

Chapter 21

A Social Influence Perspective on Uses of Online Football Forums: The Case with Turkish Football Fans

Anıl Sayan

Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey

Vehbi Gorgulu

Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey

İtir Erhart

Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey

Yonca Aslanbay

Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study aims to shed light on Turkish football forum users on the Internet from a social identity and uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective in order to reveal joint intentions among football fans online. The research model of the current study applies a uses and gratifications approach to examine whether fan motivations while using online football forums determine we-intentions among forum members. Social influence processes are also essential in the context of research on online forums, since they determine changes in attitudes and actions produced by the virtual social influence that may occur at different levels. Findings reveal uses and gratifications of football forum participation as maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, generating entertainment and purposive value along with affective social identity construct determined we-intention among forum users.

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INTRODUCTION

New media technologies extend the limits of cultural fluidity and groupings by providing multifaceted digital platforms, such as online petitions, blogs, forums and other social media, that enable civic participation and engagement. Communities of interest, whether they exist online or offline, can use these platforms to engage in civic issues (Smith, 2013). Online sports fan groups are examples of communities that employ new media technologies increasingly for civic participation. As Yang (2009) reveals, online communities utilize different digital spaces for various civic aims in contemporary societies. Hence, online communities and the online spheres in which they exist, are critical factors to consider when analyzing civic engagement and participation in an era marked by intense uses of new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Sports fans are social agents who exist in various social networks and contribute to the online social world with their unique individual and collective practices. For instance, politically oriented football fan groups in Turkey, such as *çArşı*, have used technological means to affect Turkey's mainstream political agenda with their social actions (McManus, 2013). From a similar perspective, Erhart (2014) shows how football fans in Turkey were politicized in protests at Istanbul's Gezi Park and organized using various digital tools such as Twitter. These examples show that online fan groups are important not only for their commitment to sports clubs, but also because they can act as agents of social change. This situation is consistent with the fundamental aim of this study, which is to explore the underlying motivations of Turkish football fans for utilizing online forums as means of social change and civic participation.

This study aims to shed light on Turkish football forum users on the Internet from the perspectives of social identity and uses and gratifications (U&G) to reveal joint intentions among football fans online. In the context of forum use, previous research has explored motivations triggering football fans to get involved in joint interactions for various team-specific and football-related purposes. These studies reveal that forums are useful platforms for gathering fans to discuss issues related to the football teams they support (Natelli, 2008; Cook & Hynes, 2013). Previous research also revealed that the construct of "uses and gratifications" is necessary to understand the motivations that drive football fans to get involved in joint interactions through online football discussion forums (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Thus, the research model of the current study applies the uses and gratifications construct to explain and examine whether fan motivations while using online football forums determine individual commitment to joint intentions among forum members. Social influence processes are also essential in the context of research on online forums, since they determine changes in attitudes and actions produced by the virtual social influence.

The intensity of Turkey's youth population, nationwide use of social media, and the strong presence of football fanship make Turkey-based online football forums an attractive arena for studying collective actions. Results indicate that football forums are useful platforms to create joint intentions (we-intention) among forum user fans by establishing emotional bonds.

The following section addresses the constructs used to understand online football forums as platforms for collective action. Next, the research methods used for this study are described followed by the results, conclusions, and finally, directions for future study.

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