Chapter 18
Identity of Virtual Supporters: Constructing Identity of Turkish Football Fans on Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to develop a framework for understanding and analyzing digital media as an autonomous social space or structure in which to construct an identity. This chapter extends debate on the impact of developing an online identity by focusing on football supporters, a specific and prevalent community within Turkish society. The authors examine issues surrounding online identity and the impact of digital culture on football supporters through questionnaires conducted with members of fan-based websites, football forums, and football blogs in Turkey. In the research, the authors focus on the digital identity of fans from the three major clubs of Turkey - Besiktas, Fenerbahce, and Galatasaray. The independent football fan communities of Carşi, UltrAslan, and Gencfb are also present in the digital environment in the form of the official websites of these fan communities at www.forzabesiktas.com, www.ultraslan.com, and www.gencfb.org. The three main websites also include different forums and blogs. This research examines the impact of digital media and distributed social spaces of these clubs’ supporters on contemporary understandings of their digital identity. The authors give the conceptual frameworks and approaches to understanding digital identity of football fans. In this context, authenticity, fanaticism, reputation, belonging, and defending identity are examined to understand individual, group, community, and network based digital identities. From a theoretical perspective, the chapter also tries to understand what it means to be a part of a community using digital media.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1915-9.ch018
1. INTRODUCTION

While football has never been more popular, in many countries like Turkey the culture of its supporters is taking on increasingly different types. Studies on the changing culture of the football supporters have investigated issues of power, fanaticism, race and racism, highlighting the changing role of fans in the game. In this study we focus on the meaning of ‘being a supporter’. At first glance ‘being a supporter’ brings with it a powerful sense of building individual and social identity. This is a crucial issue and starts with the important question: ‘Who am I?’ A huge part of being a human being is the ability to ask one’s self ‘Who am I?’ We can answer this ‘basic’ question with a name, a profession, a nationality and so on. We can also say that one’s identity stems from whom one knows, one’s associations and connections (Turkle, 1997: 258). But we can also ask: How much of the reply comes from within me and more importantly how much has come from sources outside of me? We can say that much comes from sources outside of me, especially from mass media. which plays a prominent role in the development of the self in the world today. We are subject to opinions, people, places, and communities that can induce us to conceal who we really are. The key question of our research in this paper is: What role does digital media play in constructing and articulating our identity when answering the question ‘Who am I’? In most sociological literature digital media is described as a set of tools aimed at supporting interaction within social spaces and the socio-technical construction of digital identity. Where interaction takes place through digital media we can make claims that what one can be and how we are perceived is determined through these interactions.

2. THE BALL IS ‘ROUND’ AND FOOTBALL IS AN INDUSTRY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOTBALL?

Football is the most followed, practiced, and watched sport in the world. Over the last century football has grown into a cultural phenomenon commanding media, academic and government attention. The game itself has undergone huge changes over the past decades. The creation of the football leagues around the world can be explained by the commercialization of the game, the influx of television revenue, and the growth in the numbers of foreign players (Boniface, 2007; Authier, 2002). In relation to these, some problematic areas like violence, race and racism in football have been focused on with increasing interest by the media and amongst the pages of football magazines (Elias and Dunning, 1986; Marsh P., et.al, 1996). We also find issues of identity and social representation being discussed in the context of football. Why has football become such an important arena for the expression of these elements? The answers to these questions can be found in sociological literature where highly readable and accessible books and articles provide the first systematic and empirically grounded account of the role of sociology within contemporary football cultures. Moreover, even historical, anthropological, geographic, as well as sociological and theoretical studies have been executed in the area of football. A real sociology of football in this research has examined the central elements of the game as well as the cultures and behavior patterns of its fans (King, 2001: 568-585; Finn, 1994; Armstrong and Harris, 1991; Giulianotti, 1999; Giulianotti ve Robertson, 2004; 545-568; Bourdieu, 1993: 339-355; Wann, et al. 2001; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002; Maguire, 2002).
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