

Progress in IS

Francisco J. Martínez-López
Rafael Anaya-Sánchez
Rocio Aguilar-Illescas
Sebastián Molinillo

Online Brand Communities

Using the Social Web for Branding and
Marketing

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Francisco J. Martínez-López
Dept. Business Administration
University of Granada
Granada, Spain

Marketing Group
Open University of Catalonia
Barcelona, Spain

Rocio Aguilar-Illescas
Dept. Economics &
Business Administration
University of Malaga
Malaga, Spain

Rafael Anaya-Sánchez
Dept. Economics &
Business Administration
University of Malaga
Malaga, Spain

Sebastián Molinillo
Dept. Economics &
Business Administration
University of Malaga
Malaga, Spain

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Originally, human communities were comprised of people who shared a value system and interpersonal trust (Wiegandt, 2009). The basic motive for belonging to a community has evolved through the twentieth century, becoming increasingly based on an individual's interests and needs (Wilson, 1990), not solely geography or family. This new type of community combines traditional community values with individuals' needs such as self-actualization (Von Loewenfeld, 2006).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) strengthen the role of interests and needs, decreasing the importance of a person's location on their integration into a specific community (Uslaner, 2000); the ubiquity of the Internet greatly facilitates the expansion of the phenomenon of virtual communities (Plant, 2004). The evolution of the Internet resulted in websites evolving from mere places of transactions to spaces of dialogue where users share their experiences. With the integration of individuals comes the integration of their thoughts, feelings, statements, and actions in relation to brands (Weber, 2007). These communities, which tend to be linked to a common topic, problem or task that connects the distinct users, have their own codes of conduct, both implicit and explicit (Uribe, Rialp, & Llonch, 2010). Furthermore, they are usually specialized, geographically disperse, and based in dynamic networks that allows users to present their shared values (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004).

The communities, supported by technology platforms, currently attract an ample percentage of the population and generate a high level of trust among their members. When a common sentiment is shared, the bonds within the virtual community are strengthened (Wiegandt, 2009). Some of the communities' characteristics are related with members' continuous, asynchronous or real-time and rapid use of chat, forums, etc. (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010), features made possible by the Internet, its global span, etc. (Uribe et al., 2010). However, in the present day, the Internet advertisers finds itself facing new challenges, like identifying the

diverse interests of each user in order to send them content specifically tailored to them in real time (Li et al., 2012).

Virtual communities are based around a social component, which in certain cases, can develop explicitly around a brand (Palazón & Sicilia, 2010). Brands can play a significant role here, since consumers use them to define and express their personality and also present distinct emotions towards them. Therefore, brands are elements that help to articulate the shared values of the community members, a basic feature of supporting the integration of the communities' members into the group (Wiegandt, 2009). Furthermore, consumers are increasingly encouraged in online communities to make decisions about products and brands (Kozinets, 2002).

Thus, many companies (e.g., Intel, Walmart or Microsoft) have created online brand communities that recognize and reward prizes for user participation to support their other efforts in marketing (Powell, Groves, & Dimos, 2011). In some cases, the shared interest for a brand is so strong that communities are spontaneously formed without the aid of the company itself (Wiegandt, 2009).

The appearance of these virtual communities, together with other phenomena such as globalization, creates new challenges and opportunities for brands and products (Bellman, Johnson, Lohse, & Mandel, 2006). Because of these challenges and opportunities, companies' ability to succeed in the current economic climate depends in great part on the social value that their portfolio of products is able to create (Wiegandt, 2009); meaning, the feeling of the conversations of the consumers, both current and future, in online communities is strongly connected to the reputation and positioning that the brand ends up having (Weber, 2007). Companies can improve the efficiency of their process of developing new products if they have support in these communities, which is especially useful in the stages of generating new ideas or testing new products or services (Okazaki, 2007). Additionally, community's usefulness to the companies' ends is increased when the community is explicitly focused on their brand and/or category of product or service (Kim & Jin, 2006).

This has led to the study of online communities, including brand-related communities, being an emerging field of interest to various scientific disciplines (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009; Li, 2004), not only on an academic level, but also on a business level (Sung et al., 2010). Online communities, especially brand-related ones, grow day to day as a result of improved contact between consumers, allowing them to gain information that helps with their consumption decisions (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalú, 2007). Because of this, marketing professionals need to understand how to promote and manage online brand communities (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). However, the negative aspect of this is that many companies have rushed to create or participate in online communities to promote their brands without having a clear understanding of how communities function or how to use them to best benefit their brands and businesses (Spaulding, 2010).

As a consequence of the appearance of online brand communities and of the concept of co-creation,¹ the study of how to manage brands or branding on the Internet has changed and is now one of the most talked about topics in marketing research (Ewing, Wagstaff & Powell, 2013). In many cases the involvement of consumers or users in product management is due to word-of-mouth (WOM), which is of great importance and interest to the organizations in general due to the amount of conversations taking place on the Internet and the level to which these conversations are able to influence the consumers' behavior towards a brand (Weber, 2007). A large part of the power exercised by the consumer is due to the fact that people are increasingly talking about products online on websites that are not controlled by the brands themselves. Therefore, the challenge for companies is to enter into the dialogue created on the Web; the stronger and more positive the dialogue is and the more users there are talking about a brand, the stronger this brand will be. This fact leads to brands tending to design their websites as places for aggregation of content and participation of users (Weber, 2007).

In order to be able to take advantage of the growth of virtual communities to benefit companies, it is equally important to understand why users become a part of these communities. Over the past few years, social psychologists, consumer researchers and brand-culture researchers have investigated and debated what a community is as well as how they are created, are developed and how they create strong relationships with users (Ewing et al., 2013).

The study of the community's behavior, of the users' motivations and of social interactions is already varied and complex, showing multiple motives and objectives (de Souza & Preece, 2004), without considering the complexity of developing the necessary software. The community has come to have an important influence on the users themselves, further strengthening their bond. In some cases the user considers these online communities to be a substitute for their real lives, recreating all of their actions; they are an ideal platform for fulfilling their needs such as socialization (Seraj, 2012). The main motives indicated by several studies are, in general, related to the interaction between users and/or consumers and the exchange of knowledge (Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007). Some of the other motives that strengthen communication within the community include negotiation of the rules of the community, dealing with opposing values and confirmation of similarities (De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). Therefore, one can say that the user is looking for an experience that provides social satisfaction as much as they are hoping to learn about the product or brand (Yang, 2010).

The rapid development of these communities has led to the appearance of new methods of study such as Netnography (Kozinets, 1999, 2002). One of Netnography's purposes is the studying of information published on the Internet by users in order understand the behavior of different online groups (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). However, there is not a classification system for online communities that is globally

¹ Involvement and participation of the user or consumer in the creation or modification of the product and/or Brand (Weber, 2007).

accepted (Porter, 2004); rather authors tend to categorize them based on the variables that are important to their particular discipline (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2001). There is practically at least one virtual community for every aspect of real life (Yang, 2010). The most ubiquitous type of online community is the Internet Social Network (e.g., Facebook) (Li et al., 2012).

This book delves deeply into this budding and thrilling area of online brand communities. First, the initial topics that define the backdrop of online communities are introduced. Specifically, question about the evolution of the web, the foundation and pillars of the so-called Social Web, the use of the Social Web for users and businesses and the evolution of the marketing mind-set to adapt to the Social web will be presented, among other themes.

Once its backdrop is presented, we move on to deal with specific online brand communities in detail. The evolution of the concept of virtual communities will be looked at with special emphasis given to brand-related virtual communities. To this end, the trends related to branding and brand management will be analyzed. Next, a classification system for online brand communities will be created, establishing the main factors that motivate a person to join one; we will also elucidate and analyze the factors that increase appeal, participation and user retention. Then, the application of the process of creating value in a community, both from the point of view of business interest and from the point of view of the user, is studied, analyzing the user's new role as "prosumer".² Finally, the necessary steps and stages of the successful development of an online brand community are presented.

² Prosumer is a concept resulting from the union of the words producer and consumer. It aims to capture the new role of the participant consumer in online communities, which in many cases lead to active collaboration in the modification and creation of new products.

Chapter 2

Evolution of the Web

2.1 Evolution of Information and Communication Technologies

The importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT hereafter) in current society is highlighted in many sources. One illustrative example is the words of Kofi Annan, the ex-secretary general of the United Nations:

Information and communication technologies are not a panacea or magic formula. But they can improve the lives of everyone on this planet. (...) We have tools that can propel us toward the Millennium Development Goals; instruments with which to advance the cause of freedom and democracy; vehicles with which to propagate knowledge and mutual understanding. (Annan, 2003)

In our current society of knowledge and information, considered by some to be the “Era of Information,” has ICT at its very core, which affects all aspects of daily life including the economy and businesses (Garrido, 2010). The ICT are an amplification of the Information Technologies (IT), which includes a wide range of technologies based in information systems, apart from computing Martínez-López and Luna (2008) point out four major changes in the ICT’s evolution in recent decades:

- Between 1960 and 1980 there was the first period characterized by the focus on large machines, mainframes (central units) and the beginning of minicomputers. In this phase they were primarily used by large companies and institutions.
- The eighties were characterized by the expansion of personal computer use, stemming from the appearance of IBM’s PC in 1981. From then on, companies have progressively integrated their use into the business setting.
- The momentum of the Internet in the nineties produced a paradigm shift, gaining importance in external communications. This phase had the establishment of connections between all areas and levels as a priority, making the computer into a ubiquitous element of life.

- The fourth phase, in which we currently find ourselves, is characterized by the appearance of convergent, digital multimedia content, promoted by the maturation and possession and use of information infrastructures at the global level, causing evolution towards the Society of Information and Knowledge.

Peattie and Peters (1997) summarized this process in three phases:

- *The computer age* (from the seventies through the beginning of the eighties): characterized by not yet generalized ICT due to their unavailability. However, there was a growing consciousness about the strategic importance of ICT in the collection, storage and management of information.
- *The PC age* (from the middle of the eighties through the beginning of the nineties): the availability of PCs to small and medium businesses and to consumers increased the use of ICT in the development and execution of business strategies.
- *The communication age* (from the beginning of the nineties): the capacity of communication and connection within and outside of companies grew, leading to changes in distribution channels and permitting direct contact with consumers.

Currently, the adoption of and investment in ICT is increasing on a global level, showing surprisingly high growth numbers over the last two decades. ICT offer extraordinary opportunities for the evolution of business information systems and for electronic commerce (Weber & Kauffman, 2011). The possible benefits derived from the use of ICT have been analyzed in various contexts including the labor market, education, health, commerce, etc. The interest in ICT stems from the radical changes caused by its adoption and its effect on the evolution of ways to establish relations between various economic agents (Pérez-Hernández & Sánchez-Mangas, 2011).

ICTs are ubiquitous in the social, work and business levels of society, and it is predicted that they will continually play an increasingly vital role in daily life. ICTs allow people to develop their activities more quickly, easily and efficiently, and allow companies to deduce their inefficiencies, accelerating and improving their processes. Additionally, improvements are seen in equal measure in communications within companies as well as between companies (Ghadar & Spindler, 2005).

Aside from the progress and change in life-conditions and the social change around the globe (Rico, 2005), ICTs have had a clear impact on the business world; they have brought about modifications of distribution and production processes (Bharadwaj, El Sawy, Pavlou, & Venkatraman, 2013), as well as of work organization (Rico, 2005). Information is gaining ever greater importance and taking on a significant role in business. ICTs, by means of creating communication networks that increase the availability of information and improve compatibility among networks have become a key part of developing relationships with clients, employees and other businesses.

Lately, this has forced companies to redesign their organizational processes to avoid being left out of the game (Ahadi, 2004; Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Sieber,

2004). All these changes are made with the end in mind of adapting and improving companies' competitive edge. They contribute to the improvement of productivity in terms of fabrication, business efficiency, market penetration, cost reduction and elimination of manual work and processes, all of which help to strengthen a company's competitive advantage (Brynjolfsson & Hitt, 2000; Fuentelsaz, Maicas, & Polo, 2005; Martín, 2010; Rico, 2005; Sieber, 2007).

Additionally, ICTs have reformed traditional businesses, which have adapted to a strategy that is modular, distributed, interfunctional and oriented towards global business processes. They allow work to be done regardless of time, distance or function (Bharadwaj et al., 2013), and they blur the line between digital products and the concrete ICTs supporting them (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; El Sawy, 2003).

Bharadwaj et al. (2013) analyzed ICTs' current situation from a strategic point of view. They point out that, traditionally, the business strategy of a company directs strategies and actions related to ICT (alignment view). Due to businesses' becoming increasingly digital—from the transformations that have integrated ICTs into processes, capacities, products, services, etc.—it has become clear that, rather than there being a hierarchy between a business's strategic direction and the direction of the ITC, a fusion of the two must be created: digital business strategy. To better understand this, the scope of action of the ICTs, their scale, speed and the sources of value creation must be studied.

The ICT revolution is increasing both people's job skills and consumer sophistication, augmenting education and awareness on a global level. In this way the increased use of technology and the increase in work productivity are supported, which, in the end, leads to economic growth (Quah, 2002, p. 22) and transforms social relations among consumers and between consumers and businesses (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Susarla, Oh, & Tan, 2012) (oh god, rework that).

Penetration of ICTs affects growth by diffusing knowledge and improving businesses' decision-making abilities, which in turn increase efficacy and efficiency of finding information sources. Additionally, product costs are reduced while demand and investment are increased, resulting in progress in both production and growth (Khuong, 2011). Therefore, the capacity to receive information more quickly and with greater security produces changes in the internal organization and structure of companies as well as in their external relationships (Martínez-López & Luna, 2008).

Since the middle of the nineties, researchers have been studying the organizational and economic changes that companies underwent when integrating the Internet into their production processes. It has been observed that information has improved decision-making, facilitated interconnectivity with other business and consumers and has increased productivity. Also, the Internet has increased consumers' choices, allowing consumers access to a considerable number of options, usually beyond the limit of what they can consciously analyze (Feldman, 2002).

2.2 Evolution of the Web

Friedman (2006) points out that the world is becoming flatter, due to diverse flattening agents including ICTs, which accelerate global changes. The modern world is increasingly virtual, globalized and connected thanks to the Internet (Castells, 2001).

At the beginning of the seventies, the web was created by the United States Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), with the goal of decentralizing electronic communications. In 1969, DARPA, together with other research groups, developed ARPANET, which came to be called ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) when certain universities and research groups were granted access. ARPANET, based on NCP (Network Control Program) protocols, was considered the backbone of the Internet. From 1982 on, ARPANET and all other existing networks switched to TCP/IP, which is a collection of general guide designs and specific protocol implementation that allows a computer to talk to a network. The same decade saw the appearance of DNS (Domain Name System), a system of hierarchical nomenclature for computers, whose objective is to make the equipment connected to a network localizable and controllable (Pfaffenberger, 2002).

At the beginning of the eighties ARPANET split into Milnet and NSFNET, each of which had different objectives. Milnet came to be used for North American government services, while NSFNET became a network used for academic and research purposes.

By the nineties, with the emergence of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the associated protocol, http (hypertext transfer protocol), the Internet was coming to resemble the web we know today. The emergence of the World Wide Web and hypertext transfer protocol alleviated the congestion of web traffic and increased the number of users who could access and use it. Since then many distinct versions of Internet protocol (IP) have emerged, the most noteworthy of which are IPv4 and IPv6. The latter of these came preloaded on the majorities of computer systems.

The use and expansion of the Internet, along with the appearance of a great amount of companies that were either web-based or were accessible via the web, occurred extremely rapidly over the course of the nineties. In 2001 the “dot-com bubble” burst, marking a crucial moment in the development of the web when many concluded that expectations about the web’s business potential had been greatly exaggerated. However, this crisis was nothing more than the starting point of a great, continual ascension that continues into the present. This expansion has allowed agents and technologies with the right capacities to arise and take their place (O’Reilly, 2005).

The Internet has hugely affected how we live and completely modified the human experience. In a way, the Internet is used as another form of media, albeit one better suited than others to finding information, buying or selling products, watching television shows, searching for friends and entertainment and for participating in political circles (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010). Tutschku, Tran-

Gia and Andersen (2008) have noted that the Internet is more than just a collection of physical networks made of IT equipment, but rather something that has evolved into a network of applications with information and content, making the user into a participatory element. Therefore, the Internet functions as a structure, within which users participate freely, with intelligent applications based in knowledge and services and whose rapid evolution forces the constant creation of new methodologies to implement and operate in layers of applications and networks superimposed on one another.

The Internet has evolved due to the changes and advances of the technologies supporting it. These technologies, as well as the focuses and philosophies underlying the management and development of the web, have been given various names for different versions, from the era of the PC through the future Web 4.0. As of yet, no one has come to an agreement about what to call the current era. It is generally accepted that we are witnessing phase 2.0 of the Web, although some believe us to be in phase 3.0 and others even go so far as to say we are living in the stage of Web 4.0. In any event, the defining elements lie in the differing opinions about which distinctive factors conform to each version. What is generally accepted is the importance of content created through user participation to the evolution of the Web.

Weber (2007) says that we are currently in the third phase of the web but that we will soon be entering the fourth. He explains that Web 1.0 (1989–1995) was the era of pages built using HTML. Web 2.0, which began with the arrival of browsers, allowed people to navigate the web, search and participate in e-commerce efficiently, which set the basis for the Social Web, the advanced version of Web 2.0. Web 3.0 has arrived in recent years and conforms more to the interests of users. Finally, Web 4.0 is known as the Emotive Web and is based in high bandwidth technology that allows for rich and visual content, allowing users to achieve feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment. In turn, WI-FI and mobile telecommunication technologies allow users to connect from anywhere, making access ubiquitous.

2.2.1 Web 1.0

The functionality of the Web was based on a system in which a Webmaster and a content generator (companies, generally) created a web page and added content, which users could then display in a static form (Bernal, 2009). Web 1.0, which is limited in terms of functionality compared with later versions, was mainly used to publish documents and conduct transactions; companies were limited to publishing information about themselves and their products to enable online sales (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). The following are some additional characteristics (Martorell, Solanas, & Sabaté, 2011):

- *Asymmetrical information flow.* Companies and consumers began having extensive sources of information at their disposal to shape their policies and affect their decision-making.
- *Consumer dispersion.* Few users could generate content as this demanded knowledge and software that was not available to most users.
- *Content created by organizations.* The majority of web sites were created by companies and communication media. They did employ unique languages or strategies for this new channel; the first corporate websites were basically places with advertisements for buying and selling online.

In summation, Web 1.0 had a business model that was based on offline models; it was thought of as another alternative sales channel with no significant differences from other channels.

2.2.2 Web 2.0: The Start of the Social Web

Web 2.0 can be seen as an update or second version of the Internet in which users actively participate in its development and expansion by uploading new content, a key difference from Web 1.0. Another basic aspect is the collaboration and interaction between users, a defining element that makes the web into what is known as the Social Web. This participation and collaboration are manifested in the form of virtual communities, virtual social networks, web aggregators, etc.; tools that will be analyzed later on. Web 2.0 represents a paradigm shift, a change from the distribution of products to the distribution of services, which can in turn be used and combined with other services (Bernal, 2009). The Web evolved from a top-down model to a model in which the users are the genuine protagonists (Maciá & Gosende, 2010).

The term “2.0” was coined by Tim O’Reilly, at the suggestion of Dale Dougherty, vice president of O’Reilly Media, after brainstorming ideas for a name for the “O’Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference,” which took place at the end of 2004. O’Reilly (2005) described the Web 2.0 as a series of principles and practices, including seeing the web as a platform as well as exploiting collective intelligence. He considered the derailing of the dot-coms to represent a crucial junction for the Web, being the starting point for the conference. Web 2.0 is viewed as a second generation of the Internet, based on new technical aspects that appeared towards the end of the last century; it is the result of the implementation and innovation of new technologies and standards within the platform itself (Bernal, 2009). It is based in services and information pushed forward by the communities and users themselves through virtual communities, social networks, blogs, wikis, forums, etc., which make it possible to have a society that is interconnected and able to communicate, collaborate and define the information existing in the Web (Levy, 2009; Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009). The seven principals of the Web 2.0 as defined by O’Reilly are (Burgos & Cortés, 2009):

- *The Web as a platform*: we use websites as applications.
- *Exploitation of collective intelligence*: the sum of users' knowledge and activities increases the value and activity of the online setting.
- *Perpetual Beta*: software is delivered as a service whose first version (version "Beta") is infinite and the users act as co-developers.
- *Open Models*: open source permits programming and development to be transparent processes, which is imperative for constant improvement.
- *Software is not limited to a single device*: the PC is not the only way to access the Internet.
- *The user is king*: users' online experiences should be based on easy-to-use sites and applications.

Web 2.0's rapid development was a result of users' employing the web in new ways. It allowed the exchange of files peer-to-peer, facilitating communication, collaborative work, democratization of content, and creation of content by users (Lozano, 2008; Maciá & Gosende, 2010). Websites were forced to adapt, switching Web directories to sites that could be labeled as social pages—personal blogs—and online encyclopedias were converted to wikis (Tasner, 2010a).

Social networks, user-generated content, social and intelligent organization of information (RSS, bookmarking, etc.), applications and services linked by mashups stand out as the pillars of the Web 2.0 (Cobo & Pardo, 2007). There are other factors that supported Web 2.0's expansion: the ubiquity of Internet access, the emergence of powerful and accessible analytical systems that generate feedback, the standardization of Web formats that make the integration of content possible, and even the economic crisis, which forced companies to adopt Web 2.0 for competitive ends (Maciá & Gosende, 2010). In Web 2.0 the information, consumers are also producers or contributors; they are "prosumers" (producer + consumer).

Therefore, Web 2.0 is not only an evolution of the Internet, but rather of the use of the Internet as a platform with improves functionality, communication and collaboration; it has allowed an explosion of content, connectivity, and the emergence of new applications and means for interconnectivity between people (Fluss & Eisenfeld, 2009). Web 2.0's tools have switched the focal point of the Internet from business-centric to consumer-centric. This change is precisely what differentiates Web 2.0 from Web 1.0; Web 2.0 is centered on the consumer, and is user-generated, interactive and dynamic, thereby encouraging community participation and building collective intelligence (Singh, Veron-Jackson, & Cullinane, 2008). The consumers of information are also its producers, capable of creating it and distributing it thanks to the availability of a multitude of tools and publication platforms on the Web (Lozano, 2008). These technologies that facilitate publication are a part of Web 2.0's infrastructure; there are content system managers, which enable anyone to create pages for publication such as blogs with no need for Web programming expertise; additionally, there are standardized microformats available that allow the sharing of information with other websites, for example the case of RSS (Rich Site Summary), which will be discussed in a later section.

The websites and applications that emerged in this context exhibit an elevated social component; they allowed profiles to be created and interaction within the site or community, as well as the promotion of user-generated content (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). As a consequence, the co-creation of content between companies and users on the Web like YouTube, Facebook, Delicious, etc. completely changed the role of the user. Companies have had to familiarize themselves with the concepts born out of the Web 2.0, primarily with the new means of relating to users, beginning an assimilation process that is slow but is expected to create large benefits (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Companies must accept that people are becoming as important as the means of communication or the businesses themselves in the generation of knowledge and ideas since they now have the tools and applications needed to express their opinions; this has entailed significant changes in society and the economy (Dans, 2008). Some noteworthy examples of companies having successfully survived the evolution from Web 1.0 to 2.0 and exploited collective intelligence are: Yahoo!, Google, eBay and Amazon (O'Reilly, 2005).

2.2.3 Semantic Web

Many authorities consider the terms “Semantic Web” and “Web 3.0” to be synonymous (e.g., Socco, 2011; Weber, 2007). Other authors point out that the Semantic Web does not constitute a phase in the Web’s evolution in and of itself, but rather deals with a series of IT applications and languages that have improved the intelligence of the Web (e.g., Berners-Lee, Hendler, & Lassila, 2001; Fumero, Roca, & Sáez, 2007; Gruber, 2008; Hendler & Berners-Lee, 2010). We share this viewpoint, although we prefer to treat the Semantic Web as an independent section within Web 3.0.

Credit for the idea of the Semantic Web is given to Tim Berners-Lee, who also promoted the languages of HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language), HTTP (Hyper Text Transfer Protocol) and of the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) system. With the goal of improving his research, Berners-Lee tried to include semantic information in the data contained in the WWW from the beginning, however, due to technological limitations, this was not possible. Berners-Lee et al. (2001) believed that the Semantic Web would make information understandable not only to human beings but also to intelligent systems. Since the emergence of the Semantic Web, many web-based applications have been released that would have previously been inconceivable, ranging from semantic search engines to intelligent agents.¹ In this way, the Semantic Web added semantic metadata and ontology-based data to the Web, making it possible for information to be automatically understood and evaluated by processing machines. The machines are conversing among one

¹ Computer programs without human operators that search for information.

another, making the Web into a huge intelligent library where the users program the behavior of the different data flows; this converts the Internet into a neuronal system capable of understanding itself (Cobo & Pardo, 2007). Because of this, Hendler and Berners-Lee (2010) consider the Semantic Web to constitute a paradigm shift, reaching the next level in the abstraction of the Web's basic infrastructure. However, it is important to note that there have been critical voices that point out the extreme technical difficulties related to its implementation (e.g., Codina, 2003).

The main reason that the Semantic Web is seen as a significant evolution within the Web is that it allows programmers and users to reference real objects without importing the underlying documents where the object,—abstract or otherwise—is described (Hendler & Berners-Lee, 2010). This implies that the Semantic Web allows the identification of real elements with words, images, etc. that are available on the Web. Said connection did not previously exist; the Web did not have any understanding of the real significance of the information it contained nor the connections with elements of reality. The Semantic Web implies an evolution of the Internet beyond its standard definition. In this way, the primary difference between the classic Web and the Semantic Web is that in the latter, data is presented in a structured form and are understandable to the system (Gruber, 2008). Therefore, the Semantic Web is a more expansive Web with greater meaning where, thanks to better defined information, users can find answers to their answers faster and more easily, interacting with the systems instead of merely being passive elements (Celaya, 2008; Hendler & Berners-Lee, 2010). Some of the basic motivations for the Semantic Web were born from the failures of the original Web that caused problems with searching and displaying Web 2.0's applications (Hendler & Golbeck, 2008).

The power of this new Web relies on people being able to find what they are truly looking for. The technologies of the Semantic Web, social networks and the labeling and linking of content will be truly useful when they permit people to do things that matter (Hendler & Golbeck, 2008). The Semantic Web permits a new generation of decentralized management of knowledge leading to an improved flow of information with metadata that can be processed by the machines themselves (Cayzer, 2004). Also, the Semantic Web's platform allows sharing and recycling knowledge (Zhou, Ding, & Finin, 2011). The possibilities of this new platform for automanagement of documents and information, both public and private, are infinite. The primary impact of having a self-analyzing Web is a matter of transparency and access to public information (Gross, 2011).

The power of the web increases through the effect produced by links between distinct elements according Metcalfe's Law, which states that the value of a network increases proportionally to the number of elements it is comprised of squared. In the Web 2.0, this effect is largely due to links between people but not to the labels attached to the data that comprise the Web since these have few labels and do not correctly conform in all cases. In the Semantic Web, however, the opposite situation occurs; the value is generated through ontologies and semantic information and their links but lacks connections between users. However it is, the

importance of both Webs is network-based, either between people or between data (Hendler & Golbeck, 2008).

The lines between Web 2.0 and the Semantic Web are established. However, by looking at various perspectives, it appears that the Semantic Web and Social Web are like two worlds with opposing purposes. Although these perspectives ought to be unified, allowing both families of technology the opportunity to advance together in the Web (Gross, 2011). The combination of both technologies is necessary. This will allow exploitation of the links' effect, revolutionizing the modes of interaction on the Web and aggregating sources of data that could then be shared and made available in different places of the users' choosing (Hendler & Golbeck, 2008).

2.2.4 Web 3.0

Many media have confirmed that the Web 2.0 has been rendered obsolete and that we now find ourselves in the next phase: Web 3.0, mentioned for the first time in 2006, which focuses on artificial intelligence and intelligent machines (Socco, 2011). Among the key elements of the Web 3.0, we find the changes in the habits and methods of website displays, the intelligence of available information, the users' search experiences and the opening of the Web (Tasner, 2010b). The combination of machine and human intelligence afforded by the Semantic Web make information richer, more relevant, timely and accessible by using more powerful languages, neuronal networks, genetic algorithms, etc. In this way, the Web 3.0 is focused on analysis, information processing and its later conversion into ideas.

The web 3.0 was constructed as a revision of the Semantic Web. It has a certain amount of artificial intelligence, which is enabled by exploiting patterns created by active users whose activity is registered as well as by analyzing the processes of collective intelligence generated by the dynamic relationships in the Social Web (Fumero et al., 2007). O'Reilly (2011) considers the next stage in the evolution of the Web to be the Web 3.0. She calls it the Web of feelings and collective intelligence; it is a global mind and network. From a marketing point of view, the Web 3.0 is comprised of five key components (Tasner, 2010b):

- *Microblogging*: sites that consist of sharing one's thoughts in few characters. Examples: Twitter, Plurk and Jaiku.
- *Virtual reality worlds*: spaces visited by users to interact with other users in a 3D platform.
- *Customization/personalization*: features that allow users to create a unique and individual experience. Examples: SendOutCards, Google and Amazon.
- *Mobility*: mobile devices and the ability to connect to the red through them make possible a huge amount of new applications.

- *On demand collaboration*: users interact by supervising documents, collaborating and making changes all in real time. Examples: Google Drive, salesforce.com, slideshare.net and box.net.

2.2.5 Web 4.0 and the Future of the Internet

The evolution of the Internet, since its creating, has developed organically, similarly to how the evolution of a living organism. It has been reconfigured spontaneously due to changes in its key components without following any strict model or design (Murphy, 2010).

Thanks to the proliferation of wireless communication, the connection between people and objects no longer has spatial limitations, allowing for real-time integration, reaching a new level of content and making improved analysis possible. In this way, the Ubiquitous Web that has been talked about for more than a decade has taken on a more important and expansive role (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009).

When considering what would come next in the Internet's evolution, O'Reilly and Battelle (2009) explained that the future lies in what is known as Web Squared, a fusion between the Web and the real world; the Web's growth is no longer linear, but exponential, which is why the next phase is the Web Squared. This new Web would be an evolution of Web 2.0, a platform in which content is generated and shared by users. In this Web, the connections between users and their interaction with technology meld the Internet's users into a "global mind." In the Web Squared, technologies and applications based in semantic, collective intelligence, etc., learn from content, creating more information and making itself worth more than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, one must take into consideration the value created by the fusion of the mobile and social Webs and the convergence between the Web and reality, which will give rise to an augmented reality (López, 2011).

Although it is yet to be examined by the scientific community, various bloggers specializing in Internet and computation-related technological advances have already begun speaking about the Web 5.0 or the Sensory-Emotional Web. Currently, the Web, despite provoking reactions from its users, is itself unaffected by the emotional reactions of its users. However, technologies are being developed that would allow the Web's effects on users to be measured by the Web in such a way that it could register their emotions (e.g., through the phrases that they write or from their facial expression), allowing for greater personalization of each Web-user.

Chapter 3

Foundations and Structure of the Social Web

3.1 Rationing of the Social Web

The concept of the Social Web, exactly as it is currently employed, emerged together with the Web 2.0 in 2004, dealing with two closely related concepts. However, if there are, in fact, sources that are used in an indistinguishable, here we prefer to deal with the Web 2.0 as a technology and the Social Web as a new Web model that resulted from the technological evolution of the Web. Thus, the concept of the Social Web would not be limited to Web 2.0 technology, and would instead transcend it, and encompass new technologies and applications that could enhance the new philosophy of the Social Web. O'Reilly (2005), creator of the concept, has stated that the Social Web is represented by a class of websites and applications in which the users' participation drives the value created; the concept of community is at the heart of this philosophy and plays an important role in media, including Web 2.0 technology. Therefore, the user's transition from being a mere consumer of information to playing the role of creating and modifying content and participating in the Web is fundamental.

The Web 2.0 was born out of Internet users reclaiming tools that enabled participation and horizontal communication between equals beyond email at the end of the twentieth century (De Salas, 2009). Consequently, the Web 2.0 was developed as a more social Web that permitted easier communication, entertainment and sharing in such a way that its users went from being consumers to content creators (Alarcón, Lorenzo, & Gómez, 2010). This new Internet entails a certain degree of danger for companies since users now play a hand in forming the information contained in the Internet; this could also lead to perceptual conflicts if, for example, the user has an image of a company, not necessarily negative, but different from the image that the company itself wants to project (Li & Bernoff, 2009). These evolving ways of viewing the Web and society in general cause different effects in each organization and industry. Nonetheless, they must be

thought of with the changes that currently encompasses them in mind (Weber, 2007), which results from a union of the following aspects (Levy, 2009):

- The maturity of the Internet as a platform and its development in recent years.
- The huge volume of users and devices with access to the Internet.
- The development and improvement of software in relation to usability and interaction with other devices and systems.

This way of understanding the Web presents a series of basic principles, essentially related to knowledge management. The Web serves as a platform whose applications ought to be treated as unique channels and as services, and not simply as technological tools. With this in mind, the user becomes an active element, creating content in addition to consuming it. Now their role can include the composing, collecting, organizing and categorizing and/or aggregating content, which adds value to the information; so users will be also consuming the content created by others (Levy, 2009).

The Web has evolved into an intelligent system and a generator of intelligence, becoming a better and faster way to deliver flexible information to users, only being slowed by the users' and business' sense of insecurity and lack of control over the content (Barnes, Hackathon, Power, & Ring, 2008). Social phenomena have emerged such as *Groundswell*, through which people use technology to get what they need from other people instead of from companies (Li & Bernoff, 2009, p. 12). Value is created thanks to the collective contributions of all the Web's participants; this is commonly labeled as "collective intelligence" or "wisdom of the masses." This value is produced through the aggregation of many contributions of individual users, thanks to websites and applications that allow said participation. The elements that the systems of collective intelligence have in common are the following (Gruber, 2008):

- Content generated by the users that participate in the social process.
- Synergy between people and machines, creating new and useful information.
- Better results, improving as the number of users grows.
- Emerging consciousness, allowing the computer system knowledge that would not be possible just based on human contributions.

The social dimension of the Web is based in the integration of users and their conversations with all the other aspects of the Web. In some cases this means the activity on social networks or microblogs but in others it means bidirectional conversations on e-commerce sites, on corporate websites (Kaushik, 2011). Therefore, the adjective "social" stands out; this is true to such an extent that a large amount of tools that emerged as part of the Web 2.0 are commonly known as social software. Users participate actively in the creation of knowledge, due to their desire to connect with other people, with new interactive technologies and with the online economy (Li & Bernoff, 2009).

The Social Web is comprised of a collection of resources and free, online, user-controlled, interactive applications that expand the users' experiences, knowledge and market power in social processes and in businesses by allowing the creation of

networks used to efficiently create, disseminate and editing of information (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). This is aided by the simplification of the languages used, with technology acting as the motor of change (Martorell, Solanas, & Sabaté, 2011). With this in mind, social software must be based in the following: supporting conversational interaction between individuals or groups, enabling social feedback that allows a group to value others' contributions and having social networks to create and explicitly manage a digital expression of individuals' personal relationships as well as helping them forge new ones (Boyd, 2003).

New social software, along with lowered costs of other barriers to entry such as computers, allows many smaller companies to offer innovation services to millions of online participants. These new kinds of software have led to a previously unseen capacity for sharing knowledge, since it was not previously possible to have a population the size of the users currently connected to the Internet (Gruber, 2008). The new challenge will be searching effectively when it is really necessary as the knowledge shared on the Web is storable, easy to share and searchable.

On the other hand, the interaction between users and applications on the Social Web is evolving into a new paradigm of learning. The Social Web's technologies allow users to express their opinions online; its tools and applications make it possible for active online communities where users express their opinions to exist, often on websites where people with similar tastes, professions or interests, etc. gather (Meerman, 2007). Therefore, the concepts of community and of collective intelligence act as fundamental elements of both the Social Web and its supporting applications (Joyanes, 2009).

The innovative nature of the Social Web is not so much due to the changes of technological components, since the new applications are no more complex than their predecessors, but to the way that users collaborate with one another (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Specifically, participation is the key concept that distinguishes the Social Web from other Web versions (Martorell et al., 2011).

New business models have emerged based in services and small businesses with a small volume of products to take advantage of all the aspects derived from user-participation on the Social Web, e.g. changes to revenue models and switching from mass markets to individual consumers (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). It is essential to understand that the Social Web is not another channel or medium for disseminating marketing messages, but rather a new way of understanding communication; online conversations are increasingly becoming part of real world conversations. Companies have created communities via content, powerful images and conversations. Additionally, they permit people who know one another as well as strangers to share their thoughts about products, offers, faults, etc. (Weber, 2007).

Both communication models and content distribution models have changed as a consequence of greater user participation. In earlier versions of the Web 2.0, there were creators, principally companies, that distributed their contents via a website for consumption by users. Now, many new content creators are emerging, principally media and users through blogs, which distribute the information. This entails the Web growing more complicated, requiring applications that add value by

connecting sources of information and content (Kaushik, 2011). Weber (2007) points out that the Social Web is not just another channel of communication, but rather a complete platform that unifies all the other channels; the users and organizations that participate in it are content aggregators and not channels of communication. Dialogue is the foundation of new communication.

Within the Social Web, social media has come to play a fundamental role. The concept of social media refers to the activities, practices and behaviors exercised within communities where people meet online to share information, knowledge and opinions through media that permit conversation; they facilitate communication and interaction with members of a collective while also facilitating the creation of content, without the need for a high level of computer-expertise (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Rivero & De Andrés, 2011; Safko & Brake, 2009). These media were developed with the primitive technological support available for Web 2.0 applications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Powell, Groves, and Dimos (2011) have pointed out that social media are maturing rapidly thanks to the evolution of their nuclear technology, to consumers adopting the format and to businesses incorporating the format into their strategic models. They explained that social media's growth will continue and that the Internet is going to grow ever more important in people's lives, in the global culture and in all types of companies, including relationships that they initiate between themselves.

3.2 Why Is the Social Web Used?

Using the Social Web's tools could become the central activity for anyone who wants to buy, plan, learn or communicate. Even if it does not dominate our lives, it will become the first place to go in search of news, information, entertainment or fun (Weber, 2007).

From the users' point of view, the main aspect that makes use of the Social Web worthwhile is the fact that they trust horizontal relationships with other similar people more than they do vertical relationships with organizations or people on different levels. This trust leads to consumers preferring to believe other consumers in their own communities, in which they co-create their products and experiences, only searching outside the community for information put forth by sources that are known to be trustworthy on the matter (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010). Social applications represent an advance not only in the range of personal relationships but also in the range of professional relationships (López, 2009). The ways in which consumers communicate amongst themselves, how they meet and exchange information, and how they obtain and consume products have changed dramatically over the last decade (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2010). The new media that have appeared provide consumers many avenues for obtaining information and products (Kornfeld, 2009). In a way, consumers receive value from interacting with other people, with whom they share information. People

search the Internet for responses to their problems in addition to services and products, positioning the Web as the first stop no matter the goal of their search (Meerman, 2007). Social technologies have made this even truer. They unite people through their devices, services, applications, networks and information and they create personal information systems, thanks in large part to their ubiquity and low cost (Pitt & Berthon, 2011). This bolsters the connectivity between users, who exchange all types of opinions about products and experiences. The systems of information created by the “prosumers” changes the role of their use; they have become content creators (Kotler et al., 2010). Also, as a consequence of the rapid growth in Internet usage, the methods for establishing new friendships have changed (Hui-Yi & Hung-Yuan, 2010).

Next, some issues that help explain the way in which social events on the Social Web unfold, evolve and grow enormously (Gladwell, 2000; Mason, 2008):

- *The law of the few.* There are not many people who are enthusiastic about spreading an idea. They are informed about ideas or new products, they are familiar with and speak about them with a lot of people and they have the ability to persuade others to try new products.
- *The unification factor.* Some small factors and aspects of an idea or product catch people’s attention and excite them about adopting these ideas or products.
- *The power of context.* The setting in which the idea or message is transmitted can influence how the message will be accepted. People are sensitive to small differences in their environments and small things can turn out to be important.

The existing literature dedicated to explaining why users employ the Social Web’s tools is still not very developed. Previous research has confirmed that models explaining attitudes (e.g., Theory of Planned Behaviour Theory, Theory of Reasoned Action) help in understanding the behaviors associated with social media use. Application of these theories has been useful in analyzing how new technologies are accepted and used (e.g., Technology Acceptance Model) (see Bigné, Curras, Ruiz, & Sanz, 2010). One topic of interest to researchers is why users give their information voluntarily to others on social media. The Darwinian models of reciprocity establishes that altruistic acts and cooperation only occur when they are helpful to an individual’s survival; i.e., the origins of sharing information with other users lies in reciprocity ultimately satisfying one’s own needs. This fact further reinforces an individual’s unique identity within a community (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Powell et al. (2011) have made use of Maslow’s hierarchy (pyramid) of needs in order to make sense of the motivations for using social media. This theory of human motivations originated initially in 1943, and has been used in many disciplines from business to education and technological sectors. This model is described as a pyramid that consists of five levels or categories of needs: physiological, security, social, recognition, self-esteem and, finally, self-actualization. However, this model has been criticized for its simplicity and for omitting elements that did not exist at the time. Authors such as Krasnova, Hildebrand, Günther, Kovrigin, and Nowobilaska (2008) or Powell et al. (2011) found the model acceptable for

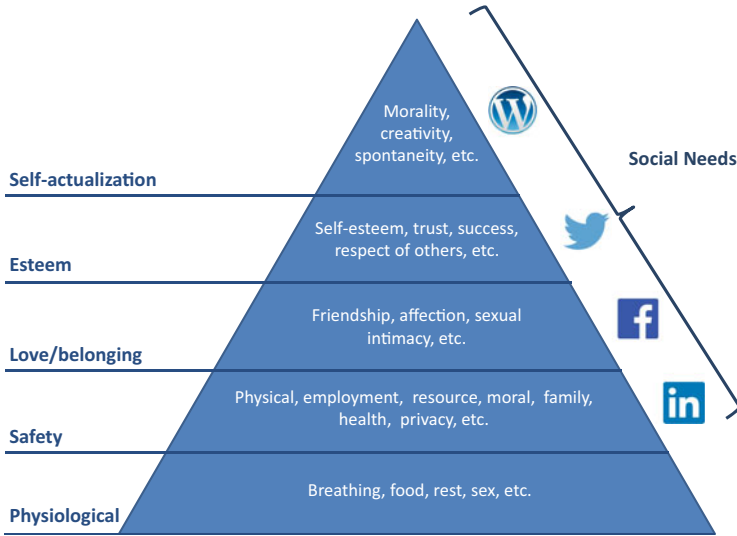


Fig. 3.1 Social needs within Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs and examples of the social tools that help to satisfy them. *Source:* Own elaboration based on Hopkins (2010) and Rutledge (2011)

analyzing Internet social networks; they believed the needs to affect and belong, along with peer-pressure, explained the high levels of participation. In general, the Social Web’s tools move between the intermediate and high levels of the hierarchy of needs, covering needs related to security and, to a greater extent, socialization, recognition, self-esteem and self-actualization. Specifically, of all the types of benefits that explain the use of social tools, several studies have concluded that socialization—the creation and maintenance of relationships—is the main motivation (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Figure 3.1 shows various examples of the needs covered by different social media.

Hart, Ridley, Taher, Sas, and Dix (2008) point to pleasure, curiosity, fun, self-expression, surprise and privacy as the main reasons that users need social tools. Jordan (2002) identified social pleasure as one of the four main categories of pleasure; seeking this pleasure largely explains the use of social tools by users.

Finally, in the same way that there exist diverse reasons for using the tools of the Social Web, their use also varies in accordance with personal characteristics such as experience, age, origin, etc.; these factors determine what tools are used and how they are used. In relation to this idea, Li and Bernoff (2009) created a system to classify a user’s profile based on social and technical aspects, establishing six groups: creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators and inactives. According to the classification, the most numerous profile types are the spectators and inactives, both being very common in European countries; the groups with the highest level of participation, mainly creators and critics, are mostly in Asian countries and make up less than a quarter.

3.3 Tools and Applications of the Social Web

There are a wide variety of tools used on the Social Web, each with unique characteristics and uses as well as differing degrees of ubiquity among users. In this section we analyze their types and characteristics.

Social software, which was previously talked about as a facet of the Social Web, is now seen as an emerging category of ICT that includes a range of applications and platforms designed to facilitate personal interactions through computer networks. Blogs, wikis, podcasting, social bookmarking services, recommendation systems, social networks, etc. form part of the social software base used in the current Social Web (Joyanes, 2009). All these social technologies and applications rely on peer-to-peer production based in open-source software and are enhanced by collective intelligence (O'Reilly, 2005).

Regarding the different types of social tools and applications, there are multiple classification systems but not one that is generally agreed upon. With the objective of synthesizing all these classification systems (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Li & Bernoff, 2009; Merodio, 2010; Safko & Brake, 2009; Tasner, 2010a; Weber, 2007), have proposed the following, primarily based around the most-used tools and applications of the Social Web:

- Virtual Communities
- Virtual Social Networks
- Blogs
- Microblogs
- Wikis
- Other social applications: RSS and syndication, forums, audio, video and photography, social bookmarking, reputation aggregators, photography and others (e.g. streaming, videogames, widgets, new exchange, etc.)

The use of these social tools is of interest to companies due to the wide array of potential benefits, into which we will delve deeper in Chap. 4 (Celaya, 2008; Lim, Zegarra, & Zegarra, 2011; Martínez-Priego, 2009; Safko & Brake, 2009):

- *Obtaining information* in real time about new ideas and products and concepts.
- *Branding*: a brand constructs the experiences through which the client lives with its products. Media or social tools become especially relevant channels for carrying out said experiences; they help to put together unique and valuable brands as well as to improve their reputation and influence.
- *Customer Relationship Management (CRM)*: through the use of social media, organizations can manage contact with different target markets.
- *Search Engine Optimization (SEO)*: actively participating in social media conversations results in a higher number of links directing users to the company's website, which will positively affect its natural positioning in search engine results.
- *The possibility to listen to markets*: social tools afford companies the opportunity to listen more closely to their clients, thanks to the conversations they are having

with them. This is useful, for example, to obtain information about new ideas and concepts for products in real time.

- *Improving knowledge of clients*: through these tools and processes, companies can understand exactly what their clients' expectations are.
- *Enabling participatory construction*: The participation of clients and other users in the transformation of ideas will help to improve and create new products.
- *Improving visibility*: conversations, participation and voluntary interaction will place companies in the virtual world, naturally improving their search position and their position in the consumer's mind.
- *Gaining advertising efficiency*: the use of social tools makes it possible to direct ads and their messages at smaller audiences while having higher rates of response of diffusion, making investment in advertising more efficient.
- *Improving the internal culture of participation*: searching for interaction with and growth of a company's client base necessitates increased internal participation as well as corporate and dynamic participation.
- *Augmenting the value of the experience*: organizations must abandon the interrelation based in a message in order to deepen the fundamental relationship between the client and the company or between clients.

