Chapter 17

Fan Culture in the Digital Age: Online Football Fan Forums as the Virtual Extensions of Football Terraces

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine the impact of the stadium and its emotional references on spectators’ virtual presence and experience. Specifically, the transfer of such practices to the online fan forum Ali-Sami-Yen.net, one of the largest unofficial fan forums founded by supporters of the Turkish popular football team Galatasaray in 1999, is inspected and the significance of spatiality for the football fan cultures is scrutinized with Maffesoli’s concept of the “neo-tribe” in this chapter. The notion of neo-tribe helps to discuss the role of shared ambiance and emotions for the construction of the virtual experience in a fan forum. Methodologically, content and interaction among the users on Ali-Sami-Yen.net is analyzed through the primary sources including in-depth interviews and participant observation. It is concluded that the stadium attendance with its specific terrace culture practices constitutes a distinctive source of identity among the Galatasaray fans and their online forum is the replica of this experience.

INTRODUCTION

The stadium as the “fan community’s home” plays an integral role in the creation of a shared “sense of place” for the football fan communities (Bale, 2000; Giulianotti, 2002). The Taksim Gezi Park Protests in May 2013 once again showed us the importance of gathering in a physical space for the formation of a sense of belonging and collective purpose. Football fans played a crucial role by spreading over the cause of the movement via their well-known slogans and chants. In doing so, they transferred their repertoire of action to a political cause and activated a collective spirit for the protesters (Ömer & Özçetin, 2017; DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1048-3.ch017

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Departing from such example, we argue that the terraces with their emotional references to the atmosphere of “standing together against the opponent” offer fans social notions such as collectivity and belonging or communality and devotion. This study tries to investigate whether the transfer of such “terrace experience” to the Internet is possible. Even though a football fan forum cannot occupy a unique location, it is possible to see certain equivalences between football forums and terraces of the stadium when we consider them as a place for gathering. Space, as de Certeau, Mayol and Giard (1998) define, is a practiced place. Departing from their distinction between place and space, the experience of being there with others can give the forum some characteristics of space. Here, this study tries to examine the relationship between the stadium and an online forum setting from the eyes of the football fans in Turkey.

The football fandom in Turkey is closely related with the capitalist modernization process of the country, in which new forms of belongings were needed. After the introduction of football by westernized ethnic minorities in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, the foundation of Muslim Turks’s clubs was a parallel act coming through the elites of the empire. Among the big three football clubs in Turkey, BJK was the first football club that was formed by the Turkish-Muslims in 1903. Galatasaray Spor Kulubu (Galatasaray Sports Club, GS) was founded in 1905, by Ali Sami Yen and other students of the Lycée de Galatasaray. The school also called as Sultan’s School (Mektep-i Sultan), and palace elites had been educated there since 1868. Fenerbahçe Spor Kulubu (Fenerbahçe Sports Club, FB) was the third and the most lately founded football club in 1907 by the group of people from Kadıköy- a district in Anatolian side of Istanbul- with the students from St. Joseph High School. From the beginning of 1900s, during the legitimization of the football as a modern cultural practice, the football fandom diffused deeply into the metropolitan lifestyle at first in Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara. And today, football fandom is a shared cultural practice among the different social classes (Emrence, 2010). And football has vast impact on fans’ daily life. One of the major practices of the football fans is following their teams in media throughout the season of the Premier League. An Istanbul derby between the GS, FB, and BJK constitutes the major topic of their daily talks. There is a huge volume of sports programming in Turkish television channels. In addition to football-specific channels, every publicly broadcasting television channel has football shows, in which former referees, journalists, and former football players discuss for hours every detail of each game with other specific information about football teams including their transfers, administrations, coaching, etc. These discussions on various media forge forum topics as well.

Recent years marked with a big wave of gentrification in Turkey, which caused the displacement of stadia from inner cities. In this process, the Galatasaray Sports Club (GS) moved from the iconic Ali Sami Yen Stadium to the Turk Telekom Arena in 2011. Today, the Ali Sami Yen Stadium and its neighborhood, used to host the team for decades, is a luxury residential complex. In parallel, new regulations of Turkish Football Federation (TFF) such as The Law to Prevent Violence and Disorder in Sport (April 14, 2011) and E-ticket system fostered restructuring the site of football in Turkey with new exclusionary practices (Yağmur, 2017). With the effect of these regulations added to the spatial restructuring on football fan groupings, the role of online fan forums increased. They helped for sustaining the sense of the community among the GS fans by offering them a new space for “gathering” while the emotional tie between the stadium and its community has been challenged. Football fans increasingly use the digital tools in various aims and goals (Mc Manus, 2013; Erhart, 2014; Sayan et al, 2017). Twitter’s yearly statistics of 2015 exhibits that the concerning GS, FB or BJK hashtags on match days appeared in the first five hashtags on Turkey’s sports related topics. This article defines the online football forums serve as a third environment between the traditional mode of spectatorship by attending games in the stadium.