

In The Context of Fan Culture and Virtual Influencer Concepts The First Digital Fan: Leothefan

Hayran Kültürü ve Sanal Influencer Kavramları Çerçevesinde İlk Dijital Taraftar:
Leothefan

Serkan KARATAY 

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms, which have become carriers of new communication and expression forms in digital environments, influence communication in personal, cultural, and societal contexts. These platforms, where a variety of expression and representation forms converge, enhance visibility for influencers and fans. Furthermore, social media platforms, where artificially generated virtual characters can establish influence, manifest within the realm of 'digital reality,' and reflect human-like passions, also generate innovative forms of representation. Leo constitutes the foundation of this study both as a fan/supporter and as a virtual influencer. The study, which is framed by the convergence of sports fandom and supporter practices with fan and influencer practices, also examines the relationship between media fandom and sports fandom. In this study, a case study method was employed. The data collected in the research were obtained through descriptive analysis technique from Leo's YouTube and X accounts, and through content analysis technique from his Instagram account. The findings of the study reveal the relationship between sports fandom and media fandom with fan practices and influencer practices.

Keywords: Virtual influencer, Fan culture, Leothefan, Digital fan, Galatasaray.

ÖZ

Dijital ortamlardaki yeni iletişim ve ifade biçimlerinin taşıyıcısı konumuna gelen sosyal medya platformları, iletişimi kişisel, kültürel ve toplumsal bağlamlarda etkilemektedir. İfade ve temsil biçimlerinin paylaşım çeşitliliğiyle bir araya geldiği bu platformlar, fenomenlerin ve hayranların görünürlüğüne artırmaktadır. Bunun yanında yapay zekâ aracılığıyla üretilmiş sanal karakterlerin etki alanları oluşturabildiği, 'dijital gerçekliğin' içerisinde boy gösterebildiği ve insanlara has tutkuları yansıtabildiği sosyal medya, yeni temsil biçimleri de yaratmaktadır. Bunun bir örneği olarak görülebilecek olan dijital taraftar Leo, hem bir hayran/taraftar hem de sanal bir influencer olarak bu çalışmanın temelini oluşturmaktadır. Teorik çerçevesini spor hayranlığı ve taraftarlığın, hayran ve influencer pratikleri ile yakınsamasının oluşturduğu bu çalışma, medya hayranlığı ile spor hayranlığı arasındaki ilişkiyi de irdelemektedir. Bu çalışmada örnek olay yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada toplanan veriler Leo'nun YouTube ve X hesaplarından betimsel analiz tekniğiyle, Instagram hesabından ise içerik analizi tekniğiyle elde edilmiştir. Araştırmanın bulguları, spor hayranlığı ve medya hayranlığı ile hayran pratikleri ve influencer pratikleri arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sanal Influencer, Hayran Kültürü, Leothefan, Dijital Taraftar, Galatasaray.

Introduction

Digital communication centered around social media incorporates technology-centric new forms of expression into communication. These forms of expression can emerge directly through design practices or the use of artificial intelligence, which can be directly associated with technological advancements, as well as indirectly through creative utilization of digital media and user-centered approaches. The diversification of usage patterns in digital environments by consuming producers is also encountered in fandom practices. The opportunities offered by the digital environment, which also contributes to the proliferation of fan culture, encompass various outputs. The outputs include multimedia elements such as videos, sounds, images, digital drawings, designs, narratives, and artificial intelligence-generated content, which can be collective. If such productions occur as a fan practice, they can be evaluated within the scope of fan culture.

One of the digital platforms where fan practices are most prominently manifested is social media. Given that these environments operate based on individual profiles, the individual presence of users becomes significant, and the accessed follower base can also be interpreted as a sphere of influence. The aforementioned sphere of influence is currently perceived as an opportunity for digital marketing, and influential individuals, referred to as influencers, are becoming significant actors in the digital aspect of the advertising sector. Virtual characters, whose distinction from genuine digital representation has become increasingly difficult from the design stage to identity construction, gain influencer qualities as they expand their spheres of influence and exist in digital environments.

Within the study, the execution of individual fan practices by a broad-spectrum influencer within specific themes has been examined through the case of Leo thefan. The digital fan Leo is a virtual character who shares Galatasaray fandom through various interests and talents, serving as both a passionate supporter and an influencer

with a sphere of influence. The significance of this character stems from being both a fan and a virtual influencer. Leo's possession of these two attributes sets his shares apart from those of an ordinary fan or virtual.

Fans and Influencers in terms of Digital Content Creation

While a significant majority of content production on social media occurs for personal use, content from fans and influencers is becoming increasingly visible on social media platforms. These contents, which nourish the diversity of content on social media and bring new players to the social media economy, can also lead existing digital-integrated institutions and organizations to adapt to or be represented in various ways in these forms of content production for various purposes.

As a prosumer, the social media user has become a carrier of participatory culture through content creation practices. The conceptualization of participatory culture is closely associated with fan practices conducted both before and after the internet era. In his work titled 'Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture', Jenkins indeed proposed an alternative understanding of fandom for viewers who appropriate popular texts, reinterpreting them to serve different areas of interest, thus transforming the television viewing experience into a participatory culture (1992: 23). Additionally, it can be said that with the proliferation of the internet and the diversification of content production formats, access to fans and fan content has expanded (Jenkins, 2018: 18). This expansion has led to the digitalization of certain traditional content creation methods, the emergence of new forms of content creation and expression, and the creation of an environment that enables consumers to interact with all kinds of media content.

The ease of spreading digital content enables user-generated content to reach audiences ranging from small communities like friend groups to large communities such as brands

or fan groups effortlessly. The motivations of users to share content and the technical designs that enable this provide “content gains greater resonance in the culture, taking on new meanings, finding new audiences, attracting new markets, and generating new values” (Jenkins, 2007). The fragmentation of today’s media consumers has also changed the way media producers engage with consumers. It can be said that media producers who make ample use of the interaction opportunities provided by social media respond quickly to new possibilities (Harrington, 2016: 330). For both traditional and digital media, every type of media content such as series, films, music, sports, etc., can facilitate consumer interaction through social media in various forms. These interactions can also be facilitated through fan group content production, such as the re-creation and reinterpretation of popular content in different contexts, in addition to consumer feedback. Jenkins, who identifies that more media producers embrace fan practices thanks to spreadable media content and emphasizes that media consumers are encouraged to take media products into their own hands, appears to find validation in today’s prediction that viewers will make beloved media sustainable in the long term (Jenkins, 2007). Indeed, the existence of fan pages producing and reinterpreting content related to popular media products such as *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *La Casa De Papel*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Peaky Blinders*, which concluded years ago, demonstrates the viewers’ insistence on keeping media products alive.

Alongside fan content, the role and significance of influencers are also increasingly growing in terms of digital content creation. An influencer is defined as “a person or thing that influences somebody/something, especially a person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by recommending it on social media.” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries). According to Robinson, there is no precise definition for an influencer; however, they can broadly be understood as individuals with social power who can shape the behavior of others through their words and actions (Robinson, 2020: 1).

Influencers, who play a significant role in brands marketing strategies (Weinswig, 2016), consist of famous figures who appeal to large follower bases. While social media platforms have brought influencers to the forefront like never before with the widespread use of the internet, individuals who could be considered influencers have been engaging in digital content creation since the 2000s. Some blogs created on topics such as motherhood, celebrity news, and fashion have garnered millions of followers, bringing fame and money to their authors (Burns, 2021: 1-2). With the proliferation of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, digital content creation practices have also begun to concentrate heavily on these platforms.

Influencers can be seen not only as influencers on marketing and advertising practices but also as content creators who directly contribute to digital content creation with a strong follower base (de Veirman et al., 2017: 3). As content creators, influencers are classified as nano, micro, macro, and mega depending on the breadth of their follower base (Campbell & Farrell, 2020: 471). The number of influencers is fewer compared to the users they can reach. Indeed, it is estimated that there are approximately 2 million influencers on YouTube, around 80 million on Instagram, and close to 50 thousand on TikTok (wpdevshed, 2023). Although influencers account for a small proportion compared to the total number of users on platforms, their high follower counts result in equally high accessibility to the content they produce, along with significant contributions to digital content creation due to factors such as content production frequency.

