

Digital Communities in Türkiye as Pressure Groups in Political Marketing

Politik Pazarlamada Baskı Grubu Olarak Türkiye’de Yer Alan Dijital Cemaatler

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine digital communities in Turkey as pressure groups in political marketing. This study examines the characteristics of digital communities, their similarities and differences with traditional communities, and their impact on the political marketing mixes of political parties and candidates who develop political marketing mixes based on the demands, expectations, and needs of the political market through a literature review. With the increasing use of social media today, digital communities, where social media users gather with similar demands, are thought to be one of the interest groups in political marketing and to be able to shape political life through their social media posts on topics such as education, religion, economy, politics, and social life. This study is the first to investigate the impact of digital communities as pressure groups on political marketing in Turkey. Because there is no research on digital communities in the political marketing field, the evaluation is conducted only in conjunction with studies on digital communities in different fields. The study findings suggest that digital communities have the power to influence the political marketing mixes of political parties or candidates through their social media posts.

Key Words: Political Marketing, Digital Communities, Pressure Groups, Services Marketing, Marketing Research.

Jel Codes: M10, M31, D72

Başvuru: 27.10.2025

Kabul: 25.12.2025

Özet

Çalışmanın amacı, politik pazarlamada baskı grubu olarak Türkiye’de bulunan dijital cemaatleri incelemektir. Çalışmada, dijital cemaatlerin özellikleri, geleneksel cemaatlerle olan benzerlik ve farklılıkları, politik pazarın talep, beklenti ve ihtiyaçlarına göre politik pazarlama karması oluşturan siyasi partiler ve adayların politik pazarlama karmaları üzerindeki etkileri, literatür taraması yöntemiyle incelenmektedir. Günümüzde sosyal medya kullanımının artmasıyla, sosyal medya kullanıcılarının benzer taleplerle toplandığı dijital cemaatlerin eğitim, din, ekonomi, siyaset ve sosyal yaşam gibi konular hakkında yaptıkları sosyal medya paylaşımlarıyla politik pazarlamada çıkar gruplarından biri oldukları ve siyasal yaşama yön verebildikleri düşünülmektedir. Çalışma, Türkiye’de dijital cemaatlerin baskı grupları olarak politik pazarlama üzerindeki etkilerini araştıran ilk çalışmadır. Dijital cemaatlerle ilgili siyaset pazarlaması alanında çalışma bulunmadığından yalnızca farklı alanlardaki dijital cemaatlerle ilgili olan çalışmalarla birlikte değerlendirme yapılmaktadır. Çalışma bulgularına göre, dijital cemaatler yaptıkları sosyal medya paylaşımlarıyla siyasi partiler ya da adayların politik pazarlama karmalarını etkileyebileyebilme güçleri olduğu söylenebilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Politik Pazarlama, Dijital Cemaatler, Baskı Grupları, Hizmet Pazarlaması, Pazarlama Araştırmaları.

Jel Kodları: M10, M31, D72

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines digital communities in the field of political marketing for the first time. The purpose of this research is to define and evaluate digital communities as pressure groups in political marketing through a literature review. The idea of computer users communicating with each other online was first mentioned in Licklider and Taylor's 1968 work "The Computer as a Communication Device" (Licklider and Taylor, 1968: 21). Users who communicate online share their ideas and interact with each other on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, e, TikTok, Telegram, Messenger, LinkedIn, Clubhouse, WhatsApp, and blogs, creating communities (Çalışkan and Mencik, 2015: 265). This article defines the concept of political marketing as the adaptation of traditional marketing techniques to political life within the scope of digital communities formed on social media platforms (Gecer, 2018: 132). Marketing science broadens the scope of political science, providing a new perspective and contributing to democratic life through a consumer-focused approach to politics. The concept of political marketing focuses on the demands, expectations, and needs of voters through the political marketing mix, developing the necessary activities for political parties or candidates seeking long-term political power (Bayraktaroğlu, 2002: 162). With the proliferation of internet use and social media, political consumers share their opinions without any concerns about time or place (Öztürk and Türk, 2014: 4). Internet users seeking to communicate their demands, expectations, and needs to governments, political parties, and candidates are gathering on social media platforms or forming professional teams with the support of experts to meet their demands, expectations, and needs. Digital communities are online communities established online, gathering around a specific cause, idea, or shared interest, and voicing their demands, expectations, and needs to governments, political parties, or candidates. Digital communities consist of political consumers who interact on social media without the need to physically gather. Furthermore, there is no legal voting age requirement to participate in digital communities. Non-voters can also become political consumers because they live under the rule of winning governments. They can express their opinions about the political marketing mix of political parties or candidates, and by forming digital communities for this purpose, they can try to influence other political consumers on issues such as politics, the economy, and social life. Beyond election periods, the influence of digital communities can also generate public pressure against political parties, leaders, or municipalities in power (Delaney, 1970: 24).

1. THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL MARKETING

The political marketing mix is defined as a model that guides all political organizations that aim to achieve electoral success and become leaders in the political market, or in other words, in power, over the long term (Shama, 1975: 794). When creating the marketing mix in political marketing, not only the framework offered by political science is used, but also the insights provided by marketing science (Lees-Marshment, 2003: 15). The political marketing mix consists of four elements: political product, political price, distribution, and promotion (Johansen, 2005: 87). The first stage of political marketing activities is the design of political products based on the demands, expectations, and needs of political consumers, and the introduction of these products to the political market. After the design of political products, the other components of the political marketing mix are also shaped before they are introduced to the political market (Çiftlikçi, 1996: 105; Lees-Marshment, 2001: 694). Political products are the output of the political marketing mix (Pınar, 1970: 49). The price in political marketing differs from traditional marketing. While a certain fee is paid for purchased goods and services, the price element in the political marketing mix is the vote cast by political consumers, or voters. Votes cast by voters legitimize the administration of elected candidates until the next election (Aydoğan, 2007: 22). One of the fundamental elements of the marketing mix is distribution (Johansen, 2005: 87). While in traditional marketing, the distribution of products or services is carried out by elements of distribution channels, in political marketing, distribution is not limited to distribution channel elements. Voluntary contributions from political party members and organization members also support distribution (Demirtaş, 2010: 27). Bureaucracy, political party volunteers, and political party organizations play a critical role in ensuring that political products reach the target audience—political consumers—and in ensuring effective marketing activities are carried out in this process (Yalçınkaya and Ay, 2017: 207). Distribution is considered a crucial element of the political marketing mix for interest groups to secure their interests (Kahraman, 2021: 224). Political parties or candidates running for office can modify their political marketing mix to distribute services based on the demands of digital communities if they want to come to power or remain in power (Aydın and Gürsoy, 2017: 966). These changes can be influenced by various factors. Some of these factors include:

- a) Laws
- b) Bureaucracy
- c) Interests of different digital communities or interest groups
- d) Political market research

e) Media

f) Political party organization

Political marketing practices that consider these factors increase the likelihood of influencing political consumer preferences both before and after elections. The impact of digital communities on the political market is also monitored by the groups listed above, and these influences can contribute to the impact of digital communities on the political market. Promotional activities, a key component of the political marketing mix, are a crucial element of the political marketing mix and support the effectiveness of political marketing activities (Schonker-Schreck, 2004: 164). Collecting data from political consumers about political products and implementing promotional activities based on the data collected plays a crucial role. Promotional activities are an influential element within the political marketing mix and directly impact the success of the strategies (Harris and Lock, 2005: 1131). Within the political marketing mix, promotion encompasses the promotional activities conducted by political parties or candidates to influence political consumer preferences and encourage them to vote for them. Promotional activities include promoting political products, shaping public opinion, announcing service delivery to political consumers through the media, and influencing political consumer preferences. The use of audiovisual communication tools is common among promotional activities. However, with the rise of internet use, digital media is becoming more widely used today. With the proliferation of social media, digital communities can also contribute to promotional activities. Political parties or candidates are increasing their promotional activities with press releases, statements, media collaborations, visits, and rallies (Akyüz, 2015: 93; Taşdemir and Tan, 2020: 552). The most emphasized elements of the political marketing mix in digital communities can be seen as political products, political pricing, and distribution. Among political products, positive and negative reactions are most often received from digital communities about the party leader, candidates, and party officials, in addition to promises. The contents of some of the posts shared by digital communities to influence political marketing are as follows (Türkkan, 2018):

