

REFLECTION OF BRANDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

With the development of the Internet in recent years, many concepts in many areas have undergone changes. These changes are observed in every field in the society, from the politics to economy, from education to communication on a large scale. The development of information communication technologies started a new age. Today, this age is defined as the digital age. With the digital age, new marketing concepts emerged in the communication field. The traditional marketing methods used for many years are not enough for brands anymore. The social media, which is a new medium emerging with the development of information communication technologies, is preferred by brands due to the reason that it takes part in the social life. The social media brought new dimensions to the marketing understanding of brands. Brands create their own communities on digital platforms and present new marketing studies to the masses. The communities named as virtual brand communities provide new opportunities for the brands to create brand loyalty and maintain it.

Keywords: *Social media, Social network sites, Virtual brand communities, Harley-Davidson, Apple*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information communication technologies brought along changes in many situations and concepts encountered in the daily life. With the advancement of the technology, the "Internet" which has an important place today, has undergone a rapid progress since its first day until today and has affected many concepts in this direction. The story of the Internet begun for a military-designed project during the 1960s when the Cold War was waged most severely. The feature of the Internet which showed a constant development for years as a cross-continental web began with the establishment of the World Wide Web in 1990. It attained its contemporary form in the 1990s and has increasingly become a necessity of life. As various concepts underwent changes with the Internet, this change was also observed in fields such as communication, marketing, advertising and public relations. Many familiar concepts in this field fell behind, and newly emerging concepts and nascent concepts and applications have emerged. The traditional media and conventional marketing methods in communication, marketing, advertising and public relations fields were actively used. Although the use of traditional media continues, the importance

and the use of digital media have increased with the advancement of the Internet. Now people access information through digital media and by means of the conveniences the Internet provides, they prefer spending their time on these platforms. Due to this reason, it became necessary for companies to use the Internet. With the influence of the digital age, instead of marketing studies employed in the traditional media, marketing studies which are valid in the Internet environment have gained importance. The social media, emerging as a result of the development of the Internet technologies, is a new element in marketing communication. New communication environments emerge with the social media. While the brands address only a definite target audience through the traditional means of media, they have obtained chances to establish a peer-to-peer communication with the target audience they want through social media. With the constant updatability of social media and the fact that it enables sharing, it has become one of the ideal media. Instead of socialising outside, individuals have the opportunity to socialise any time of the day with their smartphones. This causes the individuals to spend most of their lives in social media. The individuals socialising constantly in the virtual environment are subjected to various

messages in the virtual environments. With the increase in the use of social media with each passing day, brands rapidly continue their social media studies as well. Also, the brands which do not have a social media account or an advertising work are bound to be forgotten quickly. In terms of marketing studies of the brands, social media offers great chances for the brands. In the increasing competition environment, there are various brands in the same class. The survival of the brands with the features which distinguish them can only be ensured with brand loyalty. By means of the daily use of social media, and being in constant contact with their consumers, brands have the chances to carry out more effective studies. Now, each brand has an account on each social network page. However, the important thing is the studies that the brands carry out on these accounts. The social network pages have become a medium for those who advertise. The platform which many brands use as an advertisement medium is Facebook, which is one of the most used social networks today. The brands create their own communities on this platform and carry out more effective studies. In this study, the definitions of social media, social network pages, and virtual brand communities will be mentioned and the contents on the Facebook pages of Harley-Davidson and Apple companies which are one of the most widely known virtual brand communities will be examined.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Media

At the end of the 1990s, technological advancements and the invention of the Internet and the emergence of new online technologies dependent on the Internet and thus the emergence of new digital platforms lead to the emergence of new mass communication techniques (Onat and Alikılıç Aşman, 2008: 1114). The enormous change in the information technologies in the last decade drastically changed the traditional marketing approaches. Although the media such as radio, television, newspaper and journal which are employed in the traditional media are still effectively used by marketers, social media is able to establish a peer-to-peer communication with individuals through more personalised messages rather than addressing the general. With this aspect, social media has become a new medium in the social media marketing world. The social media has become a preferred medium due to its multidirectional communication.

The sources in the literature define social media in the following way; according to Tosun (2014: 644), the technology creating the basis for social media is transferring from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Online applications and platforms which enable the engagement and content sharing established on the Web 2.0 technology are defined as social media. According to Baruh and Yüksel (2009: 47), it is possible to define online communication channels which take target audience participation as the basis, are interactive and harbours communities in it and create new communities, in other words, which direct the users to sharing by media. According to Özmen (2012: 361), the social media is a name given to all of the Internet-based tools which provide the basis for Web 2.0, social communication and engagement by gathering the contents people create. According to Özutku, Çopur, Sığın, İter, Küçükylmaz and Arı (2014), social media is a post-Web 2.0 Internet environment which enables many people to share information simultaneously thanks to the technology, provides a mutual engagement environment for the users and which is constantly updated.

According to Safko and Brake (2009: 6), social media activities involve applications and human communities which gather information, knowledge, and opinions. According to Bruns and Bahnisch (2009: 7), social media is the web pages which are established on Web 2.0 technologies, enabling social engagement thoroughly, community formulation and cooperative projects and creating a space for this. According to Ryan and Jones (2009: 152), social media, as a general generic term of the web-based software and services, allows the users to come together, make interchanges, communicate, discuss and participate in a social engagement way online. This engagement is provided with audio, video, photograph, and other media individually or as a combination. According to Scott (2009), social media provides a means for people to share their opinions, thoughts, contents and relationships online.