Finally, and prior to introducing the tools and applications previously commented upon, we would like to point out that any organization seeking success on the Social Web must be rooted in a foundation that is solid, coordinated and has a coherent Social Media Plan. To achieve this, designing a plan, commonly known as a Social Media Plan, is necessary. There are myriad recommendations and tips that academics and practitioners have offered on how to create, maintain and optimize social media use. For example, Silver (2009) put forth eighteen strategies for generating loyalty and passion in users; Funk (2013) has focused on giving examples of the best practices and platforms; Chaney (2012) explained how reality has changed for small businesses, how they could take advantage of social media and make use of the changes of WOM, the creation of products and the relationship with clients in said context; Success Sculpting Coach (2012) described, in language that is simple and easy to understand, how to use the principal social media to achieve a better reputation; finally, Safko and Brake (2009) highlighted through links, examples of better practices, interviews, etc., how to exploit the advantages of the different social media and how to plan for them.

3.3.1 Virtual Communities

Without getting into too much detail, since this will be the central topic of the next chapters, communities, in general, are groups of people that share social interactions, bonds and common space (Kozinets, 1999). This involves going beyond simple aggregators that allow temporal interactions between users.

Virtual communities are social associations that emerge when a group composed of a considerable number of people maintains public conversations for a considerable period of time, with sufficient bonds to become stable places of discussion on the Web, or with important support from ICT (De Moor & Weigand, 2007; Rheingold, 1994). Additionally, they have the goal of organizing and sharing certain types of content among their members (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), that in turn have their common needs, orientations, behaviors, profiles and goals (Mayordomo, 2002).

This component of community, using the Web to share data, collaborate and exchange messages, has been the heart of the Internet since its inception (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Virtual communities began gaining importance in the 1990s, when they were presented as the center of Internet business models; they aided in collaboration and fostering relationships between companies and clients, modifying organizational and social structures (Kozinets, 1999). A virtual community must contain people interacting to try to satisfy their needs or working towards a common goal, politics that guide their interactions, as well as an electronic system that gives support and mediates social interaction (Preece, 2000).

Within virtual communities the dominant focus is relationships, which are more important than the actual geographic locations of the users (Koh & Kim, 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). These relationships go beyond the exchange of information, as participants can be as emotionally involved in the online setting as in physical spaces (Brown & Duguid, 2000). On the other hand, offline communities are, to a large extent, more similar to traditional communities, such as family, friends, coworkers, classmates, neighbors, etc. than virtual communities, which are primarily composed of groups of users that interact and share information amongst one another via Internet platforms (Bishop, 2009). However, the two types of communities are not incompatible; virtual communities can complement relationships that exist outside of the Web, and can help in the search for relationships (Näsi, Räsänen, & Lehdonvirta, 2011; Whitty, 2008).

Communities can be classified according to their users and intentions (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007):

- *Transaction-based communities* establish processes for sales, purchases and auctions.
- *Interest-based communities* are centered around a topic of common interest to the users.
- *Relationship-based communities* establish a nucleus around lived experiences that are common among users.
- *Fantasy communities* are imaginary virtual settings that can be based around a game.

Wang et al. (2002) developed a conceptual model for virtual communities based on two concentric circles that represent the community. In the first circle we find the place of creation (the platform), the potential of the community and the group of symbols in which the community is based, meaning the basic components of the community. In the second circle, which encompasses the primary elements and the

community itself, we find electronic systems, politics, goals and the people who interact and develop the community—in other words, the elements that define the community. This model groups people similarly to offline groups (cities, towns, etc.) as well as by other variables such as lifestyle, identity, etc. Additionally, they point out that their users' needs that are met by participating in virtual communities are the same ones satisfied by belonging to offline communities, specifically the following: functional (e.g., transactions, information entertainment, value, etc.), psychological (identification, participation, belonging, creativity, etc.) and social (relationships, interactivity, trust, communication, etc.).

3.3.2 *Virtual Social Networks*

3.3.2.1 Overview

Internet social networks (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Bebo, Google+, Friendster and many more) perfectly exemplify the Social Web, being the most recognizable and most frequently used tools (Merodio, 2010). Their appearance brought about an increase in social interactions by promoting them as well as facilitating their management. They are defined by being virtual communities in which the users create and manage profiles through which they maintain relationships, share information, create content, etc. These benefits explain the rapid proliferation of their use among individuals and organizations (Alarcón et al., 2010). It should be made clear, however, that while the majority of virtual communities can be put under the umbrella of social networks, not all social networks involve a community (Celaya, 2008).

Social networks are defined as a collection of individuals united by the relationships they have established with one another. They have existed since the beginning of society, since humans have social needs that are of utmost importance to people's psychology (Barabasi, 2002). Furthermore, human nature makes humans behave dynamically and evolve over time (Zhou, Ding, & Finin, 2011).

Despite the fact that social networks based in the physical world have been studied extensively (see Coleman, 1990; Freeman, 1979; Milgram, 1967), the increase of their importance, use and growth on the Internet, specifically within new media, leads to new questions and research challenges (Zhou et al., 2011). Virtual or Internet social networks are places where people with common interests or worries meet to find others with similar interests, express themselves and/or make sales. They connect with one another via nodes, forming social complexes through which each user is connected (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Joyanes, 2009; Liberos, 2010; Weber, 2007), which also enables relationships with organizations (Preece, 2000; Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007). Part of their success is derived from the combination of a series of emerging societal topics such as trust, Internet security measures, the union of the virtual and the real worlds, users' generational characteristics, the concept of privacy, etc. (Palvia & Pancaro, 2010). In relation to

these factors, the reason for their rapid growth is due to members providing and consuming the content, to hedonism, to free registration, to security options and control of various profile aspects, etc. Consequently, individuals find social networks more attractive and perceive them as less risky than other websites. This has made companies interested in the possible commercial, operational and strategic benefits they could gain, such as improved brand loyalty (Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009).

To briefly analyze their evolution, virtual social networks originated 1995 with the creation of Classmates.com, the purpose of which was to find and contact old classmates. This website proved to be the starting point for the creation of other spaces that promoted friend networks like MySpace or Orkut (Valladares & Gacimartín, 2011). However, it was not until 2002 that virtual social networks truly began to take off (Caldevilla, 2009). At that point new social networks began appearing in rapid succession: MySpace (2003), Hi5 (2003), Second Life (2003), Facebook (2004), Orkut (2004), Flickr (2004), LinkedIn (2004), Youtube (2005), Ning (2005), Twitter (2006), Technocrati (2008), Goear (2008), Foursquare (2009), Pinterest (2010), Instagram (2010) and Google+ (2011).

Today's virtual social networks differ greatly from their predecessors, due to how substantially the Internet and society have changed. Their capabilities have increased and their structures have been refined (Caldevilla, 2010), improving the user's experience and the usability of the social network itself (Hart et al., 2008). These networks are used as complementary channels of communication as well as for leisure, the exchange of information, entertainment, creation and maintenance of relationships and even as a reward in the form of social recognition (Burgos & Cortés, 2009; Celaya, 2008). Consequently, the concept of classic social relationships and of investment of free time has been revolutionized. However, social networks have sparked a debate about privacy, the risks of these new relationships, the addiction of being connected with hundreds of friends, the decrease of productivity in the workplace, etc. (Caldevilla, 2010).

Additionally, mobile devices have allowed for increased use of private social networks. Mobile devices now allow connectivity anywhere and anytime and have added additional functions like creating friend lists, following friends' geographical movements and developing customized maps and alerts that advise the user of updates on their networks (Corrocher, 2011).

Internet social networks can be divided into three basic types based on their specialization (Celaya, 2008; Joyanes, 2009):

- *General networks* have a high number of users that are very diverse and exhibit wildly varying behaviors. They allow users to create subgroups based on common interests; e.g. MySpace, Facebook, Google+ or Hi5.
- *Specialized networks* facilitate the finding of other people with similar tastes, interests or needs; e.g. Meetic, TripAdvisor, Flickr, etc.
- *Professional networks* are usually used to increase and manage the user's network of professional contacts. Therefore, the number of participants tends to be fewer than in general networks. The principle reasons for joining are

establishing professional contacts in order to change jobs, recovering contacts from previous jobs, sharing knowledge and searching for new channels of communication and marketing, e.g. LinkedIn, Xing y Viadeo.

The world's most important virtual social networks are (in parentheses, % of Internet users) (GlobalWebIndex, 2013): Facebook (51 %), Google+ (26 %), Youtube (25 %), Twitter (22 %), Sina Weibo (21 %), QZone (21 %), Tencent (20 %), Tencent Weibo (19 %), Youku (12 %), Ren Ren (10 %), Tudou (9 %), LinkedIn (8 %), Kaixin (6 %), Pinterest (4 %) and 51.com (4 %). See also—Table 3.1.

With this in mind, it is clear that Facebook is the dominant social network on a global level, boasting more than 12 billion users (GlobalWebIndex, 2013); after Facebook follow others such as Google+, Youtube or Twitter, which are mainly used in Asian countries. The use of local social networks stands out in China (Sina Weibo, Renren, Tencent QQ and Youku) and Russia (V Kontakte).

3.3.2.2 Social Networks and Business

From a business standpoint, virtual social networks hold the possibility of bringing together four aspects of business: human resources, marketing, sales and senior management (ONTSI, 2011). Social networks could act as a means of connection between employees with differing levels of experience and from different parts of the company (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007) and could also facilitate personal and professional relationships as well as relationships between companies, between public administrations and between all types of people and organizations (Joyanes, 2009). Specifically, the interest of marketing researchers lies in knowing how to understand, organize and manage social networks to brand-promotion ends (Okazaki, Rubio, & Campo, 2010).

Companies have various options for best exploiting their presence on social networks (Celaya, 2008):

- Creating a corporate profile, which can be seen as less intrusive by users since the choice of adding or not adding this profile to their contacts will be up to them. This option therefore becomes a way for the user to show their affinity for a certain brand.
- Forming a common-interest group with the objective of aggregating people interested in the company, product or service, trying to impart a brand-experience to the user. The main objective is to invite clients to start a relationship with the brand, speaking about it and recommending it (González & Aparici, 2008).
- Segmenting the market by a wide array of criteria from demographics (age or gender) to geo-targeting (who is speaking with whom and of what) to tailor offers to meet users' specific needs.
- Carrying out surveys to, for example, obtain market information prior to a product's release.

Table 3.1 The most popular virtual social networks by continent/region

Continent/region	Dominant social network
Africa	Facebook is the principal network, with Hi5 also being noteworthy (Cameroon, Angola and central Africa)
North America	The number one network is Facebook. Also of note are MySpace, Youtube, Flickr, Nexopia (Canada), Netlog (Canada) and Hi5 (Mexico)
Central and South America	Facebook is the main network. Orkut (Brasil), Hi5 (Peru), Sonico and Migente are also important
Asia	Facebook boasts the largest number of users throughout the continent with the exception of China (QZone) and Iran (Cloob). Also of note are: Sina Weibo (China), Tencent QQ (China), Youku (China), Renren (China), Tudou (China), Kaixin (China), 51.com (China), Friendster (southeast Asia), Orkut (India and Pakistan), Cycowrld (South Korea), Hi5 (Thailand and Mongolia), Youtube (Japan) and Mixi (Japan)
Europe	Facebook dominates all of Europe with the exceptions of Russia (V Kontakte), Latvia (Draugiem) and Moldavia (Odnoklassniki)
Australia	Facebook is the main network; Bebo is also noteworthy (New Zealand y the Pacific Islands)

Source: Own elaboration based on: Kim, Jeong, and Lee (2010, p. 218), GlobalWebIndex (2013) and VincosBlog (2013)

- Analyzing the user's behavior, identifying who is the person or group that initiates WOM about certain products. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine who turned out to be the first buyers and which users do not buy, yet recommend, the product.
- Improving customer service through continual updating of their profiles and the development of applications that improve the user's experience (e.g., games) (Muñiz, 2010). Also, through 'appvertising' (Godoy, 2009) and the integration and synchronization of social networks with contact centers (Valladares & Gacimartín, 2011).
- Advertising online.
- Listening to conversations to determine how people are relating and who the leaders or groups are that can support the company's communications (Ibáñez, Liege, Herrero, & Lostalé, 2011).

Companies must take advantage of their presence on social networks in order to establish bonds with clients, workers, collaborators, etc. through the creation of profiles on various social networks. A company's presence on these platforms will play an important role in brand recognition and corporate reputation. Furthermore, this will prove to be of importance to brand enthusiasts, who in certain cases will share their positive feelings about the company with others in their networks of contacts and followers (Maciá & Gosende, 2010). Along these same lines, Muñiz (2010) highlights the attraction of social networks for brands, given that users spend more time on social networks than on other conventional media like television or print.

Companies' participation in social networks is a key element in the economy of knowledge, given that transmitting knowledge facilitates coordination and helps to reduce conflicts (Torrent, 2009). Organizations, by means of these platforms, can interact with users, opening dialogue with them and building brand-value, which helps their brand on a global level in the long-term. Also, they offer opportunities for improving the performance of the organizations (Bulkley & Van Alstyne, 2007).

Of the main benefits companies see for participating in social networks, the following are the most noteworthy (González & Aparici, 2008):

- *Brand management*: Social tools make fluid communication between organizations and their clients or the general population possible. Accordingly, they can serve as an important tool for creating brand recognition, customer loyalty and even the perception that the brand is at the forefront of using new communication channels.
- *Relationship marketing*: This involves all participants. Social networks become channels of communication between the brand, various target audiences and consumers, which can create sense of trust and belonging within a community.
- *Lowered marketing cost*: A greater value is achieved relative to what is spent on marketing when an ad goes viral.
- *Development of new products and actions*: The information generated on the various social networks can help organizations develop new products or adapt their marketing strategies to the different needs of their target audiences.
- *Attracting new client*: Companies participating in social networks can help recruit new clients, who are more loyal when they find the company through the recommendation of another member.

Finally, it is essential to keep in mind that social networks also pose certain threats to companies. For one thing, they provide a channel for rapidly spreading fads, which can cause a displacement, reduction or boost for the brand (Li & Bernoff, 2009). For another, they provoke lasting negative feelings in members of the community, which can lead to users resenting the company's intrusion into what they perceive to be their own community (Croft, 2008; Hitwise, 2008). Additionally, Meerman (2007) reminds us that any business that wants to meet its marketing goals through social networks must keep in mind that authenticity and transparency are of paramount importance in this setting.

3.3.3 Blogs

John Barrer coined the term "weblog" in 1997 from the term "log" (Muñiz, 2010). It is believed that the first blog was created on April 1st, 1997 when Dave Winer wrote the entry of "Scripting News," a history blog (Celaya, 2008; Villanueva, Aced, & Armelini, 2007). In 1999, Pyra Labs created Blogger, a tool that allowed the free publication of text, images, etc. Blogger later merged with Google in February 2003, which led to the worldwide blog explosion (Celaya, 2008).

Blogs are personal or group journals that are comprised of “entries” or “posts” in which thoughts, links, photos, etc. are shared (Li & Bernoff, 2009), acting like a magazine with a newspapers characteristics, brief and in chronological order (Ortíz, 2008; Weber, 2007). Blogs are elements of conversation and publication, often-times trying to position themselves as agents of influence over their readers (Burgos & Cortés, 2009). To this end, they often specialize in a specific topic and the author or authors have the freedom to publish whatever they believe to be pertinent in an informal and personal style (Celaya, 2008; Maciá & Gosende, 2010; Sanagustín, 2009). Furthermore, some companies or departments create corporate blogs as their own communication channels (Meerman, 2007). One of the keys of blogs’ success is the ease of use and efficiency of their supporting technologies, which allow anyone to create a professional-looking blog in very little time (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Villanueva et al., 2007).

The social nature of blogs is supported by their collective creation and their open content. For this reason they mesh well with the changes that have been produced in society as a consequence of Social Web technologies. This fit allowed the emergence of what is known as “blog culture” (Fumero, Roca, & Sáez, 2007). Blog authors interact by reading, citing and commenting on one another’s blogs. This web of links between blogs creates the ‘blogosphere’ (Li & Bernoff, 2009).

The methods of creating and maintaining blogs are varied. Thus, a blog’s topic can be general or focused, the blog can be free or can cost money and can allow or not allow comments and opinions. This permits the content to be enriched through the opinions of users and added links (Muñiz, 2010). However, many editors tend to reserve the right to eliminate inappropriate comments (Meerman, 2007).

There is a wealth of opinion about how to classify the different types of blogs, although authors generally fit into the following types (Burgos & Cortés, 2009; Celaya, 2008; Maciá & Gosende, 2010; Sanagustín, 2009):

- *Personal*: the authors of these blogs share their most personal opinions through their articles, complementing them with photos and videos related to their day-to-day life. Their most intimate circle of friends and family reads these blogs.
- *Themed/professional*: these blogs are managed by people that write in a personal style but with professional goals about topics within their realm of specialties. Trendsetters are found on this type of blog.
- *Corporate*: these are used as a means of communication. They are common tools in corporate websites due to their simplicity, affordability and ability to permit personal communication of a corporate opinion or message to the public (Joyanes, 2009). They take advantage of the viral nature of content, which is easily distributed through social media (Singh, Veron-Jackson, & Cullinane, 2008), although the risk of losing control of the message does exist (Li & Bernoff, 2009). This category can be broken down into the following sub-categories (Celaya, 2008; Rosen & Phillips, 2011):
- *External corporate blogs*: These are used to maintain conversations with clients, associates, suppliers or competitors. Within this category one can find:

- Sales/marketing blogs for products (certain products that need the support of direct communication to be correctly positioned in the market); management team blogs (generally updated by members of the management team to impart the business with a new personality that is more in line with the client and more attentive to their needs); customer service blogs.
- Other blog classifications (Orihuela, 2006): brand blogs (used to introduce, change or strengthen a brand); workers' blogs (created and directed by employees, and recognized by the company as such); event blogs (dedicated to preparing, launching and developing of an event; also used to create an online record of an event); industry blogs (organizations promote or sponsor a niche blog aimed at their market sector, focusing on the niche topic and not on the business itself).
- *Internal corporate blogs*: These are used to establish internal relationships with the goal of involving all the members of the organization in the communication strategy. These blogs have one of two focuses: knowledge (designed so that one or several experts share their knowledge internally) or corporate (designed to create and maintain a corporate culture through the creation and development of shared projects).

The main platforms for editing and creating blogs are Wordpress, Blogger and Tumblr, which are all free.

3.3.4 *Microblogs or Nanoblogging*

Microblogging, or the use of microblogs, constitutes a specific type of blog. Microblogs involve short posts about what is happening in the author's life or sharing information that is relevant for the user (Muñiz, 2010). In order to read what other users share, one must follow the poster; followers can then read each post. Sites like Twitter, Pownce and Jaiku allow people to communicate with their networks in real time in a very abbreviated format (Harris & Rae, 2009).

The principle microblogging platforms emerged in 2006 with channels of microcommunication like Twitter, Pownce, Pluk, Twitxr, Sina Weibo, etc. and have revolutionized personal communication (Celaya, 2008; Merodio, 2010). All of them are based around a form of communication or publication that consists in sending short text messages through tools that were specifically created for this purpose. Their functions include to explain what is happening in a specific moment, to share information with other users or to post links to other websites (Burgos & Cortés, 2009) while taking advantage of the fact that they can be read simultaneously by thousands of people that the sender may or may not know (Celaya, 2008).

Microblogging applications have several characteristics in common: They have a maximum length of 140 characters; it is not necessary to download a program to one's computer or devise to use them; they allow users to answer messages written

by other users; messages from a specific user can be viewed together; they provide alternatives to the web for posting messages and following others' messages (Burgos & Cortés, 2009). Of all the platforms, Twitter is the most globally successful. It is even used by companies for commercial ends and to improve their brand image, to interact with clients, to identify users' complaints and to participate in online conversations (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). The most prevalent microblogging sites are currently Twitter (on a global level) and Sina Weibo and Tencent in China.

3.3.5 Wikis

Wikis (from "wiki," a Hawaiian word that means fast) are collaborative applications comprised of a collection of hypertext websites, each of which can be visited by anyone at any time (Burgos & Cortés, 2009). Therefore, wikis are sites where multiple people participate collaboratively creating and maintaining content in the format of text or images (Li & Bernoff, 2009).

Wikis are presented as websites that permit users to upload, delete or edit their content (Meerman, 2007). Their main characteristics are the following: they are open platforms that allow anyone to access the content; there is no division between the consumer and the author of content, anyone can play either or both roles; they are very easy to use (Burgos & Cortés, 2009). Out of all the wikis, the most commonly used and known is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia based on the idea that an entry can be aggregated and corrected by any user (Celaya, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005).

The way that users sustain their relationships is based on each page's "comment page," which allows collaborators to debate which content will be published (Li & Bernoff, 2009). This, along with the participatory nature of the users in the publication process, is the main threat that wikis pose to businesses. As a result of being well known and commonly used, they have become powerful tools for their users; the masses determine the content, which can dictate the image of a company. Companies can use this tool in two different ways (Burgos & Cortés, 2009): (1) As internal collaborative settings. Through the use of a wiki, a company can enjoy a space where members of their organization can share information for the purpose of dissemination or editing; (2) As external collaborative settings. Through wikis, companies initiate actions directly related to customer service, the testing and development of products, community building and the exchange of knowledge.

In any case, while wikis are not the best tools for managing a company's internal and/or external conversations, they are useful for managing a company's image cheaply and efficiently (Celaya, 2008).

3.3.6 Other Social Applications

3.3.6.1 RSS (Really Simple Syndication)

Web syndication allows users to aggregate content in multiple formats, from sources of their choosing. Syndication systems act as connection elements for users of the Social Web; this means that subscribing to an RSS service does not involve social activity but does help social activities flow smoothly (Li & Bernoff, 2009). These applications allow users to completely customize the content of the website that they wish to visit (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

Despite the fact that the use of the RSS format does not directly affect businesses, it does accelerate the rate at which users consume content. This strengthens the effects of other applications, in some cases uncontrollably and dangerously, for businesses (Li & Bernoff, 2009). Examples of RSS readers are FeedDemon, Feedly and Google Reader.

3.3.6.2 Forums and Opinions

Forums are places in which ideas and information, normally related to a specific topic or special interest, are shared (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). They were originally conceived of as a means for experts of a specific field to share their knowledge or as a tool to enable informative meetings. Forums enable the exchange of information, assessments and opinions; they are, to a certain extent, bi-directional, as one can respond to an asked question or comment on other users' posts (ONTSI, 2011).

There are many diverse types of discussion forums on the Internet. Usually, individuals, once registered as users, enter and publish content or respond to other users' questions. Discussion forums are basically conversations where people can respond to one another online.

Prior to the existence of forums in which users participated, companies only had to worry about the influence of experts; now any buyer with problems can complain (Meerman, 2007). Forums have evolved into virtual spaces in which consumers can have a dialogue about products or brands, which can just as easily be negative or positive. Therefore, it is key that organizations react to dissatisfaction both rapidly and honestly (Meerman, 2007). It is no longer sufficient to influence experts so that they share a favorable opinion; companies now have to analyze various conversations in order to be able to counteract the effects that can be triggered by their clients' criticism. In this sense, it is necessary to avoid what is known as the "Streisand effect," meaning situations in which the intent to correct or erase content from a specific forum results in its widespread dissemination (Li & Bernoff, 2009).

Furthermore, corporations can analyze the dialogues produced in discussion forums to obtain information about consumers' doubts, answer their requests for help and respond to their queries (Mayordomo, 2002).

3.3.6.3 Audio, Video and Pictures

Audio on the Web is nothing new as it has been available from the web's earliest incarnations. In the beginning, audio files were not widely used, due to the difficulty of identifying them, the impossibility of searching for them and the fact that playing them was complicated; the result was that the majority of audio files were long and the users had no idea what they contained without listening to them in their entirety (Meerman, 2007). But this soon changed. The most common audio format found on the Internet is the podcast. The advent of allowed for the syndication of audio or video files designed to be downloaded by the user to be listened to whenever he or she wants (Safko & Brake, 2009; Sanagustín, 2009). Companies have various resources in their communication, training and consulting departments to create and make use of podcasts (Meerman, 2007), to ends of using them as personal or corporate promotional tools, product presentations, conferences, seminars and other activities (Joyanes, 2009).

Similar to audio files, publishing video consists of locating them on websites or designing original platforms to view them. Publishing videos has become one of the cornerstones of the Social Web (Celaya, 2008). YouTube is the most noteworthy platform. It was founded in February 2005 and acquired by Google a year later.

Additionally, there are social platforms designed for the exchange of all types of image files, which offer a unique opportunity to convey the value and the attributes of a brand or specific product through visual communication. These websites offer users the free service of housing, labeling and sharing images that they have created themselves or that they have found on the Social Web (Celaya, 2008; Safko & Brake, 2009).

Among audio platforms we find iTunes, SoundCloud and Voocaroo. In video format, YouTube is by far the most used platform; other examples are: Dailymotion, Viadeo, Tudou and Youku. In photography, we find applications and networks such as Instagram, Flickr, Picasa and Pinterest.

3.3.6.4 Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking sites offer tools that permit users to present, store, share and label web pages or important information available on the Internet. The majority of social bookmarking websites offer the same fundamental characteristics: posts, commentaries, the ability to label, classify or categorize information, etc. (Corrocher, 2011; Joyanes, 2009). Their links and labels form part of the community and are available for other users to browse (Joyanes, 2009).

The social aspect emerges when they are used to share saved content (through tags) in such a way that anyone can access them; people, not automatic algorithms, do the tagging (Burgos & Cortés, 2009). Furthermore, they allow grading, commenting, importing and exporting, adding notes, revising, linking through

emails, sending automatic notifications, requesting subscriptions, annotating and creating groups and social networks (Corrocher, 2011).

Additionally, they give the option of labeling information through a system of folksonomy (Celaya, 2008). This is a collaborative classification style that uses keywords that are freely chosen and frequently referred to as tags. Tagging content allows for multiple associations, more in line with how the human brain categorizes items instead of using rigid categories (O'Reilly, 2005).

The social bookmarking websites with the most traffic are (Corrocher, 2011; Joyanes, 2009; Kim et al., 2010): Delicious, Digg, CiteUlike, Cannotate, StumbleUpon, Yahoo Buzz, Reddit and Technorati.

3.3.6.5 Reputation Aggregators

Reputation aggregators are search engines that can help companies promote their websites, blogs or links with Internet users. These search engines aggregate pages that offer the best product or service and usually order them according to their reputation (Weber, 2007). The main reputation aggregators are (Merodio, 2010): Google, MetaTube, Yahoo, Ask and Bing.

The site provides rankings of content and of websites. In this way, they prove to be indispensable for users finding the content they are searching for. People use these sites to decide which content they want or need when they are prepared, for example, to buy or to search for study centers, statistics, information etc.

3.3.6.6 Other Social Applications

There are a huge number of different social applications beyond those that have already been discussed. Among them some standouts are: widgets, news exchange tools, viewing streaming video and online games and videogames.

Widgets are mini-applications that connect to the Internet with a specific function. They are presented as small files or documents that are executed by the widgets' engine (Li & Bernoff, 2009; Maciá & Gosende, 2010). Widgets have a social component due to how they are spread, since they tend to have a button that allows others to download and install them on their pages (Li & Bernoff, 2009). Therefore, the widget is like a piece of code that the users can insert into their webpage, with or without a social function, that normally assumes a graphic form and functions like a mini application or program (Burgos & Cortés, 2009). The widget allows users to receive content in various formats—text, images, audio or video—and they can interact, view or share it, helping it to spread virally (Sanagustín, 2009). Its usefulness is rooted in how it makes commonly used functions easier to access and how it provides visual information (Maciá & Gosende, 2010). Widgets come in many types with different specialties, from schedulers to PC games and mobile devices (Maciá & Gosende, 2010).

News exchange is another social tool rooted in the idea that community members vote for and comment on news articles that have already been published in various places on the Internet (Celaya, 2008). Some examples of news aggregators are Digg, Reddit, Mister Wong, Technorati, Yelp, Wikio and CoRank.

Finally, *streaming platforms* where users view, upload and share videos without the need to download them (e.g., TalkShoe, ShoutCast, Live 365, Justin.tv, BlogTalkRadio) as well as *game and videogame* tools that allow users to interact with one another in virtual worlds or through web-based games (e.g., World of Warcraft, Everquest, Halo3, Entropia Universe) are other applications that permit users to interact. The last few years have shown a rise in companies using them for commercial and advertising purposes.

3.4 Visual Map of the Social Web's Tools and Applications

With the objective of illuminating the principle categories and components of the Social Web as well as its relationships and objectives, we have created a visual map (see Fig. 3.2). To do this, we have examined different classification systems that have been proposed over the past few years. As a reference, we have used the web map proposed by O'Reilly (2005), which specifies the defining elements of companies' strategic positioning on the Social Web and their main responsibilities. We have provided examples of social platforms that have been tailored to the web and have described their main characteristics and components.

Other authors have proposed different visual maps. For example, Carter (2008) came up with a classification system based on four main types of Social Web applications: games (e.g., Farmville); social networks, divided into virtual communities (e.g., Facebook) and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life); sharing (e.g., Wikipedia, Youtube, etc.); and blogs (e.g., Tumblr, Twitter, etc.). Hayes and Papworth (2008) divided their system into five categories: relating (Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, etc.); creating (Flickr, Youtube, WordPress, etc.); discussing/arguing (Digg, etc.); promoting (Ustream, MySpace, etc.); and measuring (Google, etc.).

Foundation Orange and Internality (2007) as well as The Conversation Prism (2012) established relationship and classification maps of social applications, based primarily on the applications' purposes and functions.

Based on these contributions, together with classification systems proposed by other sources (see Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Li & Bernoff, 2009; Safko & Brake, 2009; Tasner, 2010a; Weber, 2007), we have designed a visual map that represents the Social Web's distinct applications and tools, their shared characteristics and their distinctive features in comparison with other versions of the Web.

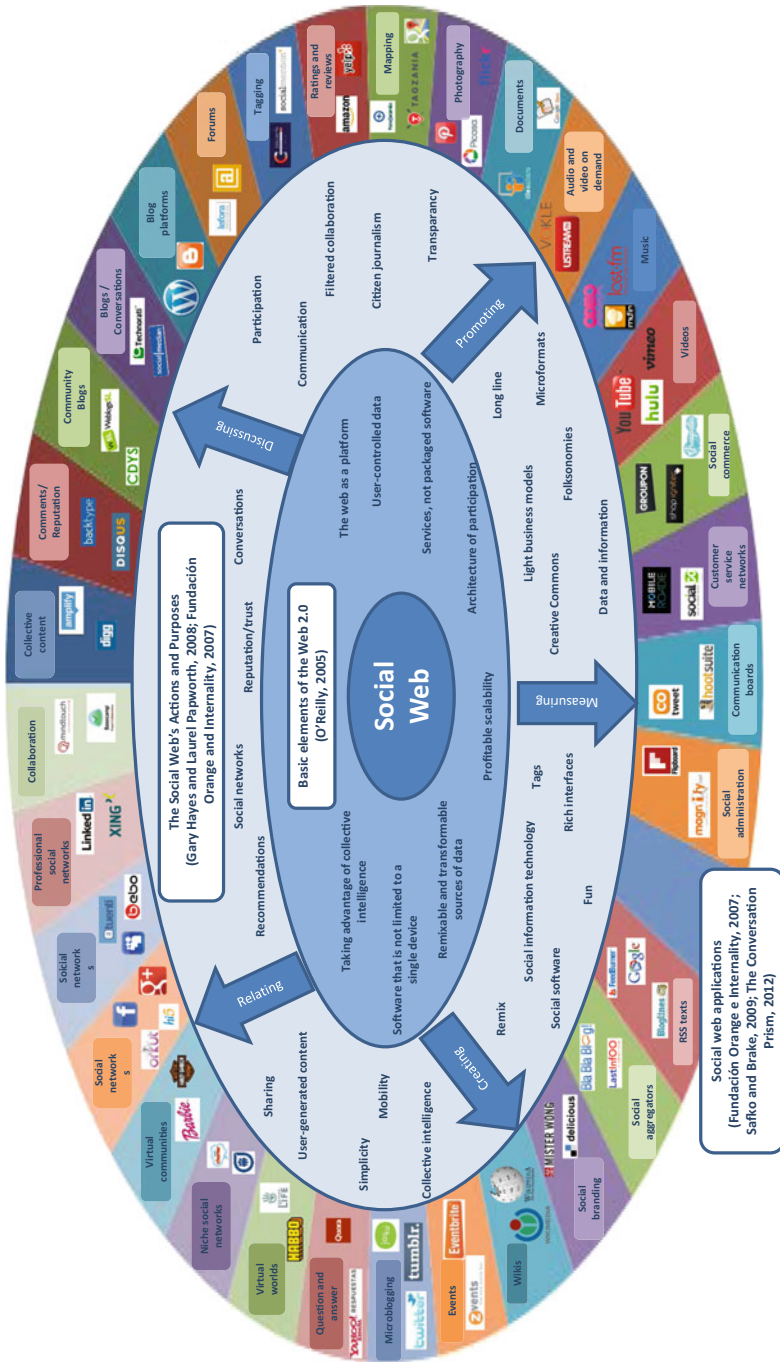


Fig. 3.2 Visual map of the Social Web. Source: own elaboration

3.5 Social Commerce

3.5.1 *What Is Social Commerce? A Conceptualization*

Social media has created opportunities for new models of electronic commerce, falling under the umbrella of “social commerce.” Social commerce was birthed from the use of the Social Web technologies discussed earlier and their associated behaviors such as word-of-mouth and value co-creation with the purpose of buying/selling products. This led to the emergence of a new platform for entrepreneurship and innovation, a fact that is considered to be one of the marketing topics that will be most important in the future (Liang & Turban, 2011).

The resulting revolution, due to the emergence and expansion of social media, has helped e-commerce evolve and innovate rapidly (Zhang, Zhou, & Zimmermann, 2013), becoming increasingly social (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Liang & Turban, 2011). Social commerce has permitted companies to evolve from being centered around the products that they are offering to being focused on social aspects and on the consumer (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Wigand, Benjamin, & Birkland, 2008). Now businesses are beginning to be able to establish better business strategies based on consumers’ shopping experiences and expectations (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Practicing social commerce allows consumers to improve their social relationships (Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011), to improve their relationships with companies by having more social and interactive relationships with them (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013) and to make the decision to buy more easily (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).

Therefore, as Huang and Benyoucef (2013) have pointed out, social commerce creates new ways to increase consumer participation, promote their relationships and create economic value. With such objectives, hundreds of new commercial initiatives were born in the area of social commerce, rapidly advancing through the stages of life for technologies (buzz, experimentation, adoption and maturity) (Liang & Turban, 2011).

Social commerce is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses multiple disciplines (Gonçalves & Zhang, 2013) such as: strategic analysis, consumer analysis, organizational behavior, virtual social networks, analytical techniques, system design, business practices, research methodology and value creation (Zhou, Zhang, & Zimmermann, 2013). However, despite the amount of attention it is receiving, due to the newness of the topic, there is not yet an agreed upon definition for social commerce. To date, there has been little published on the matter or on the social commerce platform designs (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). Next, some interesting attempts at conceptualizing social commerce are presented.

Basically, social commerce is a form of commerce that transpires through social media and the services of virtual social networks (Gonçalves & Zhang, 2013; Liang & Turban, 2011). It could be seen as a type of e-commerce that uses social media (Kim & Srivastava, 2007; Liang & Turban, 2011) in transactions as well as in the rest of its services, allowing for social interactions and user-generated content.

Qualman (2010) believes that the concept of social commerce was born in 2006, when it was named for the first time by Rohit Bhargava. Liang and Turban (2011) and Huang and Benyoucef (2013) have highlighted Stephen and Toubia's (2010) definition: a form of Internet-based social media in which people actively participate in the marketing and sale of products and services in online markets and communities. There is, therefore, a power shift from companies to consumers. Zhang et al. (2013) have established that social commerce involves the union of four components:

1. Commercial activities like marketing, selling, purchasing, etc. (business component).
2. Social media, including those that connect markets and communities online and offline (technology component).
3. Representative members of communities, venders, buyers, etc. (human component).
4. Information about products and services (information component).

Huang and Benyoucef (2013, p. 247) define social commerce as:

An Internet-based commercial application, leveraging social media and Web 2.0 technologies which support social interaction and user generated content in order to assist consumers in their decision making and acquisition of products and services within online marketplaces and communities.

Other authors' (e.g., Constantinides, Romero, & Boria, 2008; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Swamynathan, Wilsom, Boe, Almeroth, & Zhao, 2008) contributions suggest that social commerce helps: to improve a company's reputation, to strengthen the relationships they have with their clients, to identify business opportunities, to support brand and product development, to increase track to the company's website, to offer higher quality products, to predict the market's tendencies and to maximize the return on marketing investments. Thus, social commerce goes beyond virtual social networks, and is a source of economic value (Stephen & Toubia, 2010).

In general, most definitions of social commerce take into account the ideas of community participation and its socioeconomic impact on e-commerce. Social commerce is the most social, innovate and collaborative means of doing business (Parise & Guinan, 2008); it is transforming e-commerce into something that is more social and user-centric (Wigand et al., 2008).

Various authors (e.g. Grange & Benbasat, 2010; Jascanu, Jascanu, & Nicolau, 2007; Leitner, Grechenig, Krishnamurthy, & Isaias, 2007; Shen & Eder, 2011) highlight a series of characteristic elements of social commerce that are useful for consumers like: wish lists, chat options, forums, geo-tagging, geo-locators, blogs, podcasts, virtual social networks, etc.

Finally, the research into social commerce deals with diverse topics like: the changes produced (e.g. Serrano & Torres, 2010) and competition (e.g. Lee, De Wester, & Park, 2008) of small and medium companies; the impact of competition, relationships with clients, products and services offered and the growth of benefits

(e.g. Zhou et al., 2013); consumer's needs with respect to social commerce (e.g. Wigand et al., 2008); online shopping and its effects on behavior (e.g. Grange & Benbasat, 2010); changes to the decision-to-buy process (e.g. Kim & Srivastava, 2007); motivational aspects of social commerce and its consequences (e.g. Kang & Park-Poaps, 2011); the design of social commerce platforms (e.g. Huang & Benyoucef, 2013); its main components (e.g. Grange & Benbasat, 2010; Jascanu et al., 2007; Leitner et al., 2007; Shen & Eder, 2011); the barriers to social commerce (e.g. Michaelidou et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2013); the creation of a framework of study (e.g. Liang & Turban, 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2012; Zhou et al., 2013) or its use (Gonçalves & Zhang, 2013).

3.5.2 Social Commerce vs. e-Commerce

The definitions and components of social commerce seen up to now could lead one to believe that it is nothing more than an evolution of e-commerce applied to social media (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Wang & Zhang, 2012). However, social commerce is more than just the union of e-commerce and social media (Zhou et al., 2013).

Gonçalves and Zhang (2013) proposed a model for the study of e-commerce that focuses on the transactional, relational and social sides of marketing. According to their model, e-commerce can be classified by the structures and technologies applied to transactions (buying and selling occurs), relationships (lasting relationships with companies are built and maintained) and sociality (consumers have the option to interact with others). In this way, social commerce would be e-commerce but with a structure and purposed designed with the objective of helping the consumer to improve their consumption experience through socialization with other consumers. On the other hand, Huang and Benyoucef (2013) have pointed out the differences between commerce and social commerce, which can be described by the following:

- *The business's objectives:* e-commerce is focused on maximizing efficiency with search strategies, one-click sales, catalogues and recommendations based on past purchases, while social commerce is based on social objectives, networks, collaboration and information, leaving sales as a secondary goal.
- *The consumer's connection:* in e-commerce the consumer interacts with the platform, while in social commerce they can have conversations with other consumers.
- *Interaction with the System:* e-commerce offers the consumer navigation that lacks information from other consumers, compared with social commerce, which allows consumers to express themselves and share their information with other users and with the company.

Additionally, social commerce could be confused with social shopping or collaborative shopping, to which it is closely related, although their component

pieces distinguish them. Social commerce would include shoppers, vendors and the platforms that enable the activities, while the other only include the shoppers (Gonçalves & Zhang, 2013; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011).

There are many success stories about the implementation of social commerce by large companies (e.g. Coca-Cola, Starbucks, etc.) and service providers (banks and airlines), but there are also stories of massive failures (e.g. Wal-Mart), which caused friction with consumers and did not provide a satisfactory return on their investment (Liang & Turban, 2011). In light of these successes and failures, studies of models that explain how to design social commerce platforms are especially interesting. Huang and Benyoucef (2013) designed a model of the characteristics of social commerce platforms, based on Fisher's (2010) model, that is useful for designing social applications. They have discovered that the basic elements fit into four levels, three of which—individual, conversation and community—are similar to those presented in Fisher's model, plus a fourth—commerce. Through these levels, established in this order, they expose the differences between e-commerce and social commerce, as well as between social commerce and online communities.

- Individual level: users interact with the virtual community in order to learn about themselves and enjoy the community (personal profile, activity profile, etc.).
- Conversation level: people express themselves through comments and exchanges with other users, expanding user-generated content and collective intelligence (topic focus, content creation, etc.).
- Community level: strong conversation-based relationships are created (connection, community support, etc.).
- Commerce level: makes it possible to do business in an already-established community (group purchase, authority, reciprocity, etc.). Therefore, social commerce helps the existing relationships between community members.

Thus, e-commerce is based on the individual level and social commerce is community conversation based. Therefore, the four layers or levels represent social commerce. Furthermore, Huang and Benyoucef (2013) offer specific recommendations to companies: they need to identify applications and their current capabilities in both e-commerce and in social media; additionally, they must decide which developmental path their social commerce strategy is going to take (i.e., e-commerce-based or social media-based); if they have an e-commerce operation, they should complement both the “individual” and “commerce” layers; finally, they should implement the “community” and “conversation” layers.

Social commerce allows businesses to reach consumers around the globe more efficiently by integrating user-generated content into product displays; therefore, consumers can exchange information about products and services and get advice from other users. The model that Wang and Zhang (2012) proposed to understand and analyze the distinct facets of social commerce is noteworthy (Zhou et al., 2013). Such a model gives a lot of importance to people through its capacity for socialization and commerce and also to information in all its stages (creation, sharing, storage, etc.). One is able to understand the multidisciplinary components

of social commerce, including technology and business. Each element is connected with the others, showing interdependence and mutual influence.

However, Zhou et al. (2013) consider the model useful for understanding social commerce but not for understanding the key to its success. To better understand this, they have connected each factor to a characteristic related to its strategic fit, which helps envision why some practices of social commerce are successful while others are not. Pöyry, Parvinen, and Malmivaara (2013) describe two key elements of Zhang et al. (2013) model. On one hand, the interdependencies between businesses and people that are such that the mere presence of companies on social media does not guarantee their success; they should create value for the client and, as a consequence, increase the benefits to the company; their presence provides companies the opportunity to know their users' motivations and locations. On the other, the central role of information, thanks to its crucial role in the search for products, is such that companies must create content that attracts consumers.

Liang and Turban (2011), with the goal of guiding other researchers and professionals, have offered another research framework for social commerce. Such a framework allows researchers to classify themes, distinguish lines of research, compare and synthesize the existing literature and identify new potential lines of research. These authors distinguish between social commerce's two basic platform configurations. Depending on the platform used, they can be: (1) virtual social networks that can serve as vessels for advertisements and transactions; and (2) e-commerce platforms, which can include social elements to exploit their advantages. Therefore, they have focused their interest on two elements that they consider fundamental for social commerce: social media and commercial activities. The latter are structured in four groups (Liang & Turban, 2011): Social Media Marketing (CRM social, viral marketing, direct sales, video marketing, etc.); business administration (recruitment of human resources, open innovation, product development, etc.); technology, support and integration (security, platform integration, social media optimization, etc.); and administration and organization (social media planning, globalization, privacy, etc.).

There are four other elements of interest to academic researchers that are also included in this model: research themes and theoretical foundations related to the paradigms on which researchers base their work; and outcome measures and research methods, which represent research goals, referred to by authors as enrichment elements. All these elements help to classify and guide social commerce research.

Finally, according to Gonçalves and Zhang's (2013) model, the type of marketing that regularly takes place in the e-commerce context has evolved, going from transactional to relational and finally to social. The emergence of Social Media Marketing, which deals with identifying and exploiting the opportunities afforded by the interaction between consumers on social media, was previously discussed. Also there is trust in the relationship and agreement between consumers and companies, which allows spaces to exist in which brand knowledge is strengthened, potential clients are attracted and the brand-related user-generated content is exploited (Evans & Mckee, 2010; Weber, 2007). Therefore, the companies'

revenue models are evolving from transactional to relational customer orientation (either B2C or B2B), while also considering the typical C2C interactions fostered by social commerce; customers are going from mere buyers of products to an element of value-creation for companies (Gonçalves & Zhang, 2013). Social commerce will continue to evolve rapidly in the coming years, advancing in ICT function, in order to meet consumers' demands, in the benefits reaped from user-generated content and in companies' ability to respond to this situation (Zhou et al., 2013).

Chapter 4

Utility of the Social Web for Business

4.1 Introduction

The growth of the Social Web and its effects on consumers and organizations are topics that frequently catch the attention of academics (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). The importance of the use of Social Web tools has piqued the interest of the scientific community, which is trying to understand how this affects the creation of business opportunities (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). The interest is primarily focused on ways that applications contribute to behavioral changes on the part of the consumer and on new business strategies to adapt to said changes (McKinsey Quarterly, 2007).

The emergence of the Social Web has changed companies' competitive strategies and enhances the users' active role, which now entails developing part of the service and content. Companies should adjust the business models. Currently there is no generalized way for doing this; i.e. the Social Web is not integrated into the structures and strategies of business and marketing (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). In certain cases, the reason for not using or for badly using it is that companies are unfamiliar with or fear it (Kietzmann, Hermkens, Mccarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Furthermore, an error on social media can lead to negative consequences that far outweigh other positive aspects that could spread through the web, principally in products of a hedonistic character (Yang & Mai, 2010). It is therefore critical to expertly manage a company's presence on the Social Web.

However, the use of social applications by companies does not guarantee success, since people are not captives in these spaces; when they are not interested, or entertained, or when they feel manipulated, they stop using the network (Clemons, 2009). The determining factor for whether a social tool is successful lies in whether the user feels connected to the tool and to others also using it (Sicilia & Palazón, 2010).

Social media and its use by consumers make an impact on companies' reputations, sales and even their survival; their identity takes form and evolves as a

function of the relationship and conversations with and between the consumers on these media (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Brands are introduced via social media with the intention of engaging users. Branding strategies are continually executed with the brand's consumers, passing a degree of control over the company's brands to consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011). In this context, consumers read, hear and speak about brands and try to avoid massive, broad ads. This poses new strategic challenges for companies (Weber, 2007).

The use of social media and social tools by companies, due to their current importance and reach, has led to the introduction of a concept called "Enterprise 2.0" (see McAfee, 2006a, 2006b): "the use of emergent social software platforms within companies, or between companies and their partners or customers." One of the basic components necessary for a company to have success in the implementation of the Social Web's applications lies in the workers' attitude towards its use. Their attitude depends on how easy the applications are to use, on their speed and range, on their usefulness in generating ideas, etc. (Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009). In regards to the consumer, companies need to learn and evolve their communication models with their target audiences and the digital environment in mind (Weber, 2007); they should be prepared to give information and provide content to their customers, as soon it is demanded (Meerman, 2007). Consumers, furthermore, have, at their fingertips, access to various alternative forms of communication, which are used to, among other things, give opinions and ratings of products and brands, as well as of the companies that supply them. Of these means of communication, virtual online communities stand out.