a) Sharing posts about party leaders or candidates, who are the showcases of political parties, to increase their reputation in the political market can be seen as one of the most frequently used methods. These activities can involve exaggerated or biased information, flattering or negative rhetoric, and supporting narratives presented to political consumers by drawing comparisons to popular or unpopular politicians in the past (Kayaduman, 2020: 3).

b) Election promises of political parties and candidates are among the most frequently shared political marketing materials by digital communities. After the promises are publicly announced, digital communities can change the promises by expressing positive or negative opinions, or they can attempt to steer political consumers toward different political parties or candidates.

c) Just as the good deeds of political party leaders, managers, and candidates in the past have been successful, their mistakes can also be criticized, both positively and negatively, by digital communities. Publicly reported speeches and promises are among the most frequently shared political activities by digital communities.

2. FACTORS AFFECTING POLITICAL MARKETING

The political marketing mix is crucial for accurately conveying the messages of political parties and candidates to the political market and influencing political consumer behavior. The political marketing mix is influenced by many factors from different sources. Among these factors are pressure groups that increase their power and influence in the political market over time due to economic and social conditions. Government refers to the political power center within a country that holds the power to govern, has the authority to govern, and has the power to use this power coercively. Political parties in power exercise their power to the extent granted to them by law (Kapani, 2014: 58). Governments operating within the boundaries set by law are structures that are responsible to the citizens of the countries they govern, accountable to the public, and exercise authority within the limits deemed reasonable by political consumers (Heywood, 2006: 474). In the public services market, power not only refers to the power to govern, but also to the ability to use this power as a dynamic resource. In the political market, the most important and common goal of opposition parties is to seize political market leadership, that is, to gain power. To this end, before coming to power, they identify the demands, expectations, and needs of voters and obtain detailed information about rival political organizations. This information is used to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of rivals. This information contributes to the effective management of election campaigns to influence political consumer preferences during the election period. During this process, the opposition constantly learns the demands, expectations, and needs of voters, develops messages, and improves itself based on this acquired data. The implementations implemented as a result of these developed strategies establish a more dynamic and powerful connection with voters. By analyzing the demands, expectations, and needs of voters, the opportunity arises to develop a more powerful and persuasive political discourse (Tan, 1998: 78). The military structure consists of organizations institutionalized within a hierarchical chain, executing orders issued by law under the elected government in democratic

countries. In non-democratic countries, organizations consisting of military units structured within a specific discipline, under certain junta formations, oligarchies, or monarchies, constitute the military structure. The structure and functioning of the military vary across countries. In democratic countries, armies operate within a specific hierarchical chain and carry out activities for national security within legal boundaries, subordinate to the central government. In countries with a legally mandated army, whose duties are defined by law, it is generally unacceptable for the military to interfere in politics. However, in non-democratic countries, the military can act as a much more powerful actor and directly influence the national administration. Such situations in the country's administration make the role of the military in politics more evident (Kışlalı, 2016: 308). The media, which directly informs society and shapes public opinion on events occurring in the country (Bekiroğlu and Bal, 2014: 48) and directs public reactions, is a communication medium that provides a continuous flow of information (Altun et al., 2016: 30). The media's functions include ensuring the flow of information within the country, publicizing social issues and current events, shaping public opinion, contributing positively or negatively to educational and cultural issues, producing entertainment publications, and influencing political and social dynamics in the country. This role of the media can have an impact on political marketing and social life, allowing the public to obtain information on many aspects of life (Darı, 2018: 3).