However, the quality and diversity of digital content can also be considered in terms of influencers. In Harrison’s model developed to define micro social media influencers, one of the dimensions is content attributes, which includes topics such as quality, originality, consistency, debate, knowledge sharing, and providing different perspectives (2021: 54). In addition, Gross and Von Wangenheim categorized influencer types into four categories: snoopers, informers, entertainers,

and infotainers, based on audience feedback, areas of influence, and types of content (Gross & Von Wangenheim, 2018: 32). In their study defining the content characteristics of influencers, Cheung, Leung, Aw, and Koay argue that elements such as information quality, design quality, and creativity are important strategic moves in developing close relationships with consumers (2022: 12). In this context, it is possible to say that maximizing the use of content creation techniques offered by social media platforms and integrating content sharing processes with social media management techniques directly contribute to influencers achieving their marketing, engagement, and advertising goals.

The prosumers who are the primary element creating and sustaining social media platforms can now be defined as influencers or 'digital content creators' within fan cultures, capable of exerting 'influence' over their followers, amidst the evolving forms of digital content production. One of the significant consequences of the widespread adoption of social media platforms is the shift from content production solely based on user identity to content creation with various identities, whether it be for work or hobby purposes. This shift not only fuels these platforms economically but also expands the ways in which social media is utilized. One of the most recent examples of this expansion is the creation of virtual influencers.

Virtual influencers are defined as "fictional characters designed to engage with and capture the interest of viewers on social platforms" by Behare et al. (2024: 1). Kouchih and Mataa, on the other hand, define virtual influencers as "computer-generated characters designed to resemble a human and interact with users through social media platforms" (2024: 57). When this virtual character begins to reach a certain audience, it can be utilized as a marketing technique that is lower in cost compared to real influencers, can be tailored according to demand, more predictable, and capable of producing content in an interactive manner with real-life interactions (Bektaş Durmuş & Yazıcı, 2022: 121).

Today, there are dozens of virtual influencers, virtual musicians, and vtuber (virtual tuber) characters (Virtual Humans, 2024). Virtual influencers, who can be designed to be indistinguishable from real humans or entirely fictional characters, are capable of singing, appearing in music videos, and conducting video broadcasts. Virtual characters with the quality of 'influencers' create stories and narratives about their lives on their social media accounts, similar to real influencers, and share posts about their daily lives.

The origins of virtual influencers, a technological creation, lie in the "uninfluencer" virtual characters found in life simulation games. From this point, it can be said that influencers, who have become 'real' enough to make their mark in social media, one of the most popular hubs of human socialization, represent a significant milestone in the technological landscape of media.

Developing humanoid virtual characters and making them influencers can provide various benefits beyond just producing familiar content in a new form. Robinson contends that a substantial aspect of the allure of virtual influencers stems from the management of risks. Indeed, the risk of virtual influencers making politically incorrect or incongruent statements with the brand is very low (Robinson, 2020: 2). It has been determined that it has a significant impact on consumers who also require innovation and uniqueness (Sands et al., 2022: 2). In some cases, the lower cost and greatly reduced likelihood of getting involved in scandals can also be seen as other factors that make virtual influencers attractive (Thomas & Fowler, 2020: 2).

The various types of digital content creators such as fans, influencers, virtual influencers, and broadcasters increase the emphasis on social media users' 'producer' role by enhancing motivations such as earning, fame, and hobby, thereby making the 'consumer' aspect less visible. Associated with these motivations, individuals and groups can participate in digital content production processes within the framework of 'fandom' with football teams, artists, interests,

various tastes, and preferences they feel a sense of belonging. The expansion of content creators and production formats underscores the necessity for social media's political economy to focus more on user activities. Furthermore, within the framework of participatory culture, it carries a characteristic that increasingly enhances the potential to shape the media, entertainment, and sports worlds.

Football Fandom in the Context of Fan Culture

Fandom, which can signify the enthusiastic support for any opinion, thought, entity, or individual, manifests itself in various settings and forms, ranging from rallies to concerts, stadiums to shows. This visibility, often occurring in a mass manner, is increasingly prevalent on social media platforms through user-generated content. Fan content encountered on social media includes various types such as entertainment, news, information, and commentary, sometimes created by personal accounts and sometimes by fan profiles or pages catering to thousands of followers.

One of the most common forms of fandom, sports fandom, is defined as "individuals who have an emotional attachment to a particular sport, team, or athlete" (Johnson et al., 2020: 1). Sports fandom, which cannot be imagined without traditional media, is constantly nourished by the matches played by teams, news about teams, and sports discussion programs. Examples of this can be seen in sports-themed newspapers, radios, channels, and club televisions.

Sports journalism, which has become a specialization in the fields of journalism and television, has gained a more decentralized appearance with the proliferation of digital media environment, and has become independent of the journalistic identity in the context of the diversity of content produced about sports. This change signifies notable alterations in both the production and consumption of media content

and underscores an understanding where the importance of digital communication surpasses that of broadcast-centric sports media (Hutchins, 2011: 237).

Indeed, it is possible to encounter a wide variety of content related to sports disciplines in user-generated content and independent publishing activities today. While some of this content is fueled by news shared by traditional media organizations, others consist of various posts accessed via social media that interest fans. These activities, carried out independently of journalistic identity and within the framework of fan interest and sensitivity, are typically aggregated under fan pages.

Among these pages are pages that produce content for a considerable number of followers on the X platform, such as Galatasaray Gazette (Galatasaray Gazetesi), We Are After Galatasaray (Peşindeyiz Galatasaray), Fenerbahçe Spirit (Fenerbahçe Ruhu), Fener Agency (Fener Ajansı), Eagle Analysis (Kartal Analiz), and Besiktas Army (Beşiktaş Ordusu). As their names suggest, these profiles, built on a sense of fan loyalty, engage in activities such as sharing news, information, and statistics with fans, as well as expressing and commenting on opinions in the sports media and supporting hashtag campaigns. Emerging from fans or fan groups, the 'news' pages that stand out in customized content production for the target audience can appeal to hundreds of thousands of fans, despite being managed by a small group, due to the popularity of the theme.

Fan practices carried out through personal accounts on social media rarely reach a wide audience. These practices, mainly limited to actions such as joining hashtags, quoting, and reposting, largely consist of following relevant pages. The existing 'new' media format encourages fans to engage in pre-match, during-match, and post-match developments as well as transfer news and other important team-related news (Gantz &

Lewis, 2014: 19).

Social media platforms, which enable fans to engage in multitasking such as consuming news and interacting on social media during matches, also host rare examples where personal profiles merge with fandom, allowing for interactions. These examples are typically found in video blogs, tribune videos, and various fan clips on YouTube. The posts on these accounts, where content creators are not prominently featured, can be classified as fan content produced in an inconsistent manner.

Individuals or groups who admire someone or something are defined as a common feature of popular culture, and fans engage in varying levels of productivity by producing meanings and pleasures related to their social situations (Fiske, 1992: 30). The diversity and level of productivity can change with the development of media technologies. Practices such as fanzines and fan conventions have largely given way to practices on forums and social media platforms today. According to Gantz and Wenner, fandom has become more functional through the use of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral foundations via media (1995: 56).

