the official Facebook page of the International George Enescu Festival during this year edition, and their correspondent comments wrote by the online users. Thus, the corpus contains 11 posts made by organizers and 307 comments made by online users. I used the qualitative research tool ATLAS.ti 9 for their analysis.

### *The analysis of online posts*

As for the posts selected, they are kind announcements or reminders of the sanitary measures that were mandatory at that time. This Jubilee Edition, presented as a “history made with love”, could not happen in absence of health regulations that were also transmitted on the Facebook page of the festival. Regarding the way of communicating, I noticed two main strategies: a) the presentation of sanitary norms or the call to respect them in an integrated manner, with other data concerning the event and b) the publishing of the posts that contain only health measures. a) 5 messages published by the organizers contain mixed information about the event, specific concerts and sanitary rules. Since the press conference for the official opening of the festival (August 27), these rules were presented by Oana Marinescu, Communication Director. Through its communication theme, the engagement of organizers was to adapt to the pandemic circumstances and to continue to share music and joy. The message posted on August 29 to make known publicly the first concert (George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Paavo Jarvi, with Hilary Hahn and Sarah Nemțanu on violin) also integrates the necessity of sanitary conditions that were different depending on the concert halls: at the Romanian Athenaeum and the Auditorium Hall, the access is conditioned by wearing a

mask and providing an official evidence attesting the vaccination against SARS-CoV-2, with minimum 10 days from the completion of the vaccination scheme, the negative PCR or rapid antigen test, or the medical proof of existence of 15-90 days after the confirmation of the infection. At the Great Hall of the Palace, only the wearing of mask and keeping the physical distance were mandatory. Also, the maximum occupancy rate was an important criterium for tickets sold (70 % for the Romanian Athenaeum and 50 % for the Palace Hall). A special message was posted on September 5, using the violinist Nemanja Radulović's story told at the end of his performance, when he played as an encore Bach's *Sarabande* from Partita for violin no. 2 in the memory of his friend who died of COVID-19. The post continued by appealing to the responsibility of the audience, explaining one more time the regulations. This post was very much appreciated by 314 people, being shared for 15 times. b) The independent messages about sanitary safety consist in 6 announcements, 4 of them containing the reference to the medical partner of the festival that offered discount tests. This kind of posts also include thank you notes for collaboration with the audience that understood that obeying the rules represents a necessary requirement for assuring the context in which music can go on in safe conditions.

### *The analysis of online comments*

The official messages posted on the Facebook page provoked many reactions and comments from the online users. They were coded and the principal themes constructed online are the following:

1. The agreement with the measures transmitted by organizers. 19 quotations expressed the necessity of the sanitary rules, in order to create a safe space where music could be performed: "Bravo! An initiative worthy of praise", "It's a responsible appeal". Other users appreciated the clarity of conditions for the participation on site and the entire organization: "The organization of the festival was excellent, although it took place in restricted conditions, something that many easily forget". They are calling for "understanding", "discipline", "respect", "common sense and education": "Put your mask on, bring the certificate with you or stay home! For me this is a minimal form of respect!", "The rigorous control of certificates at the entrance to the hall and the correct wearing of the mask is the right attitude towards all of us: artists, audience, organizers". Moreover, a user commented: "The concerts are so captivating that we do not consider that wearing a mask represents an effort".

2. The disagreement with measures. 16 comments expressed the opposition with the sanitary rules as necessary conditions to access the concerts, labelling them as "illogical", "criminal", "incorrect", "the

culmination of humiliation”, or a “a show of grotesque embarrassment”: “I’m always with you and you know it, but it’s not right what you’re doing right now”, “Thank you for the illogical and criminal measures imposed by you”, “It seems to me a criminal action both on your part as organizers and on the part of the authorities!”, “Support measures that violate fundamental rights and freedoms, the GDPR, everything, and you also have pretensions of elegance! Ridiculous”. Direct forms of addressing to the organizers: “Shame on you!”, “Dislike”, “Unfollow” point out the discontent. The organizers are accused of supporting the green pass, and, to a certain degree, a kind of discrimination: “Only those who are healthy can listen to music? Or read a book? I propose to burn all the books read by those likely to have viruses”.