However, the use of the Social Web by companies also poses the chance for serious risks and errors. In a general way, the largest error a company can make is to unleash a massive amount of messages instead of initiating a bidirectional conversation to deliver useful information (Powell, Groves, & Dimos, 2011). Additionally, social tools do not always prove to be useful and worthwhile for companies. For example, social media is not worthwhile for top-range, high price products that are designed for a small group of clients, for organizations that have bad relations with their employees, nor for more traditional companies that do not encourage employee participation (Barnes, 2010; Martorell, Solanas, & Sabaté, 2011).

Despite these risks, the Internet and social media have affected businesses, expanding their reach and minimizing the time that transpires between sending a message and its release to the market. Before, the purpose of Internet marketing was to get users to click on advertisements that led them to corporate websites or online catalogs; now it is to build a lasting relationship with the players in their environment. In part, the Social Web represents an evolution of the original idea of the Internet; now peer-to-peer communication, collaboration and information exchange are key (Harris & Rae, 2009). On top of this, a business does not achieve success on its own; it achieves success because it has constructed a network of economic agents that are involved in the company's process (i.e. *stakeholders*). Therefore,

companies must manage their business environment relationship with a stakeholder approach, in which the customers are of utmost importance (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010).

4.2 Interest of the Social Web to Companies

In general, organizations modify, or should modify, their strategies in order to fully exploit the advantages offered by the Social Web. By means of studying social media, and the motivations and behaviors of their users, organizations can benefit in many ways (Martínez-López & Luna, 2008, p. 127; Powell et al., 2011, p. 41):

- Understanding how individuals participate in social media, with their different objectives, increases social media's usefulness.
- Providing marketing specialists with information that helps them improve their communication plans and their social media marketing.
- Providing the potential to reduce exchange costs.
- Allowing greater capacity to establish and maintain exchange-based relationships.
- Improving their competitive position and/or their competitive product advantage.

The basic ways available to a company to take advantage of and actively participate in the Social Web's virtual communities are: integrating into a community already created by other people, in which members are already talking about the company, brand or product; creating their own community, and inviting people to join the conversation taking place therein; or, as a third option, making use of both models (Weber, 2007). Once involved in the conversation, companies can use the Social Web's tools to improve their clients' experiences, reduce the number of calls they receive, search for ideas, exchange information, facilitate the flow of information and educate and update their clients (Fluss & Eisenfeld, 2009).

In any case, it should be the top-level management of companies that proposes, coordinates and directs the introduction of Social Web technologies. Furthermore, it is necessary to integrate social media strategies with the rest of the company's marketing strategies; it is also necessary to explain the benefits to the entire organization and to help all affected company members learn their roles (Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009).

The growth of social media has created opportunities for new business models based on the active role of the user. This allows companies to try to take care of their customers' needs in new and specialized ways. A new way for companies to reach consumers is measuring features related to their behaviors in regards to communicating, searching for products and buying products (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). One example is a type of community where consumers impartially

help others with product-related problems. This, as has already been stated, reduces the company's service costs and, furthermore, increases quality perceived by the client that receives the advice, even if the company loses control over the flow of information (Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008).

Specifically, Weber (2007) has highlighted various opportunities and advantages that the Social Web provides for companies:

- It allows the brand to be defined specifically for each group.
- It creates leadership
- It helps to make deals and relationships with distributors, technology suppliers and other associates.
- It allows research and development for new ideas and solutions for complex problems.
- It facilitates communication between employees, strengthening and expanding their connections.

Adjei, Noble, and Noble (2010) have looked at the benefits of using the Social Web to create or participate in communities of Internet users: it increases the intent to buy in both members and readers, consequently increasing sales and specifically increasing cross-sales, all thanks to communication between consumers. Companies still run the risk of negative comments, but positive comments are, in this case, of greater importance; the key factor is the quality of information. Elaborating further on the previous advantages, Fox (2009) points out others that improve the rankings in search engines, allow consumers to better demonstrate their loyalty publicly and encourage employee participation.

Therefore, what companies should really be using the Social Web for is paying attention to their surroundings, better understanding their consumers, speaking with various audiences, transmitting the messages and image of the company and supporting and integrating clients so that they can help one another and give ideas about how to improve the company (Li & Bernoff, 2009, pp. 109–110). In order to achieve these objectives, Li and Bernoff (2009, pp. 108–109) have proposed a process called the POST method:

- **People:** knowing what must be done to attract clients.
- **Objectives:** having a clear understanding of what the company's goals are for the Social Web.
- **Strategy:** asking what will be different once social strategies are applied.
- **Technology:** deciding which social applications the company should employ.

Once consumers begin interacting with the company through virtual media, the next goal should be to increase their loyalty. To do this, companies must strengthen certain aspects such as customization, interactivity of contact, care, community, relationship cultivation, choice and character (Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnnavolu, 2002). Additionally, loyalty can be increased through constant offers and by

supplying information (Blázquez, 2011). To best win the loyalty of online consumers, Powell et al. (2011, pp. 221–222) explain that companies must correctly identify their various target audiences for their marketing efforts, their competitors, their clients and their brand influencers, with the goal of properly aligning and defining their brand. Specifically, individuals identified as influencers are very useful for widely and efficiently spreading the company's message; due to their connections, they should reach more individuals. Shuen (2008) proposed a five-stage process for incorporating the Social Web's tools into organizations and gaining the participation of stakeholders.

1. Building on collective user value, increasing the ability to compile user information and share it with people who request it.
2. Activating the effects of networks, which are created through the interconnections of the system.
3. Working through virtual social networks and other applications to manage their internal and external relationships.
4. Dynamically syndicating capabilities. Businesses' success depends on how well they mix and dynamically evolve their capabilities and resources. Social Web capability syndication allows for the sharing of information with external economic agents—e.g., customers, providers, other competitors—and accelerating the knowledge transfer, resulting in improved readjustment and evolution of capabilities.
5. Gathering available innovations from different companies to increase competitive abilities for those that collaborate.

With regards to the structuring of social media strategies, Weber (2007) proposed the four following main areas: reputation aggregators (e.g., Google, Yahoo, Bing, and Ask), blogs, online communities and social networks. Across all four of these conduits, virtual social networks have received the most attention from marketing research. Companies use them to create value for the consumers and to reap the benefits of participating in them (Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007); e.g., creating conversations with consumers and extracting useful information. However, despite the important role they are assuming within companies, the marketing actions taken thus far are still in the nascent stage and have a lot room for improvement (Spaulding, 2010).

The Social Web has an effect on both the branding and reputation of organizations. Some companies are reluctant to permit consumers to participate in the creation and management of their image of their brand. They fear negative comments and undesirable reactions from consumers, which can alter or even hurt the identity that the company would like to protect (Ladueque, 2010). However, social media show how tools can make the company/consumer relationship stronger and more stable, as they can help to overcome the current trend of the consumer distancing themselves from companies by rejecting traditional advertising media (Martorell et al., 2011).

The use of Social Web tools to create conversations about brands is the product of the evolution of the Internet. Currently, users discuss brands and companies through the Social Web. This allows organizations to expand their relationship with their consumers and with other collectives, who expect to have direct conversations with companies, brands and other brand-community members.

The aspects that help to improve analysis of brand use on the Internet can be broken down into three major categories (NCA and Associates, 2011): *impact* refers to the presence on search engines SEO and SEM; *presence*, including media controlled by brands on social media; and *reputation*, which is obtained through analysis of the conversations initiated by consumers on said platforms. For example, E.Life (2011) studies aspects related to brand presence on Facebook. Part of its analysis involved detecting 151 brands, both Spanish and international, belonging to 23 categories, on various Facebook walls. It was observed that certain days of the week saw greater tendency of users to mention brands on their walls: Mondays, Wednesdays and Sundays; the main categories mentioned are: Internet and technology, smartphones, electronics, videogames and automobiles; the main brands mentioned are: Facebook, Apple, BlackBerry, Google, iPhone, Wii, Xbox, Nokia, Coca-Cola and Movistar.

A brand triumphs on social media not by gaining more fans or followers than their competition, but by improving their relationships, building their reputation and increasing the degree of interaction with their audience, who, in turn, spread their feelings about the brand. This clearly underscores the importance of employing social media with the goal of distributing relevant information and, for brands, exploiting media's correlation with market changes, consumer habits, consumer opinions, etc. This allows companies the opportunity to better manage their brands; the idea is that companies use these possibilities to improve their decision-making strategies and their competitive edge (González, 2011).

4.3 How to Measure a Company's Actions on the Social Web

4.3.1 Overview

In the previous sections we have looked at the need to understand what consumers do on platforms and social media, so that companies can adapt to their behaviors. New tools and social media have led to challenges with measuring business-related results and the emergence of new methods and metrics to combat this problem (Blázquez, 2011).

Along these lines, Maciá and Gosende (2010) have pointed out that the traffic created on websites should be analyzed in order to understand the users' behavior

within the page. To achieve this, traditional metrics, such as clicks or browsing time, will not suffice; rather other factors need to be analyzed and measured, like the system's usability or return-on-investment (ROI). Through these techniques, companies will better know their clients and users, which will result in more profitable processes. Furthermore, companies know that it is not sufficient to use traditional measurements with the new web.

The emergence of the Social Web has presented a challenge for companies' marketing departments, since it has completely overhauled how the web must be analyzed. Many marketing practitioners tend to say that social media cannot or should not be measured, believing that the importance of this change lies with the new way of relating with users more so than with its cost (Powell et al., 2011). This focus, however, has led to managers understanding the need to measure the effects of their actions on social media, as cognizance of profitability and efficacy are necessary.

Analysis of the Social Web should take into account quantitative data as much as it does qualitative, for a company as well as its competitors. Kaushik (2011) posed various question that should be answered by those responsible for analyzing social media actions and strategies on social media, covering questions such as which user is participating, how much, how are they doing it and what their motivation may be. Furthermore, the implemented methodology of measurement and analysis should work with more complete information about the various behaviors of users and competitors as well as the main indicators. This will aid companies to obtain an increase in deposits, a reduction in costs and an improvement in customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In any case, companies should decide which metrics best suit them. The best fitting metrics, infrastructures and cultures should be able to be applied to all of a company's media, brands and channels, with adjustments for each channel or social media (Powell et al., 2011).

The expert in web analytics, Kaushik (2011), performs an in-depth review of this question and provides an extensive arsenal of metrics and methodologies, ranging from the classic clickstream analysis to emerging analytics for social and mobile commerce. Kaushik (2011) has put forth a series of questions about the search for providers of measurement tools that deal with aspects like data preference or interpretation of said data, the ability of a company to work with ICT, the type of data to analyze, system costs, functions that include mechanisms for data collection, etc. Furthermore, it is worth noting that all metrics should be simple, pertinent, timely, and immediately useful and that all companies should find their key performance indicators, which will be different than those of non-e-commerce sites.

Kaushik (2011) has explained how to carry out a clickstream analysis, which is employed just as much on the Social Web as it was on earlier versions. He has put forth the following metrics:

- *Standard indicators*: are basic metrics employed in any type of web, be it social or not, and that serve as the basis for calculating other metrics (e.g. bounce rate). The main standard indicators are the following:

- *Visits*: show the number of users that have accessed a website and track the amount of time spent there (session). The software allows counting how many total visitors have visited their site as well as how many pages within the company's main page they have accessed. This is useful for knowing which page they first visit and which are the most visited.
- *Unique views*: through the use of cookies, one can count the number of unique users that have entered during a period of time, meaning multiple visits by the same user during the analyzed time period are eliminated.
- *Time on the page*: looks at how much time the user has been on the same page.
- *Bounce rate*: provides information about how many users visit a site and then do not click on anything, but instead leave the site. This information will make it easier to improve the site in order to avoid visitors' leaving it and will favor the desired type of transactions. With this metric, one has to keep in mind that some pages are designed not to necessitate additional clicks once on the site (e.g. blogs).
- *Exit rate*: analyzes how many people leave a specific website. This allows insight into which parts of a website should be restructured or analyzed to avoid having people leave the site. One has to keep in mind, however, that all users do eventually leave every site. Analyzing exit rate is very useful in purpose-driven browsing (e.g. the online purchasing process), since it makes it easier to improve the user's experience.
- *Conversion rate*: is a percentage that measures the proportion of the total outcomes that are achieved with every visit; one must decide if such outcomes (e.g., sales or performing certain task) are divided by the number of unique visitors or the number of visits.
- *Engagement*: is a difficult variable to measure, as there is no certain scientific way to know if the visitor to a corporate website has had a positive or negative experience. To solve this, Kaushik (2011) has proposed counting the number of times a user visits the site during a certain time period and employing surveys to ascertain whether their experience has been positive or negative.

Along with clickstream, a company's search engine rankings should be analyzed and efforts made to optimize the SEO. This allows companies to better take advantage of paid positioning options on search engines, adjusting the use of pay per click in order to cut costs. Additionally, this allows companies to measure the success of their campaigns and monitor them while they are in use.

There are certain websites and web sources that, by virtue of their characteristics, are more difficult to measure, because they employ technologies such as flash, Ajax, widgets, videos, podcasts and other types of multimedia formats that do not use website visits as the primary element to be measured. For such sites, there is software available that makes it possible to codify each "event" and to make measurements related to the parameters that have been designed in the codification, such as time spent, moment of departure, etc.

On the other hand, Kaushik (2011) focused on the analysis of the Social Web. He has pointed out that changes in creation, distribution and content consumption have led to commonly used metrics not providing data that are useful for understanding social media. To remedy this problem, he has proposed a series of specific measurements for certain situations:

- *Offline applications.* The number of applications that can, via computers, cell phones or other devices, be used online as well as offline is constantly increasing. The previously discussed metrics cannot be used unless users are connected. To solve this, databases have been built into the application to log the users' offline activity, so that when they reconnect, their data can be sent and analyzed.
- *Mobile devices.* Now that operating systems and mobile devices have advanced, measuring results has become more complicated. Currently, there are three ways to measure the mobile experience: Register-based solutions (weblogs); packet-sniffing solutions, which consists of analyzing the packets of data flowing through the company's web servers; and tag-based solutions, through JavaScript or images, as tags allow companies to track user's behavior and obtain a wide array of data. By using these methods, it is possible to know how many visits the site has received, where they came from, how much time has been spent on the application, the type of device that has accessed it and if it sparked a conversation.
- *Blogs.* Blogs have traditionally used clickstream-based metrics to measure a blog's success, but this is not sufficient due to their unique characteristics. First, it is necessary to measure monthly publications and the content created, since more content means better results should be obtained. Additionally, visitors, visits and subscriptions will be measured with RSS. Furthermore, the conversion rate, based in this case on the comments garnered by the posts, must be measured, including the number of words per comment. This measurement should extend beyond the blog, since one of its objectives is to have content talked about in other media and networks. To do this, citations in other media and the "ripple effect" (measured with the ripple index), which analyzes the chain reaction caused by each publication, must be measured.
- *Twitter.* Tends to employ various success indicators:
 - The growth in number of followers, which is similar to number of visits, is related to the churn rate, which measures the followers lost over the total number in a certain time period.
 - Message amplification, measured by retweets achieved in a time period and by each message sent.
 - Click-through rate and conversions; the first is based on the number of clicks on shared links (CTR or average shared links click-through); and the second is based on the value of links shared by clients that point towards the company's e-commerce site.
 - Conversion rate is based on the number of conversations created and is measured according to the number of responses.

- Furthermore, there are other emerging analytics, related to: recruitment (how diverse the group being communicated with is), reach (interest and spread of messages), speed (who is retweeting and how long it takes them to do so), demand (number of accounts that one follows and if the following is reciprocal), network strength (influence of our followers) and activity (control over the number of messages sent and if they create new followers).
- *Videos*. As has already been briefly mentioned, to measure a video, one must codify. Once codified, the consumption (quantify how videos are being consumed) should be measured, audience gain should be followed (analyzing when the viewers quit viewing a video), its social strength should be measured (measuring comments, favorites and audience indices) and virility (studying if the video has been resent and through which media or application) must also be analyzed. Furthermore, result segmentation, analyzing the context in which the video is seen and who is watching the video and gathering opinions about what they see, is essential.

Similarly, to gather qualitative data, Kaushik (2011) has proposed asking users about the application's usability, as well as using questionnaires to measure the users' opinions, reasons for use, and the type of experience they have had with the application.

Additionally, Funk (2013) has highlighted the importance of defining the results (objectives) that companies want to reach in numeric terms, keeping costs in mind. He has indicated, similarly to Kaushik (2011), that it is recommendable to social media and campaigns so that they are carried out in A/B tests, meaning that the website is presented differently to various users in order to check their daily behavior; this allows evaluation of which website design works best.

Powell et al. (2011) have offered another series of key performance indicators: the number of fans that a company's brand's Facebook page has and how many its competitors have; the number of comments on Facebook about the company or brand per week; positive and negative feelings about the company or brand; Twitter mentions per day; and the number of mentions of a brand relative to its competitors by key and influential users.

The website SocialMediaToday (2013) has offered a list of companies that offer services to monitor and follow conversations, comments and content that is created on the Social Web in general and within specific communities. From the tools for measuring, following and identifying that are most commonly offered, the most noteworthy are:

- Cross analysis of comments and conversations that take place on various social networks, segmented by user profile identified preferences and attitudes (e.g. BlizMetrics, Bottlenose, Buffer, Buzz Equity, Collective Intellect, Social Marketing Cloud, Social Mention, Social Response, Swix Analytics, Shoutlet, UberVU).
- Metrics tailored to a specific virtual social network, which allow the following of behaviors and opinions on these platforms (e.g. Facebook Insights, Google

Alerts, Curalate, Back Tweets, PinPuff, PinReach, Pinterest Web Analytics, TweetBeep, TweetDeck, Twitalyzer, Pluggio).

- Coordination of measurement across different social media for marketing purposes, allowing decisions to be made in short timeframes (e.g. Alterian/SDL, Custom Scoop, HootSuite, Icerocket, MarketMeSuite, MeltWater, Vocus).
- Measurement of engagement and the company and brand's image through different social media (e.g. Argyle Social, CARMA, Crimson Hexagon, Gorkana, Netbase, Sprout Social, Synthesio, Sysomos, Talkwalker, Visible).
- Identification of WOM, key words to follow and their virility (e.g. Brandwatch, CyberAlert, Mention, NUVI, Topsy, Trackur).
- Recognition of clients and leaders of opinion who are key in the creation of content, comments and behavior patters (e.g. Fliptop, Klout, Netvibes).
- Combined analysis of data from traditional media and online social media (e.g. MediaVantage).

Managing and measuring social media has become a huge challenge; the options for labeling and syndicating on the Social Web is becoming increasingly complex; products are consumed and companies are discussed outside of the analyzed pages and users create a huge amount of content. This necessitates that indices and metrics become increasingly sophisticated (Kaushik, 2011).

In conclusion, measuring actions and strategies on the Social Web is more complicated than it would initially appear. There are interesting and useful proposals, some of which have been commented on here. However, the dynamic and rapid development of social media's tools and applications require that analytics be constantly renovated to keep up. Weber (2007) suggests that companies ask themselves the following questions when they are ready to measure their actions and strategies on the Social Web: What needs to be measured? or what are the most relevant metrics?

4.3.2 How to Calculate the Return on Investment in the Social Media

Among the researched elements of the web, Return-on-investment (ROI) is particularly noteworthy. Given its importance in comparison with other measurements, thanks to its usefulness in determining the magnitude of effect that web-based actions are having on the company's results, ROI merits special attention and review apart from the other metrics.

The difficulty of measuring the results of Social Web actions and actions taken in virtual communities does not imply that these actions do not have value nor that they cannot create value (Clemons, 2009). To the contrary, they demand greater effort be put into understanding them. Therefore, marketing actions carried out on social media must be measurable so that it can be determined if investments are paying off (Merodio, 2010). It is also worth considering that although the use of

social media holds a huge potential for reaching large audiences and for strengthening relationships, using social media, while cheaper than other media, is still not free. Social media use necessitates the use of writers, community managers, graphic designers, application designers and personal directive, on top of software appropriate for following and monitoring these actions (Funk, 2013).

The most essential ratio for measuring the effects of companies' actions on social media is ROI. In general, the use of ROI is in pursuit of three goals: improving the decisions of where to invest in marketing; diagnosing and improving the response of a specific channel; communicating the obtained results with the rest of the company. The difficulty of ROI analysis, however, lies in the fact that actions on social media do not produce isolated effects; they are instead related to and strengthened by traditional actions and vice versa. Therefore, when measuring results, the analysis must be done with the big picture in mind; i.e. not seeing these marketing actions as isolated from other factors (Powell et al., 2011).

Among marketing professionals, there are two main camps: those who believe that social media actions cannot be measured; and those who believe that they can and that ROI is the measurement to use (Funk, 2013; Sobejano, 2011). However, the difficulty, or lack of understanding about how to measure this, leads to many companies not establishing methods for analyzing their returns on investment, when they should be doing exactly the opposite, investing based on an expected return (Newman & Thomas, 2008). To do this, measurement metrics, related to ROI of investments made on social media, that provide marketing practitioners more precise knowledge to help them manage a predetermined budget are needed (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011).

Prior to considering the formula for calculating ROI, one must keep in mind that the Social Web is an environment of entertainment, interaction and connection between people more than a place for commercial transactions; this makes the calculation of ROI more complex. Furthermore, this should be viewed as a return in a broader sense with the following benefits in mind: improved ability to search for potential clients, increased ability to reach current clients and higher capacity for solving and dealing with topics of interest to clients (Funk, 2013).

The ratio used to calculate the ROI is simple; it is the following calculated as a percentage (Powell et al., 2011):

$$\text{Marketing ROI} = \left(\left(\frac{\text{Incremental Revenue} \times \text{Contribution Margin}(\%)}{\text{Marketing Cost}} \right) - 1.00 \right) \times 100\%$$

In practice, however, Funk (2013) has noted that there are various ways of measuring social media's impact on business results, offering a more realistic ROI:

- *Audience response.* Everything measurable and traceable should be studied. Funk offers supplemental metrics to help calculate the ROI.

- *Impression valuation.* Funk has proposed a system similar to measuring free publications in traditional media by suggesting that posts, “likes,” comments, and rankings be measured.
- *Attitude and usage.* Measuring reputation, visibility and consumers’ attitudes and behaviors through social media surveys. Furthermore, product rankings, edits, mentions, etc. made by consumers should be kept track of.
- *Cost savings.* Costs that are reduced thanks to using social media should be calculated. These savings can come from social media performing the function of fielding calls from users or spreading promotions and other advertising actions, which can be cheaper or happen naturally on social media.
- *Loyalty impact.* This is the main contribution of social media to ROI. Social media help create greater consumer loyalty to a brand, which increases sales and reduces operation costs and the amount of searching a customer has to do. To measure this, organizations can analyze users’ behaviors, identify profiles, etc.
- *Risk of ignoring.* Staying out of the conversations occurring on social media can result in a diminished competitive edge in the market.

On the other hand, the complete calculation of ROI is not necessary for many companies, which is why those responsible for marketing can use a simplified form called ROMI (Return On Marketing Investment); this ratio allows comparisons between the various channels used by companies (Powell et al., 2011):

$$\text{ROMI} = \frac{\text{Incremental Revenue}}{\text{Marketing Cost}}$$

The index of ROMI’s margin can be calculated, using margin increase as the opposite of the increase of deposits in ROMI:

$$\text{mROMI} = \text{ROMI} \times \text{Contributing Margin (\%)}$$

The above formulas provide a simple method for calculating, although making decisions about what to include is still complicated. Li and Stromberg (2007) applied this last formula to the measuring of blogs, but it could be applicable to other types of social media as well.

There has been another measurement proposed known as IOR (Impact of Relationship). This metric allows the comparison of qualitative factors about brands and companies derived from bidirectional communication and directed by the user that ROI does not include (see Merodio, 2010). IOR applies objective values to each interaction between the brand, its content and its social media followers, going beyond clicks and cookies. This allows companies to analyze relationships and the evolution of their brand’s presence on social media, optimizing their approach to goal creation and the comparison of results and evolutions through numerical indicators (Cavalcanti, 2011). The four axels put forth in IOR are (see Merodio, 2010):

- *Authority of the brand’s content:* establishing the mention of a brand in media and profiles that do not belong to the company (mentions on blogs, references in

online periodicals and portals, the brand's content that is used in presentations or conferences, etc.).

- *The brand's influence on social networks*: calculating how many followers or fans a company or brand has across various social media (number of fans on Facebook, number of Twitter followers, number of YouTube subscribers, etc.).
- *Follower participation*: measuring the interactions between the followers or fans with the brand and with the content created by the company (comments in their blog, comments and "likes" on Facebook, retweets on Twitter, etc.).
- *Traffic driven from social networks to the brand's website*: counting the visitors that arrive to the company's website through the social media with which the company participates.

Additionally, Fanscape (2009) has proposed a model for measuring a social relationship's value. They have highlighted various indicators that complement the information obtained by ROI as well as that obtained by IOR:

- *Conversion or Redemption Rate of Promotion*: the rate of conversion of a promotion (e.g. discounts, coupons, etc. that were used as part of the promotion).
- *Average Gross Profit per Transaction*: the average benefits of each operation.
- *Retention or Repeat Purchase Rate*: percentage of clients that purchase again.
- *Customer Lifetime Value*: economic value of a customer over the course of the life of each client.

4.4 Risks of the Social Web for Companies

The use of social media and the rest of the Social Web's applications pose risks if the new role played by both companies and consumers is not understood and managed. Li and Bernoff (2009, p. 28) cited several examples; one of which is the "Streisand effect." This refers to a situation in which an organization or person deletes content that is not to their liking from the Internet, prompting a wave of other individuals spreading that same content as a form of retaliation. Also consumers can use social media to spread information that has a negative effect for a company. For example, in the case of Dunkin' Donuts, a blogger who was also a provider for Dunkin' Donuts in South Korea posted an entry titled "The Truth about Dunkin' Donuts," accusing the company of making their food in unsanitary conditions; this conversation was spread by other blogs. This leads to the conclusion that movements on the Social Web cannot be stopped, only understood and accepted as part of the Web context.

There are other cases involving large companies like Peugeot, Domino's Pizza and Dell. Peugeot discovered how the errors of their models were being discussed on forums and communities with the goal of damaging the company. Domino's Pizza did not know how to take down a video from YouTube in which two fake employees made pizzas in unhygienic ways as a joke. Dell saw a letter written by a famous blogger complaining about a Dell product he purchased go viral, gaining

enough attention to appear in traditional media. The common element of these cases and others is the companies' mistaken response strategy or that they were not aware of how quickly these comments or negative pieces could spread through social media (PriceWaterCoopers, 2010).

Some practitioners are reluctant to incorporate social media into their business strategy due to the inherent risks of social media, stemming from how easily they can be used for communication between consumers and their ability to rapidly spread a message (Liberos, 2010). In any case, users will criticize companies when they feel like they are not being treated properly, regardless of whether the company is present on social media. It is preferable that they criticize the company in an environment controlled by the company rather than on sites that they do not manage; this helps companies by giving them insight into their clients' complaints and opinions, by allowing them access to feedback, etc. Therefore it is incomprehensible how unaware many companies are about what is being said about them on social media; they do not understand how useful the users' comments can be to them (Hughes & Boudreaux, 2010; Weber, 2007). If companies are prepared to process these messages, they can manage them quickly and effectively, denying the information if it is incorrect or rectifying the situation and solving the problem being discussed on social media.

One noteworthy aspect that helps to explain the rapid spread of negative messages about companies has been explained by Yang and Mai (2010) in relation to WOM on social media. Negative comments and WOM about a company have more influence over a customer and spread more rapidly than positive reviews. However, one thing that should never be done with negative messages in a virtual community or website, even one sponsored by the company, is eliminating them. This would cause consumers to lose trust in the company, as well as cost the company the opportunity to respond to information that is, in one way or another, going to spread (Carracher, 2011).

However, companies should be aware that sometimes the individuals that make negative comments are not looking for a response or solution. To the contrary, these comments are not made with the goal of resolving doubts, but to attack the company; social media are frequently used because the commenters know how widely messages can spread (Moschini, 2011). These individuals are known as "trolls" and pose a threat on social media, as they do not participate in conversations with genuine intentions. The way to manage such comments is different from consumers' true comments, which are made in good faith. To combat these sorts of destructive comments, organizations need to deny the accusations and clarify the information and facts for the rest of the consumers.

4.5 Managerial Changes Motivated by the Social Web

The effects of the growth and expansion of the Social Web have substantially modified the reality of the business world. Primarily, in the aspects related to managing relationships with clients, competition, success of marketing strategies and value creation. However, the impact on companies is still small, compared with the effect it will have in the future. In any case, it still remains to be seen how business models will develop and evolve for the Social Web (Blázquez, 2011).

Specifically, Barnes, Hackathon, Power, and Ring (2008) have presented elements and areas where one can observe the effects of the Social Web and how these have led to an evolution in management:

- *Customer reports*: customer reports improve the connection and interactivity in company-client relationships, enabling new forms of measurement.
- *Control panels*: control panels make available a multitude of indicators, sources of information and places to gather information, requiring applications to manage them.
- *Labeling*: labeling is a flexible way to classify information available to the company. Labeling makes it possible for the company to divide their customers into segments and, to better understand them and their behaviors and to have a better understanding of the company, its image and its products.
- *Mobile information delivery*: the generalization of mobile devices permits access to the previous aspects anywhere at any time.
- *Managing metadata*: the availability of data sources and reports is increased and complemented by users' ability to add, modify and rate new information.
- *Knowledge management*: having more available information allows companies to modify and improve their processes of managing knowledge, increasing their options for compiling data, for processing and for distribution.

Companies as well as people can take on the role of being a leader in society thanks to the Social Web. This is due to the social tools that facilitate companies and people becoming, in regards to certain matters, sources of information for others, something that could be advantageous for a company. Powell et al. (2011) have created a list of tactics that can be used to exploit this opportunity:

- Establishing a virtual community about the brand.
- Correctly choosing in which communities to participate.
- Choosing where and when to try to establish relationships and commitments.
- Providing valuable content to the participating consumers.
- Collaborating and establishing bonds with other experts and influential people.
- Integrating actions into the communities and carrying out business actions within them.
- Performing commercial actions in the virtual community of the company's brand.

As a consequence of the new possibilities for communication and the changes companies have made to exploit them, advertising and public relations professionals are obliged to reconsider how to develop relationships with their stakeholders. They should assimilate the new media of the Social Web into their communication strategies, taking advantage of the interactivity and of the other advantages that they offer (Christ, 2005), primarily to involve their collectives and to improve their relationships (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009); this idea is also valid for non-profit organizations.

However, even when the benefits and opportunities provided by the Social Web to businesses are clear, some companies still show reluctance and resistance to change (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Those that have decided to introduce its use show greater maturity. These companies are aware that social media's value does not lie in its existence and use, but in that they lead to more loyal customers that identify with the company. Therefore, all companies should aspire to participate in the Social Web, as its correct use contributes to improvements in marketing processes and in competitive position in markets, especially for small and medium companies.

4.6 Some Data on the Companies' Use of the Social Web

In this synopsis, various statistics and reports on the use of Social Web applications by companies will be discussed, with the goal of demonstrating their current importance and envisioning their future behavior. Prior to beginning with the use by companies, however, it will be helpful to share some data about the use of social media by the population, which will help explain the phenomenon's importance.

- Social media are the primary activity on the web (strongblogs.com, 2013); specifically social networks are where users spend the most time: an average user spends 22 % of their time on them, 21 % on searches, 20 % reading content, etc. (Go Gulf, 2012).
- The growth of social media use is consistent across all age groups, but age and use are negatively correlated. Ninety percent of people 18 and under in the United States use social media and this percentage falls to less than 43 % in people over 65 (Pew Research Center, 2013). Furthermore, 40 % of users access social media through mobile devices and 28 % do this daily (Pew Research Center, 2013).
- Google is still the most visited website, although the site where users spend the most time is Facebook, six more hours a week than Google for an average of 7 h, 45 min and 49 s (Go Gulf, 2012).
- The virtual social networks with the greatest world-wide use are (GlobalWebIndex, 2013): Facebook (51 %), Google+ (26 %), YouTube (25 %), Twitter (22 %), Sina Weibo (21 %), QZone (21 %), Tencent (20 %), Tencent Weibo (19 %), Youku (12 %), Ren Ren (10 %), Tudou (9 %), LinkedIn

(8 %), Kaixin (6 %), Pinterest (4 %) and 51.com (4 %). The most used user-generated content sites are: YouTube, Wikipedia, Twitter, Craigslist, Wordpress and Flickr (EBizMBA, 2013).

- Every minute more than 60 h of video are uploaded to YouTube; on Twitter more than 250 million tweets are published every day; Facebook has more than 800 million updates daily; Google sees more than a billion searches a day (Go Gulf, 2012).
- The number of active users (those that use social media frequently) on Facebook were 693 million in December 2012, Google+ has the second most users with 343 million people using it at least once a month, and YouTube would be the third social network with 21 % of Internet users actively using it. Twitter is the social network experiencing the most growth (GlobalWebIndex, 2013). Furthermore, it is worth noting that in 2013, Google+ has gained 925,000 users every day, Pinterest's growth is not slowing and since the acquisition of Instagram by Facebook, each day sees more than 300 million photos uploaded on both platforms (strongblogs.com, 2013).
- It is important to keep in mind that the total number of Internet users in the world is over two billion, 30 % of the world's population (Go Gulf, 2012). In 2012, 44.8 % of users were found in Asia, 21.5 % in Europe, 11.4 % in North America, 10.4 % in Latin America, 7 % in Africa, 3.7 % in the Middle East and 1 % in Oceania. The largest proportional growth of Internet users between 2000 and 2012 was in Asia and Europe (44.8 % and 21.5 %, respectively) (Internet World Stats, 2012). Asia has the largest population of Internet users (China is the country with the most users at almost half a billion), which North America has the highest rate of use at 78.90 % (Go Gulf, 2012).

It is also important to understand how companies use the Social Web; some interesting introductory data are: 50 of the brands included in the top 100 of the world already make use of virtual communities for their brands (Wirtz et al., 2013); more than two and a half million companies have LinkedIn profiles (strongblogs.com, 2013); one million websites have integrated Facebook; 56 % of consumers' tweets are ignored by the involved company.

Nevertheless, Ennes (2013) has pointed out that there still remain certain aspects of the Social Web that companies have not seriously considered. Social media are now a reality, but companies do not know how to apply them. The following aspects are noteworthy:

- Fifty-eight percent of companies participate in social media like Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, but economic investment is predicted to rise in the future. He points out that 79 % of companies plan their social media actions in some form, but only 12 % believe that it is currently effective to promote their brand, record customer tendencies and obtain new product ideas.
- Sixty-six percent of companies do not have a real social media strategy. It is an executive priority in only 32 % of companies, despite a predicted 69 % increase in its use. Companies see measuring the efficacy of their actions, calculating

their ROI and understanding the effects of their social efforts as their main challenges.

- Only 12 % of companies' personnel is primarily dedicated to social media, instead the responsibilities are usually delegated to external departments or to experts. Ennes points out that this could possibly explain why only 20 % of companies have a budget dedicated to social media. Furthermore, it leads to non-controlled environments where the company is alienated from its own publicity.
- She highlights the differences between effective users and those who are simply present when they need to consider the benefits. There are significant differences when one considers them as tools for generating sources of conversations, promoting a brand, tracking tendencies and gathering opinions and new ideas for products. In all of these situations, effective users are more aware of these advantages.

In order to compare their behavior with other types of companies, Ragan.Com (2013) analyzed 100 companies that are most important on the international level in order to understand how they use social tools as well as how they use other data. In the data, they observed that: 87 % of large companies have a presence on some social media platform, a number that coincides with those that have Facebook and/or Twitter; those that have a profile in YouTube and/or LinkedIn are up to about 50 % and about 33 % have a Pinterest and/or Google+ account; 80 % of small companies have social media plans and 28 % measure the ROI of their actions; companies only respond to 30 % of the comments that their customers direct at them through these media (in Twitter, 56 % of tweets from clients to companies are ignored); 26 % of companies encourage their clients to interact with them; finally, only 30 of the 500 large retail companies allow their clients to access their site through the users Facebook account and less than 20 % of American companies have integrated social media in their processes of sales, product development, etc.

With regards to the unique case of small businesses, Vertical Response's (2012) study offered the following conclusions: managers have to dedicate more time to social media, while having to share their limited time with other business functions; the importance of Facebook and Twitter use is clear, while Pinterest and Google+ use is slowly growing; managers understand that creating value through content is important; and they are beginning to see the necessity of investing in social tools.

The study of the situation of Inbound Marketing done through Hubspot (2013) highlights results such as: 21 % of marketing directives believe that social media have become more important over the six months preceding the study; 74 % consider Facebook to be very important when creating leadership strategies; companies that receive more than 1000 "likes" daily get, in turn, 1400 visits to their website; 52 % have found new consumers through Facebook, 43 % through LinkedIn and 35 % through Twitter; 23 % invested in blogs and social media, 9 % more than in 2012.

In accordance with some already-presented data, Booz and Company (2011) have noted that the companies perceive the benefits of using social media to be:

brand development, interactivity, virility, knowing their clients, improved efficacy of marketing actions, innovation, reduced costs and drawing traffic to the company's website.

Regarding the tactics carried out by companies on social media, the following are noteworthy: the use of social communities sponsored by brands, blogs and microblogs, participating in social networks or in bookmarking sites, the use of "likes," allowing comments and reviews, distribution of content, rating and instant messaging (Adobe, 2011).

Finally, one of the major ways that social media can be used is as an advertising platform. Fifty-three percent of American companies use social media for this purpose (Owyang, 2011). This is due to the fact that, little by little, users are coming to accept that social media are going to act as advertising platforms. According to Nielsen (2012), 33 % of users consider advertising on social media to be more annoying than in other media; 26 % pay more attention to ads on social networks than in other media; 26 % feel that ads should match the information on their profile; and 17 % are more connected to brands that follow social media.

Additionally, investments in social media advertising are predicted to rise 134 % through 2017, reaching 11 billion dollars; this assumes an annual growth of 18.6 % (Bia/Kelsey, 2013). The key to seeing this kind of growth will be improvements to the platform to allow for better advertising support.

Chapter 5

Evolution of the Marketing Mind-Set and the Value-Creation Process

5.1 Background

5.1.1 Evolution of Business-to-Consumer Communication

The Social Web is becoming the primary communication center, making people into communication media through the content they produce (Weber, 2007). This fact has forced organizations to use the web more and more to spread their messages, eliminating the costly advertising that was standard in traditional communication media (Meerman, 2007).

In this sense, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010, p. 312) define the new media as:

...websites and other digital communication and information channels in which active consumers engage in behaviors that can be consumed by others both in real time and long afterwards regardless of their spatial location.

Furthermore, these authors characterize the new media by being:

- *Digital*, allowing anyone to create and distribute content through the Internet.
- *Proactive*, which makes it possible for consumers to create value on all levels, from the superficial to the creation of new products for the company.
- *Visible*, since consumers' actions on forums or in virtual communities can be seen and followed by other users and/or companies.
- *In real time and long lasting*, as consumers can share experiences in real time in new media like blogs or forums, and these posts remain available indefinitely.
- *Ubiquitous*, meaning that, thanks to mobile devices, these new media can be accessed anywhere and anytime.
- *Structured in networks*, for example, social networks make it possible for users to create content, share it and relate with other consumers.

Therefore, and thanks to the consolidation of new social technologies, the communication maintained between consumers and companies has ceased to be unilateral and passive. This has brought about the shift from the information era to the new era, the participation era. This new stage is characterized by, in addition to social media, other external factors such as: information overload, an increase in skeptical clients, an overload of commercial messages, new leaders of opinion and clients on the network (Celaya, 2008).

In this era of participation there are multiple parties that publish messages about the brand, meaning that the company is not in complete control of their message. To highlight this loss, we have the ever-increasing importance of user-generated content, which is difficult to trace, written anonymously and not done for monetary gain (Muñiz & Schau, 2011). Still, social media offer organizations a higher level of engagement with users than traditional channels of communication do (Powell, Groves, & Dimos, 2011). The increase in consumers' power in this new era has recalibrated the equilibrium in the communication between companies and their target audiences that are more collaborative and autonomous (Hoffman & Novak, 1997). Companies that want to be successful in this new setting must be aware that they are mere providers of information, meaning they must deliver content whenever and wherever it is necessary, managing it as a valuable asset (Meerman, 2007).

Communication in this interactive era of marketing is shifting the control of communication from the company to the consumers (Lee & Park, 2004). The Web 2.0 brought a new level of control to consumers, along with greater flexibility to decide what information about the product or company interested them (Peterman, Roehm, & Haugtvedt, 1999). This highlights the current paradigm shift from unidirectional communication models to participatory communication models. These models are predicated on the assumption that the control and creation of messages no longer rests in a single pair of hands, but is now diffuse, with all participants forming part of the message, creating "participatory conversations" (Muñiz & Schau, 2011). These transformations are making communication into a more and more effective marketing instrument (Burgos & Cortés, 2009).

Part of this transformation involves consumers' current expectation to be part of a bidirectional conversation with the brand, making the role of marketing in organizations change for good. With this in mind, companies must alter their strategies to incorporate bidirectional dialogue and measure the impact that it is having on their brand (Powell et al., 2011). The characteristics of communication on the Web 2.0 are (Bastón, 2008): conversation, participation, reputation, trust, recommendation, transparency, value, correct tone and social or open software.

Additionally, it is imperative that organizations make an effort to understand the primary factors that influence consumers' attraction to and behavior on these new social media. One contribution to this effort was made by Hennig-Thurau

et al. (2010), who identified essential elements of the new media that affect market instruments:

- *New multimedia services.* Examples such as video-sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube) or virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), afford consumers the opportunity to create, consume and share content in ways that are, in many cases, related to brands or companies.
- *The digital consumer's expression.* Consumers share opinions and comments about companies and their products on social media, using what has come to be known as eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth).
- *Customers acting as retailers.* Consumers can end up acting as retailers on the Internet, selling their own products or services to other users (e.g. sites like eBay or Amazon).
- *Virtual communities.* New media allow consumers to meet and interact online with other consumers through platforms known as virtual communities, which present an opportunity for companies to improve their relationships with clients.
- *Search engines.* Search engines have become an indispensable tool for gathering information about products, services, companies, etc., anywhere and anytime. This has been key to the transformation of the consumer from passive receiver to an active element of the process.
- *Shopping bots.* Consumers, thanks to shopping bots, can easily and quickly compare the price at which various companies are offering a product.
- *Mobile technologies.* Mobile technologies such as laptops or cell phones have enabled consumers to access the Internet from anywhere at anytime, which helps create a more personal marketing, that is still directed at a large number of clients.
- *Automated recommendation systems.* Organizations can use social media to filter comments and collaborate with other users to create products and services.
- *Peer-to-peer networks and piracy.* On many occasions, consumers, through new media such as social networks, can distribute and obtain different types of products from other users (e.g. movies, music, etc.) without taking into account the legality of their actions.
- *Online auctions.* Online auctions have experienced a high growth rate with the expansion of new media.

5.1.2 A New Consumer Profile

The new digital era puts companies in the position of not only facing a changing environment, but also one in which the profile of the client is changing (Taylor & Strutton, 2010). It is important, then, for marketing professionals to better

understand the processes that surround their clients and their behaviors of shopping on the Social Web.

In order to profile the characteristics of the new consumer, it is important to be aware of the digital culture in which society is currently immersed. This culture is characterized by: interest in creating information and sharing knowledge; rejecting ideological indoctrination and vertical hierarchies; new forms of relating and socializing; recognizing value-creating leadership; awareness and curiosity about quotidian and personal topics; and latent creativity as an engine of innovation (Caldevilla, 2009).

New social technologies largely satisfy the need for daily communication with others in a way that is both faster and more robust. Furthermore, once this basic need is met, many of the Social Web's users go on to create new relationships, both personal and professional, through the use of blogs, wikis or social networks. There are also people who use or collaborate on the Social Web to make money. Finally, there are users who actively participate in this setting with the goal of becoming a point of reference on a specific subject or because they are looking for social recognition (Celaya, 2008).

The current digital-based consumer is highly connected, due to the possibility of being connected at all times, from wherever and with anyone in the world. Furthermore, they are capable of creating their own content, transforming themselves into very informed and up-to-date consumers and they have control over companies' image and communication. Therefore, in this context, it is the consumer herself that decides how and when to consume, determining their setting for brands and contacts (Relaño, 2011). Street (2005) has elucidated some of the diverse expectations that this type of consumer has of their relationship with companies:

- Being able to get in contact with the company at any time through any channel.
- Being able to use procedures that are tailored to their needs and preferences to shop, obtain a service or simply request help, deciding how and when to make the decision to buy.
- Having the option to compare different companies' options prior to committing to one.
- Wanting to always get an excellent product in whatever category they happen to be shopping, and through every channel.

The existence of digital consumers has ushered in a new way of dealing with customers. This is due to the role that these new cyberconsumers, who create their own content about products and brands, have taken on as informative agents and critics (Octavio, 2007). This content is characterized by its low cost of production and the absence of censorship and quality control because it comes from varied sources and is perceived as less trustworthy than professional content (Martínez-Ríos, 2007).

In short, opinions about companies' actions circulate freely in the context of the Social Web. Furthermore, they can be found and expanded upon by consumers any time of day and from anywhere in the world. Therefore, these opinions or experiences shared between online users leads to a type of empathy between the users, which makes them feel closer. This promotes the emergence of groups or communities relating to brands, which, in these cases, form the basis for interaction and dialogue among consumers, be it as friends, admirers, followers, enthusiasts or detractors of a brand (see Martorell, Solanas, & Sabaté, 2011).

5.2 Marketing Mindset Evolution: From Marketing 1.0 to Marketing 3.0

5.2.1 Marketing 1.0

Marketing 1.0 is characterized by the Web 1.0. As a refresher—the Web 1.0 was based on a system in which the information on a company's website was published, usually by the company itself, without any alteration for the type of consumer; these websites also had very limited feedback possibilities. Company websites like this were more than online catalogues; they were 24 h a day stores, accessible from anywhere, through which the company offered products and/or services in a unidirectional fashion (Maciá & Gosende, 2010). They were dealing with an immature version of the Internet, where users were limited to passively surfing, removed from the action (Caldevilla, 2009).

Therefore, Marketing 1.0 was based on the sale of products and services that the company manufactured for whomever wanted to buy them. Its primary objective was expanding and standardizing in order to reach lower production costs, have lower prices and be more accessible to shoppers. Levels of success were measured through market share. In conclusion, we are talking about the age of product-based e-marketing (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010).