In the case of social media, this function extends the opportunities to interact with, be visible to, and express concrete manifestations of fandom. Indeed, fandom reflects a belonging that goes beyond listening, watching and participating, and is shaped by special interest and support, involving sacrifices of time and money (Gantz & Lewis, 2014: 23). Within this framework of belonging, the fan culture that takes shape is described as “a culture produced by fans and amateurs for circulation through an underground economy and that draws much of its content from the commercial culture” (Jenkins, 2006: 285). Fiske argues that fan culture is a culture created by fans themselves through their production and distribution systems, which can be referred to as a ‘shadow cultural economy’ (Fiske, 1992: 30). The majority of academic studies on fan culture frame this culture within the context

of media fandom. Duffett, who argues that sports fandom triggers different instincts from fandom of music, cinema, and television products, highlights the more nuanced interests of media fandom, attributing the blurring distinction between sports fandom and media fandom to the mediatization of athletes (2013: 3). Jenkins suggests that while individuals who are fans of different things may share some common experiences, their interests may vary due to different forms of entertainment (1992: 293). The competitive nature of sports can be seen as the most significant difference between sports fandom and media fandom. However, as advocated by Duffett (2013), this nature mostly does not result in hooligan actions, but rather can further solidify fans’ sense of belonging and imbue them with a sense of responsibility to contribute to the success of the clubs they support. Examples such as packed stadiums filled with tens of thousands of people, the various ways in which fans can influence the course of a match, and contributing economically to the club through purchases from club stores support this view. Duffett, who argues that media fandom is enacted socially through different behavioral styles and types of emotions, overlooks the relationship between sports, particularly football, and spaces such as stadiums and neighborhoods, the ideological meanings teams can carry, and the socially cohesive aspect of sports fandom. Indeed, Tulloch and Jenkins explain the distinction between followers and fans by attributing it to fans’ adoption of a social identity (1995: 23). When considering that sports fandom not only holds ideological significance but also possesses a social dimension through practices such as consumption of fan products and shared activities, it is possible to say that sports fandom constitutes an important part of fan culture. In addition, in his study, Duffett includes fan practices such as fan fiction, media archiving, producing written content, and fan videos within fan practices (2013). Equivalents of these practices listed by Duffett can be found in sports fandom through fantasy football, written and visual archives related to clubs, as well as blogs of sports enthusiasts and videos crafted by fans.

The increasingly blurred distinction between media fandom and sports fandom can also be observed in Kalman-Lamb's (2020) study, which explores the nature and reasons behind spectators' emotional investments in sports. According to Kalman-Lamb, fans are interested in spectator sports due to a desire for connections that are difficult to satisfy within capitalist social relations. The satisfaction fans derive from watching sports relies more on their relationships with fellow fans rather than sports players, and the alienation caused by capitalism affects the emotional attachment of fans to their teams (2020: 1). Indeed, the formation of large or small groups in every form of fandom and the influence of group relationships nourish fans. Furthermore, the alienation caused by forms of thought and actions that do not directly contribute materially to individuals' life worlds is a commentary that can encompass fandom for any media product.

Fan practices, which cannot be separated from production and consumption activities, inherently involve actions such as affirmation as well as criticism, reinterpretation, and reshaping of media content, given their basis in participatory culture. Indeed, fans can influence the transfer policies, players, and management processes of the teams they support through various hashtags, and their desires or developed reactions can evoke an impact similar to chants in the stadium (İşoğlu, 2017). Effects such as interaction and the ability to influence media, which Jenkins addresses in terms of media industries (Jenkins, 2017: 44) and considers as fundamental characteristics of participatory culture, can also be considered in the direction of the sports industry regarding the activities of football fans on social media. Indeed, the consumption of products created by the sports industry, which is defined as "a market in which people, activities, business, and organizations involved in producing, facilitating, promoting, or organizing any activity, experience, or business enterprise focused on sports" (Arıkan, 2020: 201), is closely related to media. The said relationship involves the visibility of clubs, organizations, and players, the reproduction of sports content, and

the broadcasting of sports events. In this regard, it can be said that the sports and media industries, which are interconnected not only economically but also culturally and socially, are also nourished by fan activities developed within the scope of participatory culture when considering the contents of these activities.

Gantz and Lewis highlight the social dimension of sports fandom by listing the experiences of fandom in new media as digital self-expression and identity, extended fanship networks, information expertise (2014: 27-28). These experiences find their counterpart in participatory fan practices on social media, creating a complex structure between official accounts of clubs, athletes, and journalists, as well as independent news pages and personal fan accounts. With elements constantly feeding off each other in terms of subject matter and content, this structure has greatly enhanced interaction among fans, sports clubs, and the media.

The relationship between fan culture and fandom often emerges within communities formed on social media. Influential figures in their fields, with very high numbers of followers, including biased or unbiased sport players, former referees, journalists, and sports administrators, constitute one pillar of the media between fans and clubs. These individuals, due to their experiences and professional backgrounds related to sports, can be positioned somewhere between opinion leaders, influencers, or a combination of both, depending on the inclusivity of definitions. Regardless of how they are labeled, these individuals who can influence the sports public agenda appear to be distant from the nature of fandom. Therefore, in football fandom, unlike the more traditional forms highlighted by idol fans like fan group leaders (*amigo*), there are no instances of fans identified with a single personality in fan forms that can be evaluated within the scope of new media-mediated fan culture practices.

Influencers, who have become the most recognizable figures in social media and have gained fans in various ways by establishing a

significant presence in digital media marketing, have the potential to redefine the notion of idol fans associated with their names and nicknames, moving away from being merely a memory of traditional football fandom. This potential, which can be supported by visible fan practices on social media, enriched with video blogs and user-generated content, and completed with a sense of belonging to a football team, appears to emerge from a rather unexpected source, akin to a digital fan.

The In'fan'luencer Leo thefan as an Intersection Point

One of Turkey's largest sports clubs, Galatasaray, announced the world's first digital fan, 'Leo', on October 12, 2023. Leo was described in the announcement text as "one of the millions of Galatasaray supporters who have placed Galatasaray at the center of their lives, and emphasized as a music producer, songwriter, and expert artist influencer in video, photography, and drawing" (Galatasaray.org, 2023).

Within the scope of the study, an interview was held with Yasin Çakmak, a member of Galatasaray Sports Club who is one of the thought leaders of the Leo thefan project and carries out its management. Çakmak explained the emergence of the project as follows.

"As an active member of the club, I always brainstorm with friends I trust on how we can contribute to the club. The economic structure of clubs in Turkey is well known... Therefore, when we started this project, we thought about creating income for our club from scratch based on the idea of doing something but not imposing an extra financial burden on Galatasaray and its supporters. Later, with contributions from people in different sectors, it grew and expanded." (Interview with Yasin Çakmak, February 07, 2024).

It has been announced that the project, carried out in collaboration with Leo The Fan Inc., a partner of Galatasaray Sports Club, aims to provide support to the club without fans having to use their own financial resources (2023). Çakmak also stated regarding Leo The Fan company, "The Leo thefan company is a venture jointly established by a few friends who are engaged in this business and

who assist me in this matter. Ultimately, in order to work together with the club, issue invoices, and collaborate with advertisers, it was necessary to establish a company." (Interview, February 07, 2024). It is possible to say that the digital fan Leo, created under a legal entity to support the club's resource generation purpose, is a brand marketing strategy.

The digital fan Leo is a character with diversity. Indeed, this diversity is evident in the qualities and skills attributed to him and in the shared posts where these are visible. Çakmak also describes Leo as a multifaceted project and mentions that a team of 10 people works on the project apart from auxiliary services (Interview, February 07, 2024). While Leo's diverse interests are constructed as Galatasaray's digital fan, they also encompass characteristics that shape his identity. Çakmak used the following statements regarding the construction of the Leo character.