Social media enables people to be in touch with each other easily and observe what is currently happening in the lives of people in their contacts on a daily basis. People are not limited to only the news they read in newspapers, what they watch on television or what they hear from their friends' one-to-one dialogues. Now people make many-to-many communications on global platforms. This worldwide communication wave is named as "mouth-to-mouth" because now people can hear

experiences from many countries (Qualman, 2011:1). While the communication was solely from the company to the consumer because of the one direction communication in the traditional means, this process used to remain limited. The drastic change in the communication process also caused the marketing process to undergo changes. The reason for the changes affecting the marketing studies originates from many features that the social media has. According to Mayfield (2008: 5), it is possible to summarise some features of the social media as follows;

- Participation: It supports participation and feedback from everyone related to social media.
- Openness: Many social media services are open to feedback and participation. These services support voting, adding comments and sharing information. There are rarely limits to use the content and comment on it; like not considering the password and protected content appropriate.
- Chat: While the traditional media is interested in broadcasting, social media is better, it is interested in a mutual chat.
- Community: Social media enables the communities to be formed quickly and have effective communication. Communities share their common interests; like love for photography, a political subject or a favourite television programme.
- Linkability: Many social media means succeed with their linkability; they enable it by giving links to other sites, resources, and people.

Social media has brought many changes along since its first day until today in every field. After the traditional means, social media has started a new age. We encounter the social media which has reached an important position in the society with different features when compared to other media environments. By means of these features, it has become a strong, effective and necessary means. The most important feature of the social means is that it is an environment which is updated every time, dynamic and too fast to be followed (Çakır Yeygel, 2010: 55). It is possible to list the distinctive feature of social media which distinguishes it from other means as following (Özutku et.al. 2014: 83);

- Social media consists of contents, each information is a content, and each content is a resource.
- Differently from the traditional media, content is created and consumed by the users. In the traditional media, the one creating the content is different and the one consuming is different.

- Different from the traditional means, social media is a living platform. Its most significant difference from newspaper, TV and other published means is that it is a simultaneous information sharing. A mutual communication comes into question.

- Social media is user-oriented and without a limitation, everybody has the right to speak. When it is used correctly, social media which provides various benefits especially in terms of the brands has either positive or negative effects on the individuals.

- The information sharing on the social media is carried out without requiring any cost and it reaches very wide audiences.

- There is an incomparably big difference between the traditional media and social media in terms of the speed both in the delivering the news and in the perception formation.

- The access potential of the social media is easier when compared to the traditional media.

- Especially in the use of mobile Internet and social media, dependence on space and time have significantly decreased.

- It provides an opportunity to reach larger audiences when compared to the traditional media.

- Differently from the traditional media, any filter, censorship and banning do not come into question under normal conditions. Thus, it is freer than the traditional media.

- Established rules have not been formed yet when compared to the traditional media.

- Social media has a more serious security gap when compared to the traditional media. Especially, the ability to open fake accounts is one of the weakest links of the social media.

- When compared to the traditional media, social media has negative aspects like creating addiction and causing people to spend so much time.

Along with the importance social media has in the society, the social media tools also have the same importance. The social media tools used by both the brands and people can be classified in some groups. According to the literature, social media consists of web-based, open and user-friendly applications like applications which provide new opportunities in creating the content together (blogs, wikis, Flickr, Twitter), social network (Facebook, Netlog) correlation and sharing the likes (Amazon del.icio.us, Google Pagerank) link (Wi-Fi sharing) and collective intelligence (Web 2.0) (narrated from Verdegem by Kamiloğlu and Yurttaş, 2014:136). According to Kahraman (2014: 21), social media tools can be listed as

wikis, social networks, location-based services, dictionaries, blogs, content sharing sites, microblogging, and data curation services. According to Onat and Alikılıç (2008), it is possible to gather the social networks on the Internet in some groups. These groups are e-mail groups (yahoogroups.com), Blogs (the links put on the blogs and bloggers' communication with each other), Forums (forums about various professions), Corporate intranet (in-house web), Extranet (the network created by the suppliers and corporate customers), fast message services (msn, icq). According to Mayfield (2008: 6), there are six kinds of the social media. It is possible to list them as follows;

- Social network sites: They enable people to establish their own web pages and later connect with their friends to share their contents and communicate with them. The biggest social network sites are MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo.
- Blogs: Maybe, they are the most known form of the social media. Blogs are primarily considered as online journals with the newest shares.
- Wikis: These web pages allow people to add comments or information and they are considered as a communal document or database. The most known wiki is the Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia with more than 2 million articles in English.
- Podcasts: The audio or video files which are available with the subscription (For example, like Apple iTunes services...).
- Forums: They are online discussion places about a definite subject or an area of interest in general. Forums are a strong and popular element of the virtual communities which were present before the social media.
- Content communities: They are the communities sharing or organising a definite content. The most famous content communities are those shaped with photographs (Flicker), bookmark links (del.icio.us) and videos (YouTube).
- Microblogging: The social networks unite online or mobile telephone networks which include various small contents with the blogs. Twitter is the leader of the microblogs.

Social media tools are the new digital platforms preferred both by the users and the brands. People on these platforms are present according to their purposes and have the opportunity to socialise. If it is necessary to summarise the social media examples with a table, it is possible to classify them as following;

Table – 1 Social Media Examples

- Social network sites (MySpace, Facebook, Faceparty)
- Websites to share the creative works : * Video sharing sites (YouTube) * Photograph sharing sites (Flickr) * Music sharing sites (Jamendo.com) * Content sharing sites which provide information and support (Piczo.com) * General intellectual property sharing sites (bidding sites) (Creative Commons)
- User supported blogs (Unofficial Apple Weblog, Ccnet.com)
- Company supported websites/blogs (Apple.com)
- Company supported campaign/aid sites (Real Beauty campaign site of Dove, click2quit.com)
- Invite only social networks (AsmallWorld.net)
- Business network sites (LinkedIn)
- Cooperation based websites (Wikipedia)
- Virtual worlds (Second Life)
- Commercial communities (eBay, Amazon.com, Craig's List, etc.)
- Podcast networks: For Immediate Release, The Hobson and Holtz Report (forimmediaterelease.biz)
- News distribution sites (Current TV)
- Education material sharing sites (MIT OpenCourseWare, MERLOT)
- Open resource software communities (Mozilla's spreadfirefox.com, Linux.org)
- Social tagging sites which allow the users to suggest online news, music, video, etc. (Digg, del.icio.us, Nesvine, Reddit)