Bureaucracy is embedded within the state structure as the fundamental mechanism regulating the functioning of public institutions. Through bureaucracy, governments have the power to deliver the services they promise in the messages they convey to political consumers before and after elections. If the bureaucracy obstructs the activities the government aims to implement, instability can occur in the political market (Tan, 1998: 79). Therefore, from the moment the governments have the power to govern, they make bureaucratic appointments in the high bureaucracy to serve their own purposes.

3. PRESSURE (INTEREST) GROUPS

In political life, before and after participating in elections, political parties or candidates interact with various civil society organizations. Political parties or candidates establish ongoing relationships with democratic mass organizations, influencing and being influenced by each other. Pressure groups, unlike the government, benefit from the advantages provided by the legal power wielded by the government, without assuming the same responsibilities. The primary goal of these organizations, publicly known as pressure or interest groups, is to protect or gain benefits for the interests of the organization and its members, as well as those of society at large. Some interest groups also have general objectives, such as humanity and the environment. Pressure groups include civil society organizations such as labor unions, chambers of commerce and industry, cooperatives, unions, foundations, and associations (Çağlar, 2012: 282).

4. THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

Community-style communities consist of members united around goals determined by a leader or community and acting in accordance with shared values, ethnic identity, beliefs, norms, and ideals (Falk, 2004: 48). Communities worldwide exert significant influence in social, political, and economic life. Communities with high social influence are not organized solely for religious or social welfare purposes, but also for economic and political purposes. As in diaspora examples, community members participate in many layers of social life and can exert influence in areas such as bureaucracy and the media.

4.1. TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

Tönnies states that the most prominent type of traditional community is the family (Akarsu, 2015: 83). Based on this definition, communities formed by ties such as blood ties and territorial ties also form the basis of traditional communities. Tribes, clans, and communities formed in rural areas, where members of a community share common beliefs, customs, traditions, and traditions, are also included in the types of communities. Tönnies states that the lifestyle and organizational structure of a community are sufficient to distinguish traditional communities from modern ones (Evciman, 2022: 386). In traditional communities, members establish social trust among themselves and help them cope with problems such as loneliness and exclusion in social life. Furthermore, communities play a significant role in the sense of belonging and identity construction of their members. Members of a community unite around a common purpose or belief and develop a sense of belonging by seeing themselves as part of this community (Gezgin, 1988: 188).

4.2. MODERN COMMUNITIES

The role of communities is diversifying in modern societies, and they are affected by factors such as globalization and secularization. Modern communities, in addition to those that gather in physical settings, also refer to digital communities

formed by individuals who share a common online space or ideological view. Some communities not only represent an ethnic or religious affiliation but also hold a strong presence in many aspects of social life. Modern communities can wield significant power in influencing social structure and shaping political decisions (Kurttaş, 2017: 50).

4.2.1. DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

In our age dominated by modernity, the structure of communities is changing and new community structures are emerging due to the influence of developing digital communication tools. The concept of digital community is defined as a part of the virtual life created by internet technology. Digital communities exist on many internet platforms, especially social media. There are 5.2 billion social media users worldwide (Wearesocial, 2024). In Turkey, this figure reaches 57.9 million social media users, while there are 303 million social media accounts (Toptaş, 2024).