"During the preliminary work for Leo, a character analysis was conducted. First, we said; Who should Leo be, who should he appeal to? For this, we created a character profile. We said; Leo should appeal to both Galatasaray fans who go to the stadium, follow Galatasaray, and should not miss the interests of the new generation. He should be a versatile character. Therefore, he should have an artistic aspect, an artistic weight. That's why, in terms of being a character with a daily life apart from being a Galatasaray fan, we added extra features." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

The additional features mentioned by Çakmak are also characteristics beyond fandom that Leo uses to define himself, such as music production, songwriting, and drawing. These attributes elevate Leo beyond being just a Galatasaray fan, diversify his shares, and lead him to acquire a 'real' identity, distinguishing him among virtual influencers. Yasin Çakmak expresses this difference as follows:

"What makes Leo an influencer is actually being a living character unlike other virtual influencers, having passions, and living them. Most importantly, having passions such as Galatasaray, music, and drawing. This way, he can have a guiding role among Galatasaray fans... These features make him an influencer, and the intense interest that comes with Galatasaray brings him to the point of being a phenomenon." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

As an influencer, Leo stands apart from other virtual influencers by being a living character with

passions; however, he resembles other influencers in his desire to financially support Galatasaray and the need for sponsors to achieve this. Project manager Yasin Çakmak emphasizes that Leo's goal of making money is to generate revenue for Galatasaray and the project's guiding purpose is to create sustainable income for the club. He also notes that this revenue can come from sponsors.

"When it comes to sponsorship, we are very selective. Firstly, we prioritize Leo's growth. Of course, there are many companies we talk to, but right now, we specifically pay attention to companies that are suitable for the Galatasaray character. We already have a few big projects waiting to be implemented, and after they are realized, we want to focus particularly on these sponsorship deals. Because we don't want to immediately devalue the potential income that the character can generate by starting too small." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

The digital fan Leo has accounts on X, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitch, Pinterest, TikTok, and Spotify. In addition to these, Leo also has memberships on Letterboxd for movie recommendations and Spotify for his own songs. The content not only varies quantitatively but also qualitatively depending on the features of the platforms. While Leo's role as a music producer and songwriter is more prominent on YouTube and Spotify, his skills in video, photography, and drawing are more visible on Instagram.

Leo fulfills the requirements of being a 'YouTuber' with vlogs, music, and chat videos, but his posts are concentrated on Instagram and X outside of YouTube. Yasin Çakmak has interpreted this issue in light of the differences inherent in social media platforms and Leo's specific goals.

"The profiles of fans on social media vary greatly depending on the platform. There is a significant difference between the fan groups on Instagram and X. While Instagram focuses more on entertaining content, X is built on teasing, competing, expressing emotions, and conflict. Therefore, we started positioning Leo more on Instagram profiles. We began reducing our posts on X. Our goal is to create a fan profile that can soften the tension. We want it to be understood that this is actually done for entertainment, that it is something revolving around our love and efforts." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

Leo is primarily designed as one of the millions of Galatasaray supporters, which characterizes all

of his other qualities. Therefore, all of his content is Galatasaray-related, including ordinary fan practices such as attending matches, as well as vlogging before, during, and after matches, composing songs and creating music playlists, publishing video podcasts, sharing digital designs and drawings, and various other types of content that can be evaluated within the context of fan culture. While Leo's posts are largely related to Galatasaray, it's also possible to see glimpses of his daily life or personal life in his shares.

"Our goal is to keep Leo alive, but ultimately, we're talking about a group of people working with a start-up mentality and largely volunteering their efforts, whatever the outcome. Our priority in the work we do with them is still centered around Galatasaray. However, as things continue to expand and follower counts and ad revenues increase, there will be an increase in the number of shares from Leo's life. Right now, Galatasaray is the priority because Leo's purpose is to provide resources to the Galatasaray club." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

The fan culture that emerges within the framework of fan practices can be considered as part of participatory culture. Participation, interaction, reproduction, and interpretation are elements of participatory culture contained within fan practices. In this regard, it can also be said that fandom can sometimes have a critical dimension. Çakmak, stating that Leo is designed as a fan, also suggests that it is possible for him to elicit fan reactions.

"Leo won't react with responses like 'x resigns' or 'y go away' when facing fan reactions. However, Leo has the capacity to comment on anything he sees as not in line with Galatasaray's principles. Therefore, Leo is a collaborator of Galatasaray. Otherwise, Galatasaray would handle it within its own communication framework, manage it, and resolve it, thus becoming an organ of the club." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

In this vein, the aspect of the Leo project being conducted independently from Galatasaray provides him with a space of freedom and demonstrates that he can assume a critical fan characteristic when necessary.

Interaction and participation, which are important in both fan and influencer practices, are visible in many of Leo's shares. These include question-answer and chat videos, as well as questions

directed to followers about the Galatasaray agenda. Çakmak, who says that interaction with followers and fans will increase even more, expressed the importance he attaches to interaction as follows.

"What turns Leo into an interaction beast is his ability to communicate with fans. We particularly do this through Instagram stories. For instance, when we're about to conduct an interview for the 'Chatting Like Lions' (Aslanlar Gibi Muhabbet) series, I always start by saying, 'Let's do this, but one of the prerequisites is to please shoot a video asking questions from the fans, let's start with that.' The goal here is to increase interaction; Leo should already be in constant conversation with the fans." (Interview, February 07, 2024).

It is possible to see the creation of a virtual influencer that will enhance the digital media presence of Galatasaray Sports Club, which can already be seen as a global brand, as an intersection point between two practices, combining fan practices on social media with influencer practices.

Research Methodology

In this study, a case study method was employed. Data were collected through passive participant observation. The data collected in the case study can be analyzed through descriptive or content analysis methods (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016: 297). The data in this study were analyzed using both descriptive and content analysis. Due to Instagram being the social platform where Leo most frequently shares content and has the largest number of followers, his posts on this platform were subjected to content analysis. Furthermore, descriptive analysis was employed to obtain data from his accounts on YouTube and X platforms, as it was deemed that they would enhance the depth of the research findings. The design of the research is the holistic single-case design, which is one of the case study designs. Unique situations that do not conform to general standards can be the subject of individual studies and the holistic single-case design can be used in these studies (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Research Questions, Purpose, Contribution and Limitations

RQ1: Can Leo's posts, as a sports fan, be evaluated within the scope of fan culture practices?

RQ2: Regarding the virtual influencer Leo, what are the similarities or differences between fan culture and influencer practices?

This study aims to explore whether there is a distinction between sports fandom and media fandom by tracing fan culture practices in the Instagram posts of the digital fan Leo. Additionally, the study aims to reveal the relationship established between influencer practices and fan culture practices through Leo, who embodies the attribute of a virtual influencer.

The contribution of the research stems from its evaluation of an unprecedented situation within the framework of fan culture, pertaining to fan studies and influencer practices. It is believed that this evaluation enhances the originality of the research, particularly in the context of the relationship between sports fandom, media fandom, and influencer practices.

The limitation of the research is constituted by Leo being 'the world's first digital fan' and the absence of another example implementing fan culture practices through a virtual influencer.

Descriptive analysis of LeotheFan's YouTube and X accounts

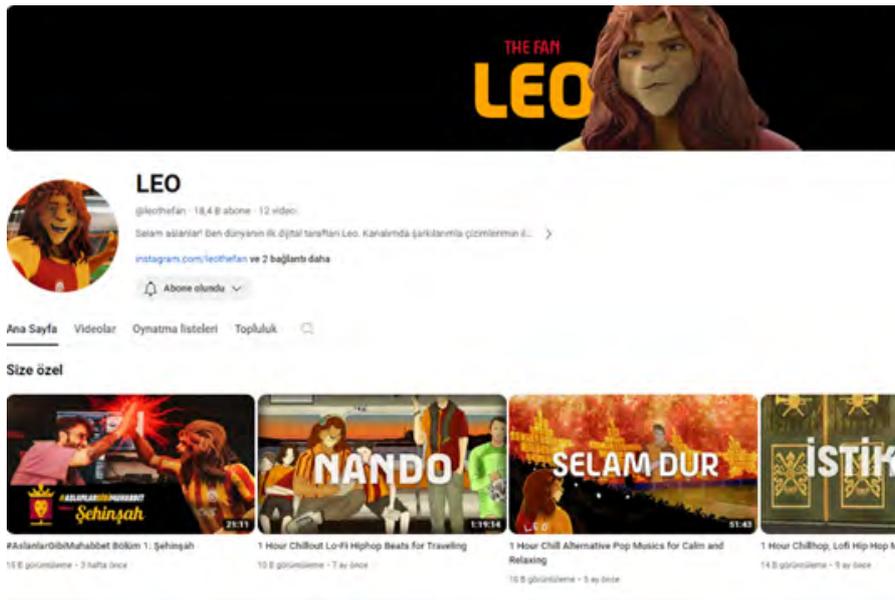
The digital fan Leo's YouTube and X accounts have been subjected to descriptive analysis within a framework created based on research questions and observations. This framework is shaped around fan culture and influencer practices. The contents are thematized through Leo's self-identifications, references to personal and real existence, and representations of fandom and admiration.