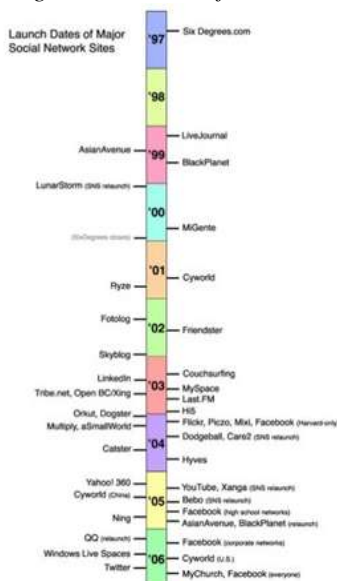
Resource: Mangold and Faulds David J. (2009)., *Social Media: The New Hybrid Element of the Promotion Mix*, *Business Horizons*, 52: 358.

When the kinds of social media in the literature are examined, it is observed that each kind bears a distinct importance. One of the most actively used social media tools bearing importance for the brands and used actively today as a result of the emergence of the virtual communities is the social network sites. Due to the importance that the social network sites carried in the marketing communication dimension and which increased more, the brands carry out their marketing activities through the social network sites. Due to this reason, the social network sites bear importance for the virtual brand communities.

2.2. Social Network Sites

The social network provides an opportunity to the expand of social connections which gather the Web 2.0 technologies together, accelerate the work process, develop the customer relations, enhance the high capacity personnel and appropriate price, and develop the morals, motivation and work satisfaction among the personnel (Zyl, 2009: 907). Social network sites are the websites designed to develop the social engagement in the online environment. Both maintaining the current communal connections and establishing new connections play roles in the emergence of the social network sites (communal sharing networks) (Toprak, Yıldırım, Aygül, Binark, Börekçi and Çomu, 2014: 26). The history of the social network sites dates back to the “sixdegrees.com” webpage established in 1997. The social network sites, Cyworld established in South Korea in 2001 and Friendster established in the USA in 2002, focused on business or meeting with new people. The two biggest social network sites in the world are MySpace established in 2003 and Facebook established for education in 2005 and became open to all users in 2006 (Çakır Yeygel, 2011: 299). With the establishment of LinkedIn in 2003, a business network was created in the social media, and later on MySpace in 2003 Facebook in 2005, YouTube in 2005 and Twitter was established in 2006.

Image – 1 Timeline of Social Media Sites



Resource: Boyd, D. M., Ellison N. B. (2008), *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship*. 13 (1), USA: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Page: 212

The Internet sites created for the users in the Internet environment to meet with each other by communicating, establish dialogues, share content, form groups that they come together with the individuals in their common interests are known as social network sites (Çakır Yeygel, 2010: 56). A social network service, by needing to use a software, centres upon establishing and verifying social networks for individuals in the online communities who share their interests and activities or for individuals who look for others' interests and activities (Qiao, 2008:1). It is possible to list the common features of the social networks as follows (Çakır Yeygel, 2011: 285);

- User-Oriented: The contents on the social networks are not controlled by either an editor or a mediator, instead of this, the contents are created by the users themselves.
- Living/Alive Content: The content in the social networks can be constantly reformed and the archived content can be re-designed for another purpose.
- Communal Aspect: Cooperation, participation and the shared information are the anchor point of all social networks and each site puts forward a distinct community.
- Ease of Use: The biggest advantage of the social networks is the simplicity or the ease they provide in using to give the opportunity to anyone in a community to post or share something to reach a wide audience regardless of their technical education or skills.

Three of the social network sites have played a big role in shaping the research, business, and cultural areas. These social network sites are Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook. Friendster, which began to be used in 2002, despite other social networks' feature of meeting with strangers, gave people an opportunity to communicate with people they knew. That Friendster grew on the social network site originates from the fact that it enabled people to create community and fan pages. As for MySpace, it was established in the year 2003. MySpace made itself different by providing the users with the ability to personalise their own pages. Generally, although young people never became a member on Friendster in contrast with the elderly, the young people have begun to use MySpace in order to sign up to the fan community pages since 2004. If it is necessary to approach from a different angle, unlike this social network and the similar ones, Facebook was designed in 2004 to establish a communication network only at Harvard University. While only the students who

had Harvard University mail address were able to log in on Facebook, later starting from the students who had mail addresses of other schools, high schoolers, and the corporate network, this social network began to accept everyone as a user in 2005. Along with this, on the contrary to other social networks, Facebook users do not make their profile information open to the public. Another distinguishing feature is that it gives place to personal details of the users as far as their movie choices or travel information by personalising their profiles (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 217- 218).

While Facebook and MySpace allow the users to create profiles and communicate with the friends they chose to share their profiles with, LinkedIn is used as an occupational use network to show the connections in the users' connection. As for YouTube, it allows the users to upload videos and allows anyone who is either a member or not watches them. While "fan" pages are created on Facebook and are followed by the users, YouTube gives the users the opportunity to create a "channel" for their videos. Similarly, Twitter, which is a microblogging site, allows the followers to post short text updates and allows these to be seen by the users (Taylor, Lewin and Strutton, 2011: 259). Twitter was launched in March 2006 with the service named "Twtr" which was a small communication service. Twitter started as a corporation project of a podcast company in San Francisco, but before long, it became the main subject of the corporate. Only 3 years after this, a boom took place on Twitter (O'Reilly and Milstein, 2009: 5). In comparison with Facebook, Twitter is a more news-based site as a social network. Rather than with the purpose to sell something, the companies there share informative things about their companies or campaigns. Especially the accounts with information content like newspapers, columnists are preferred by users.

In general, social network sites make the communication easier by giving information about the identity of the individual in the direction of the information like the user's photo on his profile, his hobbies. The users can communicate with other users through e-mail or kinds of the online message by looking up to that person's profile. The messaging parts on the social network sites used in order to provide instant communication with other users ensure that the individuals stay in touch with each other. Also instant messaging such as personal websites made it easier and reachable for the users on the social network sites to reach their peers and

get feedback (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert, 2009: 228).