Ideas can also be shared in a virtual environment online. In digital communities, similar to traditional communities, individuals provide support and relationships with each other in the virtual environment, but they often do not know each other (Haberli, 2012: 123). Users with similar ideologies, ideas, and comments on social media shape public opinion, particularly through social media, and influence many decisions made or to be made in political life. Data from the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure indicates that some social media users have multiple accounts, a figure six times larger than the number of users. Users often participate in social media using anonymous nicknames. Especially during election periods, social media users who use different accounts attempt to influence political consumers' voting decisions (Kayaduman, 2020: 6). Rheingold's work, "The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier," explains that using pseudonyms is more effective in expressing true opinions (Rheingold, 2000: 12). Using pseudonyms in digital communities provides users with the freedom to freely express their opinions. However, the anonymity of users leads to the formation of groups that knowingly or unknowingly influence other users. Troll groups are among the most well-known of these groups. Troll groups, which can penetrate digital communities, are defined as amateur or professional social media users who aim to direct social media users toward the actions and behaviors they wish to influence (TDK Dictionary, 2024). Individual trolls or troll groups manipulate public opinion or incite outrage on social media by diverting the attention of social media users (Kayaduman, 2020: 5). Events or issues that raise public concern receive high levels of engagement through the posts of digital communities, influencing voters and putting pressure on political parties or candidates. Sometimes, posts made with false information or by impersonating others (Gönülşen, 2022: 2110) to influence voters can also have an impact. This method, which can be particularly effective on voters with low social media literacy, is observed through posts made by those impersonating others. Digital communities organized on social media as interest groups in political marketing are divided into two groups based on their interests (Arpacık, 2020):

- a) Digital communities that provide professional services to politicians who request their services in exchange for a fee or benefit.
- b) Digital communities that can be defined as amateurs, organized for personal or social benefit without receiving any payment.

Beyond the two types of digital communities listed above, there are digital communities that can fall into both groups. In Turkey, dictionaries that publish user comments can be cited as examples of both professional and amateur digital communities.

4.2.1.1. AMATEUR DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

In non-professional digital communities, receiving commands from a specific center is generally not seen, other than guided trolling effects. The aims of amateur digital communities are to fulfill both individual and societal demands, expectations, and needs. Social media users individually express their demands to political parties or candidates on social media, while interacting with other users who share with the same goals (Gedik, 2020: 64). As a result of these encounters, which mostly occur on social media, they form digital communities by acting in an organized manner to further voice their demands. Organized activities are seen in both professional and non-professional digital communities. Activities can include posts in favor of or against politicians, as well as be inclusive or polarizing.

4.2.1.2. PROFESSIONAL DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

There are also digital communities controlled by administrators or editors appointed by a specific center. Professional digital communities are established to provide a specific fee or benefit (Kayaduman, 2020: 10). Social media users who engage in these activities are often teamed up by companies, political parties, or candidates operating in this field, and the topics and content to be shared are determined with the support of experts. Activities within professional digital communities can take the form of endorsements or disparages. Posts of endorsements are predominantly social media posts geared towards the political marketing mix of the supported political parties or candidates.

4.2.1.2. IMPACT OF DIGITAL COMMUNITIES ON POLITICAL MARKETING

Digital communities share and interact on digital media regarding political speeches or events in political life to influence political consumers. These speeches consist of public statements, such as parliamentary speeches by political party leaders or members of parliament, speeches delivered during election campaigns, and press releases. Following politicians' speeches, interactions, endorsements, and comments that support or oppose them are circulated on digital media by digital communities, aiming to influence political consumer preferences (Türkkan, 2018). As the election date approaches, social media posts about political parties or candidates, including those running for re-election, generate buzz in the political market. Therefore, the interactions digital communities have about political parties or candidates, starting before the election, are considered important for political marketing. Some of the activities digital communities engage in to influence the political market include:

a) Sharing biased information online to support or oppose a particular viewpoint, opinion, or ideology is considered one of the most common digital community activities. Biased information can spread rapidly and reach large audiences thanks to digital communities on social media platforms. Biased information can be shared to further political or social interests regarding the government, the opposition, political parties, candidates, or individuals or groups that provoke a reaction from digital communities. Biased information increases polarization in the political market and prevents political consumers from accessing objective information.

b) Serving misleading information is defined as the deliberate or unintentional circulation of partially or completely false information on social media by digital communities. Misleading information can spread rapidly on digital media because there is no monitoring mechanism to verify the accuracy of the information's content. c) Activities aimed at manipulating political consumer preferences by spreading rumors against political parties or candidates' political marketing mixes are defined as smear campaigns (Kayaduman, 2020: 7). d) Taking advantage of the anonymity of social media to pose as an opposing viewpoint is also a frequently used method (Kayaduman, 2020: 9). Digital communities can adopt a pro-government identity and make comments or statements that can influence political consumer preferences.