In LeotheFan's YouTube account, which he has transformed into a platform for content creation, there are hour-long music videos featuring his image in the background, match vlogs, video podcasts, museum visits, and a song collaboration with the rapper 'Mado' (YouTube, 2023).

The music in the hour-long music videos is

Figure 1

LeotheFan Youtube account



predominantly instrumental, such as lo-fi and chill, rather than anthems or stadium chants. The 'about' section of the account succinctly summarizes the representation of fandom in fan culture practices.

"Hello lions! I'm Leo, the world's first digital fan. On my channel, I share exciting content related "to my biggest passion, Galatasaray, inspired by my songs and drawings. From match vlogs to museum visits, exhibitions, and songs I've composed, you can find everything on this channel. #LeoTheFan #Galatasaray" (YouTube, 2023).

On YouTube, Leo has 18.4 thousand subscribers and 12 videos, five of which are music-themed and four are video blogs. Among the remaining videos, one is a Q&A session, one is a guest conversation, and one is a promotional video. In the promotional

Figure 2

LeotheFan 'Hello, I'm Leo!' video



video, Leo talks about his three passions: making music, drawing, and Galatasaray. Throughout the video, Leo is seen in real locations, narrating from his room, with accompanying footage of him on the metro and at matches.

Figure 3

LeotheFan "I went to Galatasaray Museum! (Vlog)" video



The video blog titled 'I went to Galatasaray Museum' one of Leo's video blogs, also takes place entirely in a real location. In the video, Leo guides viewers through the museum, providing information and commentary on the trophies displayed.

In the other two video blogs on Leo's YouTube account, viewers are also invited to become part of the character's daily life. The video is accompanied by footage often featuring Leo, taken from the stands and the field. Moments from the match and brief tours of some parts of the stadium are

also depicted in the video.

In the question-and-answer video where questions from followers are addressed, Leo states, “Just because I’m digital doesn’t mean I’m not real; I’m as real as the influencers you typically follow”. He defines himself as both a digital fan and a content creator. In the video, Leo also reveals his age and profession, and talks about the books he reads, his interests, and his personal life.

In the video shared with the hashtag #aslanlargibimuhabbet (Chatting Like Lions), Leo has conducted an interview with the rap artist ‘Şehinşah’. During the interview, questions from followers were also posed to Şehinşah, and discussions were held about Galatasaray and music.

On X, one of the platforms where digital fan Leo produces the most content, he identifies himself as

Figure 4

LeotheFan X profile



a ‘YouTuber, Music Producer, Songwriter’ (X, 2023). A significant portion of the content on this account consists of visual media such as short videos, photos, and digital drawings. Additionally, Leo shares comments on club-related developments, reposts, and engages in fan hashtags on X.

The cover photo on Leo’s X account, like the cover photo on YouTube, is a representation of the iconic image of legendary Galatasaray footballer Metin Oktay. The majority of the visual content shared on the account consists of posts or stories also

Figure 5

Examples of tweets from the LeotheFan X profile



shared on Leo’s Instagram account. While the content is predominantly visual media, it is often accompanied by various comments or narratives. Additionally, Leo’s videos on YouTube are also shared on X, and posts from the official Galatasaray account are frequently retweeted.

Figure 6

A tweet from the LeotheFan X profile



Leo, observed to make posts suitable for the text-based structure of the X platform, develops supportive and motivational messages for Galatasaray and its fans in these shares. Additionally, Leo's posts include comments on football and mentions to players.

Content Analysis of LeotheFan Instagram Account

Instagram stands out as Leo's platform with the highest number of followers and where he produces content most frequently. In his Instagram bio, Leo identifies himself as a digital content creator, YouTuber, Content Creator, and Music Producer, and provides an email address for collaborations (Instagram, 2023). The content on Leo's profile includes images with Galatasaray footballers, digital designs featuring Leo, stadium photographs from matches, wallpaper images, music shares, and diverse content such as question-and-answer sessions. Additionally, Leo's account, LeotheFan, also includes posts from social events like vacations, memories, and concerts, showcasing a personal presence in this regard.

Content analyses conducted on interactive media texts consist of processes such as content creation, content generation, content searching, content archiving, and content coding (Skalski; Çomu, & Halaiqa, 2014: 39). In this study, all posts from the 'leotheFan' Instagram account up to February 4, 2024, and stories from January 28 to February 4, 2024, have been archived for content analysis. The

codes used in content analysis have been adapted from Maderer et al.'s (2018) study titled "Brand-Image Communication Through Social Media: The Case of European Professional Football Clubs". The product-related codes encompass content directly related to the team, including team success or failures, star players, and head coach. On the other hand, non-product-related codes include posts about the club's management, club's symbols, history, and culture, as well as on-field visuals related to match agendas and matches, stadium and fan visuals, sponsored content, and personal shares unrelated to these topics. The adapted codes are thematized into categories of participation and interaction, reproduction, fandom and supporter, player interactive, and independent. The participation and interaction theme pertains to posts containing comments and inviting followers to engage. The reproduction theme represents content where images obtained from official accounts or the internet are shared in the same or similar contexts. The drawings, video montages, and photographs related to matches that reflect the identity of fandom and

Figure 7

LeotheFan Instagram page

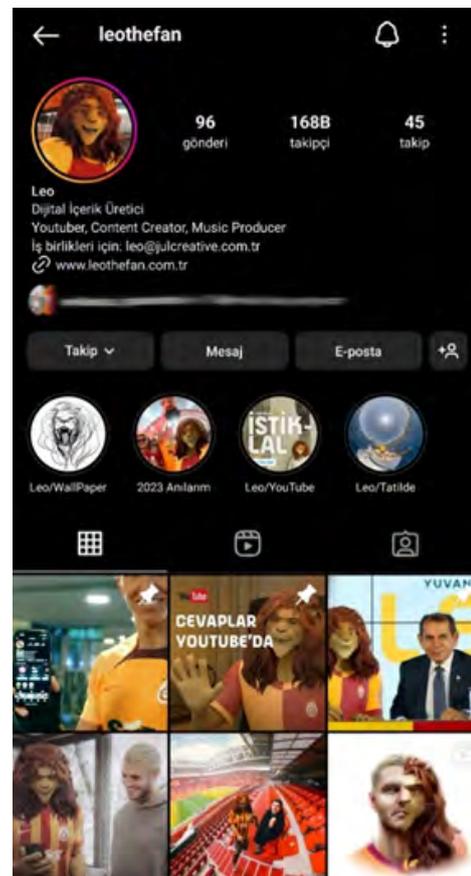


Table 1

Codes used in content analysis (Maderer, et al., 2018: 323)

| Product-related codes | Non-product-related codes |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Team success | Club's management |
| Star players | Club's symbols, history, and culture |
| Head coach | Match agendas and match visuals |
| | Sponsored content |
| | Stadium and supporters |
| | Personal shares |

supporter fall within the scope of the fandom/supporter theme. The player interactive theme encompasses photos and videos of Leo interacting with club players in the same environment. Lastly, the independent theme includes photos related to Leo's life, music shares, drawings unrelated to athletes, and posts about his travels.

Between October 12, 2023, the date when digital fan Leo was announced, and February 4, 2024, he shared a total of 96 posts on his Instagram

account. During the same period, the total number of highlighted stories on the profile was 100, while the number of stories shared from January 28 to February 4, 2024, was 37. The total number of posts subjected to analysis is 233.