3. The wider questioning of the legitimacy of measures. A cluster of comments constitutes inquiries about the restrictions and measures applied, enlarging the discussion. Thus, people debated about the lack of unitary measures in all the concert halls, the number of hours where a test is valid, the logic of the legal frame in which the measures take place, the insufficiency of green pass and the necessity of testing, the peril of segregation when the certificate is mandatory, the necessity of specific actions on the spot (because the concerts take place in the music halls, online posts could not have a maximum impact). Collaterally, the reimbursement of money was another topic of discussion that attracted many concrete aspects.

4. The non-compliance with measures. 28 comments raise the issue of lack of respecting the rules in the concert halls: the certificates are not verified (“Stupefaction, at the entrance no one ever checked anything!”), seats capacity exceeded (“Dear organizers, the occupancy rate at the Palace Hall is not 70%, not even in your most beautiful dreams. 90% at least. The occupancy rate at the Athenaeum far exceeds the 50% allowed.”), people do not wear face mask (“the audience present at the concerts was completely exposed by the irresponsible people who did not want to follow a minimum rule of common sense. Those who should draw the attention to those who do not wear the mask properly are primarily the ushers. But perhaps the other spectators should have elegantly drawn the attention of those who demonstrate a gross insensitivity.”) or other activities (“Drinking champagne or coffee in the concert hall is not at all ok, either”). The reflections about these observations are quite sad: “everyone is happy to collect as much money as possible and turn a blind eye to violations of the regulations” and “unfortunately, we are ‘champions’ in breaking the rules, anywhere... even if there are places and events where we have higher expectations... That’s it, that’s all we can do.”. The reflections about the present are not quite optimistic, many comments emphasizing the poor level of compliance with sanitary measures for the entire Romanian society:

“They are Romanians, we speak in vain.”, “sad and ugly”, “typically Romanian”.

5. A layer of this category is constituted by pro-vaccine opinions, with one distinct sub-layer the call for vaccination as a solution for a normal life, with events such George Enescu Festival being able to take place with public: “Go get the vaccine, stop criticizing for the sake of criticism”, “Go get the vaccine, it won’t bite!” or “So go get vaccinated, all of you who haven’t done it yet, as billions of people have gone so far! If you had gone in time, we would not have discussed this today. We only wish you well, even though you have done us a lot of harm and you are still showing an absurd stubbornness, sometimes even violence!”. The anti-vaccine layer was moderately represented in the discussion. Moreover, a special cluster was dedicated to the idea that vaccination does not prevent from the transmission of the virus, so many other measures must be concomitantly adopted and respected: “The fact that you are vaccinated does not mean that you cannot be infected and that you cannot spread the virus to those around you who have a negative test and are sitting next to you!”, “I’m vaccinated and that doesn’t mean anything about transmitting the Delta strain”. The opinions are sometimes transformed in ironies for vaccinated people who “prove nothing and who can make others sick!”, such as “My life is endangered by the vaccinated (these altruistic people who think of others and society)”.

6. The issue of testing. This is a very interesting topic, related to the previous cluster discussed above. The testing for everyone who wanted to participate at concerts, no matter if they are vaccinated or not, is a consistent thread of conversations. “Which certificates? Negative tests, yes! Vaccination certificates are equal to 0 in terms of stopping the spread of the virus!”, “If you really want to protect artists and spectators, ask for tests for everyone. What the law says is one thing, what is ethical – it’s another thing!”. The tests are perceived as the more effective tool in order to preserve a healthy environment: they are “more effective than the vaccination certificate, which, between you and me, says nothing about the owner: whether it’s positive or not!”. Some posts emphasized that testing would be the criterium that settles the dispute between vaccinated and unvaccinated people: “It seems abnormal to me, while I test myself to prove that I am not sick, to be forced to participate to the concert with untested (vaccinated) people who can transmit the disease and who can make me sick. Shame on you!”. Another consistent part was dedicated to the question if the tests should be free of charge, included in the ticket price or supported by the participants.