Professional digital communities, through their influencer activities, can influence the political marketing mix of political parties or candidates they wish to support or oppose by influencing amateur digital communities through their posts. In Turkey, the digital community formed by the group known as those stuck in retirement age (EYT), who face legal obstacles to accessing retirement rights, is considered one such group. Before the 2023 Turkish General Elections, users gathered on social media to demand their retirement rights from the ruling and opposition parties in the political arena, resulting in the law, commonly known as EYT, being passed by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (SGK, 2023). Another of the largest digital communities in Turkey are teachers awaiting appointments in public institutions. Hundreds of thousands of teachers who have graduated from university are waiting for the government to appoint them to permanent positions in public schools. By forming digital communities, teachers are trying to force the government to appoint teachers through public pressure (BBC, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Türkiye, it is observed that digital communities, which influence political, social, and educational matters due to the influence of social media, do not remain indifferent to sensitive issues in society. With the emergence of digital communities gaining importance as a result of social media's influence on political life, updating political marketing activities can enable political parties or candidates to develop strategies to influence political consumer preferences and gain a strong position in the competitive political market. This study investigates the effects of digital communities within the scope of political marketing and their role in politicians' political market strategies. Other studies in the literature on digital communities generally fall within the scope of political science and communication sciences. Studies have identified the structure of communities (Akarsu, 2015), the structure and characteristics of pressure groups (Çağlar, 2012; Kahraman, 2021), social media trolls (Kayaduman, 2020; Haberli, 2012), and virtual communities (Haberli, 2012). A study by Haberli (2012) on virtual communities evaluates virtual communities from a communication science perspective. This study defines and evaluates digital communities within the context of political marketing. According to research in the literature, with the increasing use of social media, digital communities are thought to have a significant impact on political life as pressure groups in political marketing. The steps taken by political parties or candidates to address the demands, expectations, and needs of digital communities to outperform the competition in the political market provide insight into the impact of digital communities on political life. This study investigates the impact of digital communities on political marketing and their decisive role in shaping political consumer preferences on social media platforms. Through interactions with digital communities, political parties or candidates learn about political consumer comments about themselves and

monitor the comments made by digital communities about other political parties or candidates they compete with in the political market, developing new strategies accordingly. The use of anonymous identities on social media facilitates such interactions and can influence political marketing. Therefore, research is being conducted on how the political marketing mix is evolving in the digital world and how to integrate traditional and digital media. The research reveals several recommendations. Political parties or candidates should place greater emphasis on digital media strategies and pay attention to their interactions on social media. Social media can be seen as a key tool that increases the effectiveness of politicians and political campaigns. Monitoring mechanisms should be developed to ensure that political parties or candidates continuously monitor digital communities and respond satisfactorily to them. To positively capitalize on the reactions of digital communities, political parties or candidates should tailor their political marketing mix to meet their demands, expectations, and needs. Further research should be conducted on the impact of digital communities on political marketing, and the long-term impact of these influences on political marketing should be analyzed. Furthermore, understanding the impact of professional and amateur digital communities on the political market and swiftly responding to their demands, expectations, and needs is considered crucial. Political marketing, as a discipline, plays a crucial role in helping politicians reach political consumers. The advantages this role provides politicians are not limited to strategic planning; they also depend on the factors influencing political marketing. The influence of digital communities, which are among pressure groups, is a key factor shaping the success of political marketing activities. The increasing influence of digital communities, particularly during election periods, can influence politicians' decisions and, consequently, political marketing practices. In light of this, more in-depth research on the role of digital communities in the political market is needed within the context of political marketing.

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