One of the social network sites, Facebook, is a website used by people from all ages from all corners of the world for a long time. Facebook has become a worldwide social network by having an increasingly larger number of users with each passing year. According to Facebook's second quarter statistics of the year 2015, the number of daily active Facebook users around the world reached 968 million by showing a 17-percent increase when compared to the previous year. 65 percent of the monthly active users log in to Facebook every day. According to the second quarter data dating to 2015 of Facebook, more than 39 million people visit this platform every month in Turkey. The number of the daily active users have reached 26 million in Turkey (<http://www.dijitalajanslar.com/guncel-facebook-istatistikleri-2015/>).

Another application which emerged with the increase in mobile use and popularity of which increased in the recent years is Instagram. Instagram is a free photograph sharing application in the social media. When Instagram was founded in October 2010, it enabled people to use the digital filter on a photograph they took, and share this photograph with the social media services, among which Instagram is included as well. Instagram, founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, was bought by the social media giant Facebook for 1 billion dollars in April 2012. Instagram, which had 30 million users before it was sold to Facebook, has 400 millions of users since the year 2016 (<https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram>).

The application used solely in Apple operating system in the year 2010, became usable for the Android operating system in the year 2012 as well. The most important feature of the application is being able to have a "filtrated" photograph album, which draws attention in your profile by applying various effects to the photographs (Sevinç, 2012: 127). Also with its feature to share any photograph shared here on other social network sites at the same time easily and fast, Instagram exactly corresponds with fast and accessibility feature of the Internet. The application runs in a quite integrated way with other social network sites. With the 'hashtag', which is a Twitter feature, it is both possible to make the photographs reach millions and make location notification with social cueing (about where the photograph was taken) and it also offers

the feature to share on Facebook and Twitter simultaneously. Instagram is an application which adds up many features of social network sites in an app and enables all the opportunities.

The social media and social media tools which emerged with the advancement of the Internet carried the marketing studies of the brands to a different dimension. The social network sites, which are one of the social media tools, offer new marketing understanding for the brands and users. The daily frequent use of social network sites by people in the society made it necessary for the brands to take place on these platforms. One of the effective marketing studies the brands apply on these platforms is to create their own virtual brand communities.

2.3. Virtual Brand Communities

Due to the difficulty of the geographical conditions, human communities emerged to fight against the hardships with unity and solidarity. These communities create a common culture with their common lifestyles, behaviours and purposes (Varnalı, 2013a: 17). Semantically, the word community does not express being abstracted but refers to the interpreted and understood sub-culture of the community culture by people (Bernard Cova and Veronica Cova, 2001: 8). The academic accumulation in the sociology field expresses that there have to be three conditions for a human community to be defined as a 'community' (Varnalı, 2013b: 124-125):

- 1) The sense of community: It is the internal bond community members feel for each other and against a community, and as a result of this bond, the community members feel themselves dissociated from the non-members. This feeling binds the individuals to each other and triggers the instinct to move collectively; strengthens the feeling of belonging.
- 2) Shared rituals and traditions: They ensure that a common history and culture of a community is formed and ensure that these are maintained. As the traditional behaviours occurring in the course of time are repeated, they gain meaning, become valuable and become a classic.
- 3) The sense of responsibility towards a community: This feeling leads the members to derive benefit more than helping each other voluntarily and thus members' becoming a part of the brand community.

Technology has become an indispensable part of the daily life with the emergence of social media in the course of time, and the social network

tools became involved in the people' lives increasingly. For this reason, communication skills, behaviours and styles of humankind, and also their socialising manners became subjected to a revolutionary change. Since past years, while it was observed that people formed communities, now instead of these communities, congregations, "digital tribes" which are human groups gathering up on the online means in the axis of the their area of interest, and new social formations which may correspond to humankind's search for belonging and identity (Varnalı, 2013a: 20).

The community concept is growing into a concept the importance of which is increasing in the marketing studies especially today with the Internet's feature to extinguish the time and space pressure. The virtual communities created by the individuals who are far away from each other in the geographical sense by gathering on a common website, discussion group or a fan club site due to their similar areas of interest and thus similar needs, without being physically together, express the new lifestyle which also bears the characteristics of the postmodern communal structure and marketing understanding (Çakır Yeygel, 2010: 14).

The case of being a community is also a case of "being approved", "being shared" and being exalted". Living in a community, belonging to a community, being approved, being shared and respecting what we share are an important means of living happily and peacefully. Also, the consumption congregations designed in the centre of brands function as a belonging group containing these features (Bati, 2013: 146).

The communities which are also called 'virtual congregations' or 'virtual communities' are the groups which probably do not have a face-to-face communication at all, which have created a community by finding each other by means of technology and computers, and have a common lifestyle and feelings. The relation of these communities with marketing is, with the increase in the features which attach the product to the consumer, rather than the product, that the identity and social ties coming together with the product begin to bear importance (Odabaşı, 2014: 79).

As a result of the increasing competition with the advancement of information communication technologies, as the marketing activities show alteration with each passing day, they require more strict strategies. For the brands to carry their brands one step further successfully, one

of the sensations which are necessary to create lately is the brand loyalty. In this case, the brands which are close to “its tribe”, along with creating brand loyalty, are able to carry this onwards. As acting with the sense of community comes into question by creating a universal brand loyalty for these communities which we can define as a community, tribe, congregate, it becomes a strong sensation for the brand users. For these communities to be strong, it is necessary for some conditions to actualise. It is possible to list them as follows (Bati, 2013: 144-145);

- It is necessary to have an easy access to the brand.
- It is necessary to actualise a positive attitude in the users.
- Consumers’ needs and requests should be absolutely answered.
- It is important to meet the demands on time.
- It is necessary for people who will be made to face them to be experienced and properly equipped.
- It is important to tell what should be expected.
- It is necessary to pay attention at meeting the given commitments and fulfilling the given promises.
- It is a necessity to carry out an assignment at the first time and right, and be pursuing.
- It is another necessity that the brands should know their social responsibilities and be decent.

