

THE EXAMINATION OF BRAND COMMUNITY CONCEPT IN FOOTBALL SPORTS CLUBS AND A CASE STUDY FROM TURKEY: THE EVALUATION OF FENERBAHCE’S SPORTS CLUB AND ITS PRACTICES AS A BRAND COMMUNITY

Ors Muge

Halic University, Research Assistant

Latif Ozge

Dogus University, Research Assistant

Abstract

Today, the concept of brand community is accepted as the highest adaption of consumers to the brands. In this article, the definition of brand community and its basic components are examined conceptually. Afterwards, whether the sports clubs could be addressed as a brand community or not is discussed in the highlight of literature. At the end of the article, Fenerbahce Sports Club (FB) which was first established football club in Turkey with 25 billion fans, is evaluated with its practices as a brand community in a case study.

Keywords: Brand, Brand Community, Turkey, Football Sports clubs, Fenerbahce

Brand Communities

“A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.” (Muniz& O' Guinn, 2001:412). In their explanation, Mc Alexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002:39) observe that brand community can situate the consumer in a *“complex web of relationship”*. In addition to the work of Muniz and O’Guinn, Mc Alexander and his colleagues (2002: 39) widen the conceptualization of relevant community members to include fellow customers, the brand itself, the experienced products by the customer, and at various levels, the marketing institutions responsible for producing, distributing, and communicating about the products. They approach brand community integration as the cumulative relations of consumers with the product, the brand, other consumers and the company.

Today brand communities are getting more and more crucial for business. According to Gobe (2001) positioning based on benefits or associations can not lead to a lasting competitive advantage because it can be easily imitated by competitors. Especially, consumers are interested in buying an emotional experience and building relationships with brands based on trust. As Cova (1997: 307) argues consumers seek products for their linking rather than use value, a linking value that is not created by firms, but by individuals who consume the same brand.

In brand communities, members of the community want to be at the center of the community, and so the motivations have to be different from the pure hedonistic pleasure of owning a brand/product. The reason that Harley owners get together is because they share a riding lifestyle passion. Ethnographic researches indicate that even people who no longer own a Mini Cooper stay in the community, so it cannot be that the car is at the center of the community in all those cases the companies have provided environments in which those member communities can operate and thrive. Jeep marketers are providing training camps and are organizing the barbecues around which members can share their passion. But in all cases they are enablers of a shared passion that exists within a tribe or community (<http://www.emergencemarketing.com/2009/10/21/why-brand-communities-dont-exist/>).

Marketing literature indicates that brand communities have three core components. The first and the most important element of community is *the consciousness of kind*. “*Consciousness of a kind is shared consciousness, a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity. Brand communities are generally open social organizations in that they do not deny membership, but like most communities they do have status hierarchies. Ostensibly, anyone who is devoted to the brand can be a member of the community, regardless of ownership. Oppositional brand loyalty is another social process involved in perpetuating consciousness of kind. Through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand*” (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:420).

The second indicator of community is the presence of *shared rituals and traditions*. “*Rituals and traditions represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community. Some of these are widespread and understood by all members of the community, while others are more localized in their origins and applications*” (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:421).

The third component of community is *a sense of moral responsibility*, “*which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members. The*

communities formally and informally recognize the bounds of what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate” (Muniz & O’Quinn, 2001:413).

So, according to the Muniz & O’Quinn’s brand community components , first question that comes to mind is “Could every community that shares those three components be defined as brand community?” At this point, it would be appropriate to ask “ what about the football teams?” .

Sport, especially football is a massive and still growing industry. In particular, football is perhaps one of the great phenomena in terms of attraction to people of every age, gender and nationality. A loyal fan base and thousands of occasional spectators come together in football stadiums around the globe every week to watch the games (Tapp, 2004: 225-246). The fans build relationships not only with a team but also among themselves. According to Kozinets (2002:20-38), a football team fans show similar features with a brand community in terms of identification with the team, reducing social isolation and building personal relationships to others, distancing from occasional spectators, carrying out common rituals as well as escape from everyday life and everyday role models. Just like members of religions, sports fans have a strong sense of belonging and teams have a clear mission (to win) and strong senses of us (Lindstrom, 2008:123). Like brand communities, which are formed around a product or service brand, fans can be described as a community formed around a particular sports club brand. They also have some rituals like wearing the color on game day; marches that are sung all together, celebrations etc.