5.2.2 Marketing 2.0

More than a decade ago, an Internet-based dialogue in which a group of people tried to understand and explain how a new focus of company-client relationships could be created led to the conception of an excellent book outlining the end of the traditional company: *Cluetrain Manifesto*, the basis of which came from 95 research theses. This manifesto is based on the idea that markets are made up of conversations. Now, the principals of the evolution from Marketing 1.0 to Marketing 2.0 are

laid out, meaning that the evolution from a product-centric focus to people-centric focus, with message trumping image and experience-trumping product (see Cortés & Martínez-Priego, 2010). This evolution is marked by three types of changes (Burgos & Cortés, 2009):

- *Language*: advertisement ceased to be the most effective way of impacting clients, making way for the emergence of conversations between clients and between clients and companies or brands.
- *Base*: the client is the center of focus, not the website, product or message.
- *Form*: the client is no longer a passive subject and now actively participates.

The collection of applications that enable communication and interaction between users that forms the Web 2.0 platform is totally applicable to marketing (Villanueva, 2011). Weber (2007) has delved deep into this subject and notices that the web is becoming ever-more important in the medium of marketing. The Social Web is presented not only as a challenge for companies, but also as an opportunity to interact with the market, know the need and opinions of clients and relate with them in a direct and personalized fashion (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

Therefore, O'Reilly (2005) has explained that the Web 2.0 promotes the creation of a collaborative network between individuals, which is founded and relies upon participation. One of the main advantages of the Web 2.0 is the availability of numerous cooperation tools, which accelerate social interaction between people separated in time and/or space. Furthermore, due to its reticulated structure, open collaborative spaces and collective intelligence must be managed, in a communication model based on a many-to-many interaction.

Accordingly, marketing, following in the footsteps of the evolution of Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, has changed from a model where the protagonist was a product on a company's website to a user-centric model.

In summation, the Web 2.0 makes it possible for marketing to be centered around new relationship models in which consumers take on a fundamental role. In this way, consumers can share information, become tastemakers, vote to award or punish content and/or create or share their information (Maciá & Gosende, 2010). Because of this, Muñoz (2010) believes that a new marketing has begun, one that is more than just the traditional banner, search engines, social networks or emails; this new marketing is social, viral, more creative and can have its return on investment measured.

Payton (2009) has proposed that Marketing 2.0's principal characteristics are being interactive, flexible, democratic, viral directed, accessible and fun. Companies that want to adopt this new conception of marketing will have to undertake a series of structural changes to adapt to version 2.0 (Cortés & Martínez-Priego, 2010):

- *From individualism to collectivism*. Currently, markets are conversations, meaning they are connected places in which clients are no longer passive subjects but have asserted themselves as active players that consumer and create content. Therefore, the most collaborative, participatory and interactive consumers

become “prosumers” (producers and consumers of information). This forces marketing to move from being individually based to being collectively based.

- *From advertisement to conversation.* Today the market is saturated with advertisements, which is why companies must use new methods for getting their message to clients, based on conversations and equality. To achieve this, organizations must go to the places where their clients are on the Internet (blogs, social network, etc.) or in whichever device they are using to connect (computer, telephone, etc.).
- *From self-initiative to client-initiative: collective intelligence.* Collective intelligence is understood as “the sum of knowledge and activities in a web setting that creates a final result superior to the sum of the individual intelligence or contributions” (see Cortés & Martínez-Priego, 2010, p. 18). Therefore, clients, groups and society in general must form a part of companies’ projects.
- *From project to engagement.* The product is the only way through which clients relate with a brand or company. Therefore, it is essential to promote the possibility of participating and interacting with the organization’s brands or products in a sensory fashion, to the client, facilitating experiences and engagement.
- *From advertisement to experience.* In this context, the company must abandon persuasion and begin to attract customers through experiences.
- *From the computer to the use of multiple electronic devices.* In the current age, consumers are always connected through different electronic devices that offer the possibility of navigating, communicating and being informed in any moment.
- *From brochure to recommendation.* Now recommendations, either from the company itself or from other users, accelerate the process of positioning and of purchasing.
- *From egocentrism to corporate reputation.* The Internet offers sufficient media to be able to manage the reputation of a company.
- *From supposition to web analysis.* The Internet provides companies the necessary tools and indicators to gather information in real time about the behaviors of clients on the network.

In order to adapt to this new focus, companies should adjust the various marketing variables and strategies that the current market demands. To achieve this, organizations must think about marketing as a more global and strategic business concept, and apply this philosophy to the rest of their departments (Muñiz, 2010).

As Weber (2007) pointed out, in this new marketing, the vendors, instead of acting like broadcasting organisms, need to become aggregators of consumer communities, which is the true mission of marketing on the Social Web. To do this, companies have to stop transmitting messages to an ever-more indifferent public and start fostering participation on the social networks where the clients want to be. There are two necessary actions for aggregating clients. First, companies should offer complete content on their website and create commercial spaces that

the clients want to visit and, second, they should participate and involve themselves in the public sphere. Furthermore, the marketing objectives on the Social Web will continue to be the same as always, although from a different perspective: attracting and retaining the client to take advantage of the organization/consumer relationship. Therefore, marketing's new job will consist of creating communities of interest, providing content, but also facilitating the creation of content by users. It is important to encourage dialogue between the company and the consumers, as well as between the consumers themselves, to create engagement, positive WOM and customer loyalty to the brand.

Mazurek (2009) analyzed the implications of the Web 2.0 and marketing at both a conceptual and operational level. He noted that the Web 2.0 developed tendencies to use technology through the Internet; also, he focused on the creation of virtual communities and the transfer of control of content to the users. This author, furthermore, explained the benefits that the Web 2.0 could offer to companies. From among these, the most noteworthy is the possibility to transfer a large amount of activities to the consumer, focusing exclusively on image and research, encouraging community members to participate and to create value. He added that companies could make use of the tools that promote the new technologies to:

- Allow faster search times for, access to and exchange of information.
- Allow the use of contacts and knowledge more efficiently.
- Help companies hold on to their best employees and improve their job satisfaction.
- Break down time and geographical constraints in order to improve communication between personnel.
- Reduce bills.
- Improve productivity and competitiveness.

5.2.3 Marketing 3.0

The most ambitious foreseeable evolution of the Internet is the possibility of a semantically focused web that allows machines to speak to one another: a network that becomes a large, intelligent library with data flow programmed by users, transforming the Internet into a neuronal system, capable of self-awareness (Cruz, 2007). Therefore, people are trying to develop a more intelligent, intuitive, open, efficient and sensible Semantic Web that would be able to work with databases distributed across various systems (Cobo & Pardo, 2007). Some authors are referring to this goal as the Web 3.0, or the possibility of creating a Semantic Web.

On the road to this evolved web-context, substantial changes are occurring in marketing, motivated by technological developments and giving rise to what is known as Marketing 3.0, the next stage in the evolution of marketing. This new marketing is characterized by the convergence of new technologies and the

progressive change of consumers' shopping tendencies, which are influenced by the unlimited information available through any device (Tasner, 2010a).

Kotler et al. (2010) have pointed out that while Marketing 1.0 was based exclusively around the product and unidirectional communication, Marketing 2.0 was based around the consumer and interaction and Marketing 3.0 will consider the consumers' thoughts and demands in order to offer products based in values and emotions. These authors speak of Marketing 3.0 as the value-oriented era, in which consumers are treated as human beings with hearts, minds and spirits, working towards making the globalized world something better. For their part, consumers will try to contact companies that satisfy their deeper needs and that contemplate social, economic and environmental developments in their mission, vision and core values. Specifically, consumers will search for products and services that provide satisfaction not only on a functional and emotional level, but also on a spiritual level. This vision of marketing, which is general, is not incongruous with the Social Web; it would be in line with the ultimate objective, suggested by Martínez-López and Sousa (2008), that organizations should have for their marketing strategies: contributing to customers' self-actualization.

Marketing 3.0 boasts consumer collaboration and participation as one of its basic pillars. It gives people the opportunity to express themselves and to collaborate with other individuals, through the creation and consumption of news, ideas and entertainment; in this context, social media is key. Companies have been affected by the increased tendency towards collaboration, which decreases the control they have over their brands.

With this in mind, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) have argued that the role of consumers is being transformed. Consumers are no longer isolated entities, but people connected with one another, that consciously make decisions and become active agents that provide useful information to companies.

5.3 Keys to Understanding the Value-Creation Process in the Context of the Social Web

5.3.1 Value-Creation: An Overview

The concept of value is one of the most complex concepts of the economy; additionally, it is the foundation of all marketing activities (Holbrook, 1994, p. 22). The theoretical approaches to companies' value-creation processes are varied. One that stands out is Porter's (1985) contribution of the value chain, which regards a business as a collection of linked activities that allows delivery of superior value to clients and outperformance of competitors (Gilmore, Carson, O'donnell, & Cummins, 1999; MacStravic, 1999). Said activities can be divided into five main activities (i.e., inbound logistics, operation, outbound logistics, marketing and sales and customer service) and other supporting activities

(e.g., research and development, human resources, business infrastructures, etc.) (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

From the customer's perspective, however, we should talk about perceived value. Let's examine some conceptual synthetic approaches.

- Para Zeithaml (1988), believes that perceived value is the general assessment that customers make about a product's utility, and is based on what it gives and what it receives.
- Kotler and Keller (2009, p. 147) define perceived value as the difference, as perceived by the customer, of all the pluses and minuses associated with a specific offer (e.g., product/service) in comparison with alternative offers, meaning the difference between the total value and total cost to the consumer. It is, therefore, a subjective and personal concept that influences behavior depending on the perceived quality, the perceived sacrifice, the framework in which the evaluation is made, the category of products dealt with and the intrinsic attributes.
- Ravald and Grönroos (1996) have conceptualized perceived value as an equilibrium between the functional solution gained by the customer and the required sacrifice to obtain it.
- Fifield (2009) regards perceived value as the result of comparing four basic elements: obtained benefits, risk, effort and price paid for the product.
- Hassan (2012), similar to Rintamaki, Kuusela, and Mitronen (2007), defines perceived value as an evaluation of the product's positive and negative consequences.

Therefore, the take-away is that only when a buyer expects and obtains a higher value than he has to pay for a product will he likely maintain a relationship with the company (MacStravic, 1999). This is a convenient place to bring up something known as value-in-use, which is a loose guide for current marketing practices (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). As Woodruff and Gardial (1996) have pointed out, the value of a product to an individual or an organization cannot be assessed without keeping in mind the product's use. When considering this, it is necessary to separate the concepts of production and value-creation. Value is not produced or embedded in products or services, but rather depends on the consumer's ability to extract value at the moment of consumption; Vargo and Lusch (2004) refer to consumers as operant resources in their seminal service-dominant logic of marketing.

5.3.2 Value-Creation on the Social Web

The previous introduction concluded with the idea that the value a consumer obtains does not depend solely on the product, but also on the interaction at the moment of consumption (Ind & Coates, 2013); this means that the value obtained by the customer depends on the quality of the interaction. Therefore, from this new perspective, the process of value-creation is understood as a process shared between

the company and the client. It involves considering the market with the consumers (Cova & White, 2010). This is the underlying focus in the context of the Social Web, where the control companies traditionally have had over the processes of value-creation and marketing has been reduced in favor of the consumer control.

Clients or users are not necessarily passive receptors of the value offered by companies. Now, thanks to the tools of the Web 2.0, they are informed, connected through networks and have a high degree of power that they have never had before, due to the possibilities afforded by search engines, participation platforms, an increased number of Internet-based interest groups and the generalization of the technologies of social interaction. Clients, through the use of these tools, have learned how to make their opinions and ideas heard, and, therefore, achieve an active role in the process of value-creation. This has happened largely without cost (Fisher & Smith, 2011) and has benefited companies as well (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

Ramaswamy (2008) has pointed out that companies are adapting to this new scenario. They are expanding the co-creation of value towards creating value for customers (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). In this regard, the experience of co-creation can be defined as a process that allows co-creative interactions in which people can enjoy significant and convenient participatory experiences that are tailored to specific consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Specifically, there is a new context of value creation in which value is created through experiences (Prahalad, 2004) and both companies and customers are considered co-producers of not just goods and services, but also of experiences and value.

Co-creation is a process that allows individual consumers to have a hand in designing future products, marketing messages and the sales channels through which they will be available (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008). A dialogue, therefore, occurs between parties involved in an interactive process of mutual learning (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006), in which the experience of co-creation itself takes on a relevant role. From this perspective, co-creation can be defined as “the participation of consumers along with producers in the creation of value in the marketplace” (Zwass, 2010, p. 13). Therefore, the process of value-creation is not competition exclusive to companies; value is co-created by the market’s different actors that participate in the process online (Nenonen & Storbacka, 2010). The co-creation of value is understood as being shared between companies and consumers (Fisher & Smith, 2011). Accordingly, the dominant role of companies has been eliminated, establishing equality between the various participants of co-creation, where organizations share their experiences in exchange for various benefits (Ind & Coates, 2013).

According to Lusch and Vargo (2006), the process of value-co-creation produces significant benefits for companies. This is partly due to how it helps them understand consumers’ opinions and uncertainties, and partly due to improvements to the process of identifying the needs and desires of customers. However, Grönroos and Ravald (2011) have pointed out that the concept of value-co-creation is currently overly abstract, both in theory and in practice. These authors have suggested that,

even if it is accepted that customers are co-creators of value, the implications of this for customers and providers has not been explored.

Similarly, authors such as Ind and Coates (2013) have affirmed the idea that value-co-creation has materialized thanks to the confluence of various factors. Some of these factors that are particularly noteworthy are the generalized use of the Internet, the orientation of companies towards services and experiences, the inclination towards innovation and the boom of social, collaborative and participatory technologies provided by the Web 2.0. From this same point of view, Zwass (2010) believes that the elevated importance of the consumer's part in value-co-creation has been strengthened by the Internet, and even more so by the Social Web's ubiquity and accessibility. Additional important aspects are networks of relationships, collaboration, forums and interactive media. Fisher and Smith (2011) have argued that collaboration is constantly growing between producers and consumers due to the new digital technologies that make the connection between consumers possible. They confirm that these new tools are creating new ways of engaging in marketing processes, augmenting a change in mentality in relation to the role of consumers in experiences.

Therefore, Pagani (2013) believes that the rapid adoption of these digital tools is making new growth and innovation strategies possible in settings that are more complex, dynamic and non-linear, like those presented in this scenario. For example, Arvidsson (2011) thinks that companies are putting more trust into public opinion and viral communications that are produced in these media as elements of corporate reputation and brand value. Furthermore, they are increasingly incorporating consumer participation in the creation of their products and innovations.

Kucuk (2011) has proposed that the basic elements of the value-co-creation process in the context of the Social Web are: connectivity, content, community and commitment.

Zwass (2010) considers co-creation in this field to be characterized by four types of elements: common access, collective intelligence, virtual communities and open innovation; Ind and Coates (2013), recognize that the participatory design and collaborative innovation, which have been enabled by new technologies such as virtual communities, have supported new possibilities for co-creation. Zwass also notes that the new Web context provides facilitating elements for co-creation, access to different media that make production possible, coordination of effort by involved parties, aggregation of disperse digital products and the supplying and distribution of digital products. With this in mind, he has proposed two distinct methods for carrying out value-co-creation in a virtual world, especially in online communities: sponsored co-creation and autonomous co-creation. Sponsored co-creation refers to those activities in which consumers create value by supporting the business model of the producers, at the request of said producers; for example, supporting ideas for new products. The activities of autonomous co-creation, on the other hand, are those in which the consumer creates value through their participation in actions that are voluntary and independent of any organization while still creating value for consumers (e.g. wiki development).

5.4 New Ways of Connecting with Consumers on the Social Web

5.4.1 Crowdsourcing Marketing

Crowdsourcing marketing is a new marketing idea that primarily consists of asking the 2.0 world to provide ideas to companies (Li & Bernoff, 2009). This involves a company or institution externalizing an act traditionally performed by employees to a group of undefined people (generally a large group) through an open call using Web 2.0 technologies (Howe, 2006; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008).

This concept was pushed by Howe (2006). Issuing an open call to an indeterminate group of people results in the gathering of the people most capable of handling the task, responding to complex problems and contributing relevant ideas. In this scenario, people anonymously, voluntarily and spontaneously perform tasks, which are normally performed by technical personnel or other members of the organization's personnel, with the goal of resolving problems or clearing up doubts (PuroMarketing, 2008).

Another more concise definition of crowdsourcing was put forth by Van Ess (2010, p. 28): "channeling the experts' desire to solve a problem and then freely share the answer with everyone." Therefore, crowdsourcing is a production model and a method for solving problems that is explained by the following sentences:

1. The problems are spread to a group of unknown people through an open call for help.
2. The users, which normally constitute online communities, work on solutions until they find the best option.
3. The best solutions went on to become what is now known as crowdsourcing.

Crowdsourcing strategies can be divided into four categories (Howe, 2006):

- *Crowdfunding*: deals with collective cooperation on the Internet, executed by people that make a network to collect money or other resources to fund a project. They can also be carried out to support the efforts started by other people or organizations (Wikipedia, 2012).
- *Crowdcreation*: online collective collaboration is used to create content made to solve all kinds of problems.
- *Crowdvoting*: consists of exploiting the judgment of organized groups of users in communities (mass) to organize, filter and create a range of different content. This method leads to higher levels of crowdsourcing participation.
- *Crowd wisdom*: is based on using many people's knowledge to solve problems, predict future results or directly help business strategies.

Therefore, crowdsourcing is really a new form of collaboration that differs from traditional collaboration in the following ways (Carpenter, 2010):

- The teams are virtual and they are formed as needed. Consequently, the concept of a specialized team created beforehand is no longer relevant.
- The team forms as a response to information of common interest instead of by request by some type of authority.
- Joining a collaborative team is a personal decision, not a requirement.
- Throughout the collaboration responsibility is shared; anyone can contribute, abandoning the concept of a structured team.
- The interaction is spontaneous-instead of structured-throughout the project.
- Collaboration is pushed forward by innovation instead of by systematic completion of assignments.

However, authors such as Baranek and Skilton (2011) have pointed out that crowdsourced collaboration cannot replace traditional collaboration; the former creates new opportunities for the latter to follow through on. While traditional collaboration is a process used to complete a known objective, crowdsourced collaboration is a path to discovering and developing new ideas.

Some of the noteworthy benefits of this type of collaboration are (Wikipedia, 2012):

- Problems can be solved quickly at a relatively low cost.
- It tends to be an effective tactic for corporate communication and problem solving when trying to be creative in new situations or decision-making (PuroMarketing, 2008).
- In most cases, if the group is remunerated, the pay depends on the results obtained.
- Companies can take advantage of all the available talent present in their organizations (Noveck, 2009).
- By listening to users, companies gain real information about their clients' desires and preferences.
- The community can end up feeling an affinity towards companies that implement crowdsourcing actions.

5.4.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

As has been previously noted, the Social Web represents an important transformation in the traditional business-consumer communication model. The model has gone from being a unidirectional to a multidirectional one in which the consumer, which has historically only received messages, can also emit and transmit messages through a simple code (words, images, sounds, etc.) and a channel that does not require too much technical knowledge.

The Social Web has expanded and improved Word of Mouth (WOM). In general, WOM can be conceptualized as the “information about products, services, stores, companies and so on [that] can spread from one consumer to another” (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005, p. 125). More specifically, WOM is

understood as all oral and personal communication about a brand, product or service, where the person receiving the message perceives the emitter's intentions to not be related to commercial actions (Arndt, 1967). Accordingly, Harrison-Walker (2001b, p. 63), defined it as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization or a service."

The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA, 2012) defines WOM, with a marketing perspective, as "any business action that earns a customer recommendation." It is, therefore, considered to be a more honest form of marketing because it is based in people's natural desire to share their experiences with family, friends and colleagues.

In addition to becoming an important tool for promotion and for market research, WOM communication is turning into a fundamental element in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Harrison-Walker, 2001b; Tuskej, Golob, & Podnar, 2011).

The effects and consequences of WOM for products and brands have been the subject of multiple research projects in the offline context (e.g., Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bone, 1995; Richins, 1983; Wangenheim & Bayón, 2004). However, currently, as has been demonstrated, Internet-based relationships have become an effective way to complement or substitute face-to-face interaction (Palazón & Sicilia, 2010). The expansion of the Internet and of social media, together with increased access to technology, have made it much easier than it was in the past for consumers to make comments about brands (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008). WOM can now occur through various virtual platforms, like social networks or comment-aggregating websites (Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012).

However, the current theories about interpersonal communication based on face-to-face interaction must evolve to capture the behavior of WOM communication in an electronic communication context (see Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). This effort has led to the emergence of what is known as eWOM (electronic Word of Mouth). This type of communication can be defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). eWOM-based marketing has proven to be one of the most interesting and effective ways to reach an organization's target audience (Meerman, 2007). eWOM has come to be a tool with much greater reach and exposure than other techniques of traditional promotions (see: Kucuk, 2011; Rejón-Guardia & Martínez-López, 2014). This is because eWOM is grounded in the idea that users can easily spread content amongst themselves, causing companies' advertising campaigns to spread across the web like a virus. All of this happens at little to no cost (Maciá & Gosende, 2010).

Regarding WOM, researchers have confirmed that it makes a large impact on consumer choice and judgment of products (Arndt, 1967; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008b; Engel, Blackwell, & Kegerreis, 1969; Hung & Li, 2007; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; Richins, 1983; Villanueva & Armelini, 2007). This phenomenon makes sense because it has been shown that consumers are more likely to trust informal and personal sources over formal and business sources (for example,

advertisements) when it comes to making purchasing decisions (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Furthermore, it has been shown that the trust placed in WOM has an even greater importance when selecting services, due to their intangible nature and the increased risks associated with them (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Casaló et al., 2008b). Therefore, its influence on purchasing decisions will increase when the search for this type of information is more active (Bansal & Voyer, 2000).

WOM communication also influences consumer satisfaction, brand awareness, post-purchasing perception and rebuying behavior (Bone, 1995; De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Hung & Li, 2007; Purnawirawan et al., 2012). Occasionally, it can even be more effective than the traditional marketing tools of personal listings and ads, especially in the acquisition of home items (Engel et al., 1969; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955). Therefore, there are authors that tie consumer-made positive comments about brand with sales, considering the former a predictor of the latter (Woisetschläger et al., 2008).

In conclusion, companies should take advantage of the opportunity to increase their market share and their influence over consumers through the development of positive WOM communication about their products between clients (Casaló et al., 2008b).

Additionally, there are diverse precursors to WOM. Brown et al. (2005) have shown that satisfaction, commitment and identification with a brand or company are determining factors in the intention to spread positive WOM. With respect to consumers identifying with companies, authors like Tuskej et al. (2011) consider this variable to be an essential component of being able to promote the company to other consumers, to frequently recommend a brand's products and to make positive comments about it. As far as commitment goes, Harrison-Walker (2001b) has shown that effective commitment in particular exerts a strong and positive influence over the creation of WOM. In a similar vein, De Matos and Rossi (2008) have observed other important variables in the creation of WOM such as perceived value, quality, trust and brand or company loyalty.

In the electronic context, researchers have demonstrated that the online exchange of knowledge between clients also affects a product's perceived value and the probability of recommending it, although not the intention to rebuy (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Furthermore, eWOM can have greater credibility and relevance for users than other web-created sources (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Therefore, it has been shown that the intention to spread positive WOM is dependent on the loyalty and satisfaction that consumers feel towards a specific brand or company (Casaló et al., 2008b). Companies that want to create positive WOM between their clients should keep the following characteristics in mind (Villanueva & Armelini, 2007);

- Non-intrusive. The creation of brand knowledge is based on the free flow of information between individuals.
- Bottom up. The process of learning about the product takes place within a community, led by its own members.

- Less control. Companies should only strengthen or amplify WOM, but it is almost impossible to know who is receiving the messages and how the content varies.

5.4.3 *Gamification*

The expansion of the Internet, and especially of the Social Web, has led to the emergence of new marketing concepts and strategies that have helped attract new clients and strengthen relationships with already existing ones. A new formula applicable to this new context and related to marketing is gamification.

Gamification, in a general way, can be defined as: “the infusion of game design techniques, game mechanics, and/or game style into anything” (Gamification Wiki, 2013). More specifically, gamification is the use of thought and the mechanics of games in settings outside the games, with the objective of creating more fun and attractive experiences for the users (Wikipedia, 2013). It is also used as a formula to make individuals participate in different activities or to try to solve problems (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). This is a concept that emerged in 2004, although it did not attain popularity until the around 2010 (Gamification Wiki, 2013; Luminea, 2013). In any case, gamification is becoming an important opportunity for businesses. Based on data provided by M2 Research (2012), researchers have prognosticated exponential growth of the worldwide gamification market over the next two years, with an estimation of 2.8 billion dollars in 2016.

Marketing’s global reach, the saturation achieved by some communication tools, Web 2.0’s expansion and changes to consumer mentality have made gamification into one of the most attractive options for capturing consumer attention (Zichermann & Linder, 2010). Online gamification strategies are now gaining traction in other areas and sectors through the conversion of consumers to true players (Gamification Wiki, 2013). An example of this would be the numerous strategies that various companies have employed in social networks.

There are no universal mechanisms or rules for the play tactics carried out in the virtual world. However, some authors have tried to group the different play methods according to the most common methods used by companies. This is the case with Bajdor and Dragolea (2011) or Zichermann and Linder (2010), who think that those companies that have adapted this new technique into their strategies share some common gamification mechanisms: points, levels, badges and/or leaders or challenges.

- Points: provide information about how a game is going. They are used to reach an objective or to measure how a user is doing relative to others. This is a mechanism that motivates users to win as many points as possible.
- Badges: can be purchased with business cards but in the digital world.

- **Levels:** are mechanisms used to motivate users to increase their efforts to reach higher and higher levels. It is a form of dividing the game into subgames that can be unlocked (Zichermann & Linder, 2010).
- **Challenges:** are elements that normally need the participation of a group of users that face a series of tasks, sometimes simple and other times more complicated.

Vassileva (2012) has classified the different game mechanisms according to their patterns or rules, distinguishing between: ownership (games that give individuals the chance to acquire products such as points, loyalty card, etc.); achievements (mechanism that make virtual representation possible to get something on your own or in a group); status (tools that rank users) and community collaboration and quests (challenges or competitions that can be done in groups). Zichermann and Linder (2010) have confirmed that some of the key game elements provided by this new tendency are: status and levels; points; rules and demonstrability.

There are many examples of gamification use by companies in the virtual world. Among the most recent, some noteworthy ones are: unlocking badges or prizes offered on the social network Foursquare by visiting new places (Frith, 2013) or earning points and unlocking avatars in DJing's virtual space (Gamification Wiki, 2013). Another noteworthy example are Nike's goals behind creating the virtual space Nike+, where consumers can set personal goals or challenges for friends; or the initiatives of automobile companies like Fiat, who allows users to gain points online by playing FiatDrive.

Additionally, among the most noteworthy benefits of executing a gamification marketing strategy we find the connection formed between the company's interests and the intrinsic motivations of the players. This could lead not only to participation by long term players but also to gaining new users (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). In fact, winning the loyalty of new users is one of the basic objectives that companies are hoping for when carrying out these types of mechanisms (Zichermann & Linder, 2010). These tools are also useful for: solving companies' problems (e.g. being overrun with emails) (Bajdor & Dragolea, 2011), responding to clients' questions (Lumineva, 2013), and intensifying the participation of users in a specific time period (Thom, Millen, & DiMicco, 2012). Furthermore, it is an effective mechanism that achieves a long reach for a low cost (Zichermann & Linder, 2010) and a fitting marketing technique for selling virtual goods (Hamari, 2010).

Finally, it must be mentioned that, although adapting game mechanics to fit business strategies has brought about obvious benefits, it is also possible that not all tactics are convenient in all cases. Therefore, organizations should be aware that mechanisms like the accumulation of points only serve to motivate users in the short term. Furthermore, these mechanisms could also work as a disincentive for some of the more creative users, who are essential for companies and will not find the possible offers attractive (Vassileva, 2012). Therefore, it is advisable that companies use gamification not only to encourage consumers' extrinsic motives through, for example, games based on points or badges, but also to encourage their

intrinsic motives (e.g., sense of identity) (O’Sullivan, Richardson, & Collins, 2011) through more sophisticated mechanisms such as challenges.

5.4.4 Inbound Marketing

Another of the procedures developed as a result of the expansion of the tools provided by the Social Web that stands in contrast to the traditional form of marketing is inbound marketing. This new marketing concept has emerged to respond to behavioral changes of consumers who, as was previously stated, have stopped being passive receptors of the offers the company makes to entice them to become active participants in the process.

Halligan and Shah first coined the term “inbound marketing” in 2009, although its antecedents are found in what Godin, in 1999, called “permission marketing” (Fishkin & Hogenhaven, 2013). In general, the term “inbound” refers to “those activities that involve pulling your customers towards you” (Pateman & Holt, 2011, p. 10). It is a form of marketing that requires the consumer’s active participation, and not only seeks an active relationship, but also draws in new consumers. Therefore, inbound marketing will always be effective and when companies consider clients to be partners or value-co-creators, organizations will figure them in as part of the dominant logic of their services (Lusch & Vargo, 2009).

This new way of marketing, thanks to the technical possibilities offered by the Web 2.0, has rapidly replaced “outbound marketing,” which refers to those traditional marketing activities that try to push a company’s messages on the outside world, like, for example, through television advertisements or through telemarketing (Smith, 2011). It, therefore, deals with the consumer reaching different brand’s products or services through the Internet of their own volition. This is due to, according to Fishkin and Hogenhaven (2013), among other things, the emergence and consolidation of search engines like Google and the involvement of companies in the tactics of Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Inbound marketing, especially on the Internet, involves a series of very different techniques, among which some of the standouts are: content marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), marketing on social networks, video marketing and permission marketing (Fishkin & Hogenhaven, 2013; Pateman & Holt, 2011).

Content marketing, for example, is based on understanding the client’s exact wants so that companies can deliver content that will be of value to them and other potential clients, attracting them to the company. To do this, they use various platforms such as websites, digital magazines and podcasts, along with other social media. Permission marketing is an evolution of direct marketing, which uses email to contact databases of customers interested in receiving commercial messages (Maciá & Gosende, 2010; Tezinde, Smith, & Murphy, 2002).

Companies that want to implement inbound marketing will have to put a series of actions into practice like, for example, creating/maintaining a wide-reaching website; producing content; or driving website traffic (Johnson, 2013). Also, in line

with the dominant logic of the services, inbound marketing should promote value-co-creation, the importance of learning and company-consumer dialogues (Lusch & Vargo, 2009).

Accordingly, this new form of marketing provides companies an appropriate tool to draw in potential shoppers, keep them informed throughout the purchasing process, make the organization visible, classify shoppers and, in short, make the process profitable.

5.4.5 Social CRM (Customer Relationship Management)

As has been shown throughout the chapters of this book, new social technologies have led to many more social consumers who share their experiences and opinions about products and companies on a massive scale, instantaneously and with a widespread audience (Acker, Gröne, Akkad, Pötscher, & Yazbek, 2011). Therefore, this new generation of clients requires organizations that are transparent, authentic and available to interact (Greenberg, 2010). Social Customer Relationship Management (Social CRM) is a new marketing strategy that has caused this change of attitude, pushed by the acceptance of new social technologies, especially social networks.

Social CRM represents an evolution of traditional CRM tactics, the goal of which is “to manage customer relationships so as to maximize their life-time value for the organization” (Ang, 2011, p. 32), or managing detailed information about customers, as well as the important interactions that they have with companies, with the goal of maximizing loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 159). To do this, organizations take advantage of the possibilities to adapt to the social client that are afforded by Web 2.0 tools.

In general, Social CRM is “the process of integrating the social consumer into current CRM efforts (Goldenberg, 2011, p. 6) or “the strategies and tools for new levels of customer insight” (Greenberg, 2010, p. 411). More specifically, it could be defined as “engaging, monitoring and analyzing relationships with prospects and customers via social networks, the web and other digital methods” (Dickie, 2013, p. 8).

It deals, therefore, with integrating all the relevant information that stems from the interactions between clients and the company and between clients themselves, through the tools and applications of the Web 2.0, into the CRM systems. Having precise knowledge about the nature of conversations regarding specific companies, whether generated by individual clients or groups of clients, or through debates in the population at large, will be important (Greenberg, 2010). For example, following and managing complaints that customers have levied against brands through the Social Web could be considered part of Social CRM strategy; also the creation of online forums or frequently asked questions pages to solve consumers’ problems would be a part of a Social CRM strategy.

Greenberg (2010) believes that all companies that want to improve their ability to learn through customer information should keep in mind five main elements: data (web page visits, marketing response campaigns, blog conversations, etc.); analysis of individuals' feelings about the company (emotional temperature); information gathered from social media; compilation of clients' profiles in this environment; and consumers' experiences.

Social CRM helps companies to understand consumers, improving the execution of marketing strategies to meet their needs, increasing, therefore, benefits for the company (Goldenberg, 2011; Woodcock, Green, & Starkey, 2011). More specifically, it can create opportunities, help adapt and design better products, aide in refining channel and price strategies and finding the most fitting positioning strategy. Additionally, it can help with the construction of virtual communities, increasing brand-awareness, company credibility, engagement with the brand or even increasing web traffic or social sales (Acker et al., 2011; Dickie, 2013; Woodcock, Broomfield, Geoff, & Starkey, 2010). This last case would lead to increased sales due to greater brand-awareness and more customer engagement, which would also lower costs (Woodcock et al., 2011).

All companies that want to successfully establish a Social CRM strategy should keep in mind that this strategy should be in line with their business goals and, more specifically, with their company culture. Furthermore, all the company's social networks (customers, providers, etc.) should be included and be supported by appropriate system technology (Woodcock et al., 2011). Therefore, it is recommendable to go through the following steps when constructing this type of strategy: monitoring the flow of information on the web; evaluating possible opportunities and threats; creating strategies; testing strategies on a small scale; integrating them through implementation; and, later, revising them (Acker et al., 2011). Another similar point of view comes from Woodcock et al. (2010), who have proposed eight stages for developing Social CRM strategies: (1) listening to and learning about what is being said about the brand on the web; (2) understanding consumer behavior on social media; (3) deciding how important Social CRM will be in engagement strategy; (4) developing data models; (5) optimizing the company's website according to the acquired information; (6) attracting fans; (7) strengthening interaction; and (8) measuring and evaluating the efficacy and efficiency of the strategies put into place.

Chapter 6

Brand and Social Web

6.1 Branding

6.1.1 *Traditional Branding*

The American Marketing Association (2012) defines a brand as a “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers.” The brand is the primary identifying element of the product, reflecting its personality and, therefore, its positioning (Serrano, 2008, p. 361). It is, therefore, a means to be able to distinguish one product, service, manufacturer or retailer from another (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

The construction of a strong brand is necessary to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in the long run (Aaker, 1989). It provides companies (Keller, 2001): better loyalty from clients; less vulnerability to the marketing actions of competitors; better margins; more positive client reactions in response to price increases and decreases; better support and cooperation of intermediates and greater efficacy of marketing communication. Furthermore, it can simplify inventory distribution, legally protecting the distinct elements of products or services and preparing particular quality level (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

The perspective of brands as legal instruments, of differentiation and visual identification, has evolved to reach other broader visions, which can accommodate functional, emotional, relational or strategic dimensions. Authors such as Fournier (1998, p. 367) have confirmed that brands go beyond helping consumers, giving meaning to their lives. This makes complete sense if one bears in mind that brands also symbolize abstract values such as quality, social status or reputation (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Wang, Butt, & Wei, 2011). They can come to constitute a fundamental asset to consumers in the decision making process, they reduce buyer’s uncertainty and they help protect consumers’ personal image (De Chernatony & McWilliam, 1989; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Wang, Butt et al., 2011). It could be said, therefore, that brands define consumers (Schembri, 2009),

and even create personality and identity (Matzler, Pichler, Füller, & Mooradian, 2011). In this same vein, Belk's (1988) studies have confirmed that consumers feel linked to the objects and brands that hold emotional value for them, as if the brands were a part of who they are. Therefore, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) have recognized that affiliating with a brand is more based on a brand's symbolic attributes than its actual benefits or characteristics.

Accordingly, a brand is based on evaluations made by consumers, who are influenced by information and stimuli provided by the company and other sources not controlled by the company. In the case of the former, consumers relate to elements that serve to identify and differentiate a brand, like visual and verbal information (Keller, Apéria, & Georgson, 2008), elements influenced by brand-related marketing activities (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Regarding the stimuli from sources not controlled by the company, some of the non-commercial sources worth noting are: WOM, direct personal experiences and anti-brand web. One additional source of information used to evaluate brands would be the associations independently made by the consumers about the links between people, places or other elements (Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012).

Once they have evaluated these stimuli, some consumers could have negative emotional responses to certain brands; e.g., ire, discontent, disgust, shame, sadness and worry (Romani et al., 2012). To avoid these types of reactions, companies must construct and design a solid marketing strategy. Branding is based on this principal. In a general way, branding implies the aggregation of a brand's power on different products and services of an organization; this should contribute to the creation of mental structures in the consumer, which are useful for decision-making and benefit the company (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Brand strategies should respond to the 5 Ws (what, who, why, when and where) with respect to the communication and distribution of both verbal and visual brand-related messages. A well-executed brand strategy should provide a strong brand-value, which, in turn, should allow the brand to be marketed at a higher price than their competition (Johansson, 2010).

Companies can follow diverse strategies to capitalize their brands (Aaker, 1996; Santemasas, 2008):

- Branded vs. Non-branded (generic) products. Companies can operate in the market with or without a specific brand for their product.
- National, franchising and store brands:
 - National (manufacturer) brand: the manufacturer decides to market its products under its own brand.
 - Franchising: a company belonging to a recognized brand cedes its rights of use to other institutions in exchange for economic compensations.
 - Private label or store brand: it is the distributor that decides whether to market products under a private brand or under their own brand.

- Single or multiple brand:
 - Stand-alone brand: all of a company's products are marketed under the same brand.
 - Multi-brand strategy: different names are used to market a corporation's products; e.g., Toyota and Lexus or Nissan and Infinity.
- Brand alliances or co-branding: these are arrangements between complementary brands that aim to strengthen their images and increase the perceived quality of some of the products.
- Brand stretching: A company uses its brand to attend to new segments, in or out of its usual existing product class, by extending its product portfolio. In its existing product class, the brand can be vertically stretched, either moving it down or up in its original market segment. On the other hand, if the brand enters new categories, this strategy is known as brand extension.
- Second brands: organizations that possess overlapping brands that wish to increase the market and cover different segments. This strategy is usually followed when companies are interested in isolating their main brands from new brands they release: for instance, when targeting lesser market segments with lesser quality (and cheaper) versions of products.

Taking a cue from customer-based brand value, Keller (2001) has proposed a model of four sequential phases for constructing a solid brand. In this model brand value is contextualized and we explore how to better create, measure and manage it. The first of the model's phases consists of cementing the brand's identification with the client and securing an association between an appropriate brand and a type of product or the customer's need in the mind of the consumer. Next, a brand meaning is implanted in the mind of the consumer. In the third step, the consumers' response to the identity and meaning of the brand is analyzed. And finally, the company tries to transform the response to the brand into a strong and active loyalty between the consumer and the brand. Furthermore, this model depends on a series of essentials blocks to create successful brands: importance, performance, images, opinions, feelings and resonance. These blocks form what Keller (2001) calls the brand pyramid; in order to create value, is necessary to put each of the blocks in the correct order and begin to keep each in mind until reaching the peak.

6.1.2 Brand Equity

In this section, brand equity and its most important implications for organizations are discussed.

Although there are multiple definitions for brand equity, there is not as of yet a consensus about what it really means and what it covers (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Park & Srinivasan, 1994). In general, brand value has been understood by multiple authors to be the value that a brand lends to a product

(e.g., Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993; Santesmases, 2008; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). However, there are two general perspectives with the respect to defining brand value (Pappu et al., 2005): financial (e.g., Brasco, 1988; Simon & Sullivan, 1993) and the consumer (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Rangaswamy, Burke, & Olive, 1993).

A widely accepted definition for the second focus is one proposed by Aaker (1991, p. 15), which considers brand value to a collection of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand that add to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product or service to a customer. Specifically, the collection of assets (or liabilities) would be composed of five elements: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets. The first four are considered the most relevant, so we will focus most of our attention on them (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Pappu et al., 2005).

Brand awareness reflects the intensity of a brand's presence in the mind of the consumer (Johansson, 2010). This recognition in the target audience's memory is created through the activities undertaken by the company to construct the brand (Samu, Lyndem, & Litz, 2012). These can lead to a positive attitude about and intentions to by the brand (Keller, 2003). Also, there are various types of brand-construction activities that are positively correlated with brand equity (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). Furthermore, brand awareness can be created very successfully if the company manages to take a large market share and gains the knowledge necessary to be able to operate outside of the traditional channels of communication (Aaker, 1996).

Brand association refers to what the brand means to the consumer (Keller, 1993). This is influenced by brand identity, meaning what the company wants the brand to represent in the minds of the consumer; in other words, it refers to a collection of distinctive associations that symbolize the brand's meaning and promise transform the consumer (Aaker, 1996). It can also be conceptualized as "ethos, aims and values that present a sense of individuality differentiating the brand" (De Chernatony, 1999, p. 165).

Perceived quality is understood as the subjective evaluation that the consumer makes about the product (Zeithaml, 1988), and brand loyalty is understood as the union that the client has with the brand (Aaker, 1991, p. 39). This last term will be studied in depth in this text, as it is considered one of the most important elements of brand value (Aaker, 1996), since an increase in customer loyalty increases brand value (Yoo et al., 2000). Here we are going to introduce what brand loyalty is understood to mean and what its repercussions are for companies.

Brand loyalty has come to be a fundamental objective for companies (e.g., Jones, Reynolds, & Arnold, 2006; Wallace, Giese, & Johnson, 2004), and is considered to be a key element in the maximization of their benefits (Oliver, 1999). This is due to an environment that is increasingly competitive, to the reduction of costs associated with changing customers and the sophistication of society's shopping and consumption habits (Bustos & González, 2006). Loyalty can be considered from two different focuses: behavioral, which emphasizes the customer's history of buying the brand (Mascarenhas, Kesavan, & Bernacchi, 2006); and attitudinal, which is

based in future actions (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Zins, 2001) and the psychological link with the seller (Carpenter, 2008). Originally, loyalty was considered from the first perspective, focusing on customers' repetitive purchases (Buttle & Burton, 2002; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006). Authors such as Oliver (1997, p. 392), define it as a deep commitment to consistently buying a specific brand, outside of situational influences and other companies' marketing actions that tend to lead to a change (of brands).

However, basing loyalty on repeat purchases assumes that consumers only temporarily accept a specific brand. Therefore, the concept of brand loyalty has expanded to cover attitude-related aspects (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973); the attitudinal approach to brand loyalty is more solid than the behavioral approach; it represents the consumer's commitment or preference when unique values are attributed to a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This type of loyalty translates to intentions to purchase again and positive WOM if the consumption experiences are satisfactory, or to intention to change provider and negative WOM in the opposite case (Moliner & Berenguer, 2010). On the other hand, Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2004) have noted a positive correlation between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. This is congruent with the conceptualization of brand loyalty as a cross between a consumer's positive attitude towards a brand and her willingness to repurchase that brand (see, as e.g., Dick & Basu, 1994; Rossiter & Percy, 1987).

Therefore, through the combination of these two approaches to brand loyalty, attitudinal and behavioral, a customer's loyalty profile can be determined by looking at their level of commitment to the company or brand and their purchasing behavior (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998; Denison & Knox, 1993; Dick & Basu, 1994; Liljander & Roos, 2002; Oliver, 1999; Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000). Keeping the attitudinal component in mind, one can differentiate between customers that purchase a specific brand for reasons of functionality and those that do it for emotional or affective reasons. On the other hand, brand loyalty is not always associated with the customer's preference for a certain brand but with a lack of alternatives (forced loyalty), superior functionality (cognitive loyalty), or routine of purchasing (inertial loyalty).

In any event, regardless of the brand loyalty classifications and typologies that could be argued, it has been proven that a customer's loyalty provides an array of benefits to both the consumer and the brand or company (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Some examples are: creating a group of customers (Oliver, 1997), lowering costs for the company (Griffin, 1996; Payne & Frow, 2005) and supporting brand value (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). On the other hand, customer loyalty provides companies with greater strategic effectiveness and an improved competitive position in markets (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Yan & Peterson, 2004). Furthermore, it has been shown that loyal customers tend to buy more, participate in more positive WOM and are willing to pay higher prices, since they are less sensitive to the price of brands to which they are loyal (Dick & Basu, 1994; Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004; Lynch & Ariely, 2000; Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Wang, Hsu, Hsu, & Hsieh, 2011; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

Finally, studies carried out by He, Li, and Harris (2012) have proven the existence of direct and indirect effects of consumers identifying with brand on the traditional antecedents of brand loyalty, such as perceived brand value, brand satisfaction and brand trust.

6.2 Evolution of Branding Towards Integrating the Social Web

As was confirmed earlier, brands have become important, tangible assets for companies and are also continually becoming relevant to the lives of consumers. Furthermore, over recent years, their management has been influenced by the emergence and spread of new social tools that have enabled important changes to their conceptualization. Among them, some noteworthy examples are (Jones, 2012):

- Brands no longer seek to seduce or persuade consumers; instead they offer themselves as useful platforms that allow users to do the things that interest them (e.g. Ebay).
- Increasingly, brands worry less about the consistency of their visual identity strategies and are focusing more on their cohesion, seeking not just to state a message, but to provide constant experiences through co-creation with users (e.g. Google).
- Brands have ceased to represent an ideology or medium of control and have become a jumping off point for innovation and different users' initiatives (e.g. Lego).
- Brands' property is, at present, shared with stakeholders (e.g. Android).

Therefore, it is essential that organizations understand how to manage their brands in order to be able to develop and design a solid strategy that helps meet their objectives and influences the consumer's purchasing decision.

In this section, the main factors that characterize the current focuses of brand management are presented, reviewing the evolution of different iterations that have been experienced over time.

A brand-management paradigm can be defined as "a deep-seated way of seeing and managing brands and their value, shared by the members of an organizational community marked by a common culture." Therefore, it should incorporate all aspects (assumptions, opinions, experiences, etc.) related to the objectives and results of the brand-management (why), the brand-concept (what), the organizational structure (who) and the variables pertinent to brand-management (how) (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p. 853). Drawing on the works of Louro and Cunha (2001) and Quinton (2013), five distinct paradigms can be seen, in function of their conceptualization: product-related, adaptive, projective, relational and community brand management.

Louro and Cunha (2001) have proposed four brand-management paradigms in function of two dimensions:

- Dimension of brand centrality: shows how much a company's collection of brands provides a common philosophy for creating and developing marketing strategies. In other words, it is the degree to which brands can guide and establish an organization's strategy (Tuominen, 2007). Therefore, both a brand's tactical elements as well as those that define the brand's identity are considered when seeking long-term competitive advantages.
- Dimension of customer centrality: reflects the perspective of those members of a company responsible for how consumers affect value-creation, from unilateral perspectives (passive consumer) to multilateral (active consumer).

In addition to the previous paradigms, Quinton (2013) has suggested a fifth brand-community paradigm as a result of the proliferation and acceptance of the new media promoted by the digital era.

Next, the previously mentioned paradigms will be discussed with special attention paid to the key aspects of each.