Belonging to a community, creating a community due to the sense of belonging is a common need for people. A community is usually founded around the common interest and values. Companies use this social phenomenon, the bond between the customers, users and suppliers of a company to increase engagement for the common products and convey the sense of loyalty by starting the communities (Heitmann, Prykop and Aschmoneit, 2004:1). A community consists of heterogeneous people in accordance with their age and gender income levels. These people share the passion and the emotion. The community members are not only the ordinary users but also they are like the attorneys of these brands and act collectively. (Bernard Cova and Veronica Cova, 2001: 10).

The brands which build communities compose common experience in the consumers by offering the experiences of their own product or services. In fact, what is important is sharing the “common” values. Usually, consumers talk about

these experiences by coming together and can share them by gathering without distinguishing any language, religion race or gender as they only have a common point (Özgen and Doymuş: 2013: 95). The communities come together in the direction of the elements below (Schau, Muniz and Arnold, 2009: 30):

- Primary experience-based ones
- Lifestyle based ones
- Ideological view based ones
- Brand based ones

Brand communities are the communities which are specialised, which do not have any geographical borders, and are structured on the social relations by the brand fans. These communities are specialised because a well-branded service is in the centre of them. Like other communities, they consist of collective consciousness, ritual, traditions and sense of moral responsibility. The brand communities bear a vital importance for the growing structure and the future of the brand. (Albert, Muniz, Thomas and O’guinn 2001: 412). In order to strengthen the bond between the individuals who use the products or services of the brand, instead of the functional features of the product or the service, the product or the service gathering people around a group emotionally are emphasised (Bati, 2013: 147). The brand communities become effective by establishing the relationship as the person who shares the interest of someone in that brand with the customers who hold the same opinion to persuade the customers for the brand and to be reliable to attach the customers to the brand, for the customers to demonstrate more purchase behaviour and be loyal to be reliable (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006: 46). Brand communities are the places where people have specific areas of interest, ideas, and passions and gather these under the roof of a brand. These communities give the opportunity for people to use the sense of belonging, sharing, trust and loyalty to be social (Akdoğan and Altuntaş, 2015: 139).

While a brand community is a community based on the connections the fans of a brand who share the same enthusiasm establish with the product, brand, company and other customers, social relationships and a well-developed social identity, it ensures keeping the customers and the loyalty (Bilgen, 2012: 4). The brand communities become effective by establishing the relationship as the person who shares the interest of someone in that brand with the customers who hold the same opinion to persuade the customers for the brand and to be reliable to attach the customers to the brand,

for the customers to demonstrate more purchase behaviour and be loyal to be reliable (Bagozzi and Dholakia: 2006: 46).

Brand communities are the human communities which adopt the relationship they established with a brand as a common characteristic, gather through their common interests, and brought forth a functional congregate as a result of the collective existence processes in the course of time (Varnali, 2013a: 148). By means of devotion to a definite lifestyle introduced by the brand, brand communities offer a sense of gaining a meaning, self, belonging. These emotions ensure that the loyalty is created and they also ensure bringing forth a continuity for the future term life of a brand (Özgen and Doymuş: 2013: 94). If it is necessary to classify the community brands, it can be divided into two as marketer-centred brand communities and consumer-centred brand communities. In the consumer-centred virtual communities, the users are allowed to share photographs, videos and contents. In the marketer-centred brand communities, the companies communicate and continue it with the current and potential customers (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon: 2010, 433).

The brand communities which are built either by the brands themselves or by the fanatics of the brands and which are carefully followed by the brands within the scope of the verbal marketing strategies, play an important role in the processes of keeping the communication between the customer and the brand alive, sustaining customer satisfaction in terms of strengthening it and creating brand loyalty as one of channels in which marketing communication is operated (Akca, 2014: 219).

With the fact that the brands build their own communities and that these communities are present in the virtual environments, the concept of “virtual brand communities” emerges. The brand communities are the communities which are shaped in the virtual field and which especially involve commercial brands. For some consumers, the brands symbolise the value of the quality, status or reputation and they take the sense of belonging and uniqueness into consideration. These consumers build their own sub-cultures around the virtual brand community with the similar passion or cultural structure and shape their community and they participate in them. The virtual brand communities are the places which strengthen the brand loyalty, start the long-standing consumer-

brand relationship, continue and encourage it (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon: 2010, 432). The virtual brand communities on the social network sites are popular with gathering many users around the common area of interest, especially in the community activities. For example, Ford created a fan page on Facebook named as “Ford Drivers U” to communicate with the current and potential customers. Although many Facebook users are college students, Ford provides many promotions to them. Facebook users discuss their favourite Ford vehicles by uploading their own photos and videos (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon: 2010, 433).

3. EXAMINING THE VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES IN THE SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

One of the most successful examples to give as the virtual brand communities is Harley-Davidson and the other one is Apple. Apple brand is one of the leader brands in the technology field in recent years. When the word “Apple” is searched on Google, thousands of results come up and this shows the power and success of Apple as a company (Varnali, 2013a: 147). With its brand strategy since its first day until today, Apple company has distinguished itself from other companies. The company has always emphasised its distinguishing features. Since the first day it came onto the market, it has put forward its differences from Microsoft. With its first advertisement, it marginalised Microsoft, distinguished and exalted itself. With its unique features such as both by its applications and by its “apple identity”, Apple company has transformed everyone into a user and a fan of Apple. As its new product launch is awaited impatiently, Apple is a brand which receives thousands of orders even before its new phone begins to be sold. With its slogan as “think different”, Apple, stating that it is different every time, has a loyal customer portfolio. Also, there are mobile phone users separated as Apple users and Samsung users. Apple has infused the sense of belonging into the customers so much that users do not use any other brand as they feel as if they have betrayed Apple if they use any other brand. Every new product of Apple bears a new importance for Apple users. Tech-savvies have Apple communities where they guess new Apple products and even turn this subject into a competition. In these communities, even the lost Apple products are reported by notifying to the users. Apple users completely live the sense of belonging to a brand, and brand loyalty at the highest level (Varnali, 2013a: 151). One of the

reasons for the fact that Apple is one of the brands about which content is created most is that it has a loyal user group (Varnali, 2013a: 147).