The codes related to team success, star players, and head coach, within the scope of product-related codes, correspond to 26 contents in Leohefan's Instagram posts. These contents constitute 11.15% of the total content.

Table 2

Leohefan Instagram account product-related coded posts

| | Team success | Star players | Head coach |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Post | 1 | 12 | - |
| Story | 1 | 6 | - |
| Featured stories | 2 | 4 | - |
| Total | 4 | 22 | - |

Table 3

Leohefan Instagram account non product-related coded posts

| | Club's management | Club's symbols, history, and culture | Match agendas and match visuals | Sponsored content | Stadium and supporters | Personal shares |
|------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Post | - | 2 | 3 | - | 21 | 57 |
| Story | - | - | 6 | - | 8 | 16 |
| Featured stories | - | 2 | - | - | 43 | 49 |
| Total | - | 4 | 9 | - | 72 | 122 |

Table 4
Analysis of codes of LeotheFan Instagram posts

| Codes | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------------------|------------|---------|
| Team success | 4 | %1,71 |
| Star players | 22 | %9,44 |
| Head coach | - | - |
| Club's management | - | - |
| Club's symbols, history, and culture | 4 | %1,71 |
| Match agendas and match visuals | 9 | %3,86 |
| Sponsored content | - | - |
| Stadium and supporters | 72 | %30,90 |
| Personal shares | 122 | %52,36 |
| Total | 233 | |

The codes related to club's management, club's symbols, history, and culture, match agendas and visuals, sponsored content, stadium and supporters and personal shares within the scope of non-product-related codes, correspond to 207 contents in the LeotheFan account. These contents constitute 88.84% of the total content.

In the analysis of the codes, it is observed that content identified with the personal shares code constitutes more than half of LeotheFan account's posts. Following this, the stadium and supporters code is observed. No content corresponding to the head coach, club's management and sponsored content codes has been encountered.

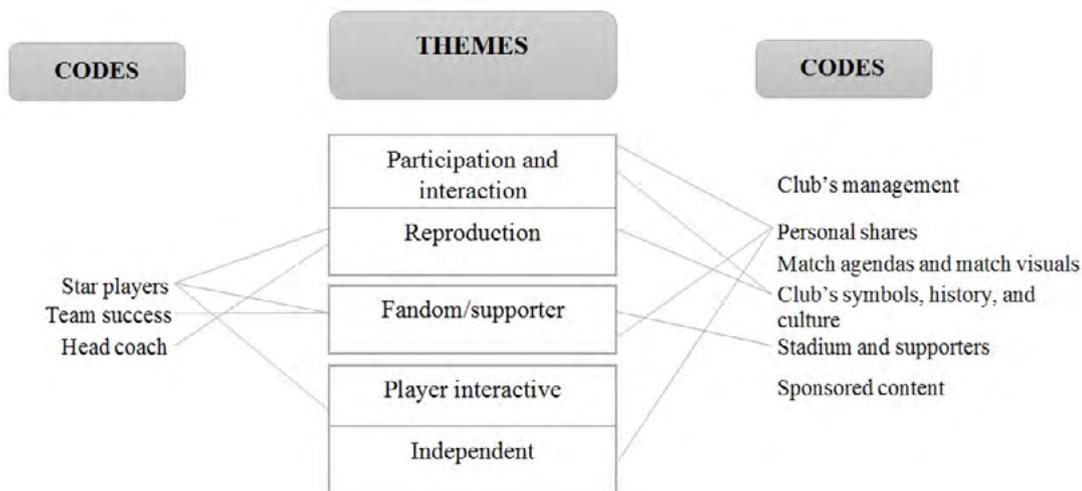
Table 5
Themes of LeotheFan Instagram posts

| | Participation and interaction | Fandom/supporter | Independent | Reproduction | Player interactive |
|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Post | 7 | 59 | 22 | 3 | 5 |
| Story | 6 | 14 | 8 | 7 | 2 |
| Featured stories | 2 | 65 | 30 | 3 | - |
| Total | 15 | 138 | 60 | 13 | 7 |

Table 6
Themes analysis of LeotheFan Instagram posts

| Themes | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------|
| Participation and interaction | 15 | %6,43 |
| Fandom/supporter | 138 | %59,22 |
| Independent | 60 | %25,75 |
| Reproduction | 13 | %5,57 |
| Player interactive | 7 | 3 |
| Total | 233 | |

Figure 8
Distribution of LeotheFan Instagram posts themes by codes



The coded content has been processed according to the themes within the scope of the analysis. Accordingly, the ratio of content included in the fan/admiration theme to the total content is 59.22%. The 60 contents evaluated within the scope of the independent theme constitute 25% of the total content.

Interpretation of findings

The data obtained from the descriptive analysis conducted on digital fan Leo’s YouTube and X accounts have been examined within the framework of fan culture and influencer practices. The data have been thematized around self-identification, references to personal existence and reality, and the representation of fandom and admiration.

In his shared videos, Leo consistently emphasizes that he is a ‘digital fan’. His fan identity can be seen not only in his content related to Galatasaray but also in his music productions and the background of his music videos. Additionally, the digital fan being designed as the symbol of Galatasaray, the ‘lion’, indicates that fandom is at the center of his identity. In a question-and-answer video on YouTube, Leo responded to the question ‘Are you the mascot?’ by stating that he is not a mascot but rather a digital fan existing in a digital environment where other fans also exist, implying his effort to blur the boundary between himself and other fans on social media.

Leo’s emphasis on reality is not only at the level of discourse. In each of his videos, he is present in a real environment, which can sometimes be a bustling environment like the outside world. In this regard, it is possible to interpret Leo as a ‘techno-identity’ who is not a subject but can think like one, not an artist but can produce artwork (Molo, 2023: 312).

As a techno-identity, digital fandom also gives rise to a production practice. In order to sustain its existence in the digital realm, which is its reason for existence, it is necessary to create and share. This production can only be realized within the axis of identity or identities. In the case of digital fan Leo, the focus of his productions lies in Galatasaray and Galatasaray fandom. The production resulting from an identity formed within the framework of admiration and fandom necessitates creativity, dedication, support, and reinterpretation.

The YouTube uploads of LeotheFan also embody the characteristics of fan culture, both in terms of Leo’s *raison d’être* (*varlık sebebi*) and the quality of his content. While the content types on Leo’s YouTube account vary, including music, vlogs, travel videos, question-and-answer sessions, and interviews, the common thread among all these contents is Galatasaray.

This common thread can be visible in the background, colors, or questions of an hour-

long instrumental music video, in interviews with musicians, or during visits to museums. Additionally, in some of the question-and-answer videos he shares, Leo mentions that he doesn't do these for monetary gain and that his sole purpose is to support Galatasaray. In this regard, LeotheFan's YouTube usage practices, which also bear traces of gift-giving practices, appear to be closely linked to fan culture practices.

Leo's influencer status, like other virtual influencers, is primarily linked to his personal identity. Therefore, for the digital fan Leo to be referred to as an influencer, a 'real' and personal identity needs to be constructed. Indeed, scenes such as Leo's presence in interview videos and footage on the subway are convincing of his physical existence, while videos where he talks about his

hobbies, interests, and personal life complement his personality.