6.2.1 Product Paradigm

This first brand-management paradigm is based on the principles of Marketing 1.0 or product-centered marketing; this perspective is focused on structuring brand-management around a brand instead of value-creation, considering consumers to be peripheral elements in the process (Quinton, 2013).

From this tactical focus, brands are only considered to be legal instruments and visual identification instruments for the company (Louro & Cunha, 2001). Brands are explained, for example, using definitions like the one proposed by the American Marketing Association, which conceptualizes them based on their visual characteristics and the differences that make products from one brand stand out from others (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998). In short, brands are used to attribute legal ownership of each organization, to legally protect them against possible imitations by other companies, to support communication strategies and to serve as an element of visual differentiation (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

This product-based focus is grounded in the idea that consumers will choose products that offer them higher quality, better results or the most innovative characteristics, meaning that companies should concentrate their efforts on continually making improvements to their product through the marketing mix (Kotler & Keller, 2009). To achieve this, the product paradigm strategy should seek to better results through identification, development and protection of a good market position in the market (Louro & Cunha, 2001); success is measured through efficiency and financial results (Quinton, 2013).

That said, basing brand management solely on a products attributes can have produce a series of limitations. Aaker (1996 cited by Louro & Cunha, 2001) has

posited that a product's attributes cannot be totally effective to distinguish a company's value proposition. Furthermore, they could be imitated by other companies, take the customer's rational character for granted, limit the brand's expansion strategy, restrain the multidimensional vision of the brand's identity and lessen strategic flexibility.

6.2.2 Projective Paradigm

As has been shown, the product paradigm has some important limitations for brand management, giving rise to some inconveniences. A remedy emerged in the form of the projective paradigm, which improves upon and expands the product paradigm, basing itself on the strategic aspect of the brand (Louro & Cunha, 2001). This paradigm does not just include tangible attributes of the product paradigm, but also takes the brand's intangible aspects that are important to the company into consideration. It, therefore, involves believing that aspects such as brand identity and market position are relevant for brand management, for achieving financial objectives and for differentiation (Quinton, 2013). Within this focus brands are platforms whose function is to coordinate the management and execution of the strategic goals of a company in accordance with their brand idea (Louro & Cunha, 2001). Therefore, brands go far beyond being simple visual elements or legal protectorates, becoming extensions of the corporation's personality (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998).

The competitive advantage of the projective paradigm lies in the company's resources that are characteristic and difficult to imitate, as well as in the management of organization from the inside out; however, it does not take the possibility of the consumer being a co-creator of the brand into account (Louro & Cunha, 2001). The point of the projective paradigm is to achieve a coherent vision that includes the brand's full line of products and to communicate coherent messages to all the stakeholders, strengthening its market position (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998). This is all thanks to the creation, development and communication of a coherent brand identity, which also allows: the management of profitable marketing mix strategies for the organization; the rapid adapting to environmental changes; and the administrative support of the company's product portfolio (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

Nevertheless, despite overcoming some of the previous paradigm's limitations, the projective paradigms has still received numerous critiques (Quinton, 2013): it is overly focused on the short-term; it can create problems of interdependency between brands with respect to marketing strategies; and consumers are seen as passive receivers of the company's communication, which becomes a monologue.

6.2.3 Adaptive Paradigm

Up to now, in both the product paradigm and the projective paradigm, the consumer has been seen as a passive piece in the world of brand management. This is what brought about a new vision known as the adaptive paradigm, which expands the conceptualization of the brand. The adaptive paradigm, in contrast to its predecessors, emphasizes the role of the consumer as an essential element in the creation of the brand's meaning. This paradigm switches from an internal perspective, based on business performance, to an external one, in which the consumer's satisfaction is of paramount importance.

Brands help consumers make purchasing decisions and reduce the risks and costs associated with them (Louro & Cunha, 2001). In this paradigm, brand identity, which is established by the company and very important in the projective paradigm, is replaced by brand image, a concept that guides and encompasses all the marketing strategies and programs related to the brand (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998; Quinton, 2013). Brand image can be defined as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3), and can constitute an important aspect of building brand value (Schembri, 2009). Customer-based brand value and brand awareness are related concepts that are also important (Tuominen, 2007).

Nevertheless, although the adaptive paradigm overcomes some of the previous versions' limitations, it is not free of them. By considering customers as unique factors important to the process of brand management, it overlooks other essential factors for attaining success, like the company mission, its strategic objectives or internal characteristics and the resources necessary to accomplish them (Louro & Cunha, 2001). Furthermore, the modification of the customers' opinions and visions, in some cases, causes fragmentation of the brand (Quinton, 2013).

6.2.4 Relational Paradigm

In the current context, characterized by the social media boom and the new Social Web mindset, the establishment of lasting relationships between brands and consumers is presented as a key element for companies to achieve success. Therefore, the fourth paradigm proposed by Louro and Cunha (2001) is the relational paradigm.

This new vision overcomes the limitation of not understanding the consumers' active participation that was present in the projective paradigm, as well as not considering the role that companies play in managing brand value in the adaptive paradigm.

Classic authors in the field of brand-study have highlighted the importance of relational orientation in the management of brands (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009); keeping long-

term relationships with consumers can be beneficial for both parties (Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, & Vogel, 2010). The relational paradigm visualizes brand management as a continual process in which value-creation and the creation of brand meaning are carried out through coordination and collaboration between organizations and consumers (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Customers involved with brands do not just obtain functional benefits, but emotional and social ones as well (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Hankinson, 2007; Pawle & Cooper, 2006; Pfahl, Kreutzer, Maleski, Lillibridge, & Ryznar, 2012). Therefore, if brands provide emotional benefits to consumers, the consumers will have to feel attached to the brands and form relationships with them (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998; Fournier, 1998); emotions are very important to the consumer's perception of value and to their long-term loyalty for the brand (Lozano & Fuentes, 2005). Additionally, brands can help consumers define their lives and can be important factors in their purchasing and consumption behaviors (Ahuvia, 2005; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Therefore, brands represent personalities that are constructed through the relationship of the brand with the consumer (Fournier, 1998).

From the social point of view, recent researchers have pointed out the importance of focusing on social identity in the creation of the relationships between companies and the rest of the involved parties (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mukherjee & He, 2008). This perspective is based on the analysis of consumers' identity-related motives (specifically, self-expression, self-improvement and self-esteem) for developing relationships with brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Escalas, 2004; He et al., 2012). Therefore, with increasing frequency, consumers base their social identity in their role as a consumer, basing their identity on the brands they consume (Wirtz et al., 2013). In summary, the consumer does not consume because of a product's utility or functionality, but because of what they express symbolically (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009).

There are authors that even confirm that, due to the strong bond between consumers and their preferred brands, consumers can come to feel a true passion for certain brands (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2012; Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Fournier, 1998;). This passion can be understood as "strong feelings of attraction for the other person" (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999, p. 52). In a business context, it could be contextualized as an "extremely positive attitude toward a specific brand" (Bauer, Heinrick, & Marin, 2007, p. 2190). Therefore, this feeling predisposes the consumer to form a close relationship with the brand and to be excited about consuming it (Albert et al., 2012). Keller (2001) states that a greater relationship between a brand and its customers is determined by a resonant state, in which consumers interact with the brand, are very loyal and feel connected with it. At this level, loyalty, attachment, feeling of community and active participation are essential.

However, the relationships formed between brands and consumers can take on a multitude of shapes, and not all interactions conclude with the establishment of long-term relationships. Occasionally, a brand's bad conduct prompts negative

responses from the consumers. This unbecoming conduct can show itself in relationships with products, services, social actions or questionable ethics (Hogg & Banister, 2001; Huber, Vogel, & Meyer, 2009). Consequently, consumers could reject the brand, affecting its image, reputation (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004), brand value (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000) and marketing efficacy (Van Heerde, Helsen, & Dekimpe, 2007). Also, they could develop negative WOM (Huber et al., 2010). Furthermore, it is also important to keep in mind that negative reactions do not only occur as a consequence of the brand's actions but also as the result of independent sources of information (Romani et al., 2012).

In light of the previous information, and although the relational paradigm is an improvement over previous visions, Quinton (2013) considers it to be insufficient to manage the interactions that currently occur between consumer and brands in the digital economy. Accordingly, this author has proposed a fifth brand-management paradigm called the “community brand management paradigm.”

6.2.5 Community Brand Management Paradigm

The last brand management paradigm presented is known as the “community brand management paradigm.” This new vision holds that ICT and especially the Internet have deeply transformed the global perspective on brands (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). In a society that is ever-increasingly driven by the Social Web, brands have become an additional motivation to interact with and establish conversations with other consumers. Furthermore, they allow individuals to position themselves as friends, fans, followers, lovers or haters of a brand (Martorell, Solanas, & Sabaté, 2011).

Quinton (2013) believes that the relational paradigm does not adequately take into account the electronic marketing's central position in brand management, making it invalid in the world of today. Therefore, building on the contributions of Louro and Cunha (2001), he has proposed a new paradigm that takes into consideration new elements like: the balance of powers in a relationship, the importance of the brand community, co-creation, new abilities of brand managers and viewing brand management as a progressive process. This new paradigm recognizes the importance of the interactions and relationships between brands and consumers to the long-term development of a solid union, giving special attention to the consequences of the digital economy's progress and to the new forms of interaction allowed by social media.

Therefore, it is logical that companies and customers, taking advantage of the advances of the Internet and of new social applications and tools, will want to create and develop virtual communities centered around brands (Cova & Pace, 2006; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; McWilliam, 2000). It deals, therefore, with the development of a process of social learning in which individuals with a common interest in a specific brand feel compelled to share ideas, find solutions to problems and develop innovations (Wang, 2010).

Quinton (2013) based this paradigm shift on the transformations that the digital world has brought about in the lives of both consumers and organizations. New various topics that explain the transition from one vision to another are presented. This will help to understand the proposed paradigm shift.

6.2.5.1 Purpose of Communication

One of the important facts that have influenced the shift to a new management paradigm is how purpose of communication has changed due to the expansion of social media.

The cornerstone of the relational paradigm is the conversation between involved parties in the relationship (Louro & Cunha, 2001). In this context, the evolution of the Social Web has opened up a setting for debate and multidirectional communication, where brand plays an important role (PuroMarketing, 2011). Authors like Weber (2007) have noted that a brand in this new virtual setting is no more than the dialogue or debate that a company has with the customer. Therefore, the greater the communication effort the company makes, the greater the brand strength. It is logical, then, to think that if brands are parts of consumers' conversations, dialogues and virtual debates, that their purchasing experiences, consumption and opinions about brands will flow freely through the web. It is likely that all the information could be collected and restructured by various users at any time of day, from anywhere in the world (Martorell et al., 2011).

Therefore, companies should be familiar with and try to steer conversations about their brands in ways that are beneficial to them, as electronic WOM (eWOM) is very effective at influencing whether or not an individual chooses a certain brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010d). Thus, a brand can lead to consumer participation in conversations on social media by, for example, asking questions to its followers (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), creating (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009) or allowing participation in the creation of a social platform to foster conversations about the brand (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). The benefits provided by the creation of dialogues and debates on social media are: the creation of long-term relationships, the creation of brand recognition and the chance of positioning the brand within a specific category (Johansson, 2010). More specifically, social media sites that collect users' opinions and critiques influence brand creation, reward the company with greater efficacy of communication actions and create more awareness of brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations (Callarisa, Sánchez, Cardiff, & Roshchina, 2012; Wang, Hsu et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

6.2.5.2 Type of Orientation

Another relevant aspect that has influenced the transition to the community brand management paradigm is the expansion of the relationship's type of orientation. The new paradigm expands the relational vision of interactions, keeping in mind the

interactive aspect of the relationship that is produced in the virtual setting. Therefore, it exceeds the reference of the one-on-one relationship, in which brand experiences are shared person-to-person, taking into consideration the transformative strength of distributing within and among digitally created communities in the community brand management paradigm (Quinton, 2013). Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) have pointed out that these online communities are created when there are a sufficient number of individuals discussing something for a sufficient amount of time and with sufficient human feelings to develop virtual social relationship with other individuals.

Therefore, in this context in which the consumers are part of the brand's history, even acting as its co-creators, companies have to accept that they no longer have complete control over their brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Furthermore, they should be aware that stories created by consumers can spread as quickly as those created by the company itself (Muñiz & Schau, 2007), and in some cases, these stories will not be to the company's liking. Moreover, in certain situations they can throw the brand's meaning into question and cast doubt upon the plans for developing it (Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991; Pfahl et al., 2012). Therefore, as Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) have suggested, companies have to analyze the content that users are creating about their brand if they want to guarantee that the stories are conforming to the message that the company wants to transmit. It deals, in short, with not pursuing notoriety at any cost, as has been done traditionally, but with seeking relevance through value and meaning (PuroMarketing, 2011). To achieve this, it is essential that organizations understand and foster the necessary conditions to guarantee a positive virtual experience for the brand (see Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). It is important for brands to analyze social media forums, where individuals are trying to inform or influence other users' behavior towards a brand (Callarisa et al., 2012).

This new vision recognizes the need to accept and integrate the new balance of power, in which brands no longer dictate how consumers interact with brands, but the consumers themselves decide how to direct their consumption (Quinton, 2013). This is possible thanks to the increased quantity of information provided by the Internet and the possibility of customers communicating amongst themselves through new digital technologies (Urban, 2004). This is why participation in social media, and specifically, brand communities, is of ever-increasing importance (Quinton, 2013).

6.2.5.3 Brand Management Focus

Currently, many companies have realized the importance that experiences have taken on as ways to satisfy customers' psychic and personal needs (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008). This has caused companies to focus value-creation on coming up with processes that support their customers' experiences (Payne et al., 2009). Experiences are considered essential elements for establishing and maintaining long-term relationships between parties (Kan & Zi-Gang, 2008). Therefore, one

of the key factors of this paradigm shift is the interest in brand management through experiences, as a means of understanding the brand-consumer relationship (Schembri, 2009).

One experience could be defined, according to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), as a behavior that exposes the individual's emotion produced by the stimulus of a product or brand. Schmitt (1999) thinks of it as a behavior normally caused by the direct observation of or the collaboration on some brand-related event (Hui-Yi & Hung-Yuan, 2010).

Therefore, current marketing should not be thought of as just marketing the brand, but also as marketing feelings, specifically those based in individuals' experiences with the brand (Singh, Veron-Jackson, & Cullinane, 2008). With this in mind, experiential marketing has emerged. This type of marketing focuses on the consumer and is based on credibility, sensory experiences and consumer-centric tactics and strategies (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008). From a marketing perspective, reaching the consumer requires a personal interaction between the consumer and the brand and an experience that could be remembered as something extraordinary. In short, how consumers experience brands should be given attention over how they perceive them, keeping in mind that the brand is the sum of all the consumers' experiences with the product or company (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008). The Internet and, specifically, the Social Web have opened up new channels and applications for experiential marketing to communicate; i.e. blogs, microblogs and online brand communities. Through these new channels, consumers have the opportunity to interact with the brand and to participate in brand experiences. Thus, the new paradigm, thanks to the proliferation of digital technology, fosters brand management with an experiential or orientation focus (Quinton, 2013).

Various authors have tried to analyze which elements are part of the brand's online experience and how they are developed (e.g., Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Rose, Hair, & Clark, 2011). For example, Mollen and Wilson (2010) believe that the online brand experience is comprised of both cognitive and affective elements. Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) have surpassed this idea, proposing an online brand experience model based not only on usability, loyalty or satisfaction, but also on emotional responses and connections with the brand. Therefore, the online brand experience considers both individuals' subjective internal responses to interacting with the brand in a virtual world and their more rational responses. One example of this is given by Schembri (2009), who, based on a study of the users of the Harley-Davidson community, shows freedom to be the most important symbol that goes with the co-construction of the consumer's brand experience.

Finally, among the new tactics that enable experiential marketing, there are two types known as roach marketing and subviral marketing. Specifically, roach marketing is a technique directed at an adolescent audience, who are immune to traditional marketing tactics, by gathering and spreading information and rumors about products through virtual communities (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008). Subviral marketing is based on subversive parodies of known brands distributed as images or videos and passed around as forwarded messages. This technique is based on the fact that satirizing a brand manages to effectively activate its recognition in

the consumer's subconscious. Accordingly, their content has an amateur feel, shows risky content and is not the property of an organization's campaign (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008).

6.2.5.4 Role of Brands

Another element that has influenced the proposition of a new paradigm is the notable role change that brands have suffered over recent years in the lives of consumers. Due to the expansion of the Internet and of the Social Web, brands have gone beyond being symbolic of consumers' personalities and now act as an important support for them. Therefore, organizations should be aware of the connection that exists between brands and consumers and use it as a tool to unite consumers in the digital world (Quinton, 2013).

Brands, through social platforms, by means of online brand communities, can drive the creation of specific subcultures of consumers (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010). These types of virtual platforms have become key to maintaining long-term relationships between consumers and companies (Tsai & Huang, 2007). According to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), a brand community is a structure of social relationships based around the mutual admiration of a brand. They have suggested that, in a general way (this will be developed in the coming chapters), the elements that characterize this type of community are:

- *Consciousness of kind*: the feeling that each member of the community is connected to the other members and to the brand.
- *Shared rituals and traditions*: methods by which group members reproduce and transmit the community's identity.
- *Sense of duty to the community and its members*: the moral code that group members feel they share with other members.

Harris and Rae (2009) have shown that online communities have an important power over the creation and reputation of a brand and its relationship with its customers. These authors, therefore, concluded that social networks are essential for the future of marketing; e.g., they facilitate the change from traditional control to a more open and collaborative orientation. Furthermore, the relationships that form between members of online communities influence brand choice and loyalty (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Thus, some authors have touched on the idea that encouraging brand communities leads to the development of relationships that directly influence long-term customer loyalty) (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Tsai & Huang, 2007). Therefore, individual transactions are continually increasing, due to community-related experiences (Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008). Also, brand communities can be suitable instruments to increase the intangible and emotional attributes associated with the product or brand, thereby avoiding possible price wars with competitors (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005).

In light of this, Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, and Kim (2008, p. 57) has stated that a brand will attain total success "when consumers are able to express their personal

characteristics through the brand as a result of their membership in a brand community.”

Finally, according to Get Satisfaction (2011), the main reason that consumers follow brands on social media is to hear about special offers (36.9 % Facebook/ MySpace, 43.5 % Twitter). Customers follow brands because they offer them interesting and entertaining content and because their friends are fans of a specific brand. Furthermore, more than half of the consumers surveyed say that they follow between two and five brands on Facebook (53.47 %); interestingly, 13.32% claim to be fans of ten or more brands on Facebook. They also note that around 40 % of people that follow a brand generally consider it when shopping, buy that brand's products or services or readily recommend it to others. This study concluded that the most popular brand on Facebook, according to the number of fans they have are: YouTube, Coca-Cola, Disney and Starbucks.

6.2.5.5 Dimensions of the Brand

The new challenges of the digital era have stimulated a transformation in the emphasis of marketing dimensions. For a brand to be able to adapt to the electronic setting, the new paradigm must stress the brand's heritage and authenticity. Brand heritage, an antecedent to authenticity (Alexander, 2009), corresponds with “using marketing-mix variables that invoke the history of a particular brand, including all its personal and cultural associations” (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003, p 20). In this new context, the origin and life of a product could be considered equally as important as the veracity of their concept's original spirit, their story and their ability to adapt to changes over time (Quinton, 2013).

The search for authenticity has become one of the central aspects of contemporary marketing (Brown et al., 2003). Brand authenticity, as a part of brand identity, is rooted in aspects that are objective, constructive or even existential (Alexander, 2009); it is composed of six attributes (Beverland, 2006): heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production and downplaying commercial motives.

In particular, in the community brand management paradigm, brand authenticity takes the consumers' digital dimension into account as much as it does the products' worth (Quinton, 2013). Therefore, it is clear that this concept is linked to the consumers' own identities. In other words, brand authenticity increases the value of the individual's identity. Thus, companies, through investment in authenticity, can gain consumers' trust and, therefore, their loyalty (Edwards, 2010). Nevertheless, although there are various ways to achieve brand authenticity, not all are valid in all cases; the most common way is to develop it through communication strategies (Quinton, 2013). In the beginning of the digital revolution, Aaker (1996) had already pointed out the difficulties that companies might find, due to the wide array of new media, in dealing with and increasing awareness and recognition of their brand. In this context, organizations need to integrate themselves into the social fabric, changing their marketing and brand strategies, putting

their faith in commitment and relationships and not using unilateral, static messages (Grant, 2006; Nufer & Bühler, 2010). Therefore, as McCann Worldgroup's (2011) study suggested, if companies want to be respected in this new setting, they must carry out actions that are socially useful. Additionally, continual interaction with users will continue to be key for brand survival on the Internet, especially in the era of the Social Web (Christodoulides, 2009; Kollmann & Suckow, 2008; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013).

6.2.5.6 Measurement Systems

Another key factor in the development and formulation of a new brand-management paradigm is reworking the company's measurement systems to be up to the new digital challenges. The new community brand management paradigm should leave behind the concept of the company as the entity that controls the brand and accept that new forms of evaluation and digital metrics should be introduced into brand management (Quinton, 2013). More detailed information on this topic can be found in Chap. 4.

6.2.5.7 The Role of the Consumer in Brand Management

The Internet and especially new social media have forced a transformation of the role the consumer had played in brand management up till now. This important change must be reflected in the new paradigm. From this new perspective, brand management not only takes the customer into account, but also takes into account everyone who interacts with the brand in some form, either directly or indirectly, through social networks (Quinton, 2013).

Thus, both consumers that interact with the brand through their shopping or consumption and those who interact with it virtually, through videogames or any other option provided by the brand community are considered essential to companies. Therefore, this new vision puts forth the need for organizations to recognize and respect virtual brand communities (Quinton, 2013).

6.2.5.8 Source of Capabilities

Another outcome of the progression to a new paradigm is the change produced in an organization's source of capabilities from the inside out. Therefore, it is the consumers who, through interaction with other people on social media, decide a brand's credibility and success; their initiatives can even be more successful than those created by the organization itself (Hipperson, 2010).

The community brand management paradigm has proposed an outside-in focus. Accordingly, organizations must be able to build relationships with the brand, identifying opportunities that enable the mediation of interactions between brands

and consumers (Quinton, 2013). In this context, companies are obliged to master the necessary skills to anticipate the changes of their client's tastes and adjust more quickly than their competitors, using not only real data but also contextual information (Logman, 2008). In the new paradigm, it is essential to acquire the new types of knowledge necessary for managing brands in a digital environment that affords organizations new channels and methods for contacting and collaborating with customers (Quinton, 2013). Therefore, "successful brands will be those that listen to and learn from customer insights, both positive and negative, and engage the consumer to gain the privilege of being part of their content and their communities (Hipperson, 2010, p. 263). Thus, companies should base their strategies on creating and participating in communities of consumers, on managing campaigns that facilitate conversations and in executing the necessary mechanisms for listening to what people are saying about them on the Web 2.0 (Hipperson, 2010).

6.2.5.9 Strategic Formulation

The increase in the use of co-creation by companies to augment their brand value is a recognized piece of the community brand management paradigm (Quinton, 2013). The possibility of interactivity and adaptation presented by new digital media is forcing brands to become reactive and proactive. Therefore, innovations and ideas are co-created by all interested parties; this should be accepted and included into companies' strategic focuses, which need to be more fluid (Quinton, 2013).

Organizations that incorporate actions related to co-creating with consumers into their brand management strategies are becoming increasingly common. This involves using techniques like crowdsourcing (see Chap. 5); through the contribution of ideas to the innovation of products of communication campaigns, the consumer is rewarded either monetarily or through social recognition.

To conclude Sect. 6.2.5, and taking into account all that has been described, it should be clear that the new community brand management paradigm essentially deals with using digital media as parts of non-planned brand messages, as well as with influencing virtual brand communities (Quinton, 2013). The virtual brand community occupies a special place within this new vision, given that it encompasses all the facets of the brand and encourages thinking of consumers in a broader way in terms of brand management (Quinton, 2013).

Finally, in Table 6.1, a synthesis of this paradigm and its related contents, discussed above, is provided.

Table 6.1 Main aspects of the community brand management paradigm

	Previous paradigm (relational paradigm)	Community brand management paradigm	Repercussions for business practices of the brand management paradigm
Emphasis on communication	Conversations between the company and the consumer	Discussion (individual or group) between the company and consumer or between consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interactions through the virtual brand community - Information about the brand flows through the Internet - Long-term fostering of relationships - Improved brand recognition
Relational orientation	Relational, relational one-on-one	Co-creation, through interactivity in virtual communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customers as co-creator of the brand and its story - Customer-directed interactions
Balance of power	From the inside out	From the outside in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Companies ceding control over the brand to customers
Brand management focus	Relationships between involved parties	The importance of experience (experiential marketing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The brand is the sum of the consumer's experience with the company
Role of brands	Symbolic of and referential to personality	Consumer support through the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of tools or applications that support experiences and engagement with the brand (e.g. gamification strategies)
Dimensions of the brand	Identity, image and history of the brand	The brand's heritage and authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand authenticity helps augment the consumer's identity
Measurement systems	Traditional metrics	Digital metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourages trust and loyalty to the brand - Acquiring new knowledge to apply digital metrics
System capabilities	Interior-exterior	Exterior-interior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acquisition of new knowledge and abilities in order to adapt to the virtual world
Strategic formulation	From the inside out	From the outside in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consumers determine a brand's success - Consumers co-create products, innovations and ideas (e.g. crowdsourcing strategies)

Source: Adapted from Quinton (2013)

Chapter 7

Conceptual Approach to Community, Virtual Community and Online Brand Community

Human beings, due to their unique characteristics as a species, need relationships with other individuals. This explains the interactions between people and the tendency to live in groups. All human beings belong to one or more communities, although this happens involuntarily. By simply having a family or residing in a city, one belongs to these communities. In other cases, the individual chooses which communities he belongs to, seeking groups of people with values or styles similar to his own. Among these communities we count brand communities, which revolve around one or more brands.

The birth of the Internet and its evolution through ever-more-social versions has allowed people to find virtual communities into which, despite physical distance, they can integrate and adapt. Furthermore, online communities can facilitate maintaining and strengthening relationships with offline communities. In this context, communities that revolve around brands are strengthened by the emergence of online brand communities.

This chapter defines community and identifies its primary characteristics. Later, we delve deeper into the main characteristics of virtual communities, as well as brand communities, both online and offline. Finally, these types of communities are compared.

7.1 Community

Before defining online communities and describing their main characteristics, let us explore the generic concept of community. A community is a group of people who share a common interest. Their membership can range from three to thousands of people (Carter, 2008). These people voluntarily associate with one another as a group with a common goal (Gallego, 2012). Community, therefore, can be defined as an organization of people or small groups, interested in meeting, who have a feeling of mutual responsibility (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008; Rheingold, 2000).

In order to understand why people identify with communities and feel like parts of them, it is necessary to explain the term “sense of community.” Sarason (1974, p. 157) defines it as a “perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure.” Another illustrative definition is that of McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9): “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.”

Communities have existed longer than humanity has. For example, hominids that lived before *Homo sapiens*, as well as other animal species, lived, hunted and related in communities; these patterns of behavior are also observed in many animal species. Therefore, belonging to a community is a characteristic common to many species, both voluntarily and obligatorily; these communities affect the behavior and lives of their members (Gallego, 2012). The concept of community has been the subject of a longstanding sociological debate with a goal of establishing its definition and primary characteristics (Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013). In recent years, researchers of various disciplines have discussed what communities are and what impact they have on their members (e.g. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

In order to understand their basic constituents and the attraction for their members, Ewing et al. (2013) have turned to the mechanisms of social identity; these mechanisms help explain how users come to identify with a group and create a sense of group loyalty, at the same time strengthening the differences from other groups. Thus, they turn to the social identification theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to explain the feelings of “we” above “I,” and against “they” (Haslam et al., 2006). Alternatively, in the self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), a community-user’s opinion changes in relation to the social context of the community itself. Finally, the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) explains how people compare themselves to others in order to adapt to the environment; this can be used to understand how community members assimilate into a group and differentiate themselves from individuals of other groups.

At first, communities were conceptualized as small, homogenous groups characterized by familial or emotional links. However, this characterization has advanced significantly; they are now thought of as unions of heterogeneous individuals that share specific objectives or characteristics (Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013). Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) have described a series of features that characterize all communities:

- *Consciousness of kind*. This is considered the most important factor (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). It assumes that there is a connection felt between members and a collective feeling of difference from individuals that do not belong to the community (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). Therefore, it is a legitimate feeling that distinguishes between true members and false members and creates a feeling of opposition towards other groups.

- *Shared rituals and traditions.* These are series of actions, processes and rules that, when carried out by group members, strengthen the sense of group identity and allow members to bond over common values. This leads to the entire community having a common know-how about topics within a specific domain (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).
- *Sense of duty to the community and its members.* Community members tend to find they agree with other members and with the group itself on a moral level. This helps strengthen the internal cohesion of the group in addition to guaranteeing its maintenance and survival.

Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) have added that communities have two other central attributes: members have affective relationships, and commitment to establishing a series of shared values, meaning and historical identity.

Therefore, communities are groups of people, each of whom has their own objectives, rules and goals, who enter into a community with which they share or want to share the previously mentioned aspects. To achieve this, they act in ways that, both internally and externally, communicate what they share with the community and what distinguishes them from other communities.

Until the emergence of virtual or online communities, communities had three main characteristics: they were local, they involved social interaction and a bond between members (Hillery, 1955). Locality was a common feature because communities were located in specific regions, which differentiated them from other regions. However, the location of an individual no longer limits their integration into a group thanks to ICT (Uslaner, 2000). Social interactions are forms of building relationships between members. Finally, the bond stems from the fact that community membership imbues members with feelings of comfort and affiliation (Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004).

Thomas et al. (2013) believe that communities can endure even when the heterogeneity of their members leads to their destabilization, thanks to their members' social and economic interdependence. Thus, communities will reform with the goal of maintaining themselves.

Brand communities emerge within traditional communities and are considered by many authors to be legitimate communities, formed, in this case, around a brand (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Members of these communities share a common interest in a specific brand, creating a parallel social world around it (Cova & Pace, 2006). Two types of relationships occur within these types of communities: between the brand and the community member (consumers); and between community members (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Furthermore, brand communities contain heterogeneous groups composed of various actors, including consumers, producers and other elements of the social and economic setting, as well as characters, symbols and feelings (Thomas et al., 2013). Also, conflicts and rivalries, which cause humans to reinforce their characteristics, are important mechanisms for directing the behavior of brand communities (Ewing et al., 2013), since brands serve to differentiate groups from other groups.

7.2 Online¹ Community

The Internet and the different iterations of the Web, including its most social version, have led to increased interest in studying communities, how they act, what purpose they serve in their virtual or online versions and how companies can wring benefits and utility from them.

Virtual communities emerged in the early days of the Internet, thanks to software companies' efforts towards creating groups of users to test and experiment with new programs (Weber, 2007). Despite this, virtual communities exactly as we have defined them here began as spontaneous events to provide the community members opportunities to share their experiences, opinions and knowledge with other users (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Virtual communities were developed based on the earlier concept of Community of Practice (CoP): groups of people that share a passion for something, who regularly interact with the goal of learning to do it better (Tickle, Adebajo, & Michaelides, 2011).

The first formats used were: news groups, chats, newsletters and multi-user domains. Their importance and reach was augmented by the increase in computers and in access to the Internet (Rood & Bruckman, 2009). Communities, therefore, began to take shape as social entities whose purpose was to regain the feeling of belonging lost in the change from communal setting to societal one (Fischer, Bristor, & Gainer, 1996), uniting more and more users that were looking for support and to exchange information (Bressler & Grantham, 2000).

Wellman and Gulia (1999) performed the first analysis of a social network that existed within a virtual community. Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) recognized some of the main features of virtual communities.

The ubiquity of the Internet and the human desire for connection, knowledge and information drive the creation of virtual communities. They differ from physical or conventional communities in the sense that in this latter type, people meet each other in person and go on to maintain some type of relationship. However, the process is reversed in online communities—their members first form online relationships, which can later evolve into in-person relationships if they eventually decide to meet up (Rheingold, 2000).

Although the concept of online community might appear intuitive and despite the interest it holds for both companies and people, there does not seem to be a consensus as to its meaning (de Souza & Preece, 2004; Komito, 1998; Porter, 2004), as there are various definitions approached from different angles (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010). The multidiscipline interest in these communities can explain this fact; online communities have been studied from such disparate fields

¹ Also known as virtual brand communities. The term “virtual” does not imply that the community is less valid than a physical or traditional community; it simply identifies the community as one whose birth or main communication medium is found on the Internet (Jones, 1995; Kozinets, 2002). In any case, the terms “virtual” or “online” should be understood as synonymous and used interchangeably.

as: sociology, psychology, computer science, economics, and ethnography (Preece, 2000). One of the first, and still most widely used today, definitions offered about virtual communities is Rheingold's (1993, p. 6), which says:

Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace [...] is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.

Another widely used definition was offered by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002): social spaces, accessed by computers, where intentional actions occur and members create content through continual communication processes. Later, Dholakia et al. (2004, p. 248) refined their definition, referring to virtual communities as "a specialized, geographically dispersed community based on a structured and dynamic network of relationships among participants sharing a common focus." Hagell III and Armstrong (1997) have noted that they are spaces with the potential to integrate content, primarily user-generated, and communication.

Thorbjornsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, and Pedersen (2002) have added that dialogue happens in real time and/or asynchronously, since users can use chats, forums or news boards. Preece (2000) has established that, in addition to sharing a common interest, virtual communities must create shared resources, develop internal governmental politics, demonstrate reciprocity and share cultural norms.

The concept of a virtual community varies depending on diverse characteristics. There will be differences depending on if the online communities focus on social topics of interest to their members or if they focus on commercial interests (Kannan, Chang, & Whinston, 2000). In the latter case, virtual communities can be seen as groups of consumers of varying sizes that find each other and interact online with the objective of reaching personal goals shared by the other members (Dholakia et al., 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Many authors (e.g., Lee, Vogel, & Moez, 2003; Porter, 2004; Preece, 2000) have a different take, believing that it is necessary to include businesses or companies in virtual communities, given that they have similar interests in sharing and communicating with other companies and consumers. Therefore, the definition of virtual communities would have to be altered to reflect that they are not only collections of individual people, but individual people and companies.

Therefore, among virtual communities, and in large part due to their success and pervasiveness, something called online brand communities, which revolve around specific products or brands, have emerged (Xu, Zhang, Xue, & Yeo, 2008).

Some authors distinguish online communities based on how they primarily used their members to communicate, which can be through group discussions, news bulletins, blogs, forums or any of the ways available to communicate on the Internet (Akkinen, 2005). For example, "blogging communities" are defined as a type of virtual community that allows its members to have blogs on their websites (Efimova, Hendrick, & Anjewierden, 2005; Kim, Zheng & Gupta, 2011).

Virtual communities have ended up as widely used online networks where users share all types of interests, creating, using and debating content (Olson, 2009). They

are built on platforms that allow searching for, aggregating, modifying and compiling this content (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2011; Murray & O'Mahony, 2007). All of this has led to the appearance of a new type of organization where ideas, sources of information and members flow freely and whose limits, in contrast to traditional organizations, are not completely clear, resulting in their being very dynamic (O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007).

The salient features of virtual communities are diverse and vary according to each one's goals. Here we present some illustrative examples in chronological order, beginning with one from Whittaker, Isaacs, and O'Day (1997):

1. Members share objectives, interests, needs or activities, which serve as the main reason for belonging to the community.
2. Members have a generally active, participatory attitude, often leading to shared emotions.
3. Members can access shared resources, controlled by moderators who regulate their access.
4. The information is reciprocal, as is the support and services shared between members.
5. Members participate in the same context, with common protocols and vernacular.

Although it was previously mentioned, it is important to reemphasize the fact that geographical barriers are dissolved, meaning the main restriction on communities does not apply (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Therefore, joining and participating is not limited by members' place of residence (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; De Valck & Dambrin, 2007). This feature shapes one of the main features of virtual communities in relation to physical communities; virtual communities are more flexible and durable than their conventional counterparts, thanks to their uninterrupted nature and their multi-leveled communication structure (Kane, Fichman, Gallagher, & Glaser, 2009).

Typaldos (2000) has suggested more constitutive components of virtual communities. Specifically, twelve, which will now be presented hierarchically with purpose serving as the foundation onto which the rest is built:

1. *Purpose*: in accordance with Preece (2000), he believes that a community's existence is dependent on a common goal or interest between users, which causes them to unite.
2. *Identity*: members can identify one another and build relationships.
3. *Reputation*: members build a reputation based on the opinions expressed by others.
4. *Governance*: the administrative work is split between members, allowing them to create a community.
5. *Communication*: members must be able to interact with one another.
6. *Groups*: subgroups are created according to specific interests or topics.
7. *Environment*: a synergetic environment permits community members to achieve their goals.
8. *Limits*: the community knows why it exists; this reason defines who is outside the community and who is within it.

9. *Trust*: building trust between members and the community administrators increases efficiency and aides in problem resolution.
10. *Exchange*: the community recognizes way of exchanging things of value, such as knowledge, experience, support, bartering or money.
11. *Expression*: the community has its own soul and personality; furthermore, members are in touch with what other members are doing.
12. *History*: the community must analyze its past events and must react and change in response to them.

Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) laid out five characteristics that, geographic dispersion aside, all virtual communities have in common:

- Most virtual communities are organized around some interest that is the defining element of the community. This interest could be in a specific product, topic, common passion or even a specific demographic attribute.
- Exactly as mentioned earlier, the entire community has class awareness. This defines the options and behavior of the group, as well as the intent to participate, share information and resources with other members and believe the community's goals (Walther, 1996; Wellman, 1999).
- Most virtual communities create and share protocols and vernacular, maintain social roles, establish limits and rituals, exhibit confidence in the common goals and follow norms of interaction. This renders them able to provide the same benefits as traditional communities, despite their geographic dispersion and having to meet on the Internet (Shirley, 1995).
- Media are actively participated in and consumed. This defines the community's character and determines the influence and status of both the community and its individual members (Werry, 1999).
- Due to communication mainly being in a written form, be it in forums, social networks, or news bulletins, etc., non-verbal codes and social characteristics become commonly known among group members, and this increases integration into the group.

Finally, Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) reduced the number of basic elements and constituent parts of virtual communities down to three:

- *Virtual communities as places or settings*. The community is a setting in which users maintain social or economic relationships and explore new opportunities; they are perceived as social organizations centered around common social patterns.
- *Virtual communities as symbols*. Similar to what happens with other social entities or constructs, virtual communities present a symbolic dimension. Thus, when a community is created, individuals can feel symbolically attached to it; a sense of belonging emerges, and the community takes on special meaning.
- *Communities as virtual environments*. Virtual communities, like traditional or physical communities, have value systems, social norms, etc., but they differ from traditional communities in that communication takes place, totally or partially, through the Internet or other networks.

The previously described characteristics explain how virtual communities derive their incomparable ability to facilitate collective action and contributions to knowledge (Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007): they share, in essence, the values of the open source movement (Lakhani & Von Hippel, 2003). Knowledge is shared freely within communities, even when it could have a monetary value for individual members (Wasko, Faraj, & Teigland, 2004). This is why there are parallels with social tribes in terms of nature, community and interest in products and/or brands (Pfahl, Kreutzer, Maleski, Lillibridge, & Ryznar, 2012).

The interest in studying virtual communities has increased in recent years due to the important role they are assuming in fields such as sociology, psychology, economics and marketing. For the last two fields, virtual communities have a large economic and business potential (Rosenoer, Armstrong, & Gates, 1999). In the nineties, we got a glimpse of the benefits that could be created through virtual communities. Hagel III and Armstrong (1997) noted that they could enable consumers to develop relationships, exchange information on specific topics and to buy and sell products. This last feature has been verified by the expansion of market communities that have appeared on the web (Gopal, Pathak, Tripathi, & Yin, 2006).

Online communities are clearly useful for businesses, as they allow companies to understand their consumers and create an effective medium for the dispersion of WOM-based communication. For example, Berger and Messerschmidt (2009) have pointed out that companies that commercialize financial products can, through online communities, identify key clients, rapidly spread their message and obtain information from customers which is useful for product development, among other benefits.

Marketing and consumer behavior researchers have approached the community phenomenon from a marketplace perspective (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002); i.e., consumers, marketing managers and other interested parties such as lobbying groups or companies linked by commercial interests and by interest in the products (Tsai & Huang, 2007). Two facts stand out as the main reasons that marketing is interested in virtual communities (Kozinets, 2002): the larger the presence of consumers on the Internet, the more they integrate this medium into their processes of shopping and searching for information; and the possibility of identifying likes, desires, symbolic and value systems in the decision making models of consumers and groups of consumers.

7.3 Brand Communities and Online Brand Communities

7.3.1 Introduction

Communities of consumers of a specific brand have a long history (Sung et al., 2010). These groups have helped and continue helping consumers share their experiences with brands and products, as well as to exchange information, solve

problems and meet similar consumers who can serve as representatives for the company (McWilliam, 2000).

In the seventies, Boorstin (1974) analyzed the invisible communities of consumption, which were developed after the industrial revolution. He observed how these communities, grouped by geographical, political or religious criteria, began to exhibit similar patterns of consumption. Reigen, Foster, Brown, and Seidman (1984) advanced this line by first studying the common aspects characterizing the use of products within a social network.

Communities of consumption are groups of consumers that share an affiliation with a type of product, brand activity or ideology of consumption (Cova & Cova, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Furthermore, Thomas et al., 2013 have pointed out that they are composed of producers and media. The relationships in these communities can have an emotional, hedonistic or social tone, but no matter the case, they modify the company's creation process, since the consumers actively participate in the process (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013). The academic research into this topic can be divided into three types of consumption (Thomas et al., 2013): consumption subcultures (e.g. Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), brand communities (e.g. Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001) and consumption tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002).

We have focused on the second type but before concluding this section we will briefly discuss consumption tribes. These are communities that revolve around the activity of consumption but not exactly related with a specific brand, but with various brands or products, activities and services (Canniford, 2011; Cova & Cova, 2002). These tribes or communities provide value to their members through the bond created by sharing the use of products or services (Canniford, 2011); they are characterized by multiplicity, gamability, entrepreneurship and their transitory nature (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002). The members tend to demonstrate proactive attitudes and have contact with the companies that they interact with in the real world (Canniford, 2011). Consumption tribes are highly useful for describing collective experiences of consumption. However, they differ from consumption subcultures and brand communities, since they are not against any systems or institutions nor do they revolve around a specific brand; they share information about whatever is consumed and their membership is transient and fragmented (Goulding et al., 2013). Accordingly, Goulding et al. (2013) have decided that analyzing consumption tribes would require different techniques than studying brand communities.

7.3.2 Conceptualization of (Virtual) Brand Communities

7.3.2.1 Background

It was not until the nineties when, thanks to the development and expansion of the Internet, brand communities began to be studied to a greater extent. Rheingold

(1993)² was the first to use the term “virtual community.” Schouten and McAlexander (1995) were some of the first to study a specific brand community; they described what was known as a more visible consumption subculture, studying the culture that surrounded the brand Harley-Davidson.

Online brand communities were initially established during the Web 1.0 era, in portals managed by companies or initiated by consumers operating independently of the company (Jang et al., 2008). However, it was not until the Social Web and its associated social media began to take over that many companies and users began to utilize websites as media for creating and organizing communities around brand (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). The success of online brand communities is largely due to offering participants the following (McWilliam, 2000):

- A forum for discussing common interests.
- A sense of place with behavioral codes.
- Agreeable and stimulating dialogues that lead to relationships based on trust.
- A setting where everyone is encouraged to actively participate, not only an exclusive few.

Communities form around their basic asset, which is the brand itself. Later, they grow by building relationships between members interested in the brand (Jang et al., 2008). Wirtz et al. (2013) has observed that while the first brand communities appeared as a result of a high level of engagement between brands and consumers, in recent years some have begun to emerge as a consequence of the massive adoption of Internet advances, social media and mobile technology.

7.3.2.2 What Is It?

When reviewing recent literature on brand communities (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; Ewing et al., 2013; Jones & Kim, 2011; Samu, Lyndem, & Litz, 2012; Sung et al., 2010), it becomes apparent that the most commonly used definition is Muñiz and O’Guinn’s; their contribution to brand community research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* has clearly become a seminal paper. These authors define brand communities as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). They have indicated that brand communities do not only involve relationships between brands and consumers, but also among the consumers themselves. Furthermore, within brand communities, different groups of individuals associate with others, organizing themselves based on their affinity for the brand. These groups of consumers meet in both brand-sponsored communities

²2 Rheingold (1993) introduced the idea of virtual communities in his discussion about their activities with “WELL,” a pioneer computerized conference system that allowed people from all over the planet to participate in public conversations and exchange e-mails (Dwyer, 2007).

(e.g., Coca Cola www.livepositively.com and Amazon www.amazonpromise.org) and non-sponsored communities that are promoted by independent individuals or groups (e.g., Star Trek www.starbase75.com and Lego www.brickbuilderspro.com).

Using Muñiz and O'Guinn's definition as a guide, Thompson and Sinha (2008) have noted that brand communities offer values that create deep, lasting and effective bonds between consumers and brand. Sung et al. (2010) have added that they seem to be a good medium for making and maintaining relationships between consumers and brands. Thus, exactly as it happens in any community, members begin to feel, through their relationship with the brand and the community, a feeling of collective belonging (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Therefore, good relationships between community members are important for the success of the community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a) define online brand communities as groups of consumers on friendly terms with one another that share a common enthusiasm for a brand and develop a common social identity. Their members collaborate on group actions to reach their collective objectives, or to express mutual feelings. Furthermore, these groups mix brand-related activities with other activities of a more social nature.

Cova and Pace (2006) have their own definition of virtual brand communities, although it does not stray far from the one given by Muñiz and O'Guinn. These authors define brand communities or brand tribes as: "any group of people who possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy" (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1089).

As with traditional offline communities, the initial concept of a brand community was linked with a specific geographic territory, where their members had the necessary physical contact. However, the need for physical proximity now seems like an antiquated concept, thanks to the Internet and other ICT-based media to which the concept of brand communities are now inextricably linked (Laroche et al., 2012). Therefore, the current iteration of brand communities transcends, or at the very least minimizes, the importance of geographic limitations, as communication media have overcome this restriction (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Samu et al. (2012) have explained that the virtual brand community label should apply only when all the group's members are consumers. In the case where distributors and brand representatives are present in the community, they consider the more appropriate term to be "retailer brand community."

Fournier and Lee (2009) have pointed out that social networks and their growth in recent years could improve the power of brand communities, especially those that mainly operate online, since social networks are considered an effective tool for creating and managing brand communities. Wirtz et al. (2013) consider brand communities to be value-creating networks of relationships between providers and consumers of a brand. Furthermore, they list what are, in their opinion, the defining dimensions of brand communities:

- *Brand orientation*: the focus of the community is on the brand, common interests or on both.
- *Internet-use*: brand communities can be online, offline or both.
- *Funding and governance*: they brand communities can be founded by the company itself or by brand enthusiasts. Similarly, they can be controlled by one or the other, or by a hybrid of both.