When the brand community is mentioned, the first brand coming to minds and included in many studies in the literature is Harley-Davidson. In the book called “The Power of Cult Branding”, Harley-Davidson is introduced among the nine brands which serve as a model to the infinite customer loyalty. While Harley-Davidson was embraced by single men working as bodily labourers in the rural at the beginning, today’s Harley community reflects the mixed profile of America. What type of job one does is not important in this living consumer culture. Even if the users are shopkeepers, contractors, blacksmiths, teachers, doctors or attorneys, membership is open to everyone. Harley owners share the love for long roads, the freedom coming with travelling and membership to Harley family. When their status which was regarded as outlaws once, is examined closely, it turns into a group of individuals who joined in the collective Harley-Davidson experience in order to meet their human need toward belonging. Also, with its every kind of consumption product or service as stores, rich product portfolio, organisations, cafés, clothes, etc. Harley-Davidson almost shows creating brand loyalty in a way that would serve as a model for all brands. The brands which are classified as the extreme examples of the brand communities like Harley-Davidson are not really different from the brands like Apple. Harley has Harley Owners Groups—HOG, and Apple has Mac Users Groups –MUGs. In general, the brand communities like Harley-Davidson and Apple may be presenting something the individuals sharing the same opinion feel like they lack it in their lives. The individuals seek after giving a meaning to their lives through social engagement with people who have similar areas of interest and develop the sense of identity during this process (<http://thebrandage.com/neden-ait-oluruz-marka-topluluklarinin-sosyolojik-ve-psikolojik-analizi/>).

In this study, the contents of Harley-Davidson and Apple brands as examples for the virtual brand communities on the most used social network site Facebook were examined. It was aimed to examine how the brands managed the virtual brand communities with the Facebook studies. When the name of Harley-Davidson brand is searched in the Facebook search bar, the results showed up were as in Image – 2. Due to the Facebook using location, the Harley-Davidson store located in Izmir shows up in the first place of the

list. As it is seen in the list, pages for Harley-Davidson’ stores and restaurants in various cities were opened. The official page of the company and the fan page are also seen in the list. It is also a probability that only the official pages of the brand would show up in the search results, however, this brand opened pages for the local café and restaurants as well.

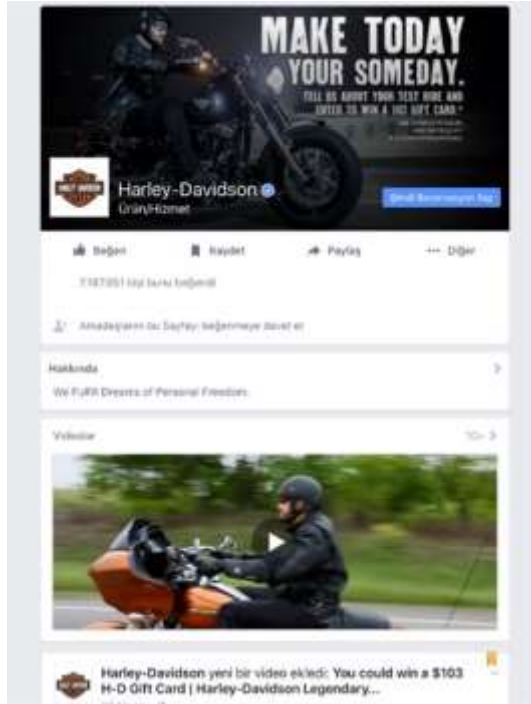
Image – 2



Source: Facebook Search Engine, 2.06.2016

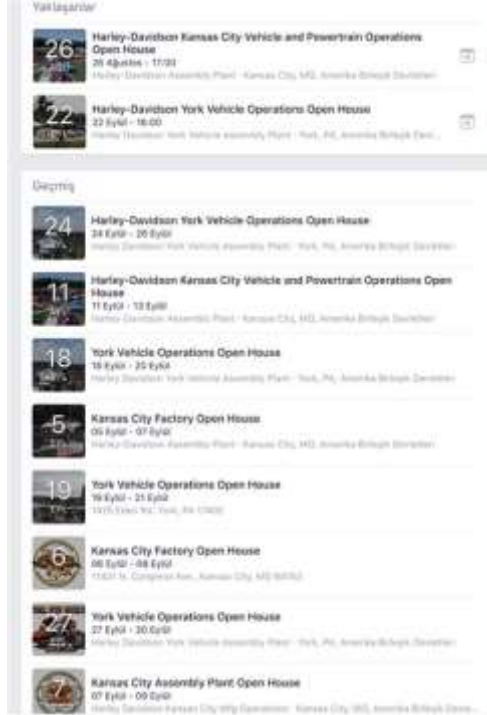
When the official Facebook page of Harley-Davidson is opened, the page in Image – 3 is seen. There are around 7 million of people who liked this page and joined this community. With the greatness of the number, it is observed that Harley-Davidson fans have gathered together globally on this platform. Many Harley fans gather on this platform without any geographical borders and cultural differences. When the upcoming events on the page in Image – 4 are observed, there are many events. The company which has created a large communication network here announces its events to its members in this place. Harley-Davidson brand is also a popular brand with the events it organises worldwide.