Grant et al, (2011:37-35) argued that sports teams and their fans are an excellent example of a post-modern community. The professional sports clubs with sharing the sincere interaction, historical moments, heroic performances and its special traditions or rituals with their fans, could be easily defined as brand communities.

Familiar to the traditional brand community members, football fans become co-producers of the brand, who advocate and evangelize the brand to their network (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). And the sports clubs, as well as companies have enough power for creating strong relations between the team and the members.

Bauer and his colleagues (2005) highlight that brand represents the most important asset of a sports club. So, the management of the sports clubs supports their brand through their fans. These fans develop a sense of community around the sport team and impact consumer behavior patterns, such as attendance, media consumption, Merchant’sa sales, and loyalty (Grant et al, 2011; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Also there are some researches, which focus on sports

club as a brand community has similar results (Heere et al, 2011; Grant et al, 2011). These results show that brand communities create value both for team and members and increase product, services and media consumption (Woolf et al, 2013:97).

As distinct from the traditional brand communities Underwood and his friends (2001:4) proposed four strategies for the sport teams in order to build the social identity among their fans. They are listed as follows:

- group experiences,
- history of the organization,
- rituals/traditions,
- physical facility.

In this scope, some of football sports clubs could be thought as brand communities in Turkey. Brand Finance, which publishes the most valuable brands every year in the world, also publishes the best valuable sports brands. According to this report; Galatasaray, Fenerbahce, Besiktas and Trabzonspor became the top valuable sports brands in 2011 in Turkey respectively. These sports clubs have some fan clubs (communities) like “Carsi” for Besiktas, “The Association of Fenerbahce” for Fenerbahce, “Ultraslan” for Galatasaray as well.

In that perspective, we decided to examine as a brand community, Fenerbahce Sports Club, which was first established football club in Turkey with 25 billion fans and showed a great unity after the match-fixing trial in 2011.

In the case study, the Fenerbahce Sports Club was approached with an initial phone call, introducing the research to the Communication Co-director of the FB Sports Club and an interview was arranged. The interview was semi-structured. The advantage of this method is not only collecting the required data for the study, but also obtaining unexpected and interesting data that emerges from the firm employees (Gillham, 2000).

The Case Study Of Fenerbahce (F.B) Sports Club As A Brand Community About Fenerbahce

F.B was founded as the first legally registered Turkish sports club in 1907. It has been performing both in the Championship, UEFA and European Cups and has 25.000.000 fans around the world.

Brand Communities and Fenerbahce

There are some sub communities that are named as brand communities under FB’s brand. These communities and their activities are examined in the scope of consciousness of

kind, which is especially clarified after the match-fixing trial in 2011. These communities are listed as follows:

The Association of Fenerbahce's fan: It is established in the aim of serving to FB sports club. This organization works on several issues such as advertisements of the club, selling tickets, merchandising activities and registration of the corporate identity of FB.

1907 Unifeb: It was founded in 2002 and became the most popular brand community of F.B. Its aim is collecting the university student fans together around F.B and join forces with F.B sports club rather than creating a tribune fans. All members consist of the university students and graduates and they organize numerous events annually. Their most important activity is the Reunion of Ataturk in November 10th (death anniversary of Ataturk) every year in Anitkabir. In this reunion meeting all of them wear uniforms coats, which have the slogan of “We follow you, Ataturk”. The community is supported by the Association of F.B.

Young fans of Fenerbahce: It is established in 2001 and has fans from 61 cities and 51 universities in Turkey and also 10 countries around the world. The establishing aim of this community is highlighted to show the accurate fan behavior to the columnists who criticize the tribune communities as tribune terrorists. (<http://www.forumpaylas.net/fenerbahce/14126-fenerbahce-taraftar-gruplari.html>)

Kill For You: It is established in 1996 opposite to the Galatasaray's (old rival of FB) “Die for You” community. The ages of members are between 30-55 years old and the community follows all amateur and professional matches during the season. The community has created some rituals, which have reached today since 1996. One of them is bringing giant flags and lunts to the games. The other one is singing the song of “Happy Birthday Fatih Terim” (Fatih Terim is the coach of Galatasaray Sports Club) after the triumph of games with Galatasaray. It was also an interesting activity bringing an orchestra consisted of the student from the conservatory and was given a concert during the games in 96-97 seasons (<http://www.kfy96.com/hakkimizda-html>).