Leo's identity and presence are articulated both visually and in discourse. The remaining characteristics of influencer status can be examined in terms of follower count and sponsorship. Based on the classification made by Campbell and Farrell (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) in terms of follower count, Leo, with 18.4 thousand followers on YouTube and 77 thousand on X, could be classified as a micro-influencer, whereas with 168 thousand followers on Instagram, he could be classified as a macro-influencer. In the question-and-answer videos, Leo also confirms his influencer status, yet he has not shared any sponsored content yet. As expressed by Yasin Çakmak, sponsorship agreements are also on the agenda of the LeotheFan project. However,

Figure 9

Images from digital fan Leo's videos



Table 7

Distribution of LeotheFan descriptive analysis data into themes

| Self-identification | Reference to personal and real existence | Representation of fandom and supporter |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Digital fan | 27 years old | Digital fan |
| YouTuber | From Istanbul | Galatasaray love inherited from his father |
| Music producer | Like making music, reading, cooking, playing basketball and swimming | His priority is to produce content for Galatasaray |
| Songwriter | No girlfriend | Sharing content revenues with Galatasaray |
| Content Creator | Graduate of electrical and electronic engineering | |
| Influencer | Someone who does not do what he studied but does his passion | |
| I am not a mascot | | |

it is considered important to proceed cautiously in this matter to avoid devaluing the potential income (Interview, February 7, 2024).

Even though there is no sponsorship agreement yet, Leo states in the question-and-answer video, "I share the revenue from these contents with Galatasaray. We did this project not to make money from Galatasaray, but to contribute to our club. Therefore, your likes, comments, and shares are very important. As Leo grows, Galatasaray will benefit" (YouTube, 2023).

In Table 7, the data from the descriptive analysis conducted on LeotheFan's YouTube and X accounts within the framework of fan culture and influencer practices have been distributed across themes.

In the scope of the research, content analysis conducted on the Instagram account of LeotheFan revealed a concentration of Leo's posts in personal shares and those related to stadiums and supporters. When evaluated within the context of themes, it was observed that the themes of fandom/supporter and personal shares were frequently utilized, highlighting an independent content theme. These findings confirm the emphasis Leo places on his "reality", while also indicating that he constructs his posts around adoration as a digital fan. Furthermore, in the distribution of themes into codes, it is observed that the themes of fandom and supporter are linked to codes related to stadiums and supporters, team successes, star players, and personal shares. This also shows that Leo associates his personal shares with his fan identity and reflects his admiration through elements such as the club's enduring features like the stadium, fans, successes, and current players in his posts. The infrequent preference for the theme of reproduction in Instagram posts can be interpreted as motivation for original content creation. The distribution of this theme into codes related to club symbols, history and culture, club players, and team successes can also be interpreted as a preference for sharing

content aimed at past-oriented or less readily accessible individuals. The theme of engagement and interaction is distributed across codes related to match agendas and visuals as well as personal shares. The distributions of this theme, where comments, narratives, and efforts to engage with followers are apparent, indicate that participation and interaction are directed towards both matches and personal shares. This finding indicates that Leo attempts to combine engagement and interaction with fan loyalty and influencer characteristics. Project manager Yasin Çakmak states that Leo's 'influence' lies in emphasizing the joy, beauty, love, and entertaining aspect of football, defining Leo's influencer domain as the Galatasaray fan universe (Interview, February 7, 2024).

The absence of the sponsor code distributed across any theme can be explained by Leo's lack of sponsorship agreements as of yet. Similarly, the absence of management and coach codes in the themes can be interpreted as the indirect or direct limitation of the fan/supporter expression.

According to the findings of the study, when addressing the research questions, the digital fan Leo's postings can be assessed within the framework of fan culture practices. Engaging in participation, interaction, and reproduction practices primarily centered around the themes of fandom and admiration, with no personal gain expectations, Leo predominantly focuses on Galatasaray as the main theme and thus orchestrates his digital content creation by centralizing his admiration. The commonalities between Leo's fan practices and influencer practices lie in building an 'online' identity, appealing to a wide audience on social media, and being able to adapt the predominant theme of 'Galatasaray' in their personal and daily life. The difference between these practices is that Leo has yet to materialize the influential factor of sponsored content, which is decisive among influencers. Additionally, while Leo's identity and shares focus on fandom and admiration, it appears to diverge from the decentralization characteristic

of influencer practices, yet it seems to have the potential to add a new dimension to influencer practices.

Conclusion

In today's world, where digitalization is changing and transforming communication formats through new technologies and applications, these changes allow for traditional motivations and affiliations to be expressed in new forms. Fandom, often directed towards representations of culture and entertainment, has also gained new forms of expression with digitalization. Fan practices, which can be considered within the scope of fan culture, have expanded independently of geography and cultural differences, partly due to the erosion of the internet's global boundaries. Digital fan practices, which initially found their expression in blogs, message boards, and forums, now reach billions of users on the global network through social media platforms. Contents produced within fan practices have gained significant diversity, partly due to advancements in technology. Videos, sounds, images, and drawings created and designed using digital design applications and artificial intelligence technologies nourish and encourage the creativity element within fan practices.

Another factor that differentiates digital communication forms is the 'personal' profile logic highlighted by social media platforms. The construction and representation of identity on these platforms, coupled with the motivation for sharing personal content and gaining followers, have created a cycle that leads to personal branding and inclusion in the economic sphere. Representations on social media, ranging from thousands to millions of followers, catering to a wide 'sphere of influence', have been termed as influencers based on the breadth of their impact, becoming significant players in the marketing sector. The production of virtual characters, perceived as cheaper, more reliable, and more controllable than deals made with 'real' influencers for companies, has gained momentum with the development of artificial intelligence technologies, leaving room

for philosophical inquiries into reality, identity, and subjectivity, thereby authentically engaging in the world of organic digital representations.

The inherently inclusive nature of digital media, bringing together diverse features and identities, has also unified fan and influencer practices under a new, cohesive appearance, including the virtual character constructed under a techno-identity that can be evaluated within the scope of fan culture. Leo, the world's first digital fan developed under the LeoTheFan project by Galatasaray and its partners, constitutes the initial example of this representation.

As demonstrated in the study, Leo's character and identity construction, representation on social media, variety of posts, and the qualities of these shares all reflect his endeavor to be a fan with a personal existence and everyday life, while also exerting a guiding influence on his follower base as an influencer. Leo, who displays dedication to the club he supports and defines it as a passion, primarily revolves his shares around Galatasaray. However, in these shares, Galatasaray is not just a sports club but a way of life where an identity nurtures, follows, interprets, and transforms its talents into digital content creation within this passion. Furthermore, Leo, aiming to financially contribute to the club he passionately supports and thereby reinforcing his guiding influence on the target audience through sponsors, enhances the 'reality' of his shares by occasionally adding everyday and sometimes mundane activities, making different dimensions of his identity visible and expanding not only the universe of his club's potential sponsors but also his own.

Despite possessing a purely digital existence, Leo, as 'real' within the reality of the internet as other users, is thereby able to play a role within a structure that encompasses corporate and economic dimensions. It is observed that this role, which also reciprocally nurtures the influence he holds as an influencer, is shaped through fan culture. The partnership established by Leo between

his fan and influencer practices throughout the study stems from his design to be both a fan and an influencer. Making this design visible through the diversity of content in his shares enables him to appeal to the Galatasaray fanbase, his most significant sphere of influence, as a multifaceted character. Leo's intersection as an influencer found within fan practices arises from factors such as his identity, large follower base, types of shares, and motivation to contribute to the club, even if for the purpose of gaining profits.

The intersection between Leo's fan practices and influencer practices, when considering him as a digital creation and a managed project, poses a risk of transforming the personal and spontaneous nature of fan practices into a more controlled structure, a process. However, the meticulous construction of everyday life, the management of the project by individuals well-versed in fan culture, ensures the preservation of the personal and emotional dimensions of fan culture.