Image – 3



Source: Facebook Harley-Davidson Page, 2.06.2016

Image – 4



Source: Facebook Harley-Davidson Page, 2.06.2016

In Image – 5, how Harley-Davidson company uses the social media in the marketing communication studies is observed. In the videos it shares, it emphasises that it is the biggest social

media promotion in the spring. When viewed from this aspect, it is understood that the company organises promotions via social media at other times as well. So as to join this promotion, the members are requested to share the photograph of their best experiences. In return to this, a gift card worth 103 dollars will be given. It is stated this prize will be given at every hour of the day and night for 64 days. As for the participation, the photograph of the person with a new Harley-Davidson the person uses, a sentence about their test-drive experience in 25-word limit and the tags they will add when sharing in Facebook newsfeed are stated. As it is understood from this campaign as well, besides the virtual community studies, Harley-Davidson brand maintains the marketing communication studies via social media quite effectively and creatively. Without any doubt, this promotion is a study which will affect many users. Also, that the rules are written in a simple and plain language and the ease of the participation are encouraging. In Image – 6, it is seen that the image of a user who sent his photograph is shared. Some of the received photographs are shared to encourage the participants. In this way, the photographs of the participants are shared on the international Facebook page and also the shares of the users are not unreciprocated with these shares done. Some users are even encouraged to share only to appear on this international page.

Image – 5



Source: Facebook Harley-Davidson Page, 2.06.2016

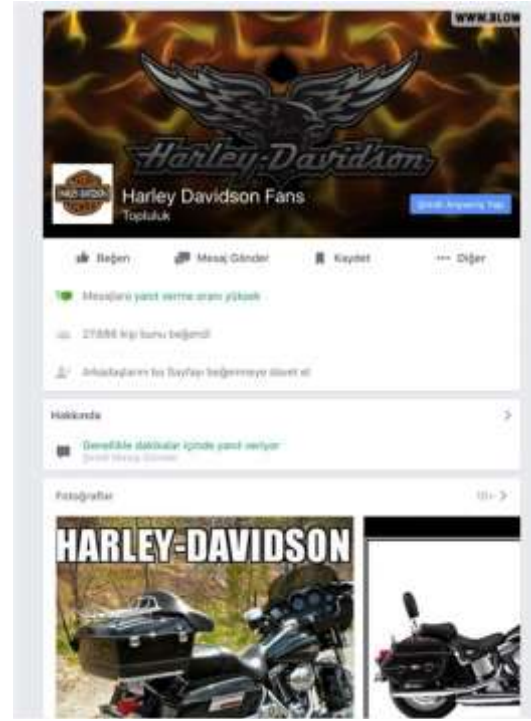
Image – 6



Source: Facebook Harley-Davidson Page, 2.06.2016

The fan page of the brand which is known for its fans and even known to bear brand loyalty at a high level is as in Image – 7. What is usually observed on the page are shares like in Image – 8. The text of the message in this kind of shares is usually as specified in the image. The text encourages liking, commenting and even sharing. While asking for these, also by remarking it to the users to comment, Harley-Davidson reminds them of the love they have for their motorcycles. They communicate with the people emotionally. In the last sentence, they wish that the users have a good motorcycle. This text encourages people to share, comment, in short, to communicate.

Image – 7



Source: Facebook Harley-Davidson Fan Page, 2.06.2016

Image – 8



Source: Facebook Harley-Davidson Fan Page, 2.06.2016

Another example given to the brand communities in this study is Apple company. First of all, when Apple is searched in Facebook searches, official pages like Harley-Davidson do not show up. Many people who search the Apple name on Facebook may experience disappointment in this regard. It is possible to think something like

such a big company as Apple definitely has to have an official page. Unlike all big companies, Apple is one of the rare companies which do not use social media actively. That Apple does not have an official page on either Facebook or Twitter became a topic discussed on the Internet. The reasons why Apple does not use social media can be explained as follows (<http://www.imfnd.com/blog/6-reasons-why-apple-doesnt-use-social-media/>);

- Apple lets people talk about it, open pages about it. Apple chooses to remain silent as a company. However, people talk about new products and create a buzz about Apple.

- Apple has the best customer loyalty in its category. Companies use social media to build brand communities, increase the engagement rate with the customers, use customer services, increase the sales, and maintain the customer loyalty and the customer retention. As Apple already has the best customer loyalty, it does not find it necessary to use social media.

- Apple is the most valuable brand worldwide.

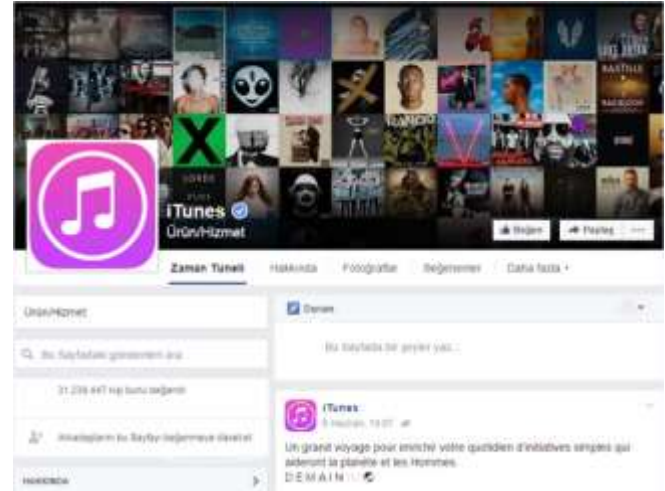
- It offers good and high-quality products and it is heard with the high percentage of mouth-to-mouth marketing style. One of the biggest reasons for Apple's being so successful is making good products. For this reason, it makes people happy to use them. The users propagate a good Apple product from mouth-to-mouth to their friends and circles.

- Apple's customer services continue successfully. Apple understands that it is not enough to create a good product only, and provides good customer services.

- Apple focuses on marketing and business objectives more than the reaching ways. Apple is not interested in the technical ways. What is important for the company is the marketing and business purposes.

Apple does not have either an official company page or a fan page. Apple only has official pages for its own applications which are iTunes, App Store and Apple Music. The official iTunes page is seen in Image – 9. iTunes is an application used to download music, movie, video and podcasts. The page has more than 31 million users. The posts on iTunes page are as in Image – 10.