Antu/Fenerlist : The community is a virtual community which is established by ex-FB president and his sons. It has 25.000 fans from 33 countries and 37 cities. Their web site is accepted as the official web site of the Fenerbahce fans (<http://www.antu.com/default.aspx>).

Outside Left: It is a community that has high educated, intellectual and activist members. This community member generally represents the FB sports club in some activist events and broadcasts some manifests.

Although there have been many brand communities of the FB sports club which are formed by different profile supporters independently from each other, the intersection point of all these communities is the deep sense of commitment to the FB sports club. It is exactly seen that these communities have the characteristics that are the same in all brand communities such as a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility.

The most important indicator of the brand community that they are acting in the context of consciousness of kind is supporting their sports club as materially and spiritually in Turkey and also in the world sports arena.

At that point, filling the stadium in every national and international matches by fans, shopping from the Fenerium (is a retail chain of the FB Sports Club which sells FB sports textile products), taking the Fenercell mobile operator service, taking the advantage of Fenercard (F.B's loyalty card) in shopping, are some examples of this situation.

The basic rituals of the FB brand community are carrying on FB sports club colors (yellow and dark blue) proudly, memorizing FB's slogans and marches, celebrating Fenerfest (is the anniversary day of FB sports club) on the 19th of every July of every year, walking to Kadikoy (is a district where FB's stadium; Sukru Saracoglu is located) before and after every match and celebrate the victory in Kadikoy with traditional entertainments.

A sense of moral responsibility of FB's brand community can be evaluated in terms of the shared attitude and behavior after the match-fixing case in 2011. The match-fixing trail of Turkey's football is a detention and arrest operation that was started on July 3, 2011 by the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor. The operation was started in 15 cities of Turkey simultaneously and many managers and players of Turkish sports club's were detained and arrested because of organized crime. Judgments and evictions still continue today. In that period, a president, two deputy chairmen, a sports coordinator, a financial director and a masseur of FB Sports Club's were arrested and some of FB players took into custody in terms of statements to be taken. Courts were taken at the courthouse of Caglayan and Silivri in Istanbul

(http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_T%C3%BCrk_futbolu_%C5%9Fike_davas%C4%B1)

The match-fixing trail hurt the community deeply however it stakes a claim on their brand influentially. The FB brand community has done many protests since July 3rd, 2011. The chronological index of crucial events is listed as follows:

- July 19, 2011: The protest march of World FB fans day in the street of Bagdat, Istanbul

- August 14, 2011: The protest march to Taksim, Istanbul
- August 28, 2011: The protest march from Bagdat Street to Kadikoy dock, Istanbul
- January 1, 2011: The new year celebration in Metris, Istanbul (Metris is a penitentiary of FB sports club president and managers)
- February 14, 2012: Silivri convoy was made; fans followed the court. And Tents were established in Silivri, Istanbul
- March 2, May 4, June 29, July 2, 2012: The protest series of Caglayan, (Fans met up in every last day of Caglayan courts in Caglayan area, İstanbul)
- June 17, 2012: The convoy to Metris in Father's Day
- July 2, 2012: The release day of FB's president and managers. Fans met their president and managers and celebrate the victory.
- July 3, 2012: The protest of July 3rd's Coup.

FB's brand community members supported their team in financial way also in those challenging days. During the match-fixing trial, most of the fans did not pay back their combined tickets although there had been a match ban for FB sports club. In addition to that Fenerium sales were explored after the date of July 3rd, 2011. There was a sales increase by 100%. (<http://www.haber7.com/haber/20110712/Fenerium-satislari-yuzde-100-artti.php>)

Conclusion

In this article, FB sports club and its community practices are tried to be examined in the title of brand communities. FB, with its consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and sense of moral responsibility features shows a quite similar with the main characteristics of a traditional brand community. So, the similarity is exhibited with tangible examples clearly.

Besides its many enthusiastic practices and extraordinary rituals, the biggest claim that proves FB sports club is a brand community is their same consciousness of kind and attitudes that all members showed after match fixing case in 2011. Fans of FB proved one truth that they are not only the fans of the same football club but also they are linked each other as a lifestyle with showing a great unity. They never left their sports club alone in challenging days materially and morally.

This great unity attitude is the most crucial feature of brand communities, which makes them alive.

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