This study, which examines fan practices through the multi-dimensional techno-identity of Leo thefan, aims firstly to situate it within a theoretical framework, drawing from the uniqueness of the sample, and subsequently to present findings that support this framework. Additionally, it is believed that delving into the distinction between media fandom and sports fandom in fan culture, exploring the 'sphere of influence' and influencer practices emerging around specific passions, and conducting identity analyses on virtual influencers could contribute to further research. Furthermore, it is recommended to conduct quantitative or discourse-based studies that include Leo's followers to expand the findings related to the sample.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

İnternet teknolojisi, kişisel ve toplumsal iletişim biçimlerini 21. yüzyılın ilk yıllarından bu yana hızla değiştirmekte ve geliştirmektedir. Sohbet odaları, bloglar, forumlar, sosyal ağlar, sosyal medya ve anlık mesajlaşma uygulamaları, iletişim kurma biçimlerinin değiştiği, dönüştüğü ve yeni ifade olanakları yarattığı ortamlar olarak dikkat çekmektedir. Bu ortamlar, bir yandan iletişime etki ederken diğer yandan iletişim ve paylaşım aracılığıyla ortaya çıkan, ortak ilgi alanı ve benzerliklerle pekişen toplulukların pratiklerini de internet öncesi dönemden farklılaşmıştır. Nitekim Jenkins, internet henüz emekleme aşamasındayken cosplay (kostüm oyunu), video klipler, karikatürler ve fanzinler gibi hayran içeriklerinin, medya tüketimi aracılığıyla yeni bir topluluğun ve kültürün üretimine katkı sunduğunu savunmuştur (1992: 46). Günümüzde ise benzer ilgi alanlarına sahip kişilerin sayfalar ve gruplar aracılığıyla bir araya geldiği, paylaşım, hediyeleşme, yorumlama ve yeniden yorumlama gibi hayran pratiklerini sergilediği sosyal medya, medya tüketimini, ilgi alanı topluluklarıyla birleştirmektedir. Üreten tüketicileri barındıran bu topluluklar, dijital içerik üretimleriyle hem platformlara hem de medya ve kültür endüstrisine katkı sağlamaktadır.

Hayranlığın ve hayran pratiklerinin en çok yöneldiği medya ürünlerini diziler, filmler, müzikler ve çeşitli şovlar oluştururken bunların ortaya konulmasına

katkı sağlayan oyuncular ile müzisyenler de sosyal medya aracılığıyla daha görünür ve ulaşılabilir olmaktadır. Sosyal medya ortamlarındaki "kişisel profil" yapılanması, medya ünlülerinin takibini ve onlarla etkileşim kurmayı kolaylaştırarak ünlülerin 'etki alanı'nı genişletirken geleneksel medya ürünlerinden bağımsız olarak internetin kendi ünlülerini yaratmasına da sebebiyet vermektedir. Dijital içerik üreticileri ya da internet yayıncıları olarak adlandırılabilir olan bu kişiler, erişebildikleri takipçi kitlesinin genişliği nedeniyle bir etki alanı yaratmaktadır. Görüşler, düşünceler ve tercihler üzerinde etki uyandırabilen bu alan genişledikçe dijital içerik üreticisi de 'influencer' yani 'etkileyen' niteliği kazanmaktadır. Dijital reklam ve pazarlama alanında giderek daha çok yararlanılan influencerlar, dijital içerik üretiminin çeşitliliğini ve niceliğini artırmakla beraber kendi hayranlarını da oluşturabilmektedir. Dolayısıyla sosyal medya üzerindeki etki alanı yaratımının ve influencerların medya ürünleriyle girift bir ilişki içerisine girmeye başladığını söylemek mümkündür.

Dijital teknolojilerin gelişmesinin olanak sağladığı sanal karakterler de sosyal medya platformlarında görünür olabilmektedir. Birçok nedenden ötürü ilgi çekebilen bu karakterler de etki alanı yaratabilmekte ve dijital pazarlama amacıyla kullanılabilir. Yeni bir dijital içerik üretici kimliği olarak görülebilecek sanal influencerların paylaştıkları içerikler de gerçek influencerlarda olduğu gibi sosyal, toplumsal ya da kişisel yaşama dönük olabilmektedir. Bu karakterlerin, geniş bir perspektifte paylaşımlarda bulunan, gerçek ilgi alanlarına sahip, gerçek tüketim ürünlerini tanıtan ve 'dijital gerçeklik' içerisinde var olan teknolojikliklerden biri olduğu söylenebilir.

Sanallığın ve gerçekliğin iç içe geçtiği sosyal medyadaki temsil ortamında hayran kültürü ve hayran pratikleri ile influencerların pratikleri arasındaki yakınsama da giderek daha mümkün hale gelmektedir. Medya ünlülerinin daha görünür, erişilebilir ve etki sahibi olabildiği sosyal medyada ünlülüğün giderek nasıl ve neden sorularından bağımsız hale geldiği gözlemlenmektedir. Hayran

sahibi olmanın etki alanı yaratmadaki önemi de göz önünde bulundurulduğunda geniş kitlelere hitap eden popüler medya ürünleri ekseninde yaratılabilecek sanal karakterlerin de önemli bir potansiyel barındırdığı söylenebilir. Söz konusu potansiyel ise giderek yakınlaşmakta olan medya hayranlığı ile spor hayranlığı/taftarlığı arasındaki bağı artıracak bir şekilde, dünyanın ilk dijital taraftarı 'Leo' ile gerçeğe dönüşmüştür.

Galatasaray Spor Kulübü tarafından iş ortaklıklarıyla beraber geliştirilen dijital taraftar Leo, bir taraftar olmasının yanı sıra çeşitli alanlarda içerik üreten sanal bir influencerdir. Galatasaray'ın hali hazırdaki etki alanını da kullanarak sosyal medyada ciddi bir takipçi kitlesine ulaşmış olan Leo karakteri, hayranların dijital içerik üretimlerine örnek teşkil ederek taraftarlığı ve influencerlığı dijital hayran pratikleriyle buluşturmuştur.

Dijital taraftar Leo özelinde gerçekleştirilen ve dijital taraftar Leo projesinin yöneticiliğini yapan Galatasaray Spor Kulübü üyesi Yasin Çakmak ile bir görüşmenin de gerçekleştirildiği bu çalışmanın teorik çerçevesini, hayran kültürü ve hayran pratiklerinde spor hayranlığı ile influencer ve sanal influencer kavramları oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmada, Leo karakterinin sosyal medya profilleri temel alarak durum (örnek olay) yönteminin kullanılmıştır. Spor hayranlığı ile medya hayranlığı, hayran kültürü pratikleri ile influencer pratikleri arasındaki ilişkilerin irdelenmesi, olası benzerliklerin, farklılıkların ortaya konması ve Leo'nun gerçekleştirdiği hayran pratikleri ile influencer niteliği arasındaki ilişkinin netleştirilmesinin amaçlandığı araştırmada toplanan veriler, Leo'nun YouTube ve X hesaplarından betimsel analiz tekniği ile Instagram hesabından ise içerik analizi tekniği ile elde edilmiştir. Araştırmanın bulguları, Leo'nun kendisini tanımlama biçimlerinin çeşitliliği, kişisel varoluşuna yaptığı göndermelerdeki gerçeklik vurgusu ve paylaşımlarındaki hayranlığın temsili yönünde olmuştur. Bunlara ek olarak kişisel paylaşımların, stadyum ve maç gibi gerçek ortamlara ilişkin içeriklerin yoğunlukta olduğu görülmüştür. Leo'nun paylaşımları, onun kişisel varoluşa ve gündelik hayata sahip bir hayran, aynı

zamanda da takipçi kitlesi üzerinde yönlendirici etkiye sahip bir influencer olma çabasını gösterir niteliktedir. Sosyal medya içeriklerinde, katılım ve etkileşim unsurlarını taraftarlık ve influencerlık özellikleri ile bir arada yürüten Leo, içerik üretimini hayranlığını merkeze alarak kurgulamaktadır. Bulgulardan yola çıkılarak varılan sonuç ise dijital taraftar Leo'nun paylaşımlarının hayran kültürü kapsamında değerlendirilebileceği, hayran pratikleri ile influencer pratikleri arasında bir kesişim noktası oluşturduğu ve influencer pratiklerine yeni bir boyut katma potansiyeline sahip olduğudur.

Yazar Bilgileri

Author details

1- (Sorumlu Yazar **Corresponding Author**) Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Yeni Yüzyıl Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi, serkan.karatay@yeniyuzyil.edu.tr

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