7.3.3 A synthetic Overview of the Research in Brand Communities

7.3.3.1 General Approach

Studying the existing literature, Hartleb and Blut (2008) have found two distinct lines of research. On one hand, there is research related to analyzing the nature of brand communities; on the other, there are those related to measuring the benefits of the consumer-brand-community relationship. Next we will explore the review presented by these authors.

First, within the studies of the nature of these communities, they attempted to identify the key features that characterize and define brand communities. From among these studies, they highlight authors such as Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), who gave the above-mentioned definition of virtual communities, as well as the key features that all communities possess (class awareness, shared rituals and a sense of investment in the community). Also, Schau and Muñiz (2002) have, through the analysis of different brand communities, described four types of relationships between personal identity and membership to the community: subsumed identity, super member, community membership as an identity component and multiple memberships. Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig (2007) have put forth a model that places the focus of the community on the consumer. Expanding this model, Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) have divided brand community members into four categories, based on their reasons for participating in them: enthusiasts, users, behind-the-scenes and not-me. Other works have focused on studying auto-exhibition compared to other consumers in brand communities (Cova & Pace, 2006), anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006), the role of social environments (Luedicke, 2006), rumors in brand communities (Muñiz, O'Guinn, & Fine, 2006) or social brand communities compared to psychological brand communities (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008), features that will be discussed in later sections.

From the line of research dedicated to analyzing the benefits of the relationship between consumers and brand communities, diverse and interesting conclusions can be made. One of the most interesting is: greater consumer integration into the brand community increases the community members' loyalty. The development of transcendent experiences for the consumer in communities drives a stronger relationship with the brand, the product, the company and other consumers;

experiences that are created in communities, as well as the ability to share these experiences with other consumers, reinforces members' identities and the relationships between them (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schouten et al., 2007). In this vein, Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) note that brand communities have managed to shift their users' behavior from passively identifying with a brand to having a more active attitude; brand communities are based on the gathering of consumers with a shared affinity for a specific brand.

Other studies have analyzed the impact of satisfaction, integration into the brand community and consumer's loyalty experiences (McAlexander, Kim, & Roberts, 2003); the antecedents and consequences of shopping in relation to participation in small brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a); or the positive influence that participation has on consumer trust and the satisfaction they feel about previous interaction (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008a). Jones and Kim (2011) have highlighted brand communities' ability to create loyalty towards the brand, which extends into the offline setting.

The above findings make it easier to understand why companies now regard brand communities as an interesting investment that can improve brand loyalty (Hanlon, 2006; Lindstrom, 2005). The market is growing more and more competitive and is more saturated with communication media than ever, making it an increasingly difficult challenge to create a brand, build loyalty and maintain or control positioning (McWilliam, 2000). This is why creating brand loyalty has taken on such vital importance (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In this competitive setting, brand communities are considered fundamental tools for building relationships between consumers and brands (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004).

Good relationship management will result in community members exhibiting favorable behaviors towards the brand (Carlson et al., 2008). Wirtz et al. (2013) compiled a list of all the benefits of online and offline brand communities:

- *Source of information for customers:* communities, by allowing the sharing of information and opinions, transform the community into a place to search for information about the brand and the company; the communities give a platform to the most loyal customers and give companies the chance to hear about their products' best and worst attributes, in addition to the chance to discover ideas for new products.
- *Cultural change for companies:* communities stimulate communication between a company's distinct departments and generate information that helps them understand the reach of their marketing efforts; this results in greater collaboration.
- *Brand benefits:* communities strengthen the relationships between the brand and the consumers, promoting greater brand engagement and brand equity.

The importance that the consumer has acquired as the center of the community, as well as the loyalty that consumers can show towards a brand, with all the associated advantages (e.g., recommending the brand, helping innovation and improving communication between the company and consumers), has led to

brand communities researchers increasingly focusing on the consumer's perspective (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Samu et al., 2012). In addition to increasing loyalty, companies can learn from their consumers that participate in brand communities about topics such as: consumer perception of new product offerings and competitive actions (Laroche et al., 2012); maximizing opportunities to attract and collaborate with very loyal consumers (Franke & Shah, 2003); influencing the actions and evaluations of members (Muñiz & Schau, 2005); and rapidly spreading information (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Moreover, virtual brand communities can provide value on functional, social and experiential levels (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). They also, introduce new ways of serving customers and they help companies achieve new methods for maintaining one-on-one relationships more efficiently (Laroche et al., 2012).

Finally, Wirtz et al. (2013) has pointed out that the development of brand communities is not only beneficial to consumers but to anyone that is interested and active in the market (e.g., employers, users of competitors' brands and experts in the sector). For example, in relation to the effects online brand communities have on employees of the brand itself, Devasagayam, Buff, Aurand, and Judson (2010) have indicated that they contribute to employees identifying with branding strategy-related communications, increasing worker support of brand initiatives and of other works and achieve higher levels of satisfaction.

On the other hand, outside of this line of research, the literature has traditionally focused on communities built around niche or luxury brands, as is the case with Harley Davidson, Mercedes or Saab (Cova & Pace, 2006; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009), or those that already have a strong bond with their customers, as is the case with Apple. What all of these companies have in common is that they develop their product portfolio with consumers as their focus, on top of having innovative communication strategies and working to increase the loyalty of their customers. This is due to the increased likelihood of communities forming around brands that have a strong image, with a long and rich history and strong competition, which results in brands whose customers have to invest more time and/or money in them being more likely to have communities of considerable size and strength (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). However, this does not mean that communities cannot spring up around non-luxury brands without particularly strong bonds with consumers. For example, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a) analyzed small brand communities; Cova and Pace (2006) studied the case of a community based around a massively used convenience product (Nutella); and Felix (2012) analyzed the case of Yamaha's brand community, a case of a brand that is not very different from those cited as luxury. In particular, the latter studied consumers' habits, their identities and negotiations at the product and brand level. The study concluded that there was a high level of brand differentiation based on consumer perception. However, the levels of admiration and identification were less than those observed in the case of communities associated with exclusive brands.

7.3.3.2 The Particular Case of Online Brand Communities

Many companies are recognizing the use of online brand communities as a potential source of competitive advantage, since they allow companies to more efficiently manage communication with consumers, obtain valuable ideas and improve relationships with providers. This, in short, results in better exchanges of information and knowledge between the various involved parties (Fournier & Lee, 2009; Jang et al., 2008; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). As has been indicated, community members are highly interested in the brand and in the product. This leads to the users helping one another and creating new product ideas, since they are highly knowledgeable about the product (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008).

Online brand communities have opened new channels of communication with various audiences and have enabled new ways to connect with users, strengthening their loyalty (Andersen, 2005). Their loyalty is also bolstered by their admiration for the brand. Furthermore, identifying with other users and comparing the brand to its rivals reinforces the community as a whole (Ewing et al., 2013), which has positive repercussions on brand loyalty.

Companies are beginning to recognize the benefits offered by virtual brand communities for strengthening relationships with customers (Sung et al., 2010); this explains companies' interest in creating online communities for their brands (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004), as well as their growth in recent years (Sung et al., 2010); virtual social networks such as Facebook have facilitated this growth and development of online brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche et al., 2012). However, it is certain that researchers are lacking a large base of knowledge about what social and psychological factors motivate consumers to gather and relate in brand communities, or what drives them to individually or collectively participate in actions in the market.

Online brand communities can have the following types of goals (Wirtz et al., 2013):

- Being a source of creative ideas for improving products and services.
- Serving as support tools for changing company culture.
- Improving brand image and relationships with consumers.
- Increasing sales.

To achieve these goals, however, the organization must put aside several "myths" that could blur the community's focus (Fournier & Lee, 2009): brand communities are not a marketing strategy, but a business strategy; they exist to serve people, not the company; they are not only directed towards devoted customers, but should also resolve conflicts; they require people to play all sorts of roles, not just those of leader; virtual social networks are not the key, but a very useful tool; and successful brand communities are not strictly controlled, since people distrust company control.

Furthermore, due to consumers having a very different vision of brand communities' usefulness than companies (Wirtz et al., 2013), a topic that needs to be

investigated in greater detail is that of the differences between consumer-generated brand communities created by independent entities or the users themselves, on one hand, and company-generated brand communities, on the other (Sung et al., 2010). The latter has the advantage of providing information about the product and its use. Consumer-generated brand communities have the advantage of providing information useful to consumers, past experiences and the advantages of the products as seen through the eyes of the consumers; this also involves the possibility of content that is negative for the brand. In any case, consumers will no longer acquiesce to be passive observers, without any influence over their relationships with brands. They want to influence brands, as they believe that brands do not only belong to companies but in a certain fashion to the consumers as well.

In essence, brand communities, and virtual brand communities in particular, are more than a club or a social network. Their appropriate management will help improve brand equity, as well as aid in the process of value-creation (Kilambi, Laroche, & Richard, 2013).

7.4 Offline Vs. Online Communities: A Brief Comparison

To finalize the analysis of the concepts of virtual communities and brand communities, it is interesting to look at the differences between a traditional or offline community and a virtual community, as well as between online communities and online brand communities.

There are various differentiating criteria that can be used. One noteworthy example distinguishes social priorities and how connected people feel to the community. Thus, traditional communities tend to consist of traditional networks like family, friends, coworkers, classmates, hobby-based groups or neighbors. Virtual communities, on the other hand, tend to have less precise descriptions, although they typically consist of groups of users that interact and share information about a topic of common interest through an Internet platform (Bishop, 2009; Näsi, Räsänen, & Lehdonvirta, 2011). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) consider this feature to be of utmost importance when differentiating them. They argue that, despite multiple similarities between both types of communities, for an individual member, membership, involvement and communication with a virtual community are voluntary choices people make for various motivations. On the other hand, traditional communities are often due to involuntary circumstances like family or proximity.

Despite these differences, virtual communities cannot completely take the place of personal, face-to-face interactions. Therefore, even when contact is principally made through the Internet, a large portion of the members search for physical contact with other participants in the virtual community, blurring the line between the two (Jang et al., 2008; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001; Wirtz et al., 2013). Additionally, members of traditional communities seek to strengthen their bonds, not only through offline relationships, but also through online relationships in virtual communities (Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004; Norris, 2002).

The concepts of brand community and virtual community, despite having common characteristics, do not totally overlap (Füller, Bartl, Ernst, & Muhlbacher, 2005; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008).

Brand communities are often supported by Internet-based technologies but the concept is more expansive and relates to whoever feels connected to a brand, whether it is on or offline. Virtual communities are connected exclusively in an electronic setting, focusing on online relationships (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). However, online communities and online brand communities do share the medium employed to establish contact, in this case, the Internet; the latter are a specific type of the former.

In summation, virtual communities are an evolution of traditional communities, whose existence is due to the emergence and pervasiveness of the Internet. This means that the characteristic features of traditional communities (e.g., common social identity, existence of group norms and the feeling of belonging to the community) are added to new ones of equal or greater importance, like: geographic dispersion of their members, establishment of networks with dynamic limits and community relationships and the absence or at least lesser relevance of physical contact between member (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Something similar occurs with brand communities. In their traditional version they were groups of people with a common interest in a specific brand that established their relationships in limited ways due to being limited by physical proximity. In the case of online communities, on the other hand, although they have maintained the element of uniting around members' common interest in a brand, they have begun to communicate electronically, and this frees them from many of the limitations that made their expansion impossible.

Wirtz et al. (2013) believes that the key differences between purely online and purely offline brand communities lie in the nature of both, the most notable of which is the global reach and low cost of online communities. Furthermore, online brand communities allow users to obscure their true identities, produce passive engagement in the relationship, do not do much to maintain rituals and traditions and develop a weak consciousness of kind. This could lead to a weakening of online brand communities. However, it is also worth noting that online brand communities seem to allow much greater involvement than could occur offline, and they lend themselves to the creation of subgroups of people that could not interact in person with much more specific interests.

Table 7.1 has been made based on the work of Wirtz et al. (2013) that summarizes the main characteristics of totally offline and totally online brand communities and what we have come to call hybrids, because they are communities that exist in both the online and offline worlds.

Finally, just as with other communities, brand communities like Harley-Davidson or Lego, whose origins lie in an offline setting, have gone on to incorporate online platforms, which has increased their value to group members. This can also happen in reverse order with virtual brand communities going on to have offline meetings. This stretches the continuum between online and offline brand communities, allowing for different types of combinations (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Table 7.1 Online, offline and hybrid brand communities: main characteristics

Dimension	Offline brand community	Online brand community	Hybrid brand community
<i>Main mode of interaction</i>	– Face to face	– Virtual	– Virtual and face-to-face
	– Formation of more formal structures	– More informal structure and many subgroups	– Relationships begin in one medium and cross over to the other
<i>Geographic and temporal dimension</i>	– Limited	Asynchronous and without geographical limitations	Asynchronous and without geographical limitations, but with greater bonds within geographic regions
	– Members must meet physically at a specific time and place		
<i>Costs for members</i>	High (monetary costs for travel, costs of time and effort)	Low (minimal costs in all senses; this could result in less engagement and involvement)	Variable (users decide how much time, physical and economic effort they want to contribute)
<i>Involvement with the brand, company and community</i>	Greater (the brand and relationships with it and with other users are very important in the lives of their members)	Less (members can join for a variety of different reasons; some could exhibit less-active behaviors)	Intermediate
			– Allows more flexibility in terms of participation
<i>Reason for participation</i>	– Seeking the intrinsic benefits of participating and maintaining relationships	– Functional benefits (e. g., help)	Combination of intrinsic, extrinsic and functional benefits
	– High levels of loyalty and emotional connection with the brand	– Extrinsic benefits (e.g. discounts)	
<i>Community norms and rituals</i>	– Norms, rituals and identification with the group tend to be more intense	Its virtual nature and its lack of contact could weaken common norms and rituals, as well as identification with the community; this could cause a lower sense of moral responsibility	Variable (they are more important in face-to-face relationships and less pertinent to virtual relationships)
	– Greater moral responsibility		
<i>User identity and communication between members</i>	The true identities of users are not hidden. Communication is deeper but less fluid	– Possibility of having a virtual identity, different from one's real identity	Depending on the type of communication the user is partaking in and the setting in which it occurs, the user will show a greater or lesser disposition to using their real identity
		– Easier and unlimited communication, but shallower and less relevant for the member	

Source: Adapted from Wirtz et al. (2013, p. 227)

Chapter 8

Types of Virtual Communities and Virtual Brand Communities

Virtual communities have evolved considerably since they began. They have gone from being news groups and chat rooms to communities of people with strong bonds, diverse media for maintaining contact, and even with power in their sectors of interest. Virtual communities help their members overcome the sensation of isolation and allow them to maintain social activities.

However, despite virtual communities' increasing importance and popularity, there is still no classification system agreed on by researchers. This is due to the unique properties of virtual communities and to the fact that they are being studied across various fields. However, various classifications have been proposed with the objective of helping researchers of distinct disciplines to perfect their theories about the development of and participation in virtual communities.

The structure of this chapter's contents is as follows. First the existing classifications of virtual communities are analyzed. Next, we look at the special case of what are known as anti-brand communities, a specific type of brand community whose members create content that is critical of and generally against the brand they discuss. Finally, a unifying classification system for virtual communities and virtual brand communities is proposed.

8.1 Classification of Virtual Communities

In 1975, Gusfield distinguished between two types of physical communities: geographic-based communities and relationship-based, which focus on human relationships (Gusfield, 1975). Most online communities are relationship-based (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008); this feature will be one of the basic elements in the classifications that will be discussed next.

Before beginning with the classifications of virtual communities, we will explain the classification criteria used by Weber (2007); this will help to illustrate two of the main classification criteria used in all classifications: how often users visit the

community and the reasons that drive them to join and participate. This author has established three levels of community, according to how often their members visit:

- In the first level of community, the community is based around the users' main interests, which is to say, the elements that lead them to participate and be members of the community. These users will visit the community frequently.
- In the second level, the community is visited less frequently, since the community's topic is not of huge importance to the user or does not spark a desire for a sustained relationship.
- In the third level, visits are sporadic, since the user only comes to the community for specific reasons, such as finding information.

8.1.1 First Approaches to Classifying Virtual Communities

Going in chronological order, the first commonly accepted classification of virtual communities one finds was put forth by the researchers Hagel and Armstrong (1997) (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010; Plant, 2004). According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997), users can participate in virtual communities for social reasons or with the intent to conduct transactions. Following this logic, there are four types of communities.

- *Social motivations*: users are drawn to the community to establish and strengthen social bonds derived from interests, life styles or seeking leisure activities.
 - *Interests*: users share an interest in a specific topic in which they are experts, gathering to communicate with one another.
 - *Relational*: people with similar experiences use these communities to meet and establish relationships of value.
 - *Identity or fantasy*: groups form around games, with users seeking other users in order to improve their gaming experiences.
- *Transactional*: these groups provide the information necessary to conduct transaction and commerce. Thus, these users can conduct reactions to sell, buy or learn about products or services; they are inherently less social in nature due to their commercial focus.

Therefore, the authors asserted that transaction-based communities can be divided based on their target audience (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Jones & Rafaeli, 2000):

- *Communities directed towards consumers*: seek to establish or strengthen relationships between consumers. Based on the characteristics of their constituent virtual audiences, they differ in terms of geography, demographics and how up-to-date they are.
- *Communities oriented towards businesses*: are organizational and corporate; they establish relationships between companies or between companies and

customers. They can be divided into: communities for vertical industries (e.g., groups of software developers), functional communities (e.g. marketers), geographic communities (e.g. local business association) and business type-specific communities (e.g. small businesses).

Later, Stanoevska-Slabeva (2001) and Lechner, Stanoevska-Slabeva, and Tan (2002) established a classification based on the hypothesis that online communities have two constituent elements: the members and the platform. The latter allows the community to exist by providing a place to meet and providing a setting for communication. Communities can be divided into four main categories based on the actions of the former:

- *Discussion*: their members join with the goal of having discussions, establishing differing points of view and forming personal opinions. These discussion communities can be based on: *relationships between equals*, seeking to establish social relationships; *focused discussions* on a topic where people look for other people with similar interests and tastes with whom to form relationships (e.g. politics); *communities of practice*, established in organizations revolving around a topic or know-how; and *indirect discussion*, in which their users do not maintain contacts or conversations directly, but through comments or ratings (e.g. comments about a movie on a ratings site).
- *Completion of specific goals*: their members try to achieve a common objective in a collaborative manner. They can be based on: *learning*, where their members seek to complement their general training or their knowledge about the use of products; *conducting transactions*, their users try to improve their shopping experiences; or *creating information in open code*, with the goal of designing or helping to design products, services, etc.
- *Virtual environments*: their members are looking to have new or different experiences or lives in a social setting. Virtual worlds can focus on: *avatars* or second lives for users or on participation in *online games*.
- *Hybrid communities*: are based on a combination of the previous categories.

Henri and Pudelko (2003) have suggested that there are four main types of virtual communities: communities of interest, communities of interest in a common goal, communities of learning, and communities of practice based on the characteristics of bonds and intentions.

The classification offered by Lechner and Hummel (2002) is closely related to the previous offerings. They have proposed categorizing types of communities according to the relationships that are established between users without commercial goals or between companies and consumers with commercial goals, specifically:

- Without commercial goals: the first two include virtual communities where users participate with the objective of playing, *game communities*, or with the goal of sharing information and common interest, *communities of interest*.
- With commercial goals: the three following are related to transaction communities. They differ in participating parties: between businesses (B2B),

communication and buying-selling between companies and consumers (B2C) and communities based on the exchanging of products, opinion or information between customers (C2C).

In relation to communities with commercial goals, Franz and Wolkingner (2003) proposed a classification system based on what companies' goals are when they introduce a virtual community. These are divided first between standalone and add-on, depending on whether or not a community's goal is to have members participate in the development of campaigns or products:

- *Standalone communities* hope to gain direct benefits through the virtual community, but without integrating the user into the company's processes. Thus, they are divided into: *advertising* communities, *subscription* communities, *electronic commerce* communities or *other sources of commercial relationships*.
- *Add-on communities* prompt interaction with the consumer, making them participants in the organization's processes. Thus, they would be categorized as: *consumer integration*, getting ideas from the user, evaluating prototypes, participating in innovations, etc.; market research, taking surveys, offering data, etc. *product development*, allowing massive customization and helping the with the launch and modification of products by sharing ideas and opinions.

8.1.2 Classification Based on Who Sponsors the Community: Users Vs. Companies

Porter's (2004) classification is one of the most accepted. It classifies virtual communities by combining aspects of earlier classifications that are now widely accepted, with the goal of creating a common classification system for future research (AlMadadha, 2004). The criteria for classification are derived from five attributes considered to be fundamental for cataloguing different communities (Akkinen, 2005). These attributes can be divided into what is known as the Five Ps of virtual communities (Porter, 2004):

1. *Purpose* (interaction content): describes the topic of discussion or the central theme of the communication between members.
2. *Place* (Reach of Technology Through Interaction): defines the site of interaction, where it is occurring be it completely or partially online.
3. *Platform* (Interaction design): is the design that allows interactions on virtual communities either in real time (ex. chat), asynchronous (ex. e-mail) or a hybrid of the two.
4. *Population* (Interaction model): refers to the type of interaction that occurs between community members, which is dependent on the group's structure and the intensity of the social bonds (small groups, social networks, public gatherings, etc.).

5. *Profit model* (Return on the interaction): this aspect refers to whether or not the community creates tangible economic value, understanding value as the creation of site visits (for the proprietor of the website, for the proprietor of the company that it promotes, for the members who participate in the transactions, etc.)

In his classification, Porter (2004) uses a criterium¹ for the classification of communities based in whether they are member-initiated or if they are managed by the organizations they promote. Since the researchers began analyzing virtual communities, the work has been divided between the two types, buy has largely focused on user-initiated communities (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). However, the other is now garnering more attention (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009). Porter’s proposal distinguishes between:

- *Member-Initiated Communities*: these communities emerge due to users’ interest in being connected with other people that share their opinions, objectives or interests. Thus, the members are the ones who create, maintain, organize and control the community. They can be centered around social relationships (*social*) between members or around professional relationships (*professional*).
- *Organization-Sponsored*: a company creates the virtual community, normally around their brands and products, or around other aspects of the company, even if they do not directly benefit from the community. They can create *commercial* communities with financial ambitions, *not-for-profit* communities and governmental communities (*government*).

Porter’s (2004) classification is one of the most used. The majority of communities are organized by consumers or users, although many occur within organizations, like Procter & Gamble, Ford, IBM or Shell, for example (Tickle, Adebajo, & Michaelides, 2011).

The division between virtual communities based on their social, professional or commercial character that Porter (2004) employs is based on a classification provided by Markus (2002). At their core, social communities are about establishing personal relationships that are not of a professional nature, mainly based around activities like leisure, hobbies, etc. Professional communities are built around members with similar professional interests, seeking to establish economic and/or work connections and contacts. Porter (2004) expanded Markus’ (2002) definition of commercial communities; he proposed that company-created communities could be developed by for-profit or not-for-profit organizations and by public administrations.

Some authors divide communities into commercial virtual communities and non-commercial virtual communities. This is one of the most common and accepted forms of categorizations (e.g., Leimeister, Sidiras, & Krcmar, 2004; Plant, 2004; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006). Non-commercial communities or consumer communities (Thorbjornsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2002) are

¹ It uses an additional criterium, identifying subcategories in function of the primary orientation of their relationships: social, professional or commercial (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009)

administrated and founded by consumers, or by a third party, to share information about products or services and to establish relationships (Shang et al., 2006). These communities have a large influence over customers, given that they are seen as more credible than commercial virtual communities (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Furthermore, they can be beneficial to companies, since they encourage product use and awareness. However, they can be home to the proliferation of negative messages coming from dissatisfied customers, harming the image of the brand (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002; Shang et al., 2006).

Finally, the subject of classification systems that distinguish between commercial and non-commercial virtual communities brings us to Cothrel's (2000) classification system, which establishes the main reasons for having communities from a business perspective: strengthening relationships with the company, increasing efficiency and innovation, attracting new customers and increasing revenue.

8.1.3 Other Classifications

There is another set of classification systems that help understand the roles users play, what types of participation and affiliations interest them or how communities differ based on size.

- *Crowdsourcing or Definition Communities*: serve to design something or are created with the goal of providing feedback from the company about its products or services. Companies offer community members the opportunity to actively or passively participate in the conception or redefinition of the company's portfolio of products and services.
- *Activity-Based Communities*: are created by members with a common love for an activity. Users connect in order to express their affection for something and to participate in activities related to that something.
- *Obsession-Based Communities*: are similar to the previous category, but their interest is more passionate, showing a strong love for the interest.
- *Experience-Based Communities*: are for people that want to share a common experience, creating an emotional bond between members.

Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) have pointed out that virtual communities comprised of a small number of members are different from other virtual communities. They have observed that the relationships and the interactions in small groups are stronger, due to the fact that users know each other well and that it is more likely that they share a common history. As a result, the relationships tend to be stronger, more flexible and more stable. Communities based in large social networks primarily seek to achieve functional goals, something that results in inter-member relationships that are weaker, more ephemeral and more rigid.

However, not all users behave in a similar fashion on virtual communities. Akkinen (2005) has noted a system for classifying users of any virtual community based on their grade of participation. The next logical step after differentiating between members and non-members is dividing members based on their level of

participation: lurkers (only read); users (read and participate occasionally); active users (users whose involvement is greater); and lead users (a group comprised of few users that, through their reputation and participation) serve as examples for the rest of the group).

Another classification of virtual communities proposed by Plant (2004) is based on their regulations and goals. This author takes the following into consideration:

- *Unregulated communities*: they begin their existence when a group of participants initiates interaction through a common website; they use this lack of regulation as a main facilitator of participation.
- *Regulated communities*: the growth of unregulated communities results in the group dividing into ever-more-specialized niches of users; all of which remain unregulated. In some cases this leads to the decision to develop a regulated environment, using preexisting websites or creating new ones. However, this does not necessarily involve the community moving towards a commercial model.
- *For-profit, open and regulated communities*: these are open to any individual or group that obeys the community's rules (e.g. <http://www.ebay.com/>).
- *For-profit, private and regulated communities*: these are organizations that use a network and its abilities to understand private transactions, between companies and between members (e.g. <http://www.covisint.com/>).
- *Not-for-profit, open and regulated communities and not-for-profit, private and regulated communities*: are similar to the previous cases but without commercial goals (e.g., <http://www.cancerpage.com/> or <https://www.cia.gov/index.html>).
- *Communities that overlap the for-profit and the not-for-profit regulated spaces*: In communities with and without financial goals, there are examples of organizations that are simultaneously private and regulated as well as open and regulated (e.g. <http://www.icpas.org/>).

Other researchers have emphasized the role that virtual communities play in online multiplayer games and in fantasy worlds (e.g. Park & Chung, 2011), which they consider to be a type of virtual community. In these communities researchers study how users socialize, their behavior and their possible business uses.

It is equally interesting to consider how consumers affiliate with online communities, since this affiliation offers the chance to understand why consumers gather and participate in online communities, as well as how they relate to one another within them. Fournier and Lee (2009) have referenced a classification system put forth by the strategic consulting firm Jump Associates. According to this classification, there are three types of communities, which can be combined to strengthen actions and to improve strategic efficacy (also see Fig. 8.1):

- *Pools*: members of these communities² have a strong link with an objective, as well as with a set of values. On the other hand, there is less of a bond between

²For example: PETA, <http://www.peta.org/about/learn-about-peta/community-animal-project.aspx>

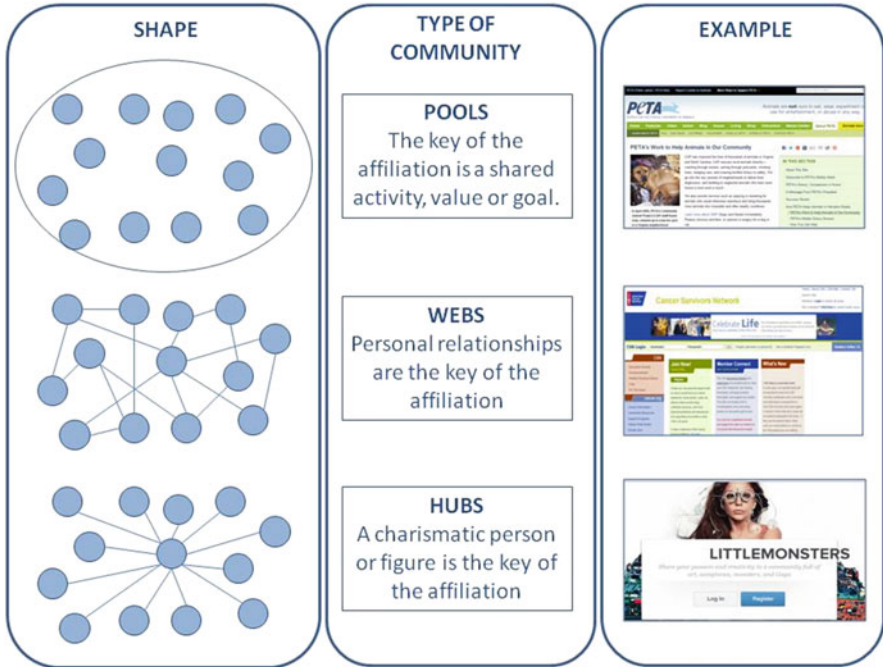


Fig. 8.1 Basic forms of community affiliation. Source: Adapted from Fournier and Lee (2009)

users. Therefore, users feel an affinity, not with other users, but with the community's objective.

- *Webs*: the community is centered around the relationships formed between community members, meaning that affiliation depends on the establishment of relationships between people (e.g. Cancer Survivors Network <http://csn.cancer.org/>).
- *Hubs*: these communities are organized through a central, strongly charismatic figure. Therefore, the relationships between members will be of secondary interest compared with the possibility of establishing or maintaining a relationship with a central figure (e.g. LittleMonsters Community-Lady Gaga's Fans <https://littlemonsters.com/>).

Finally, Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013) have pointed out new dimensions from which new classifications for consumption community can be established: focus, duration, appeal, access, dispersion, marketplace-orientation, structure of resource dependency, collective belonging and heterogeneity. These dimensions are related and help explain the structure, character, nature and types of community.

8.2 Classifications of Virtual Brand Communities

Despite the existence of a multitude of classifications, offered from different points of view and with differing objectives, all of them share one thing in common: the criterion of who starts the community. This leads to distinguishing between two types of online brand community: virtual brand communities promoted by consumers and virtual brand communities promoted by companies (Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Kozinets, 1999; Porter, 2004; Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010).

Virtual brand communities started and run by users come to life because of the work and care of the users (Jang et al., 2008; Shang et al., 2006). They tend to be consumers who are highly enthusiastic about the brand, want to share information about its products and establish relationships with other similar consumers. Some noteworthy examples would be the Ford Forum (<http://www.fordforums.com/>) or Volvo Forum (<http://www.volvoforums.org.uk/>), which provide users a place to interact; or communities that have emerged on social networks like Facebook, where consumers of brands like Coca-Cola or Windows talk about the brands. On them, consumers share photos, videos and information without sponsorship of the brands' parent companies.

The reason companies create virtual brand communities is to establish relationships with consumers and get them to create useful feedback for the company (Jang et al., 2008; McWilliam, 2000; Sung et al., 2010). These communities are centered on the company's brand and the community is created and maintained with this goal in mind (Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2014). This allows companies to be able to receive their customers' ideas or opinions about their products and services, about ways to improve and information about future wants and needs. Sung et al. (2010) have highlighted some examples like the Lonely Planet Travel community (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/>). Additionally, they have pointed out that the most popular form of virtual brand communities is being hosted on social networks, like Apple, Victoria's Secret, Pizza Hut and Red Bull have done, for example. These sites tend to offer promotions and coupons, allow event participation, etc., with the goal of actively communicating with the community.

De Almeida, Mazzon, Dholakia, and Müller (2013) have reviewed which features are common to all and which are variable among user or consumer-initiated communities and company-initiated ones. Some things they share is that both types have tools that affect their sales and their members are fans of the brand, are interested in news and information about the brand and its competition, and even sometimes participate actively in both types of community. They differ in terms of the goals of the community managers; some are business-related, while others are based on relationship and consumption experiences. In this way, organization-initiated communities seek to achieve their marketing objectives, like: collecting data about their consumers, interacting with their consumers, monitoring their consumers, increasing brand and company loyalty and increasing sales. To those ends, communities try to reach certain user profiles across diverse and sundry

segmentations. Consumer-initiated communities do not tend to have marketing objectives; their managers seek to express their love or admiration for the brand and their members join freely without being sought out because they want to share relationships with similar people. Another distinguishing feature lies in the profile of the community's administrator. In company-initiated communities it is a professional with marketing objectives, who controls what is said within the community, organizes messages and activities and, consequently, reduces the freedom of the comments made by members. On the other hand, in consumer-initiated communities, users have greater freedom of expression, identify more with the community, have more trust in the administrator, and participate more; this leads these communities to have greater effects on the shopping habits of their users.

Historically, brand communities have been founded, maintained and controlled by the companies to which the brands belong, but governed by their users (Wirtz et al., 2013); communities do, however, vary in these dimensions depending on their creation and their governance. Thus, we are focusing on communities that were founded and governed by the brand (e.g. Apple); communities created by the brand but governed by the community (e.g. King Arthur Flour); communities created by the community but governed by the brand (e.g. Gulpener); and communities created and maintained by the community itself (e.g. Lego) (Wirtz et al., 2013). Various authors (e.g. Fournier & Lee, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2013) have pointed out that the organizations that own the brands should not have total control over the community, but neither should they completely cede it to the users. Maintaining a hybrid or intermediate situation allows the companies to control what goes on to a certain extent, while encouraging vitality and participation in the community. If the organization fails to appropriately exercise its control, the dissatisfied members are free to create another community (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

Based on the study of the development of new products created through virtual brand communities, Gruner et al. (2014) have proposed a classification system for company-initiated communities:

- *Open OBC*: consumers can easily join and leave the community as they please. Furthermore, the communication between members is free, spontaneous and in real time, free from company-imposed restrictions or control over content; the company's involvement is transactional in nature, without much engagement. Therefore, the company participates, but only marginally, only responding to questions and occasionally moderating (e.g. Apple <http://discussion.apple.com>).
- *Discerning OBC*: in order to participate, users are required to register, and this does not guarantee that they will be accepted into the community. Furthermore, the company controls and guides the behavior of the users, whose communication is not always in real time and is subject to restrictions. Thus, the company plays an active role in the community, frequently participating and regulating conversations and activities (e.g. Ford Sync <http://boards.synccommunity.com>)
- *Restricted OBC*: community membership must be earned, as it is limited to the company's customers or to groups of people that fulfill some requirements. New members must pay for access. The company carefully controls the community,

promoting and editing the members' communications, and participating heavily in the conversations. As a result, members do not participate greatly in community activities and their relationships are isolated (e. g. Club Nintendo³).

In accordance with the above, is Porter's (2004) classification, which was discussed in the previous section. In the case of virtual brand communities, their classification is based on the how they were founded and their relational orientation. In other words, they are classified as member-initiated communities (similar to consumer-initiated communities) and communities organized by sponsors (equivalent to company-initiated communities) (Jang et al., 2008).

Various researchers have noted that who administrates and created the community is one of, if not the, most important factors when classifying virtual brand communities; operating mechanisms vary greatly in accordance with this criterion (e.g., Berry, 1995; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). The community members' attitude towards the community tends to depend on who the sponsor is. Thus, in a consumer-initiated community, consumers act voluntarily and participation is generally affected by the community's general characteristics, like the role played by the leaders, the quality of information provided and the content of the community (Jang et al., 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004). On the other hand, company-initiated communities often feature a mix of voluntary and involuntary communications, since members sometimes participate due to obligations of web services (e.g., services for free software updates). In this respect, interaction and participation with and in the community differ from purely voluntary communities. Furthermore, the communication's influence in the trust of the community members can be less (Jang et al., 2008). Mathwick, Wiertz, and De Ruyter (2008) have explained that since peer-to-peer communities⁴ are often sponsored by a company, it is not possible to separate them from commercial brand communities.

Virtual brand communities can also be classified based on whether they are more social or psychological in nature. Thus, Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) believe that social brand communities are made up of fans of a brand that recognize themselves as community members and engage within the confines of the social structure. Psychological brand communities are, in contrast, a group of fans lacking a clearly defined group, that feel a sense of community with other users but without social interactions; it is very possible that many consumers feel a sense of community, even if they have never socially interacted with one another.

There are also different classification systems that categorize them based on what they are investigating. For example, Cova and Pace (2006) created a classification system based on two criteria: the company's distribution strategy within the community and the level of investment necessary for it. The combination of these criteria gives rise to nine types of communities (see Fig. 8.2).

³ http://www.nintendo.co.uk/NOE/en_GB/club_nintendo/club_not_logged_in.jsp

⁴ Virtual communities where members relate as equals with the goal of problem solving.

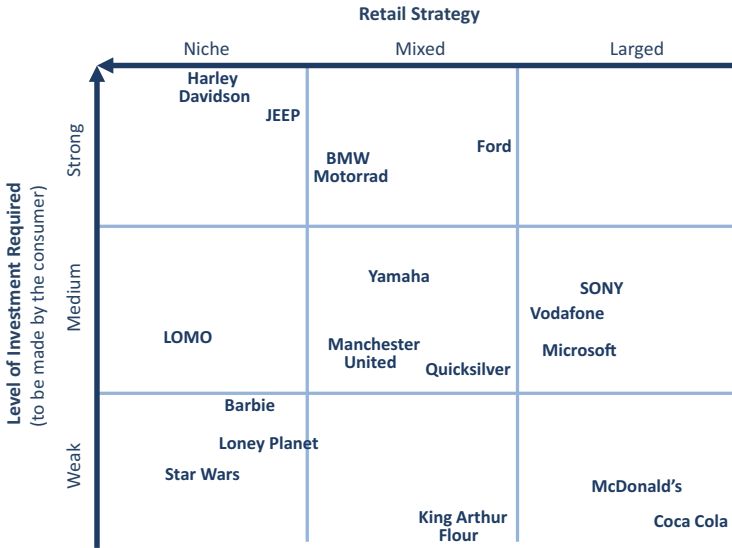


Fig. 8.2 Classification of virtual brand communities based on the organization's retail strategy and the needed investment from the user. Source: Adapted from Cova and Pace (2006, p. 1091)

The following categories are based on the organization's retail strategy:

- *Niche*, based in highly specific groups of clients, due to the characteristics of the product or to the community's segmentation.
- *Large*, without segmentation and with large numbers of customers that are potential community members.
- *Mixed*, where despite being directed towards large numbers of potential members, the community is largely destined for specific profiles.

Secondly, based on the investment that consumers must make to join the community and the price of the product or brand around which the community revolves, they distinguish between:

- *Weak*, where the user does not have to pay anything to become a member, as there are no sign up fees and the product around which the group is centered is cheap.
- *Medium*, the prices of the brand increase and/or there are sign up fees, but they are an acceptable sum for most of the population.
- *Strong*, where the price of the brand or product is high, seriously limiting who can acquire it, or there are high sign up fees.

Up till now, virtual communities have been examined without consideration for the platform in which they exist. If this aspect is taken into consideration, a clear differentiation appears. On one hand, you have virtual brand communities that exist within a website already associated with the company or within an independent site;

on the other, you have communities that exist on virtual social networks or brand communities that are embedded in social networks (Zaglia, 2013).

In general, the selection of a social network fits in with the classification of the similar communities explained in the previous section (e.g. social, business, etc.). Thus, for example, a community based in LinkedIn is largely directed at organizations and workers of a sector (Zaglia, 2013). In any case, Zaglia (2013) has pointed out that studying virtual brand communities housed on social networks requires conceptualization.

From another point of view, Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012) analyzed three virtual social networks where users generate a lot of content. They established three types of communities, based on the patterns of behavior of brands and users. Through YouTube, they exemplified the case of spaces where the user's identity is of little importance and the brand has a capacity for self-promotion and spreading information. Through Twitter, they illustrated communities that where the consumer is able to self-promote; consumers look to enter conversations and discussions, as well as to spread news either to a company or among other users; these are spaces with a high likelihood of receiving criticism. Finally, using Facebook as an example, they talked about platforms that straddle the line between the previous cases; these spaces offer an environment where companies and consumers alike can self-promote, but that are more brand-centered; in these spaces it is necessary for the organization to have a proactive attitude.

From the virtual brand communities centered on clients outside the company Devasagayam, Buff, Aurand, and Judson (2010) have noted another type of community, with intraorganizational character, that seeks participation by members of the organization. These communities help to increase employees' affinity for the brand, identification with the brand, support for the organization's commercial actions, their satisfaction and cohesion and also their emotional ties.

Finally, as was done in the section where online communities were analyzed, we apply Jump Associates classification system to the specific case of online brand communities:

- *Pools*: these communities are very useful for brands. Through their creation or through subsequent participation in them, brand image can be developed and consumer identification with the brand can be strengthened. Additionally, their users are open to receiving brand information and interacting with the brand. However, there is a risk of not establishing strong bonds, which could lead to a loss of members; to avoid this, companies can use Web and Hub type communities.
- *Webs*: their members seek to establish or maintain personal links with other similar people. Therefore, the way that brands should behave on them is to create or support a space or platform where relationships can be maintained.
- *Hubs*: these communities run the risk of disappearing when the personality of the leaders loses its appeal or the leader disappears. In any case, brands can strengthen their images and gain members if they use these types of communities, in addition to strengthening pool communities via the collaboration with people of importance for their members.

8.3 Anti-brand Communities

As a reaction to the power exercised by companies, many of their practices and capitalism in general, an international movement of resistance of brands and their globalization has emerged (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). The anti-brand movement is an example of a greater social movement where consumers resist capitalism, globalization, marketing and corporate brand strategies (see: Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010; Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Varman & Vikas, 2007). This emerging social movement, with social, cultural and ideological consequences, is defined by Holt (2002) as “anti-branding.” This phenomenon consists of “attacking” companies’ brands, as the attackers consider these brands as abstract representations of companies’ products and services that they are against (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). This is happening in a totally connected world, when business practices are exposed to the world and consumer opinion is more powerful than ever. Some examples of anti-brand communities are <http://makingchangeatwalmart.org/> (Wal-Mart), <http://mcdonaldssucks.com/> (McDonald’s) or <http://www.ihatebux.com/forum> (Starbucks).

Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010) have broken the goals associated with the new anti-branding social movements down into four categories, destined to change the market:

- *Fighting for an identity.* In anti-branding communities, constructing a collective identity requires a clear self-image and a collective idea of what a brand means; both are necessary to engage members. The “we” that anti-branding creates is against consumption in general.
- *Gaining autonomy.* With the goal of gaining autonomy, their members debate the meaning of brands, coming to an agreement about what their negative behaviors are, so that they can publicly denounce these facts in the community: e.g. deceitful sales tactics. Their members thus establish a common opinion and gain what they see as a real understanding of the market, different from the understanding of others, who are probably less informed.
- *Radicalizing modern values.* Their members seek radical changes to the economy, politics and culture of brands: e.g., eliminating fraudulent marketing activities, improving environmental standards or limiting materialism.
- *Transforming the individual person.* These communities encourage all their members to create their own behaviors, practices, identities and consumption roles, providing moral and emotional support. Thus, their members can grow on both a personal and spiritual level.

In essence, the anti-branding movement is similar to the previous anti-capitalist social movements, but it has two unique features (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). On one hand, this movement represents a confluence of ideas, which stem from the idea of equality being more important than work and that it is important to fight against the effects that companies have on the environment (Holt, 2002). On the other hand, the Internet has changed the way in which people interact socially; it allows anti-brand communities to proliferate online, thanks to the fact that the

Internet has removed spatial and temporal restrictions that previously existed for action strategies and coalitions (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002).

Online anti-brand communities exist to give consumers a place to gather and discuss a business's practices. Furthermore, they have an influence on whether consumers will buy that company's products and they often reinforce the negative attitudes that users have about a brand (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006, 2010). Therefore, anti-brand communities are considered the antithesis of brand communities. Similarly to how brand communities form around brands used by their members, anti-brand communities form around brands towards which their members have an aversion; normally it is a specific brand (e.g. Jeep or Marlboro) or an entire company (e.g. Wal-Mart or Procter & Gamble) that plays a dominant role in the market. These communities are not limited by geography and are structured around social relationships (see Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

The negative attention a specific brand receives tends to be concentrated in the websites of its anti-brand communities (Bailey, 2004; Harrison-Walker, 2001a; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). The members of these sites use visual expressions, dominions remembered for their impact, and critical language to create an online identity for the target brand. Furthermore, Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) have indicated that many of these websites are community-oriented (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), and facilitate collective actions against a brand by empowering consumers and activists (Hoffman, Novak, & Venkatesh, 2004); they tend to have forums where discontent voices can be expressed (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009).

8.4 An Integrative Classification of Virtual Brand Communities

To conclude this chapter, we offer a virtual brand community classification system that integrates all the systems analyzed thus far. This classification system aims to help in organizing ideas and to synthesize the various typologies that can be used when approaching online brand communities into one integrative structure.

The classification system we are offering is based on Porter's, 2004 study of virtual communities. This system was chosen as a starting point because its objective was to produce a classification system that organized and outlined the types that were seen to be most important according to research literature. However, we have included the rest of the typologies studied. Additionally, it has become clear that anti-brand virtual communities need to be added (Holt, 2002), and we have decided to include them for two reasons: they truly are virtual communities that revolve around one or various brands and/or companies, meaning that they fit the definition of a virtual community even if their objective is to show their disdain for a brand or company; and they are of interest to companies affected by their commentaries and activities, as their feedback can help companies see which of their aspects are worst perceived of by society.

Figure 8.3 shows the suggested classification system.

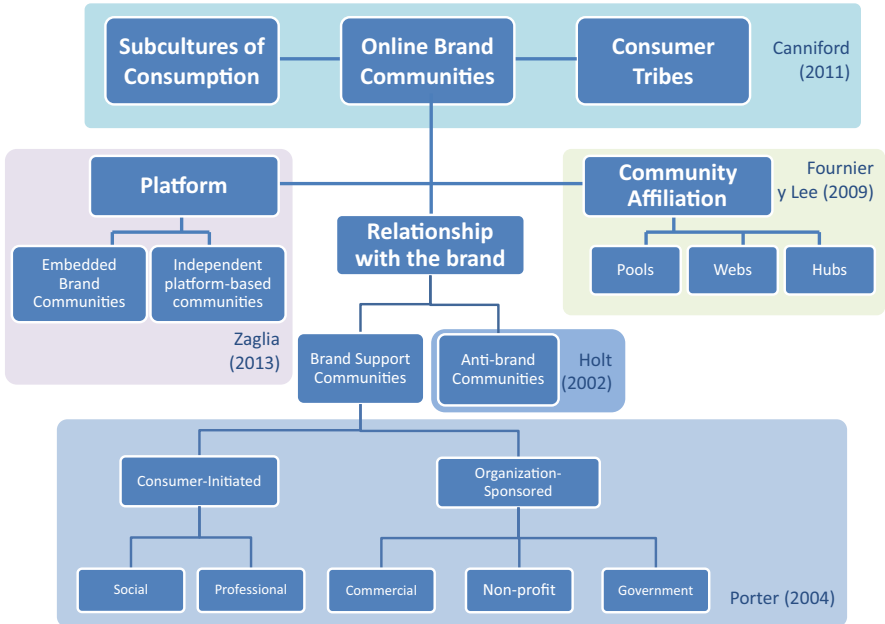


Fig. 8.3 Integrative classification of virtual brand communities. Source: Own elaboration

Chapter 9

Consumers' Motivations to Participate in Virtual Brand Communities

The reasons that bring people to relate to other similar individuals, brands or organizations through communities are highly varied, depending on the type of person, what they hope to accomplish and the type of brand. In general, motives like seeking information, communication, establishing relationships and constructing an identity show up in most studies, but other more hedonistic characteristics, like leisure or reputation also lead to participation. When trying to identify and explain people's motives for participation, various theories emerge, mainly from the fields of psychology and sociology, which offer their own view on this research question.