7. The debate about wearing a mask. Most comments acknowledged the necessity of mask as a measure of self- and collective protection indoor and as a minimal sign of respect and contribution to the festival. Few users

praised the members of orchestras for wearing masks during performances: “A lady did not wear a mask during the entire show. On top of that, the instrumentalists on stage, although they had to carry a complex 2-hour program, wore a mask. It’s not even about who wears the mask and who isn’t, it’s merely about a huge contrast that is simply measured in common sense (although from an epidemiological point of view no one asked us at the entrance about the vaccine / test, etc.). Phones ringing, people talking, etc. Performance at its peak”. Many other expressed their discomfort related to the non-compliance with this rule manifested by various participants in concert halls: “Every night I was forced to ask someone around me to use the mask. We wanted so much not to postpone the festival and now we can’t wear a simple mask...”. A user perceived a total contradiction between the festival and the wearing of mask, imagining a possible George Enescu’s reaction if he would see the actual conditions: “what reaction would George Enescu have if he had seen you with those ‘wonders’ on your faces, would he accept it? Respectfully, but you’re ridiculous with those on your face”.

8. The dissatisfaction regarding the content of online posts. 7 specific comments expressed the discontent regarding the fact that people debate about external topics and not about the music. The mission of art seems a little bit diminished in the pandemic framework, and some users felt that the context is sometimes more important than the festival per se: “Why do we forget about the mission of art...?”. One user ironically asked if “Only at the Athenaeum is the covid-19 symphony listened!?!?”. The sanitary rules are perceived as an intrusion in the rarefied space of art and culture and the blending topics of discussion create discomfort: “on the occasion of the festival it might be better to engage in debates on musical topics, than on everyday ones”. For another user, the Facebook page of the festival is almost transformed in any other page when sanitary regulations are debated: “I went on the page to be informed ... but I’m running away. And I’m glad I only got tickets for 7 concerts! What is being discussed here? Vaccine controversy?”. Another comment expresses the disgruntlement with the level of discussion: “I was curious to read the comments. Another lost illusion. I thought that classic music lovers are both intelligent and correctly informed!”.

9. Some remarks about the tone of conversations. In general, the online discussions had a polite and natural tone. Nevertheless, I noticed a significant cluster of 55 quotations where ironic or bitter remarks were transmitted among users. Thus, as an alternative, one user proposes that only unvaccinated people should attend concerts: “There is another solution, in reverse: only the unvaccinated people should participate. I don’t know if anyone else will play for them!”. As a reply for the request of free testing, one user remarked that both COVID-19 virus and the vaccine are free. Another user observed, related to vaccination debate, that “The easiest

thing is to get vaccinated and if you ‘survive’ you should come to concerts”. A micro-debate was active when a user posted a picture taken from a concert hall during a spectacle, with an attendee without face mask, with comments such as: “Congratulations, comrades, let us be vigilant and expose all the enemies of the people! Your homeland will be grateful to you. Thanks for the picture and for the denunciation!”.

### *A micro-analysis of visual communication*

A very special place in the corpus is represented by two posts published by organizers on September 17 and September 22. These two messages are multimodal, using text and image in their composition. But this is not their distinctive feature; after all, many other posts are constructed in the same way. The trigger for comments was the redesign of one of the most known visual of the festival (<https://scontent.ftce2-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/>) by replacing the violin – an instrument-symbol for this event – with a mask (<https://scontent.fias1-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/>). Also, the tagline “O istorie din iubire” / “A history made with love” was superseded by the tagline “Țineți masca pe nas și pe gură! Vă protejați viața și Festivalul” / “Keep the mask on your nose and mouth! Protect your life and the Festival!”.

The online users split in two main categories:

a) those who consider the visual modification a correct and necessary one in the present context and b) those who felt this alteration as an intrusion in the aesthetic and the values of the festival.