Image – 9



Source: Facebook iTunes Page, 2.06.2016

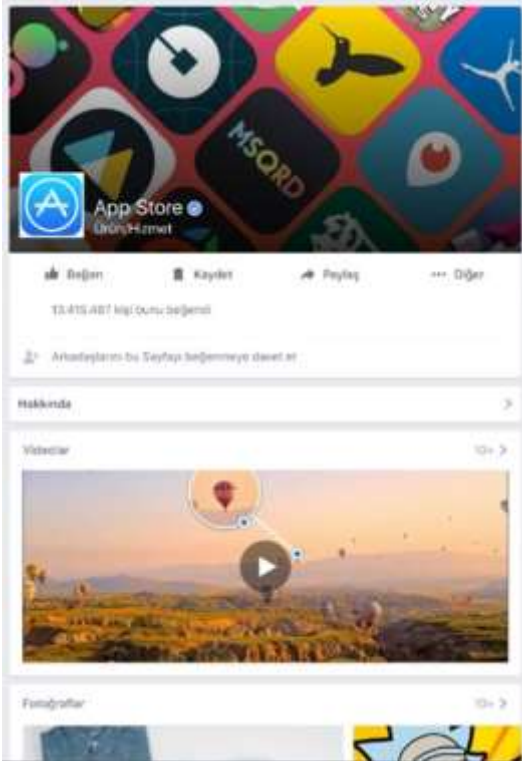
Image – 10



Source: Facebook iTunes Page, 2.06.2016

Another most used application of Apple is the App Store. It is a program the users use to download an application to their Apple devices. The official page of the App Store is followed by approximately 13 million users. The App Store page is seen in Image – 11. The content of the page is seen in Image – 12. Here, information about new applications is given and there are short promotional videos.

Image – 11



Source: Facebook App Store Page, 2.06.2016

Image – 12



Source: Facebook App Store Page, 2.06.2016

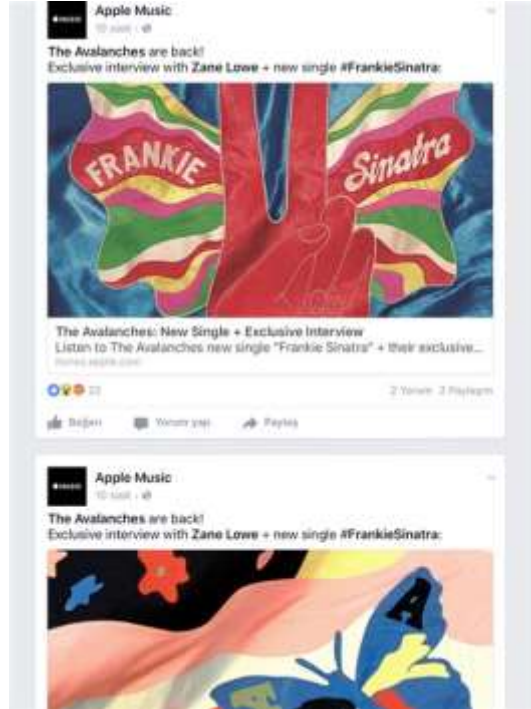
Apple Music is the new online music platform of Apple. This application has an official page on Facebook as well. There are more than 2 million users in this application. Apple Music is a music archive. The application which began to be used newly only in 2015 offers a free use for three months. Along with its newness, this promotion is a suitable idea to introduce the application to the users and familiarise them with it. The application requires a monthly premium subscription after three months. Here, there is the feature to access to the music the experts have chosen, music from four corners of the world and collect them all in an archive. The official page of Apple Music is seen in Image – 13. It is seen in the content of Image – 14 that information regarding the newly released albums of the artists is given.

Image – 13



Source: Facebook Apple Music Page, 2.06.2016

Image – 14



Source: Facebook Apple Music Page, 2.06.2016

4. CONCLUSION

As a result of the advancement in the information communication technologies, it is seen that digital media is dominating and social media is increasingly gaining more importance. Now social media is a concept which is inevitable and included in every moment of life for an individual. The old marketing understandings for the brands have undergone changes in this direction. The marketing activities with the traditional marketing methods are not enough anymore. From big companies to small companies, every company has a social network account. Social network sites have turned into necessary platforms for people to communicate with each other and be informed about the brands. Now, the users are able to follow the brands they like via these media as well. Instead of the one-direction communication in the traditional marketing methods, the brands organise more effective studies by means of double-direction and mutual engagement in the social media. The marketing understanding that the brands use effectively today with the social media, which is a new medium, is the virtual brands. As an example of virtual brands, the content on the Facebook pages of Harley-Davidson and Apple company is examined. Harley-Davidson brand, which is known for brand loyalty studies and its success for a long time, does shares on its official Facebook page

every day. With the shares it does every day, it constantly communicates with the users and reminds its brand. These shares are the studies organised to strengthen the marketing studies, increase the brand loyalty and communicate with the users. In the social media studies the brand organises, user-centred content, promotions and product overviews are included. The official page and fan page of Harley-Davidson brand use Facebook actively and successfully. Apple brand is another brand with a high brand loyalty. Apple, which is successful in terms of brand loyalty and does not need social media studies, follows a different strategy, unlike many other companies. Apple company does not need an official page in the social media. The company which uses especially the mouth-to-mouth marketing way continues its brand community successfully without being active in the social media.

As a result of this study, Harley-Davidson brand is a virtual brand community which carries out its studies on Facebook which is a social network site. As for Apple brand, while now every company has an official page, with a different strategy, it does not have either an official page or a fan page. Nevertheless, Apple has official Facebook pages about its applications. In this case, it might be in need of Facebook studies about its brand applications. Even though the brand seems like it does not place importance to the social media studies, it nevertheless carries out the advertisements of its applications in the social media. That it does not have any study in social media exactly does not come into question. Apple, which is a social brand community, exhibits an example of a virtual brand community with its social network site studies of its applications.

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