In this chapter we deal with the basic motivations that bring users to join virtual communities, especially virtual brand communities, as well as what intensifies their relationship, engagement and participation once they have joined. To go about this, we will first thoroughly explicate the different theories mentioned. Next, we summarize the main reasons highlighted by such theories for both online communities in general, and more specifically, for online brand communities.

9.1 Introduction

The existing marketing-focused literature on virtual communities primarily covers topics related to understanding the behavior of members, usually consumers, of the communities (Cova & Pace, 2006). This literature is extensive but not well defined (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Researchers tend to agree that people and organizations participate in them to interact and communicate with one another (Smedberg, 2008), about an interest, goal, experience or need that they have in common (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009; Kim, Park, & Jin, 2008; Preece, 2000; Wang & Chen, 2012), and to maintain contact with friends and family (De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009; Näsi, Räsänen, & Lehdonvirta, 2011). Porter (2004) analyzed two classes of basic objectives: social (Rheingold, 1993) and economic (Wind & Mahajan, 2002). Gallego (2012), taking another approach, has highlighted two

other main objectives: one is the common goal that unites the community; and the other is personal and specific to each person.

Communication between members is a key element for understanding the processes of recruitment and participation in a community. Communities are fundamentally social networks made for exchanging information and for social interaction (Andersen, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Wu & Fang, 2010). User behavior is one of the most studied features of virtual communities, due to the influence it has on the mechanisms of relating and communication with brands and companies, as well as purchasing behavior. Shang, Chen, and Liao (2006) have pointed out that participation in virtual communities can be seen as a passionate activity, motivated by the consumer's devotion and by their faith in the brand or product. Consumers gather in virtual communities, especially brand-based ones, to learn from one another, sharing experiences and information (Sánchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010).

Users search for information and establish relationships in the community with the intention to improve, or at least modify, their purchasing behaviors. In line with what has been expressed thus far, Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalú (2010b), by studying the modifications made to purchasing processes, have highlighted three effects previously pointed out by other authors (e.g. Koh & Kim, 2004; Kozinets, 2002): the spread of behaviors from one member to another; the organization's comprehension of the likes, desires and needs of its members; and the strengthening of bonds between consumers and the organization, which increases loyalty.

Shang et al. (2006) have noted that the motivations for and effects of participation in a community can be affected by trust in the community and by the perceived attitude towards the brand in the messages expressed in the community. This is one of the most useful features for organizations, since through virtual brand communities they manage to gather information about their brands from different sources (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Szmigin & Reppel, 2004). Another benefit to understanding members' motivations is the strengthening of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, produced through recommendations, online ratings, etc. (Chen, Fay, & Wang, 2011). WOM's impact depends on who is speaking and to whom they are speaking (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

Wirtz et al. (2013) have underscored three types of elements that help members participate in the community: brand-related (identification with the brand and the brand's symbolic function), social (social benefits and social identity) and functional (functional benefits like reducing uncertainty, improving information quality, or various incentives). Furthermore, they have noted that the community administrator can be a motivating factor in people's decision to join. In this way, consumer-managed communities have more credibility, although in some cases the attractiveness of the brand can be enough to incentivize participation in communities managed by the organization to which the brand belongs.

9.2 Theories Related to the Community Members' Motivations

There are multiple theories that can be used to explain users' behavior within virtual communities, ranging from theories related to the use of ICT to the psychological role communities play in identity creation. The purpose of presenting these theories is to help understand the theories that will be examined in the coming sections.

Akkinen (2005) has placed the theoretical explanations for why people seek out and belong to virtual communities into three groups:

- *Economic Theories.* Within these theories lies the *Resource-Based Model* (Butler, 2001). One of the main reasons people participate in virtual communities is that they believe the communities have certain benefits of which they can take advantage. Another is the *Economic Theory* (Gu & Jarvenpaa, 2003), which compares benefits attained with costs incurred.
- *Social Theories.* This group contains the *Social Exchange Theory* (Gu & Jarvenpaa, 2003), which highlights the reciprocity in the characteristics shared by members; the *Social Identity Theory*, which helps explain how communities help users create and define an identity and share social norms and a common identification; and the *Social Influence Model* of consumer participation in virtual communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). This model highlights some reasons for participating in virtual communities: self-discovery, maintaining connections with other people, improving social relationships and entertainment.
- *Theories of interest.* These theories are divided into two groups, *self-interest* and *community interest or altruism* (Chesney, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2000).

Various consumer culture theories have been developed over recent decades that deal with understanding how consumer behavior and shopping habits have been altered by social and technological changes. Thus, theories related to consumer identity, the market culture or consumption cultures and subcultures comprise another group (see Wang, Butt, & Wei, 2011).

After reviewing the existing literature, we will describe the theories and models used to explain motivations for joining and participating in virtual communities, with special attention paid to the unique case of virtual brand communities.

9.2.1 Consumer Culture Theory

The consumer culture theory emerged to explain consumer behavior in the post-modern era (Wang et al., 2011). This theory is not necessarily a unique theory, but a collection of theories that try to capture the evolution of the relationships between consumers' actions, the market and consumption's cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This collection of theories incorporates different aspects of

consumptions, such as socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological (Wang et al., 2011).

In line with the interest of this section, consumer culture theory focuses on how consumer identity is formed. Consumer identity refers to the co-constitutive and co-productive ways that consumers have to work with materials created by organizations to develop a "sense of self" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Additionally, it is important to note how this collection of theories helps explain the process of value-co-creation between consumers and the company (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Thus, the ways that consumers perceive, interpret, understand and interact with the market's offerings are studied (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011); how consumers bring their social and cultural characteristics to the process of value-co-creation when they create value for themselves or for similar people is also studied (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

In summation, consumers use physical and symbolic sources available in the market to create their own identity (Holt, 2002); they establish bonds with brands that help define their position in society and the personality that they want to express in it (Holt, 2002; Wang et al., 2011). This theory is useful for studying how members of virtual brand communities construct their identities, as well as social identification and interaction within the community (Wang et al., 2011).

9.2.2 Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner developed the social identity theory in 1986, although its characteristics had already been mentioned in a 1979 publication. According to this theory, a person's identity consists of their personal identity and their social identity. The personal identity is derived from personal features, such as their characteristics, abilities and beliefs, which make them a unique entity (Baumeister, 1998; Kim, Zheng, & Gupta, 2011). Social identity comes from belonging to a group; it corresponds with an individual perception of what a group says about the people that belong to it (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This identity helps the individual distinguish himself from both other members of their group and from other groups as a whole (Kim et al., 2011).

This theory asserts that personal identity influences the behavior of individuals through the identification with other similar people that reaffirm this personal identity. Social identity achieves this through a process of categorization, where people catalogue themselves as members of a group (for example, students, professionals, etc.) and through comparison with other groups (Kim et al., 2011). When the social identity is predominant, the needs, behaviors, beliefs and motivations of the individual are what condition their behavior (Stets & Burke, 2000). On the other hand, when social identity is predominant, behavior is derived from self-categorization of the individual as a member of a group, meaning that they behave in accordance with the group's identifying characteristics (Turner, Hogg, Oakes,

Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). However, both identities, personal and social, can be presented as co-dominant as well.

Additionally, two noteworthy theories that help understand the phenomenon of social identity are (Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013): Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), which assumes a relationship between the changes to a person's self-conception and the changes produced in a social context; and the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), which points out that through comparison with others, the individual is able to understand their abilities and opportunities, helping them establish groups.

The Social Identity Theory has helped explain how people identify with other people (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010c). People develop an image of themselves through the groups to which they belong (Hogg & Terry, 2000), and they also develop a sense of collective identity that contrasts with the unique identity of the individual (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). This self-image is made up of the real being, the ideal being and the social being. Social identification allows people to organize their social environment and define themselves as well as those who surround them (Johnson, Massiah, & Allan, 2013).

Another important quality is that the individual can constantly show his personality to other people, taking control over what information he is sharing (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Park & Chung, 2011). Therefore, identity is a dynamic factor that people can redefine and adapt based on context (de Ruyter & Conroy, 2002); furthermore, identity is derived from what other people consider an individual's most salient characteristics (Kim et al., 2011). Additionally, Harter (1998) believes that interacting with other people helps an individual see how he is perceived by other people that are members of the group; this allows him to conform to a perception of belonging to a group, either in a real or symbolic fashion (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Identifying with other people in turn makes it easier, as consumers, to identify with organizations (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). The more interactions consumers have with an organization and their group of consumers, the greater their sense of identification with the organization and the group (Bhattacharya et al., 1995).

Within the context of virtual communities, Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) have established that identification can reflect the strength of a consumer's relationship with the community and with other members. Identification with a community is the degree to which members view themselves as part of the group; strong identification increases the value of the community (Casaló et al., 2010c). This type of social identity with the community includes affective and cognitive components (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

Kim et al. (2011) adapted Hogg and Abram's (1988) definitions of personal and Tajfel and Turner's (1986) definition of social identity to the online environment. They have come to the conclusion that online personal identity is a series of idiosyncratic features and personal characteristics that the individual displays in the online environment. On the other hand, online social identity is a part of the individual's identity that is derived from their belonging to one or many online social groups, along with the emotional value consubstantial to membership.

Dholakia et al. (2004) believe that belonging to a virtual community, from the point of view of the Social Identity Theory, has both an emotional and a testing dimension. The emotional dimension of identity involves emotional participation with the group, characterized by researchers as a relationship or affective responsibility (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). This dimension encourages loyalty and civic behavior in line with the group's norms (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000); furthermore, it is useful for understanding the choice of the consumer to maintain relationships with organizations (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). On the other hand, with respect to the testing dimension, social identity provides the individual with mechanisms for measuring her self-esteem, by permitting people to evaluate their value based on the value of belonging to the community (Dholakia et al., 2004). Finally, Ewing et al. (2013), after studying the rivalry between brands, have pointed out that, under the lens of the Social Identity Theory, members of a community go from identifying as "I" to "we," and they start seeing their group as "us" and members of other groups as "them." (see Haslam et al., 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

9.2.3 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was conceived of in the field of social psychology, thanks to Ajzen's (1985, 1991) research into the behavior of organizations and the human decision-making process. It provides another avenue for explaining the behavior of users and consumers that are integrated into virtual communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). Since its conception, the TPB has become one of the psychological theories most used for predicting behavior (Gabisch, 2011).

The TPB, through the study of the relationship between attitudes and behaviors, helps us understand how individuals' behavior can be modified (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). This has led to it being used in multiple studies across various disciplines (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

The TBP has been used to study the behavior of users in virtual communities; for example, Casaló et al. (2010c) have used this theory to explain the behavior of users in a virtual community created by a tour company; Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a) have used it to analyze the behavior of users on small virtual brand communities; also, Morandin, Bagozzi, and Bergami (2013) have used it, when studying the Club Ducati community, to examine the relationship between these three variables: normative pressure, perceived behavioral control, and intentions to join the community.

This theory represents an expansion of the predictive power of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), to which the variable of perceived behavioral control has been added. Ajzen (1991) has pointed out that the TRA's limitations emerge when dealing with behaviors that are not completely voluntary (Casaló et al., 2010c). To remedy this, he takes into consideration that people's behavior is conditioned by three aspects (Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2002):

- *Behavioral beliefs*: related with predicting a behavior's consequence and with the positive or negative attitudes towards said results.
- *Social norms*: the individual's perception about behavior in relation to a group's behavioral codes and the opinions of other individuals in their social environment.
- *Control beliefs*: linked to the individual's perception about their ability or inability to perform a certain behavior of interest.

This model allows for the inclusion of other variables that help explain the existing variations in the prediction of behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Gabisch (2011) has highlighted the two important variables past behavior and self-identity, which, when taken into consideration, increase the ability to predict intention and behavior.

Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a) have noted the TPB's usefulness for understanding human behavior in general, and behavior in virtual communities in particular. However, it neglects basic aspects of communities, like social processes, emotional behavior and actions based in emotional objectives. In other words, except for subjective rules, they do not include the consequences of participating in groups; that is, the TPB is focused on the individual's point of view, which is not valid in communities. Therefore, these authors have proposed an expanded model of the TPB that will be better able to make sense of individuals' participation in virtual communities. With this goal, they have incorporated social intentions, aspects of social identity (cognitive self-awareness of group membership, affective commitment and evaluative significance) and anticipated positive and negative emotions in relation to objectives for participation in the group.

9.2.4 *Sense of Virtual Community Theory*

The sense of virtual community is derived from the sense of community (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Sense of community is what members have when they feel they belong, a feeling that causes them to care for other members and for the group itself; it is also the shared belief that members' needs will be met if they stick together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The feeling of community consists of four interacting structural and dynamic elements (Abfalter, Zaglia, & Mueller, 2012):

- Being a member of the community includes a clear idea of who is part of the community, emotional security that allows intimacy, personal investments to be a valuable member, a feeling of belonging, identification with group members and a common system of symbols.
- Influence refers to the perception of the impact a member has on the community, as well as the amount of influence that the community has on the individual.
- Integration and satisfying needs are foundational to the idea that prizes, benefits and support are necessary elements to be a community member and to maintain positive feelings about the community.

- Sharing emotions leads to a common history for the community, positive interactions and, in conclusion, identification with the community. Thus, the more that people interact, the more likely it is that strong relationships will be formed between members.

Various authors have posited that the Sense of Community theory would be perfectly applicable to the case of virtual communities. Based on this assumption, the concept of sense of virtual community was created (Blanchard, 2007, 2008; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Forster, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004). Blanchard (2007) defines the sense of virtual community as: members' feelings, identity, belonging, and bonds with a group whose main form of interaction occurs through electronic communications.

The ever-increasing number of people who belong to virtual communities could be, therefore, due to their experiencing a strong sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Jones, 1997). This feeling reflects the degree to which members feel connected to their online community, which can help understand the dynamics and vitality of a community (Blanchard, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004).

Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, and Tarkiainen (2011) have noted that most studies of the sense of virtual community have been focused on the social processes and practices that seem to impact individuals' experiences within the virtual community (e.g. individual antecedents of a sense of virtual community); the concept is not yet totally defined or developed. Hartleb and Blut (2008) have tried to incorporate this concept into the Theory of Social Identity to explain why people feel friendship and trust for corporations and why people feel that organizations support them and satisfy their needs (see: Abfalter et al., 2012; Schroeder & Axelsson, 2006).

9.2.5 Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is used to explain why people actively seek out communication media to satisfy certain specific needs; social and psychological needs stand out from the rest as the most important ones (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Gratification is achieved through different attributes of the user and of the medium, the content provided by the medium and by the social and physical contexts with which the medium is typically associated (Katz et al., 1973). Under the umbrella of gratification, Nambisan and Baron (2007) include: the cognitive aspects of integration into society, personal integration and hedonic integration. To achieve satisfaction, users must have a firm grasp of the media and must regularly interact with them (Luo, 2002).

The UGT has been applied to six areas of study (Lawlor & Rowley, 2010; Rubin, 2002): the union of motives for using media with attitude and behavior towards the media; the comparison of motives between different media; the evaluation of

similarities between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained; the study of situational variables that modify behavior; and the creation and validation of methods of measuring motivation.

Traditionally, the UGT has been employed in the study of mass media and of media content; this theory has been applied to the study of the radio, print media like newspapers and magazines, television and, currently, social media, Internet and mobile devices (Lawlor & Rowley, 2010). Therefore, the UGT has gained particular interest recently (Rubin, 2002; Ruggiero, 2000).

Studies using the UGT to understand virtual communities have come to interesting conclusions such as: satisfying motivations and the needing to belong depend on the perceived value of being a member (Dholakia et al., 2004; Mathwick, 2006); individuals decide to participate in virtual communities for functional, emotional and contextual reasons (Sangwan, 2005); the way Internet social systems are designed, with the goal of encouraging member participation, should be based on encouraging a sense of belonging, prioritizing social and cognitive aspects over other aspects related to usability (Lampe, Wash, Velasquez, & Ozkaya, 2010); variables like brand awareness, WOM, purchasing intention and satisfaction dominate the relationship between user engagement and participation in brand or company-based virtual communities (Bond, 2010).

9.2.6 Social Exchange Theory

The Social Exchange theory explains, from a psychological and sociological point of view, the exchanges between society members and the stability of their negotiation process. It is used to do a cost/benefit analysis of people's relationships, as well as possible alternatives to their current relationships.

Within virtual communities, the Social Exchange Theory explains why users join and participate; in general, a consumer or user integrates into a community, or participates to a greater or lesser extent, based on the benefits or reciprocity that she expects to gain from the interaction (Akkinen, 2005).

In his study of the relationships between consumers within virtual communities, Chan and Li (2010) used this theory to analyze the structure and experience of the interactions that transpire between virtual community members.

9.2.7 Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989) emerged as an explanation for the acceptance of new information technologies, as well as for applications related to them (Kim, Kim, & Shin, 2009). This theory is based on the idea that users present a positive attitude towards a specific technology

when they perceive it to be useful and easy to use; this acceptance affects beliefs and attitudes towards said technology (Hossaina & De Silva, 2009).

Within virtual communities, the TAM has been widely used; this theory helps explain the consumer's engagement with a brand and their community in an online context. Some examples, presented chronologically, are the following:

- Lin (2007) expanded the model to examine the impact of specific online variables—e.g., the quality of information, system and service—and offline activities in sustainable virtual communities.
- Lee, Ahn, and Han (2007) used a TAM that included the variable of perceived playfulness to explain the recommendations that users make in the setting of their virtual communities.
- Hossaina and De Silva (2009) tried to employ the model to analyze the effects of the social bonds that form in virtual communities on the acceptance of technology. In this way, they expanded the model to include the variable *social ties*, which refers to the connection between individuals through one or more relationships. The authors believe that it is easier for an individual to use a technology when people from his community say that it is useful. Furthermore, they have pointed out that virtual communities can increase user-participation in the process of product creation, whenever the conditions of participation being easy and useful are met.
- Casaló et al. (2010c) used the TAM to analyze joining and participation of users in virtual communities started by tourism companies.
- Lorenzo, Alarcón, and Gómez (2011) used the TAM to predict how much social networks would be used, due to their ability to predict the use of new technologies and their ability to adapt to include specific constructs for each of them. The original model was expanded to include the variables trust and perceived risk, as they make the model more reliable for situations of uncertainty, which often occur on the Internet.
- Lee and Lehto (2013) used the TAM to study the reasons that people use YouTube; they looked at the role of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. They concluded that the TAM is very useful in understanding the mechanisms by which users that use it as a learning platform accept YouTube.

9.2.8 Actor-Network Theory

A new way of studying the reasons for participation in virtual communities has been offered by Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013) through the use of the actor-network theory; i.e., a virtual community is seen as a heterogeneous network of different actors, with multiple interrelations between them. Therefore, these authors have adopted a view that rejects the common theory that communities are comprised of homogeneous groups of users. Various studies that use this theory (see Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2010; DeLanda, 2006; Latour, 2005; Law, 1992)

support the suitability of this theoretical approach, as online communities have characteristics on which this theory builds; e.g., social entities, patterned networks of heterogeneous elements. Such elements include people, institutions and resources (traditionally, only producers and consumers have been considered), which, despite being heterogeneous, due to established relationships and to the commitment among members, end up being united through processes of formation and reformation. However, each member has her own idea of authenticity, membership and consumption, in addition to the variability of her behavior in relation to engaging in consumption, her reasoning used to guide behavior and her motivations.

Latour (2005) has established that the root of all social movement lies in the associations and connections established by these elements. This theory concludes that society is a consequence of these associations, not the other way around. It seeks to trace social networks between heterogeneous elements, accepting the multiplicity of agents and relationships that can be established and considering them as a whole, while paying attention to the resulting infrastructure created.

According to Thomas et al. (2013), heterogeneity within a community is possible thanks to the members feeling like they belong to the group, both on the individual and collective levels. This favors communities being seen as social relationships and shared actions that reward a significant portion of their members. Therefore, as long as the uniting element exists, the community will persist, regardless of how homogeneous its members are; heterogeneity can even strengthen a community.

To explain the heterogeneity in virtual communities, specifically in relation to consumption, these authors refer to various research projects that have established the basic role these communities play in the relationships between consumers, as well as between consumers and brands or companies; they are also supported by studies and consumption and identity-creation (see Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007; Diamond et al., 2009; Fournier & Lee, 2009; Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006).

9.2.9 Network Theory

Lee, Lee, Taylor, and Lee (2011) make use of the Network Theory, which is related to the previous theory, to study the relationships established within virtual brand communities. In this way, they follow the current trend of using the Network Theory in research connected to the study of Internet relationships (e.g. Wellman & Frank, 2001).

The Network Theory is based on the idea that there are diverse networks in society that consist of nodes (members) and links (relationships), like family, friends, relationships, business partnerships, etc. This theory originated in the study of mathematical graphs, but has been used in multiple disciplines like biology, computation, sociology and economics (Lee et al., 2011).

On the Internet, this theory must take into consideration the distinct factors that compose and modify networks, like the existing level of interaction between members, the positional features of the relationship and the characteristics of the community (Wellman & Frank, 2001). In their study of virtual brand communities, Lee et al. (2011) analyzed the influence of the structural characteristics of communities, the strength and density of the relationships established within them, as well as the positional aspects measured through the network's centrality. Additionally, they include the level of homogeneity amongst members and community's level of emotional connection.

Lee et al. (2011) concluded that the Network Theory is useful for studying brand communities; they have noticed that the networks' structural factors, which were previously discussed, help to strengthen emotional bonds with the brand, leading to benefits like brand improvement and increased intention to purchase.

9.2.10 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Various studies (e.g. O'Donnell & Brown, 2012; Tsai & Pai, 2012) used the SDT to explain users' reasons for using virtual communities. This theory has been developed over various studies by the authors Deci and Ryan (1985, 2002). These authors conceived the term "self-determination" to describe the human experience of choice. Additionally, it divides human needs into three groups: autonomy, competency and relatedness; these are related to feelings of control over a situation, the ability to carry out activities and relationships with others, respectively (Tsai & Pai, 2014). By satisfying these needs, individuals acquire a full sense of self and improve their psychological well-being.

Additionally, the SDT assumes that there are three types of motivations: intrinsic-motivation, extrinsic-motivation and amotivation; accordingly, they divide satisfaction into three types: individual, as a consequence of external benefits and the absence of intention to act (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the context of virtual communities and brand communities, O'Donnell and Brown (2012) used the SDT to better understand the relationship that people have with the brand communities in which they participate, as well as the process through which individuals allow communities to influence themselves. Thus, they sought to understand their effects on the loyalty of their members.

Tsai and Pai (2014) modeled the antecedents on new member participation in virtual communities. In their study they combined satisfying the needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence to explain the social identity of the new member; such an identity, in turn, affected their participation behavior through affective commitment and collective self-esteem. Therefore, the SDT explains the nature of community member relationships with the group by means of the three types of needs indicated.

9.2.11 *Lead-User Theory*

Marchi, Giachetti, and De Gennaro (2011) applied the Lead-User theory to analyzing virtual brand communities. This theory was first proposed by Von Hippel (1977, 1986) when studying innovative users. Lead-users are people or organizations that benefit when needs that the bulk of the market is still unaware of are met. Since its first iterations in the industrial markets, the use of this theory has been extensively applied to other sectors (Marchi et al., 2011).

The initial construct (Urban & Von Hippel, 1988; Von Hippel, 1986) established two basic elements: ability to anticipate the market's needs and the perception of being able to exploit them. Over time, the model has been expanded to include relationships between companies and to be applied to specific cases in addition to groups of users. This has led to benefits going from being only economic to also having cognitive benefits related to creativity, reputation and enjoyment (Marchi et al., 2011).

The emergence of virtual communities has strengthened the use of innovative users in the process of new product creation; this has increased knowledge through spontaneous contributions that come from dialogue between participants. The innovation process, therefore, has been strengthened by virtual communities. Marchi et al. (2011) have used this theory to explain the role of lead-users that innovative consumers can play in online communities; they focused on the Ducati Motor virtual community. Specifically, they looked at whether the lead user construct had similar implications in both their original development context and in the context of brand communities. They suggested that companies create online brand communities to support the development of innovations. However, for this proposal to be useful, it is important that companies identify which community members would be good candidates to involve in the development of new products.

9.3 Motivations to Join and Participate in Virtual Communities

People decide to join and participate in virtual communities for different reasons (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). In this section an array of reasons for joining and participating in virtual communities that have been discussed in literature are presented; special attention will be paid to some of the theories presented in the previous section that were also used by authors to support their proposals. Although we have tried to stick to an internal content structure in function of the proposed reasons, we sometimes have to present integral proposals of groups of reasons, made by authors. Therefore, we have prepared a final table to help visualize the all the different categories of motivation.

Interacting and relating with others in the hopes of gaining information is the main reason that users participate in virtual communities, no matter the type

(Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Dholakia et al. (2004) believe that maintaining interpersonal connections provides the social benefits that encourage participation. The Internet facilitates the expansion of social networks (Ishii & Ogasahara, 2007); it allows the communication and interpersonal support that takes place in virtual communities to transcend time and space restrictions (Chu & Chan, 2009), as well as allowing its members to take part in new social relationships (Jung & Kang, 2010; Wang & Chen, 2012; Wellman et al., 1996).

Various studies have shown that a large portion of virtual community participants gather for the sake of seeking and providing information, as that they also seek recognition from others (Chan, Bhandar, Oh, & Chan, 2004; Dholakia et al., 2004; Hars & Ou, 2002; Park & Cho, 2012; Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke, 1997). Constant, Sproull, and Kiesler (1996) also included the search for information related to shared objectives in addition to hedonistic benefits. This is interesting, given that searching for information on virtual communities precedes certain shopping and decision-making processes (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009; Park & Cho, 2012; Peterson & Merino, 2003). In other words, the consumer, a member of the community, uses the community to obtain information about the product or service of interest to them; e.g., other users' reviews and experiences, comparing prices, verifying the quality of a product, etc. (Park & Cho, 2012).

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), previously commented upon, indicates that communication media help users satisfy some of their social and psychological needs. These gratifications, which should be compared to the costs or resources used to reach them, give value to the user's participation in the community (Dholakia et al., 2004). Butler (2001) has noted some of the benefits perceived by the user: opportunities for affiliation and companionship; opportunities to influence other people; social support; access to information; support for developing personal relationships; facilitation of collective activities. Preece (2000) has highlighted the following benefits associated with participation in online communities:

- Exchange of information.
- Support from other users.
- Conversations and socialization.
- Discussions about topics of common interest.

Dholakia et al. (2004) have noted that the Uses and Gratifications Theory is very useful for understanding value-creation for users. They believe that virtual communities create *information value*, as gaining and sharing information is encouraged in virtual communities, as is learning what other users think. Furthermore, they have pointed out the *instrumental value* of these communities, since members can complete diverse tasks like solving problems, generating ideas, etc. They have also established that they provide *self-discovery value*, which is developed through interactions with other users; this allows individuals to understand themselves more deeply, which helps shape their own personality and preferences. On a social level, they have noted several categories of value that could be created:

- *Value through the maintaining of interpersonal connection.* Establishing and maintaining relationships with others creates benefits related with friendship and social support, eliminating solitude.
- *Value through social improvement.* Making contributions to the group results in gaining the acceptance of other members and increasing one's status within the virtual community.
- *Entertainment value.* Thanks to the interaction with other users, as well as the exploration of other identities, or the formulation of virtual challenges, users are entertained.

Nambisan and Baron (2007, p. 45), after a large bibliographic revision related to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, have highlighted four broad types of user benefits in relation to virtual firm-sponsored virtual communities:

- *Cognitive or learning benefits.* Virtual communities allow their users to familiarize themselves with the products that they consume as well as with technologies and their use, thanks the collective creation of knowledge (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001; Wasko & Faraj, 2000).
- *Social integrative benefits.* These benefits are derived from the bonds and social relationships that are developed through participating in virtual communities which also increase the individual's social identity and their feeling of belonging to a group (Nambisan, 2002).
- *Hedonic benefits.* Participation in company-controlled virtual communities allows consumers to access a source of interesting experiences that are stimulating and able to create pleasure thanks to the creation of conversation and discussion among their members about products, behaviors and ways of using products (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley (2010) have also used this theory to explain the behavior of young individuals in online communities. They have noted that virtual communities' impersonal nature facilitates interactions with other people, a feature that is more complicated in the offline world; this allows them to establish relationships and create their identity. They divide gratifications into two types: gratifications sought, which include communication, friendship, identity-creation, entertainment, information and interaction; and gratifications obtained, related to peer acceptance, presenting the ideal image, maintaining relationships and limiting rejection.

All these benefits, and in general the motivations that lead to users participating to a greater or lesser extent in virtual communities, depends on the objectives that are set forth within the virtual communities and the level of engagement with the group. For example, Tonteri et al. (2011) has pointed out that the benefits for members whose participation is limited to reading information and opinions offered by other members differ from the benefits for members that also create content (e.g. writing reviews, opinions, etc.). Thus, readers expect cognitive benefits, while members that participate more seek benefits related to social and personal integration.

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) have expanded the list of reasons why consumers contribute by sharing experiences and opinions to virtual communities to include eight factors. Finally, after an empirical study, they

concluded that the five main reasons are the following: social benefits, economic benefits, incentives, concern for others and extraversion/self-enhancement.

In Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) opinion, virtual communities mainly satisfy three types of needs: functional, with the goal of conducting transactions, obtaining information and help and for leisure; social, to relate with other people with whom interests and experiences are shared; and psychological, as people need to identify and feel like they are a part of something. In relation to the psychological features, Bressler and Grantham (2000) established that communities that help individuals to reach a feeling of identification do so by answering some basic questions: Who am I? Where am I from? What connects me to the rest of the world and to what extent do I relate to other people? What am I getting out of my relationship with others? What is most important to me?

Dholakia et al. (2004) have pointed out that identifying with and participating in a virtual community takes on a special significance when considering that these actions are the sources of benefits for members. This point of view is related to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), which states that, through identification with the community, the individual is able to satisfy different needs, both on the individual and group level. Virtual communities' users are seen as a group that provides benefits and value for its users; the more users identify with the group, the more they benefit (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Social identification with a group affects individuals on psychological, cognitive, affective and evaluative levels; this helps the individual create their self-image by helping them to discover points of reference and feel like a part of a collective (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dholakia et al., 2004; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Furthermore, users can exploit virtual communities to find behavioral guides to help them reach the objectives that they share with the rest of the users (Dholakia et al., 2004). This facilitates cooperation between members and, therefore, allows them to pin down and reach their goals. For this to happen, members must feel that their contributions are valuable and that the effort of expressing them provides them with value, allowing them to build a reputation based on their contributions (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). This means that personal benefits and reputation-building are strong motivators for active participation (Tickle, Adebajo, & Michaelides, 2011). Thus, users feel compensated thanks to social improvement and increased reputation through economic or administrative benefits (Osterloh & Frey, 2000); the fact of that solving problems or sharing information can lead to "feeling good" is also a strong motivation (Muller-Seitz & Reger, 2009).

Other authors (e.g., Tickle et al., 2011; Wasko & Faraj, 2000, 2005) believe that trust is another factor in trigger consumer participation in virtual communities. Trust is developed by building a record of satisfying relationships that create the expectation of future positive relationships. Therefore, increases in user trust of the virtual community positively influence the level of user participation.

The reasons why users leave opinions and reviews about specific products on virtual communities have been widely studied. Chen et al. (2011) summarized the existing literature on the subject and have noted that there is a psychological incentive to altruistically participate in WOM, since it results in social approval. WOM is used to justify purchasing decision and because there is an interest in

sharing expert knowledge on a specific topic (Fehr & Falk, 2002), which results in increased status (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). On the other hand, WOM behavior can be used just as easily to share dissatisfaction with others as it can be to express satisfaction. Furthermore, users participate to varying degrees, depending on what type of consumers they are. This fact highlights the differences in motivations; for example, innovators participate most, as they are trying to reach a higher status in the community and to become experts (Chen et al., 2011).

Finally, various authors have talked about motivations of hedonic character and of utilitarian character in the context of virtual community participation (e. g. Cotte, Chowdhury, Ratneshwar, & Ricci, 2006; Hartman et al., 2006; Pöyry, Parvinen, & Malmivaara, 2013). The utilitarian motivations are related to the rational objectives associated with a behavior; the hedonic motivations are related to fun, gamability and pleasure. Both affect the user’s consumption behavior (Cotte et al., 2006), and their predisposition to online communities (Pöyry et al., 2013).

In conclusion, in Table 9.1 we present a structured synthesis of the main reasons (presented above) that individuals participate in online communities in general, without regard for the topic, platform or employed means of interaction.

Table 9.1 Structured synthesis of the primary motives for joining and participating in virtual communities

Motives	Studies (in chronological order)
Sharing information and knowledge	Berger and Messerschmidt (2009), Butler (2001), Chan et al. (2004), Constant et al. (1996), Dholakia et al. (2004), Hars and Ou (2002), Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), Park and Cho (2012), Peterson and Merino (2003), Preece (2000), Romm et al. (1997), Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001), Wasko and Faraj (2000)
Establishing social relationships and belonging to a group	Algesheimer et al. (2005), Brodie et al. (2013), Butler (2001), Dholakia et al. (2004), Hagel and Armstrong (1997), Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), Hogg and Terry (2000), Nambisan (2002), Park and Cho (2012), Preece (2000), Wasko and Faraj (2000)
Affiliation and status	Bressler and Grantham (2000), Butler (2001), Dholakia et al. (2004), McWilliam (2000), Ridings and Gefen (2004), Tickle et al. (2011), Wasko and Faraj (2005)
Communication	Chu and Chan (2009), Dholakia et al. (2004), Ishii and Ogasahara (2007), Jung and Kang (2010), Mathwick (2006), Wang and Chen (2012), Wellman et al. (1996)
Discussing ideas and seeking social support	Hagel and Armstrong (1997), Preece (2000), Rheingold (1993)
Leisure and fantasy	Dholakia et al. (2004), Hagel and Armstrong (1997), Wang et al. (2002)
Transactions and economic benefits	Hagel and Armstrong (1997), Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), Park and Cho (2012), Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002)
Increasing trust in organizations	Tickle et al. (2011), Wasko and Faraj (2000, 2005)
Completing tasks	Dholakia et al. (2004)

Source: Own elaboration

9.4 Motivations to Enter and Participate in Virtual Brand Communities

Exactly as in the case of online communities in general, there are myriad reasons why users and consumers participate in virtual brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). It is widely accepted that consumers gather in virtual brand communities for the fundamental reason of identifying with the brand and showing that to other people; in this way, they manage to satisfy their social needs related to the image that they show the world (Laroche et al., 2012). Sicilia and Palazón (2010) have pointed out that brand communities, both on and offline, can be seen as subcultures with their own norms and ability to influence, which can bring out different behaviors and emphasize different motivations.

Dholakia et al. (2004) used the Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain participation in virtual brand communities. In relation to this theory, Pentina, Prybutok, and Zhang (2008) have identified five basic motivations: social integration, entertainment or leisure, information searches, status and carrying out transactions. Sicilia and Palazón (2010) believe that the reasons for participation in virtual brand communities can be divided into four categories:

- *Seeking to accomplish goals*: this group of motivations includes sharing information, advice and experiences. A consumer, by becoming a member and participating in a virtual brand community, obtains a value associated with accomplishing predetermined instrumental goals (Dholakia et al., 2004). Furthermore, like the rest of virtual communities, virtual brand communities allow users to share information on different topics (Mathwick, 2006); in this case, those topics would be the brand's products and/or services.
- *Social motivations*: virtual brand communities can satisfy various social needs, like friendship, social support and finding others with similar likes and behaviors.
- *Improved status*: self-esteem, social status and improvement on a social level are motivations that give value to the participants, as they gain acceptance among the community members.
- *Entertainment*: participating facilitates fun, relaxation and other ways of passing time interacting with other members or with the company itself.

Sung, Kim, Kwon, and Moon (2010), while researching virtual brand communities created on social networks, came to the conclusion that there are six motivations on the social and psychological level. These are: interpersonal utility; brand loyalty; entertainment searching; information searching; incentive searching; and convenience searching.

Hartleb and Blut (2008) established which features act as antecedents to user participation in virtual brand communities; i.e., identification with the brand, satisfaction with the community and the perception of a high degree of opportunities. Furthermore, they have noted that social identity is of utmost importance for creating a feeling of belonging to a brand community. Additionally, they observed

that the interaction and the communication that occurs in these communities allow users to share information about the brand and the organization's products, to lend and receive support and to solve problems.

Zaglia (2013) has pointed out that searching for information is a principal element of participation, since it involves trusting in the comments and advice provided by other consumers that have similar values and behaviors. In this way, the risk associated with purchasing or using a brand can be reduced, and consumers can learn about the brand, its products and its possible uses. Other motivating aspects of participation are: passion for the brand, entertainment and fun and strengthening relationships.

On the other hand, Scarpi (2010) believes that user participation in virtual brand communities is principally due not to seeking solutions to specific brand-related problems, but to a feeling of belonging to the community and to the values shared with its members. The fact that the consumer, as a member of the community, shares an identity with the brand community increases their participation (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a), which in turn increases their identification with the brand.

Kozinets (1999) stressed two basic factors necessary for consumers to truly identify with an online consumption-related community. One factor is the person's relationship with the consumption activity related with the community—the more important it is to their self-concept and self-image, the higher the consumer's participation in the community. The second factor is the intensity of the social relationships that the individual has with other members of the virtual community.

From the perspective of using communities to develop new products, Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe (2008) have suggested some characteristics that can be gleaned from the consumer's participation: their creativity, their identification with the brand community, and the specific emotions and attitudes that the brand causes in them (Emerson, 1981); consumers participate in communities dedicated to the development of new products because they expect some type of benefit or prize, which should outweigh their efforts. The motivations for participating in this type of community can be divided into intrinsic reasons and extrinsic reasons. From the intrinsic motivations, leisure and entertainment stand out as likely candidates for why users participate in this process. This is due to the interest, curiosity, satisfaction and the relationships that are strengthened through this activity, which provides an experience for those who participate. On the other hand, we have the following extrinsic motivations (Füller, 2006, pp. 640–641):

- *Autotelic/Playful task*: individuals participate because they find the activities to be rewarding in and of themselves.
- *Curiosity-Exploration-Arousal Seeking*: consumers might engage in this sort of community because they are curious or just want to escape boredom.
- *Achievement-Challenge-Self Efficacy*: consumers have the opportunity to prove their self-efficacy and deploy their capabilities to solve challenging problems in communities like these.

- *Skill Development-Knowledge Acquisition*: carrying out an activity could be motivating for consumers, due to the effort they put into improving their abilities and gaining knowledge.
- *Information Seeking*: the user can access information that they could not find without participating in these processes.
- *Recognition-Visibility*: consumers that participate in these communities can gain the recognition of other community members for being a producer.
- *Altruism-Community Support*: altruism means doing something for someone else at a cost to one's self. An altruistic attitude—the desire to help others—could also lead to getting involved in these communities.
- *Making friends*: these groups facilitate contact between people with similar likes and attitudes.
- *Personal Needs-Dissatisfaction*: some users make modifications to products that they find unsatisfactory in order to better adapt them to their needs. These communities can facilitate this behavior.
- *Compensation-Monetary Reward*: some users seek immediate and/or delayed payoffs that justify their participation in innovation activities. In this case, monetary compensations are necessary for their efforts.

Like they did when they evaluated virtual communities in general, Pöyry et al. (2013) have noted that there are both hedonic and utilitarian reasons for joining and participating in virtual brand communities. However, they have not yet produced a theory that explains both types of motivations for the case of virtual brand communities; various studies, on the other hand, have studied the influence of both hedonic and utilitarian specific motivations (e.g. Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010a; Kuo & Feng, 2013). Pöyry et al. (2013) have noted which motivations for participation in virtual brand communities have been studied (e.g. information searches, efficiency of purchasing decisions, etc.); so far, the study of hedonic or experiential elements (e.g. fun, entertainment, etc.) has been limited. In any case, both motivational categories are related; e.g., someone can join a community seeking to resolve a problem (utilitarian motivation), but once they've joined they might seek out other experiential benefits (hedonic motivation).

Fournier and Lee (2009) have pointed out that there are more types of behaviors within the community, created by different underlying motivations. Thus, they proposed 18 types of active users, whose profiles could be useful for companies' management of online brand communities. These profiles range from those that receive new members (greeters), to those that seek new members (talent scouts) or those that show others how the community works and what type of behavior is expected (mentors). In general, everyone, regardless of category, is seeking to improve their relationships and achieve certain recognition from the rest of the community.

Morandin et al. (2013) have pointed out that in communities with strong feelings and passion towards the brand (e.g. Ducati), motivations go beyond exchanging information to strengthening a sense of identity and established relationships in addition to fondness, fun, freedom, pride, etc. They have broken down the motive

Table 9.2 Summary of the principal motives for joining and participating in virtual brand communities

Motives	Studies (in alphabetic order)
Identification with the brand and its image	Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a), Cova and Pace (2006), Hartleb and Blut (2008), Kozinets (1999), Laroche et al. (2012), Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008), Scarpi (2010), Shang et al. (2006)
Sharing information and knowledge	Füller (2006), Hartleb and Blut (2008), Mathwick (2006), Pentina et al. (2008), Shang et al. (2006), Sung et al. (2010), Zaglia (2013)
Establishing social relationships	Füller (2006), Kozinets (1999), Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008), Pentina et al. (2008), Scarpi (2010)
Conducting transactions	Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008), Pentina et al. (2008), Sung et al. (2010)
Status	Dholakia et al. (2004), Füller (2006), Pentina et al. (2008), Zaglia (2013)
Leisure and entertainment	Füller (2006), Pentina et al. (2008), Sung et al. (2010), Zaglia (2013)

Source: Own elaboration

into three types: social relatedness, personal involvement with the brand and the brand’s symbolic meaning.

Finally, in Table 9.2 we present a synthesis of the motivational categories for virtual brand communities.

Chapter 10

Factors Influencing Members' Engagement with Virtual Brand Communities

The survival of a virtual brand community relies on its ability to attract potential members and convert them into active members of the community. Therefore, it is necessary to delve deep into the main factors that have been taken into account throughout the literature in order to explain the process of recruiting and retaining individuals of specific social groups, like virtual brand communities.

Throughout this chapter, therefore, we are going to flesh out the most influential variables in the process of long-term recruitment and retention of members in the field of virtual brand communities. Special attention is paid to the member's engagement with the community, due the benefits it presents: improved predisposition to continue participating in the community, increased trust of and commitment to the community and increased satisfaction and loyalty to both the community and the brand community.

Finally, we will briefly explore other noteworthy elements from relevant research such as promoters of attraction and continued participation of virtual brand community members; e.g., agreements or social norms, usability, visual aesthetic, entertainment, quality and recommendations.

10.1 Backdrop

In recent decades, various studies have begun to analyze the impact that brand communities have had on consumer behavior, trying to come up with methods to better understand the grouping of consumers in an online setting online (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009; Kozinets, 1999; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muñoz & O'Guinn, 2001; Wang, Ting, & Wu, 2012). Multiple theories have been used (e.g., analysis of social networks, life-cycle models, and motivational theories) to find out how to engage consumers or how to understand how they behave in the communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi, &

Pearo, 2004), as well as what the effects of the experiences in virtual communities are on the real world (Gabisch, 2011). Some studies have taken a quantitative focus, while others have adopted an ethnographic method to investigate the causes of consumer behavior in virtual communities (De Valck et al., 2009).

It is important to understand what drives individuals to visit communities, maintain conversations in them and become regular participants (Weber, 2007). This would prevent consumers rejecting, ignoring or isolating a company's actions, leaving the community or speaking badly of it (Spaulding, 2010). It is important to keep in mind the handicap caused by the lack of a geographic base that underlies this type of platform (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008). There are multiple factors that have been considered throughout the literature to explain the process of recruitment and retention of individuals in a specific social group. Customer engagement, in particular, is one of the most important variable for understanding the co-creation of experiences and the value for the client in the current interactive field of virtual brand communities; different authors have highlighted the role of engagement in understanding consumer behavior in this context (e.g. Algesheimer et al., 2005; Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Sashi, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013). In this chapter, customer engagement is analyzed in detail, which entails exploring other related variables as well.

For instance, the individual's identification with the group represents one of the most important factors for creating engagement with an online brand community (Wirtz et al., 2013); it is, therefore, a salient factor to consumer integration in a brand community (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010d; Etzioni, 1996).

On the other hand, customer engagement with a virtual brand community has not only become a key element in the interaction between consumers and brands, but also has diverse effects on the community's functionality and its sponsoring brand. It has been shown that customer engagement leads to increased commitment to the community (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Chan & Li, 2010; Kuo & Feng, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). Therefore, Farquhar and Rowley (2006) have noted that while several resources are necessary for creating and maintaining a virtual community, a firm commitment from the community members is also essential. Also, Wirtz et al. (2013) have shown that engagement with online brand communities affects the how long the client will participate in the community.

Another fundamental factor to the development of long-term relationships with clients in virtual brand communities is creating trust (e.g., Anderson & Narus, 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Quinton & Harridge-March, 2010); a consumer's sense of engagement with the community is helpful with that (Brodie et al., 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). It is important to add that satisfaction with the community is another factor that determines how much a consumer trusts the community (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2011a; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). Furthermore, there is another important topic related to satisfaction: consumer loyalty. It has been observed that satisfaction has a direct effect on loyalty in the virtual brand community setting (see: Quinton & Harridge-March, 2010).

Finally, various studies have shown that community-created social agreements (Spaulding, 2010), ease of use (Lin, 2007; Wang et al., 2002), visual aesthetic (Browne, Durrett, & Wetherbe, 2004), entertainment (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011) and the website's overall quality are essential elements for sustaining virtual communities. The stock that members put into the recommendations made by other members should also be considered (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

Next all the factors that influence and encourage long-term recruitment and retention of members to virtual brand communities will be analyzed.

10.2 Engagement with the Online Brand Community

10.2.1 Introduction

One important factor of long-term recruitment and retention of consumers in virtual brand communities is known as “engagement.”

This variable, which is essential to understanding the co-creation of experiences and value in an interactive context, is an integral part of the professional and academic debates on the subject of virtual brand communities (Brodie et al., 2011). This fact is reflected in the use of the terms “engage” and “engagement” to explain the characteristics of brand community participants' interactions in much of the recent research and business discussions on the topic (Brodie et al., 2013). Although the term “engagement” is not new for some academic disciplines (e.g. sociology, psychology or organizational behavior), its use in marketing and the corresponding literature did not become common until 2005 (Brodie et al., 2011, 2013). Now many researchers are turning to customer engagement to explain the customer's experience in this new interactive setting (Hollebeek, 2011a). Woisetschläger, Hartleb, and Blut (2008) have identified customers' engagement with a brand community as one of the main research topics in the existing academic literature on brand communities.