a) The first category acknowledges the power of the image as warning and rapid trigger of understanding. The maxim “a picture is worth more than 1000 words” is here at work, some people sustaining the use of the image, even if they hope to be a momentary visual phase: “this ‘transient’ element needs to be visible, it seems. Maybe the people can understand the message better if ‘it’s with pictures’. It is a situation that we hope will not last for years, but now it is necessary for the people to understand the importance of these rules and measures”. The picture was considered important in the Romanian pandemic framework, because “For now, Romanians are quite pathetic in managing the Covid-19 pandemic, we believe a lot of conspiracies and we don’t really care about the others around us”. The transience of this visual adjustment is also denied in a comment that presents the pandemic as one of many possible future similar events, so, we can infer that this kind of visual announcements will be regular. Another aspect debated was the aesthetic per se of the banner. Thus, the image is considered to be very well-integrated in the visual

identity of this brand and a proof of creativity: “the idea of the Festival to stylize and display the mask symbol seems nice and ingenious”. Also, the image was seen as “beautiful” and successful: “the accompanying photo was extremely beautiful and appreciative, and I think that the need to open the site for debate can only be engaging, in the conditions of freedom of speech and opinion, not of school-like fears of sad memory”.

b) Few comments noticed that the post with the mask is a pinned one, so everyone could see this message with priority, a situation that disturbed some users who wanted to get more easily to the cultural information of the page. The power of algorithms was briefly remarked in this context. The association between sanitary rules and the philosophy of the festival was negatively felt by some users: “the name and the music are too valuable to associate even a transient aspect with the whole image of the festival”. For this user, the brand expectations were in this case incongruent with its communication strategy, violating his or her perceptions of brand personality (Aaker 1997). Maybe the common distinctions between high – low culture or culture – society’s problems underpinned this approach. Also, regarding the sentiments provoked by these posts, one user labelled it as “sad”: “The violin turned into a mask. Sad post. I hope that the Good will triumph and that the world will understand and be aware of certain painful events that we go through with or without our will”.

Even if the image respected the whole visual identity of the festival (colors, name of the festival, graphic elements) and the layout was used for many other messages (thank you notes for different sponsors, for instance), the incorporation of mask – as a symbol of pandemic and mandatory health regulations, was not received unitary. On the contrary, there is a division between the users who positively reacted to the image and the users who negatively perceived the image. If we discuss the perception of the image in the framework of positioning approach (Ries and Trout 2001), we can affirm that George Enescu Festival has a very specific place in the mind of the audience, and that it is associated with several main attributes (culture, music, exceptionalism, high quality, live performances and so on). The knowledge of this festival and its awareness could interfere with the modalities in which the brand has to change its vocabulary in this period. The incorporation of messages external to music and culture sphere created a kind of cognitive and affective dissonance for some people, while other people appreciated the adaptability of the festival to the current predicaments. The brand association with the current crisis, even if is a passing issue, could be perceived with distrust and sadness, on the one hand or with the acknowledging of the creative modalities in which these necessary messages could be realized, on the other hand. According to the congruence theory, people consider that congruent visual communication is

desirable for a brand, creating unity, fluency and familiarity (Phillips, McQuarrie, and Griffin 2014). Also, “ads with consistent visual brand identity over time would be liked more than ads where the elements making up visual brand identity, however positive in themselves, have been altered in a novel or unfamiliar way” (Phillips, McQuarrie, and Griffin 2014, 228). Of course, in the development of a brand, some changes are mandatory, energizing the brand or adapting it to a certain situation, but some degrees of incongruity between the brand and its new style of communication could be perceived by its public. In this process, the aesthetic intermediates this perception.

## **Conclusions**

The mixture between the sanitary and cultural registers is difficult to be unitary perceived by the audience, even if the cultural brand communicates in a correct manner. When brand awareness or, more, brand loyalty exists, the public develops a certain expectance related to the uniformity of the public messages transmitted by the brand (in style, format, type of content). At the same time, regulations had to be clearly transmitted, but the audience also had to adapt to the changing vocabulary of that cultural brand. The case study analyzed showed the ways in which such a hybridization of messages is perceived by the online audience. Certainly, each participant perceives it depending also on her or his opinions related to the present sanitary crisis (measures, vaccinations, wearing a mask etc.) on one hand, and to the personal ideas about how a cultural brand should communicate on the other hand. These two categories of ideas act as presuppositions that guide the direction of opinions expressed online. Moreover, the previous experience with the festival is not unitary and it could not be measured; in other words, the brand stickiness and loyalty could also affect the people’s comments and opinions. Despite these limitations, this micro-analysis is a glimpse into the cultural events that take place in special pandemic conditions and how these are integrated harmoniously both in the brand identity and public expectations.

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