However, few empirical studies into the meaning and the fundamentals of customer engagement in social media, especially brand communities, have been conducted (Brodie et al., 2013). Consumer engagement, therefore, can be viewed as a recent concept still in need of expansions (Gummerus et al., 2012). Next we will go over the main characteristics and concepts of engagement.

10.2.2 Engagement Foundations

The concept of engagement, customer engagement and consumer engagement are rooted in the theory of relationship marketing (Ashley, Noble, Donthu, & Lemon,

2011; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012) and the new service-dominant logic (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a).

From the perspective of relationship marketing, customer engagement fulfills the basic requirements of the theory, such as repeat purchases by customers, retention and, finally, loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011a). However, when this concept is viewed with a broad perspective, not only should past, present and future customers be kept in mind, but also other types of relationships like communities of consumers and their value co-creation networks. Thus, from this point of view, consumer engagement is fundamentally based in "specific interactive consumer experiences" (Brodie et al., 2013, p. 106). Therefore, customer engagement's role within relationship marketing allows for a broader perspective of the interactions between companies, organizational networks and clients, both current and potential (Vivek et al., 2012).

Regarding the service-dominant logic, customer engagement represents the functionality of the agents connected in the network (e.g., companies, customers and other parties interested in the relationship), which co-create value effectively by providing services (Hollebeek, 2011a). Four out of ten of the foundational premises proposed by the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) are of essential importance for setting the basis of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011):

- Premise 6: The customer is always a co-creator of value.
- Premise 8: A service-centered view is inherently customer-oriented and relational.
- Premise 9: All social and economic actors are resource integrators.
- Premise 10: Value is always uniquely and phenomenally determined by the beneficiary.

All these premises shine a light on the consumers' interactivity, the customers' experiences of co-creation with other stakeholders and the connection of the service relationships, which are important for defining customer engagement.

10.2.3 Conceptualizing Engagement

From a marketing point of view, although engagement is considered a central variable (Brodie et al., 2013), there is no consensus on its meaning. Also, specific subforms of engagement have been observed in the literature (Hollebeek, 2011a): "customer engagement" (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010; Vivek et al., 2012); "customer engagement behaviors" (Van Doorn et al, 2010); "customer brand engagement" (Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b); and "consumer engagement" (Brodie et al., 2013).

There is a controversy among authors as to whether or not transactional behavior should be considered the only part of the concept. Van Doorn et al. (2010, p. 254) have pointed out that customer engagement "goes beyond transactions," and they

define it as: “a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers.” The customers’ behavioral manifestations can be positive or negative, although marketing research has largely focused on the positive aspects (Brodie et al., 2011). Similarly, Kumar et al. (2010) believe that although the conceptualization of engagement must consider the non-transactional aspects, customer shopping must also be included as an essential part of the definition, as it constitutes one of the fundamental forms of engagement with the company.

Vivek et al. (2012, p. 128) have pointed out that in the majority of cases, professionals tend to use engagement for “building relationships with customers through programs aimed at getting individuals involved with and connected with their brand.” Therefore, they define customer engagement as: “the intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates” (p. 133).

Hollebeek (2011b) provided two definitions, one detailed and the other synthetic. In the detailed definition, he understands customer brand engagement as “the level of an individual customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct brand interactions” (p. 790); in the synthetic he understand it as “the level of a customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions” (Hollebeek, 2011a, p. 556).

Brodie et al. (2011) defines engagement as: “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships” (p. 260).

Furthermore, customer engagement could include cognitive and affective elements that correspond with the customer’s experiences and feelings, such as behavioral and social elements, which have to do with participation (Vivek et al., 2012).

Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, customer engagement also involves the customer’s co-creation of value (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Therefore, the traditional role of the customer in market exchanges has been expanded to include other activities of value, such as: helping companies understand the customer’s needs; participating in the creation and design of products; or advocating brands to other consumers, expanding information about the company and its products (Sashi, 2012).

Kumar et al. (2010) have highlighted four core dimensions that compose customer engagement: (1) Customer purchasing behavior, which is related to a customer’s lifetime value; (2) Customer referral behavior; (3) Customer influencer behavior (e.g., WOM); and (4) Customer knowledge behavior, as feedback provided to the firm for innovation and improvements.

Finally, this is the appropriate point to distinguish between the meanings of the concepts engagement and involvement. Involvement is understood as “a motivational state aroused by the personal relevance of some stimulus, object or situation” (Dwyer, 2007, p. 78). Involvement could be considered an important dimension of

engagement; the latter has gone beyond developing a proactive and interactive relationship with the object of engagement, which could be an object of consumption (e.g., a product or brand) or not (e.g., a passion or hobby), and which, moreover, must provide experiential value in addition to the instrumental value that includes involvement (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

10.2.4 A Contextualization of Engagement Within the Social Web and Virtual Brand Communities

10.2.4.1 Consumer Engagement in Virtual Brand Communities: What Is It?

The importance of customer engagement also has begun to be evident in virtual environments, thanks to the evolution of the Internet and the emergence of new digital interactive technologies and tools that help establish lasting relationships (Sashi, 2012). Therefore, within the online world, many authors have noted the importance of customer engagement in Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, wikis or social networks (Hollebeek, 2011b).

In this context, different definitions for engagement are found. Specifically, “cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value.” From this perspective, online engagement is characterized by “the dimensions of dynamic and sustained cognitive processing and the satisfying of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities)” (Mollen & Wilson, 2010, p. 923).

In the digital context, customer engagement involves adjusting marketing mix strategies to new technologies and tools in order to better understand and satisfy consumers (Sashi, 2012). This means developing interactive customer experiences with the brand and increasing the brand's value via consumer experiences (Gummerus et al., 2012). In this online context, therefore, customer engagement behaviors can be, for example, recommendations and suggestions from consumers to organizations or other consumers through blogs, forums, brand communities, etc.

In the context of communities, few attempts have been made to conceptualize consumer/customer engagement in relation to virtual brand communities (Brodie et al., 2013). Next, some relevant contributions are presented.

Wirtz et al. (2013, p. 230) has provided a brief definition for engagement in this context: “an identification with the online brand communities that results in interactive participation” (Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 230). Algesheimer et al. (2005, p. 21), have conceptualized it as “the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members.” Therefore, engagement in virtual brand communities is based in the members' interest in helping other members, participating in group activities and voluntarily supporting the community in order to

increase the value for themselves and for the other users of the community (Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 229). This conceptualization is in line with the principles laid out by Van Doorn et al. (2010), explained above, as it views engagement as a behavioral manifestation, in addition to an attitudinal one, which lends greater importance to non-transactional behaviors (e.g. eWOM) (Verhoef et al., 2010). There are four main qualities that define this type of engagement (Brodie et al., 2013, p. 107):

- It consists of “specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community.”
- It deals with a context-dependent psychological state: therefore, its intensity will vary according to how dynamic and interactive the process is.
- It is a multidimensional concept that encompasses cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions.
- It represents a central position in the process of exchange-based relationships, since it is related to other community-engagement concepts, which can be antecedents or consequences.

Van Doorn et al. (2010) has proposed five dimensions that will help understand the nature of customer engagement, which are also applicable to virtual brand communities:

- *Valence*: customer engagement can lead to different results, either positive or negative.
- *Form or modality*: it can be expressed in various ways, depending on the client’s resources.
- *Scope*: it can be a sporadic or continuous behavior.
- *Nature of its impact*: it can be measured in function of immediacy, intensity, amplitude and duration of impact, allowing different consequences for the participants (negative or positive).
- *Customer goals*: consumers can have different intentions for engaging in these behaviors.

10.2.4.2 Drivers for Consumer Engagement

Joining a virtual brand community is easier for consumers than engaging with brands or other community members. Wirtz et al. (2013) has proposed a series of basic brand-related drivers that can prompt consumers to engage with virtual brand communities. Next, they are synthetically discussed:

- Brand-related drivers
 - *Brand identification*. This refers to an element that “involves the integration of perceived brand identity into self-identity” (Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 230). This identification is considered to be antecedent of community participation. Algesheimer et al. (2005) have verified that identifying with a brand and a brand community has a positive influence on community engagement.

Therefore, research into the nature of the relationships between customer engagement and brand identity is seen as essential for the advancement of knowledge in this discipline (Hollebeek, 2011a). This will be more thoroughly explained in Sect. 10.2.5.

- *The symbolic function of a brand.* Consumers can come to feel a legitimate passion for some brands, due to the strong bond between them (e.g. Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2012; Fournier, 1998). Therefore, in the case of certain brands, a community of consumers can become an ideal medium for creating a robust brand image and creating a meeting place where users can express their adoration, strengthening customer engagement (Wirtz et al., 2013).
- Social Drivers
 - *Social benefits.* As was explained earlier (see Chap. 9), the interactions in virtual brand communities offer several social benefits to their members (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Wang et al., 2002). Thus, the interactions that take place with the expectation of social benefits enable a greater identification between community members. This improves community engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Wirtz et al., 2013).
 - *Social identity.* The Social Identity Theory (see Chap. 9) says that social identity stems from belonging to a group; it is an individual perception of what defines a group in the eyes of the person that belongs to said group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This identity helps differentiate oneself from other group members (Kim, Zheng & Gupta, 2011). Within communities, creation of a strong association with a brand among members leads to members reaffirming their social identity and, therefore, their customer engagement (Wirtz et al., 2013).
- Functional drivers
 - *Functional benefits.* As shown in earlier chapters, from among the needs that drive consumers to participate in virtual communities, the functional needs (transactional, informational, support, help, entertainment, value, etc.) stand out (Wang et al., 2002). Therefore, benefits are mainly derived from the support that the consumer receives from other members of the brand community, which increases customer engagement with the community (Wirtz et al., 2013).
 - *Uncertainty avoidance.* Virtual brand community, as was shown via the Reduction of Uncertainty Theory, can help the consumer to make purchasing decisions, thereby reducing their level of uncertainty through communication with other members (Wirtz et al., 2013; Zaglia, 2013).
 - *Information quality.* According to Dholakia, Blazevic, and Wiertz (2009), information quality is an important element that users need to feel through participation in a virtual brand community. Thus, an expansive, exact and current information base will help community members learn. Furthermore, it

is highly recommendable that community administrators monitor and maintain the quality of information. Algesheimer et al. (2005) observed that the quality of the relationship with the brand has a positive influence on brand loyalty and community engagement.

- *Monetary and explicit normative incentives.* Monetary compensation can become one of the main reasons why users participate in virtual communities (Füller, 2006). Therefore, companies tend to use these incentives (raffles, discounts, etc.) to promote short-term participation in communities (Wirtz et al., 2013). Also explicit normative incentives such as sticking to the rules of solidarity or normative standards can be used to increase short-term participation of community members (Wirtz et al., 2013).

10.2.4.3 Types of Consumer, Based on Their Engagement

The degree of engagement among community members can vary substantially (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013). Sashi (2012) divided customers into four types based on their level of engagement; as a base for classification, he used relational exchanges and emotional links to the company, which could be strengthened through virtual brand communities. Specifically, he distinguishes between:

- *Transactional customers:* are customers that have an exchange-based relationship and little emotional involvement with the brand. Therefore, it corresponds to the profile of price and offer conscious customers that have few personal relationships in the community. This type of client can be converted into a loyal customer or fan through repeated satisfactory dealings.
- *Delighted customers:* are customers with minimal exchange-based relationships that also have strong emotional ties to the brand. In these cases, the customer's expectations have been met and they are fully satisfied, even if their interactions with company are only occasional. However, this type of customer can reach such a level of affective commitment with the organization that their satisfaction can spread to other consumers.
- *Loyal customers:* are customers with a very involved exchange-based relationship but without much emotional connection. These customers will develop a calculative commitment and a lasting relationship with the company due to a lack of alternatives and, therefore, because of the existing barriers to change. With well-thought out strategies, they can be converted to fans.
- *Fans:* are customers with strong exchange-based relationships and strong emotional links. Therefore, this type of customer develops both affective and calculative commitment, which leads to their being passionate defenders of the brand.

Quinton and Harridge-March (2010) by compiling the terms proposed by different authors, have proposed a type of user according to their level of engagement with the community:

- *Lurkers*: are community users that lurk to discover and observe a community's characteristics prior to actively contributing to it.
- *Newbies or Tourists*: are community members that are only there to write some comment but that are not engaged with the community.
- *Celebrities*: are users with high levels of competency that dedicate time and effort to the community.
- *Minglers*: are members that publish in the community but not frequently enough to be regulars.
- *Devotees*: are passionate users; they publish regularly and for social relationships within the platform.
- *Insiders*: are considered experts on a specific topic; they usually decide the topic of conversation. These users establish strong emotional and social bonds with the network
- *Lead members or evangelists*: are community members with a high level of commitment, since they not only influence the community but are essential parts of it.

10.2.4.4 Process for Brand to Develop Consumer Engagement with Their Communities: A Brief View

There are authors that have tried to explain how companies should manage customer engagement; this is also pertinent to the case of online brand communities. Van Doorn et al. (2010), for example, have proposed that customer engagement with a brand can be encouraged in three stages: (1) identification of customer engagement behaviors (how, participants, content and effect), (2) evaluation of the onset of engagement (short and long-term consequences) and (3) action about customer engagement (development of abilities and resources for management).

Brodie et al. (2013) has divided the process of consumer engagement with a virtual brand community into five non-sequential sub-processes:

- *Sharing*. Sharing relevant personal information, knowledge and experiences through the process of co-creation of knowledge within the community.
- *Learning*: Through participation in the community, users gain the cognitive abilities that are necessary for acquiring and consuming products.
- *Co-developing*. Consumers can help companies, through their participation in virtual brand communities, to design new products, brands or variations of brands. They also enable the establishment of specific rules in an online community, including the development of codes and standards for a specific industry.
- *Advocating*. Advocating is the act of members supporting a brand through their recommendations to other users; this is essential for customer engagement with the virtual brand community.
- *Socializing*. The process of socializing with other members of the community helps them acquire the community's attitudes, norms and or language.

10.2.5 Consumers' Identification with Brands and Virtual Brand Communities

In this section we delve deeper into the meaning of consumer identification with brands and with brand communities, in order to find out what implications and consequences they have as antecedents of consumer engagement.

Brands are considered essential elements in the creation and communication of consumer identity (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Rodhain, 2006). Thus, brands enable individuals to highlight their idiosyncrasies and form their identities (Tuskej, Golob, & Podnar, 2011), helping them define themselves as people (Albert et al., 2012). In general, brand identification is expressed as the brand's ability to transfer information to the consumers (Fournier, 1998). It can also be viewed as the level of integration or compatibility of the brand with the consumer's self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Wang, Butt and Wei (2011, p. 47) define it simply as: "what a brand means to consumers." Various studies have shown that consumers buy brands whose image or personality aligns with their self-concepts, meaning they consume brands with which they identify (e.g., Kleine, Kleine III & Allen, 1995; Sirgy, 1982). Moreover, this type of relationship can be long lasting if the consumers feel that the brand reflects their self-esteem or social status (Wang, 2002). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) have pointed out that the more the brand coincides with the consumer's self-concept, the more attractive it is for them to identify with the brand. Furthermore, the more a customer identifies with a brand, the greater the likelihood that they will behave in ways that are beneficial for the company (Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013). These behaviors include increased intentions to promote the brand and to participate in the value creation process (Johnson, Massiah, & Allan, 2013). It also translates into the intention to buy more and to recommend the company and its products more frequently (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005).

Most definitions of consumer brand identification come from the Social Identity Theory (Tuskej et al., 2011). Social identification is defined as the perception of an individual that belongs to a group in either a real or symbolic sense (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Authors like Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) and Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) have noted the multidimensional character of this concept, composed by three different elements: cognitive (knowledge of each of the group's members), evaluative (positive relationship or negative feelings about group membership) and emotional (involvement in the group). Together these three components make it possible for individuals to define themselves as belonging to a specific social category (Marzocchi et al., 2013). The impulse to identify with brand communities can be understood as "an individual's desire to belong to a particular community and behave according to established norms and values" (Heere et al., 2011, p. 408). Thus, the values and experiences shared about the brand constitute the building blocks for identification with a brand community (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012). One can therefore say that in this case the brand is the center of consumers' identification

process (Wang et al., 2011; Yeh & Choi, 2011). Therefore, individuals tend to belong to groups that have similar characteristics as themselves (Jones & Kim, 2011), developing a sense of community through their relationship with products, brand, companies or other individuals (McAlexander et al., 2002). In this way, consumers tend to feel psychologically linked to the group's destiny (Kaufmann et al., 2012), perceiving its successes and failures as their own, instilling in themselves a feeling of responsibility for the community (Johnson et al., 2013). Furthermore, this need for identification with other people can be so strong that people form social bonds without ever having a face-to-face interaction (Mael & Tetrick, 1992), as is the case with online brand communities.

Various authors have suggested that member identification with a specific online community is the determining factor in whether or not the community is effective (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Carlson et al., 2008; Matzler, Pichler, Füller, & Mooradian, 2011). Identification with online communities is similar in nature to identifying with traditional communities (Qu & Lee, 2011). Identification with an online community is defined by Algesheimer et al. (2005) as the intensity of the consumer's relationship with the community and with the other community members; Casaló et al. (2010d) have conceptualized it as the degree to which a person considers himself or herself to be part of the community. It is, therefore, a collective identity (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995) that increases the value of the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005) and is composed of both affective and cognitive factors (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Members' identification with a community is affected by the how much value they perceive their actions within the community to have (Qu & Lee, 2011). Other factors that influence identification are: the member's predisposition towards collaboration, their knowledge about the different products and the alignment of their own identity with the brand's (Marchi, Giachetti, & De Gennaro, 2011).

Therefore, consumer identification with a brand community, regardless of whether it is virtual or not, is responsible for a number of its members positive behaviors (Feng & Morrison, 2007; Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004). Specifically, the identification process has a significant effect on aspects such as (Tuskej et al., 2011, p. 53): consumers' purchasing decisions, brand preference, consumer loyalty, brand commitment and community participation, brand trust, consumer satisfaction, repeat purchasing, positive word of mouth and willingness to pay a higher price for a product or service. Consumers that identify with a brand or brand community are more likely to recommend the company to other consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003); furthermore, they frequently purchase the brand's products (Ahearne et al., 2005) and make positive and supportive comments about the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Scarpi, 2010). Lastly, it is important to consider the effect of identifying with a brand community on brand loyalty (Marzocchi et al., 2013).

Regarding the relationship between identification and commitment, Wan-Huggins, Riordan, and Griffeth (1998) recognized the existence of a strong link between the two variables. Identification with a brand community manifests itself as commitment to the community (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Shen & Chiou,

2009; Zhou et al., 2012). Nevertheless, although some researchers have concluded that there is a positive correlation between identification, commitment and the generation of positive WOM, not all authors feel the same: Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst (2005), for example, have noted a direct correlation between identification and commitment, but an indirect one, through commitment, with positive WOM. Also, it is expected that identification with the community strengthens brand trust due to the bond that the customer develops with the community (Marzocchi et al., 2013; Szmigin & Reppel, 2004).

On the other hand, it has been proven that community members' personalities affect their identification with the community. Thus, for example, more extroverted users have a greater chance of feeling connected with the brand community, of identifying with other members and of seeing themselves as part of the community (Matzler et al., 2011).

To finish up with this section, we are going to briefly comment on the relationship between identification with a brand and identification with a brand community. Zhou et al. (2012) have pointed out that there are two contradictory points of view on this matter. On one hand, it is thought that identification with a brand community has a direct and positive effect on identification with the brand. On the other hand, some believe that there is an inverse relationship between the two concepts; meaning identification with the brand is what influences identification with the community. Therefore, from this perspective, identification with the brand is a prerequisite for identifying with the brand community and is necessary for consumers to accept ideas about new products (Marchi et al., 2011). In any case, it seems logical that there is a relationship between the consumer's identification with the brand community as a platform that enables users to share experiences about the brand and their identification with the brand itself (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

10.3 Engagement-Related Outcomes

Customer engagement with a virtual brand community has diverse effects on how a community functions and on the brand that sustains it.

In general, customer engagement, regardless of context, is essential for creating, developing and improving consumption relationships (Brodie et al., 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012). It can also influence the perception of quality (Hollebeek, 2011b); trust (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b; Sashi, 2012; Vivek et al., 2012); satisfaction (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011b); commitment (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b; Sashi, 2012) and customer loyalty (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b; Vivek et al., 2012).

In the world of brand communities, the increased integration that results from customer engagement has been shown to increase customer loyalty (McAlexander et al., 2002); Algesheimer et al. (2005), for example, have suggested that consumers that are engaged with a brand community tend to acquire more of that brand's products and to recommend those products to the community.

Specifically, various studies have pointed out the important effects that customer engagement with an online brand community has on other variables such as: the customer's continued participation with the community (Wirtz et al., 2013), satisfaction with the group (Wirtz et al., 2013), increased trust (Brodie et al., 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013) and commitment to the community (Brodie et al., 2013; Chan & Li, 2010; Kuo & Feng, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). Furthermore, it aids in the creation of value (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), gaining satisfaction (Brodie et al., 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012) and customer loyalty, which helps build community (Andersen, 2005; Brodie et al., 2013; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2007; Gummerus et al., 2012). Lastly, this engagement explains members' behavior such as WOM, recommendations or helping other customers, expressing opinions through comments and even participation in legal actions (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Next, we will present a detailed discussion on some salient engagement-related outcomes.

10.3.1 Participation in the Community

Customer engagement with an online brand community results in higher levels of participation in the community (Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 230); a community's success greatly depends on a good level of member participation (Casaló et al., 2010d, p. 359).

Tsai, Huang and Chiu (2012, p. 676) define participation as the "extent to which a member actively engages in community activities and interacts with other brand community members." Therefore, participation in a community motivates members to further integrate themselves and explains the long term increase of community through the recruitment of new members and the strengthening of ties with older members (Tsai et al., 2012). Participation makes lasting relationships possible between the different members of the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010c), and consequently increases community loyalty (Woisetschläger et al., 2008).

More specifically, increased member participation in virtual communities leads to increased sharing of knowledge, the rapid transmission of ideas and lending emotional support (Koh & Kim, 2004), higher rates of WOM (Woisetschläger et al., 2008) and community promotion (Qu & Lee, 2011). It also makes it possible for the group's collective objectives to be reached (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b) and increases the group's resilience over the long-term (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Koh & Kim, 2004; Woisetschläger et al., 2008). Moreover, member participation in a community provides the company with useful information as to how to improve the designs of their products and which product should be launched next (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Therefore, participation in a community has a direct, positive and long-term effect on a customer's loyalty towards a brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Porter, 2004); for example, it boosts the possibility of users buying new products from the

brand around which the community revolves, to the detriment of their competitors' products (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Participation also has a positive effect on consumer commitment and trust of the community by strengthening the feelings that unite the members (Ahearne et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2007, 2010c; Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013; Tsai & Pai, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013).

As a consequence of all these benefits, companies must make large efforts to capture the consumer's attention and to incentivize them to participate in the brand community. To do this, they must be aware of the factors that cause consumers to integrate into a community, such as: a common interest (Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997); the satisfaction of starting a conversation or being able to influence others (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008); seeking or exchanging information (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011); and entertainment (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Therefore, the prestige and satisfaction attributed to the relationship with the brand and the community are important to understanding why consumers choose to participate (Tsai & Pai, 2012). On a similar note, the perception that the community can respond is considered key for getting members to participate. Thus, if an individual posts various messages and does not receive a response, their motivation to participate in the community will evaporate (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002).

Another element that greatly influences user participation in communities is the technological platform. Tickle, Adebajo, and Michaelides (2011) have suggested that community members will only participate if the technology will allow them to communicate efficiently and conveniently, the flipside being that technical obstacles will lead to fewer website visits by members (see, also: Campbell & Uys, 2007). Relevant authors have recognized the lack of an ideal technological configuration that would work for all online brand communities, as this would depend on each user's specific needs. Even so, there are certain technologies that are more relevant to virtual communities, like synchronous technologies (e.g. instant messages, tele-conferences), asynchronous technologies (e.g. e-mail, discussion forums), publication technologies (e.g. blogs, repositories), or transactional technologies (e.g. Paypal) (Tickle et al., 2011; Wenger et al., 2005).

Technology aside, as was commented on in the case of customer engagement, organizations need to reflect on whether or not it is advisable to use some type of incentive to bolster consumer recruitment and participation in the community. Garnefeld, Iseke, and Krebs (2012) have researched this topic and concluded that online community administrators could use economic incentives to increase active and passive member participation in the short-term. Although they have also shown that this will not have a long-term effect, given that an individual's motivation will diminish once they have received the incentives.

10.3.2 Satisfaction with the Community

Consumer satisfaction among community members is viewed as a result of integration into the community (Casaló et al., 2011a). It is necessary to understand what

satisfaction means and how it affects the behavior of the members of an online brand community.

Diverse definitions of satisfaction can be found in the literature. The most accepted conceptualization of consumer satisfaction is Oliver's (1980), which is based on the confirmation/disconfirmation of expectations. From this perspective, satisfaction is understood as a cognitive state of the consumer related with how appropriate they find the reward/sacrifice ratio for a certain action (Howard & Sheth, 1969). Therefore, this model maintains that satisfaction is a comparative evaluation between what is gained by using the product or service and the consumer's initial expectations. Thus, if results exceed expectations, the customer will be satisfied, which could positively influence their future purchasing intentions. However, if the results fall short of the expectations, the customer will perceive a sensation of dissatisfaction that could negatively affect their future shopping (Carpenter, 2008).

Bearing in mind this theory, the satisfaction of a virtual community could be understood as "the result of the individual's perception that the benefits received from participating in the group are equal (or greater) to the expected benefits" (Casaló et al., 2010d, p. 360). Accordingly, if members' expectations are met or exceeded, they will be satisfied and will be more likely to continue participating in the community. On the other hand, if their expectations are not met, members will feel dissatisfied, which will deter future participation in the group. Therefore, in many cases, satisfaction can be an antecedent to participation itself, given that members, prior to deciding to actively participate in the group, could anticipate if their participation will be positive and if it will meet their needs (Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

From a psychological point of view, satisfaction could be defined as a pleasant sensation (Oliver, 1999). Said in another way, satisfaction could be a feeling that occurs when a shopper's consumption of a specific product gives them as much pleasure as they had expected or more (Moliner, Sánchez, Callarisa, & Rodríguez, 2008). This manages to consider both the cognitive (comparison between expectations and outcomes) and affective (feeling of pleasure experienced) aspects of customer satisfaction (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schroder, 2002; Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003). It is more interesting, however, to look at satisfaction with the community as an overall rating of the history of the relationship between the individual and the community, and not only as the consequence of a specific interaction (Casaló et al., 2011a). Thus, with each new interaction, the individual's perception will be based on more information, which will decide their satisfaction in a specific moment (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008a).

De Valck, Langerak, Verhoef, and Verlegh (2007) have divided satisfaction of members of virtual communities centered on a common interest, which would include brand communities, into four types: (a) satisfaction with member-to-member interactions; (b) satisfaction with the interaction between the organizer and the members; (c) satisfaction with the interaction between the organizer and the community; and (d) satisfaction with the site of the community. They have also shown that satisfaction with the interactions between members, between the

organization and the members and with the site of the community can increase how often the virtual community is visited.

When examining other variables, many studies have confirmed the following: there is a positive correlation between satisfaction and intent to participate in a virtual community (e.g., Casaló et al., 2010d, 2011a); there is a positive correlation between satisfaction with and loyalty to a brand and its community (Rood & Bruckman, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2013); there is a positive correlation between satisfaction with the community and trust in it (e.g., Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Bloemer et al., 2002; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006); also satisfaction with a virtual brand community could have a direct effect on members' intentions to leave positive comments about the brand and on their intention to recommend it to other users (Wirtz et al., 2013).

10.3.3 Trust in the Community

Consumer trust in the brand community is one of the main consequences of the engagement with the community (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013); it is also an important factor that drives participation in the community (Casaló et al., 2008a).

In general, from the perspective of marketing, trust has been seen as an essential factor for developing long-term relationships with customers; therefore, building trust is the main goal of companies with virtual brand communities (for example, Anderson & Narus, 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Building trust is even more important in the field of virtual communities, as consumers sense a greater risk in online relationships (Harris & Goode, 2004); this is mostly due to the absence of face-to-face contact and the lack of guarantee that the other members will act as expected (Casaló et al., 2008a). Thus, trust could be considered a key element to reducing uncertainty around relationships between the individual and the members of the community (Mitchell, 1999; Ridings et al., 2002). Therefore, it is important to understand exactly what trust is, how it is developed and its consequences with regards to consumer intentions and behavior in the online setting (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005).

Trust refers to one party of a relationship's disposition to believe the other party will not take advantage of them (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003). More specifically, trust in a brand could be defined as consumer's disposition to believe in the brand's ability to meet its objectives (Marzocchi et al., 2013, p. 96).

Generally, trust has been looked at from two different perspectives: behavioral and cognitive (Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer, & Kumar, 1996; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Siguaw, Simpson, & Baker, 1998). From the behavioral point of view, trust has been thought of as the disposition to or willingness to have faith in the other party of the relationship (Geyskens et al., 1996; Siguaw et al., 1998). From the cognitive perspective—the most utilized in literature—trust is related to specific

beliefs or convictions (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Coulter & Coulter, 2002; Doney & Cannon, 1997). From this viewpoint, it has traditionally been established that trust could be divided into three types of beliefs (e.g., Casaló et al., 2007; Leimeister, Ebner, & Krcmar, 2005; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Porter & Donthu, 2008; Ridings et al., 2002; Smith & Barclay, 1997):

- **Competence:** one party's perception about the other's knowledge and capability to develop the relationship and satisfy the first's needs (Coulter & Coulter, 2002).
- **Honesty or integrity:** one's conviction that the other party will keep their word, make good on their promises, be sincere, and, therefore, behave acceptably (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998).
- **Benevolence:** one party's goodwill; in other words, one party's belief that their wellbeing matters to the other party, which will result in their making an effort to achieve their mutual goals and not acting maliciously (Casaló et al., 2007; Spaulding, 2010).

In the context of online brand communities, authors such as Ridings et al. (2002) have come to the conclusion that from the cognitive perspective, trust is made up of two elements: competence and a combination of benevolence and integrity. This is due to the fact that integrity and benevolence elicit the same behaviors from community members: they establish conversations. Competence, from their perspective, is the ability of the members to achieve something beneficial to the community.

Other authors have suggested that a company's benevolent actions towards customers cause said customers to feel a moral obligation to restore equality in the relationship with the organizations (see De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Morales, 2005). This is due to a general moral code that obliges people to compensate others for the resources provided to them (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Therefore, Porter and Donthu (2008) have pointed out that benevolence-based trust incentivizes the consumer, a member of the community, to participate in the development of new products and to be loyal, leading to a moral obligation to the company, which results in acts of reciprocity. It also promotes exchanging resources, voluntary collaboration and cooperation between the parties (Chan & Li, 2010). In fact, it is necessary to specify that trust is also positively correlated with customer loyalty (Casaló et al., 2007; Marzocchi et al., 2013; Matzler et al., 2011; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002) and with commitment to a brand community (Hur et al., 2011).

Moreover, Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner (1998) believe that the barriers to building trust, caused by the fact that a company is sponsoring a specific virtual community, can be combated through the perception of the company's integrity and good judgment. Porter and Donthu (2008) have noticed that when trust is based on the sponsoring organization's integrity and good judgment, clients are more likely to take risks like sharing personal information with the company. In this way, the existence of a positive connection between trust and consumer intention to provide

information to the company in the setting of a virtual community has been shown (Ridings et al., 2002). Additionally, Marzocchi et al. (2013) believe that trust is positively correlated with resistance to providing negative information or leaving negative comments.

On the other hand, the literature has traditionally relied on the “antecedents-trust-results” model for analyzing trust (Shankar, Urban, & Sultan, 2002). There are various stances on what companies should keep in mind when attempting to develop confidence in their brand communities.

Firstly, an important antecedent to trust is familiarity. In general, familiarity with something (e.g., product, service, website, community, etc.) could be defined as “the number of product-related experiences that have been accumulated by the consumer” (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987, p. 411). It therefore refers to the direct or indirect knowledge that an individual has about something (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Familiarity with an online brand community mainly arises through the interactions of an individual with other members (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010, p. 349).

Familiarity’s positive effects on trust in the website (Bhattacharjee, 2002; Gefen, 2000; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003), and in the other community members (Lu et al., 2010) have been observed. This is due to familiarity serving as a subjective element that reduces uncertainty and simplifies relationships (Gefen, 2000). Also it can have a positive influence on an individual’s loyalty to the website, as it reduces the efforts necessary for making decisions, increases the individual’s self-trust and increases the degree of trust felt towards the website (Flavián & Guinalú, 2007).

Institution-based trust can be divided into two types of elements: situational normality and structural guarantees (Lu et al., 2010). Situational normality can be understood as the conviction that a particular circumstance is normal or common, resulting in the belief that if the situation is handled correctly, it will result in success (Baier, 1986). Therefore, if brand community administrators want consumers to feel secure with the community, they need to establish and maintain an environment similar to whatever is considered normal in each situation. The term “structural guarantees” refers to the belief that regulations and guarantees within a specific field will likely result in success (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998). Thus, to encourage user trust, a virtual brand community should have its own rules and guarantees about privacy and security (Lu et al., 2010).

As for personality-based (also known as dispositional) trust, authors such as Gefen et al. (2003) have noted the importance of the consumer’s general tendency to trust. This term could be defined as one’s predisposition to believe in others. The presence of this disposition has been shown to have a positive effect when the user does not know the community’s administrator (Mayer et al., 1995). It can also positively affect the degree to which an individual trusts the other members of an online brand community (Ridings et al., 2002).

Finally, perceived similarities (interests, values, demographics), which are considered antecedents to trust, are understood to be keystones in the process of building trust in someone (Lu et al., 2010). McKnight et al. (1998) have suggested that people who meet one another within a community tend to perceive other

members positively, thereby increasing their trust in the community. This is due to the fact that online brand communities are places where people with similar interests and objectives congregate, which, in turn, facilitates building trusting relationships with others.

Other important antecedents of trust in an online setting are: brand reputation (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013) and the design of the brand community's website (Dwyer, 2007; Schlosser, White, & Lloyd, 2006).

In conclusion, a positive correlation between interaction and trust in virtual brand communities has been verified (Lu et al., 2010; Wang & Chen, 2012).

10.3.4 Loyalty to the Community

Various studies have analyzed the elements that can influence loyalty such as quality of service, quality of information, corporate image, WOM between consumers, etc. (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Devaraj, Matta, & Conlon, 2001; Dwyer, 2007). Holland and Baker (2001) have recognized the existence of diverse mechanisms that companies employ to try to increase attachment to a website or community and thereby increase brand loyalty. From among them, they have highlighted the creation of relevant, plentiful and valuable content, allowing the user to personalize the site and the incorporation of games. However, as Jang et al. (2008) have noted, there is some research that has linked brand loyalty with increased participation in virtual communities. These authors have shown that in consumer-initiated online brand communities, members tend to feel a strong commitment to the community, which, in turn, leads to the creation of loyalty to the brand or its products.

On the other hand, Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalú (2010b) have shown that brand loyalty is positively influenced by participation in brand communities and affective engagement with the brand. Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig (2007) have shown that the important experiences that consumers have in a community can strengthen the connection between a person and a brand community, thereby creating a strong sense of loyalty to the brand. Marzocchi, Morandin and Bergami (2013) have done research into the roles that identification with the brand and identification with the community play on creating loyalty to a brand community. They have shown that both identification with a brand and identification with a community have a positive influence on brand loyalty, with the effect of the latter being more pronounced than of the former.

10.3.5 Commitment with the Community

Another of the noteworthy results of creating engagement in virtual brand communities is the consumer's commitment to the brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek,

2011b; Sashi, 2012) and/or the community (Brodie et al., 2013; Chan & Li, 2010; Kuo & Feng, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013).

Wirtz et al. (2013) believe that, due to the ease of exchanging information in the online world, member commitment with a virtual community is fundamental if the community is going to survive long-term. In general terms, brand commitment can be defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992, p. 316) or as “a tendency to resist change” (Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999, p. 337). Therefore, it reflects an inherent quality of the consumer and does not necessarily directly depend on the consumer’s feelings about a community (Albert et al., 2012).

Customer commitment is a psychological process that involves cognitive, affective and emotional components (Bowden, 2009; Fullerton, 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001b). From a cognitive point of view, commitment, also known as calculative commitment (Sashi, 2012), is based on economic considerations like costs of change, lack of alternatives, etc. instead of affective considerations. Affective commitment, however, is based on emotional elements of the relationship, such as shared values or sense of identification (Albert et al., 2012; Casaló et al., 2010b; Evanschitzky et al., 2006; Geyskens et al., 1996).

Commitment to a virtual community occurs when its members see value in maintaining a relationship with the community (Jang et al., 2008, p. 62). Thus, members’ degree of commitment could help predict the real behaviors of the members of the online community—behaviors such as resolving the problems of others or participating in the community. Therefore, commitment is an important part of creating loyalty (Andersen, 2005; Casaló et al., 2010b; Lin, 2010) and responsibility (Chan & Li, 2010), strengthening the community (Cova & Pace, 2006) and generating positive WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001b; Tuskej et al., 2011). Hur et al. (2011) have shown that commitment to a brand community influences positive WOM more than it influences other loyalty-related behaviors that customers exhibit towards the brand or community, like making constructive criticisms. Furthermore, commitment to an online community will have a positive effect on consumers’ intentions to seek information within the community regarding shopping decisions (Park & Cho, 2012).

Members’ commitment to a brand community could also incentivize commitment and loyalty to the brand itself (Hur et al., 2011; Jang et al., 2008; Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008; Zhou et al., 2012). Regarding this point, authors like Hur et al. (2011) have pointed out that commitment to a brand community influences some attitudes towards the community like affect or trust, and also affects loyalty to the brand. Nonetheless, Sánchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluña (2010) have pointed out that only affective commitment successfully establishes lasting relationships with the virtual community, given that calculative commitment only creates false loyalty behaviors.

Accordingly, to successfully get members to commit to an online brand community, and therefore, their membership in the community, it is necessary to focus on aspects such as: quality of service, perceived value and consumer satisfaction (Grönroos, 1990; Shemwell, Yavas, & Bilgin, 1998); the community organizer’s

enthusiasm, offline relationships and the ability to create an agreeable space (Koh & Kim, 2003, 2004; Yoo, Suh, & Lee, 2002); community support between members, value of the community, contributions of the participants and freedom of expression (Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008).

However, companies will not be able to control members' activity in some types of online brand communities, nor will they be able to generate commitment if consumers feel intimidated by the organization. Thus, members are more likely to commit to online brand communities that are initiated or sponsored by other consumers, instead of by the company (Jang et al., 2008).

10.4 Other Factors That Influence Members' Engagement with a Virtual Brand Community

10.4.1 Social Norms

A company's success in a virtual community will be tied to their ability to interact with the community. Thus, it is of paramount importance to pay attention to the values and norms that unite the group and that comprise its social contract.

Spaulding (2010) has pointed out that users who do not understand the finer points of a group's social norms will be far more tempted to leave the community, or even be excluded from it. Therefore, social contracts represent another important factor in retaining consumers in a specific online brand community. Generally social norms correspond to what an individual believes that the people who are important to him or her would do in a specific situation (Gerow, Galluch, & Thatcher, 2010). This is the basis for the subjective norms studied in the Theory of Planned Behavior (see Sect. 9.2.3); this theory posits that within any group, members influence (or socially pressure) one another. When a member's beliefs are out of line with the group's, he or she will have to cave to group pressure and conform to the norms even if he or she does not agree with them; the end result will be lessened integration into the group (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Gabisch, 2011).

Accordingly, social norms affect individuals' perceptions and behaviors, which are elements that influence their engagement with and loyal behavior towards a virtual community (Lin, 2010; Wang & Chen, 2012). Therefore, these norms affect users' intentions to search for information in the online community itself (Park & Cho, 2012).

10.4.2 Usability and Aesthetics

The usability and aesthetics of the website where the group resides are also important factors for recruiting and retaining virtual brand community members (Wang et al., 2002).

Visual aesthetic refers to the “extent to which a user believes a virtual community to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye” (Sánchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010, p. 173). Community members’ first impression of the visual aesthetic will influence their judgments about the site and its value (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that, if consumers find the virtual community’s appearance agreeable, their excitement and feelings about the website will improve incrementally. This is often a decisive factor when community members are forming opinions and when they are deciding whether to carry out commercial transactions (Browne et al., 2004). Moreover, researchers have demonstrated that favorable feelings stemming from the visual aesthetics of a group improve consumer satisfaction (Isen & Reeve, 2005).

In the context of virtual communities, usability is contextualized as the “ease with which the customer is able to learn to use the system and memorize its basic routine operations” (Sánchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010, p. 173). In addition to being a determining factor of its host website’s quality (Cristóbal, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2007), its credibility and interpersonal trust within the community (Hung, Li, & Tse, 2011), a virtual community’s usability is positively correlated with customer satisfaction; it also influences the sense of community, efficiency, efficacy and satisfaction of the individuals that belong to an online community (De Souza & Preece, 2004). In Table 10.1 some interesting effects of online communities’ usability on other variables are detailed.

We will now conclude with various points about the antecedents of usability in virtual communities. Some noteworthy features are: the number of errors, productivity and user satisfaction (Preece, 2001), the type of support offered to help information pass between users, the network’s capacity, the connection of the network used to access the community, the navigational structure of the site and the presentation of information (De Souza & Preece, 2004), good technical support (Johnson, 2001); controlling and organizing the structure of information on the community’s site, and improving user access to information (Hung et al., 2011).

Table 10.1 Effects of usability of brand communities on other variables

Variables	Types of impact
<i>Sense of community</i>	– How participants communicate with one another
	– Types of member reactions
	– The prevalent behavior in the community
<i>Efficiency</i>	The ease and speed with which operation tasks with other members can be completed
<i>Efficacy</i>	Positive results from participants’ activities
<i>Satisfaction</i>	The type of feeling experienced by the individuals that belong to a virtual community

Source: Own elaboration based on De Souza and Preece (2004)

10.4.3 Entertainment

The degree to which a community is entertaining is also important for recruitment and, most importantly, retaining brand community users (Cheung et al., 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011). For example, followers of a brand tend to exhibit more positive behaviors in entertaining brand communities compared with non-entertaining ones (De Vries, Gensler, & LeeFlang, 2012). Furthermore, entertaining experiences in an online community will hopefully have a positive impact in building trusting relationships between participants in a community (Yang, 2010). Okazaki, Rubio, and Campo (2012) have observed that the entertaining nature of social networks has been an essential element for creating the strong bonds within those communities.

Entertainment, in short, can draw consumers in to use, create or make contributions to the online content that are related to a brand (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011); furthermore, it can incentivize returning to the website (Raney, Arpan, Pashupati, & Brill, 2003).

10.4.4 Quality

The likelihood that a company will succeed on the Internet is greater if their website is high quality (see, Rodgers, Negash, & Suk, 2005). It is important, therefore, that organizations identify and understand which elements and features lead to lasting participation in virtual communities.

Specific elements of quality can be decisive factors in whether or not people use virtual platforms (Koh & Kim, 2004; Preece, 2001; Yoo et al., 2002). According to Delone and McLean (2003) and Lin's (2007) model, the following are the dimensions of quality:

- **Quality of information:** is the quality of information provided by the website (integrity, how up-to-date the information is, presentation, etc.) (e.g., Nelson, Todd, & Wixom, 2005). The administrators of a virtual community must categorize information according to the needs of the community's members (Zhou, Wu, Zhang, & Xu, 2013; Zhou, Zhang, & Zimmermann, 2013). By virtue of being a social network in which interactions are not face-to-face, this factor is considered essential to the sustainability of a virtual community. Furthermore, providing high-quality content can positively influence the customers' perception about the community's sponsor (Porter & Donthu, 2008) and its credibility (Hung et al., 2011).
- **Quality of the system:** is the functionality of a specific website (reliability and flexibility of the system, ease of access, response time and usability). This dimension is fundamental to virtual communities, given that many members will not use the website if they have issues with accessing, navigating or maintaining a connection to the site (Yoo et al., 2002).

- **Quality of service:** is the support provided by the website (guarantee, empathy and sensitivity). In virtual communities, without face-to-face interactions, the support offered by the service provider is essential. Therefore, this factor will improve the community's usability and member loyalty (Kuo, 2003).

Additionally, we would be remiss not to mention that some authors associate the quality of a virtual community with building relationships of quality (Sánchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010); in other words, the community's quality helps an individual meet their needs.

Finally, the consumers' perception of the quality offered by an online brand community to which they belong can be a deciding factor in the consumer's satisfaction with and faith placed in the community (Elliot, Li, & Choi, 2013).

10.4.5 Recommendations

Recommendations made by informed individuals or by reference groups to people making purchasing decisions are also essential for recruiting individuals to online brand communities.

An individual's reference group is composed of "all the groups that have a direct (face-to-face) or indirect influence on their attitudes or behaviors." They can influence people in three distinct ways (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 185):

- By introducing the individual to behaviors and lifestyles with which he or she was previously unaware.
- By altering how the person sees themselves in terms of attitude and general self-concept.
- By exercising influence over what products and brands they choose.

Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) have divided traditional and virtual reference groups into three groups. While participation in virtual reference groups is voluntary, membership in traditional reference groups can, at times, be an obligation based on where one was born or lives. Therefore, De Valck et al. (2009) believe that virtual communities could have a larger effect on the behavior of individuals than on the behavior of traditional reference groups. These authors have focused on investigating the extent to which members' characteristics and the particulars of the interactions in the virtual community are related to the virtual community's influence on the consumer's decision-making process. They concluded that a community's ability to influence is associated with some of its members' characteristics (e.g., their degree of engagement) and with users' behaviors in their interactions with the community (e.g. how often they visit). Some of the consumers' other characteristics will also affect how influential the community is, such as their age and their level of education. Finally, they concluded that belonging to a virtual community could affect each of the phases of the process of deciding to purchase, although its effect will be most pronounced at the information-seeking stage.

While searching for information, consumers are likely to visit communities that others have recommended to them. (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2011b). Brown et al. (2007) have pointed out that electronic WOM has become an important component of consumer interactions in virtual communities. Specifically, it is a communication tool that effectively influences consumers' habits, behaviors and choices (Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006). On the other hand, it is also an ideal tool that consumers use to express themselves and to communicate with other people (Woisetschläger et al., 2008). As has been shown to be the case for traditional WOM, eWOM carried out on virtual platforms can affect both the phases leading up to a purchase and the post-purchase phases (Brown et al., 2007; Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012). In summation, eWOM can produce significant effects, which can occur both outside and within virtual brand communities (Brodie et al., 2013). This explains the huge interest that marketing academics and practitioners have in studying the eWOM phenomenon in the context of online communities (Brown et al., 2007). For a more in-depth discussion, see Sect. 5.4.2.

Chapter 11

Value Creation in Virtual Brand Communities

The evolution of the Social Web has opened up a world of opportunities for both brands as well as for the consumers themselves. Virtual brand communities, which are increasingly used as tools for value creation by users and organizations alike, are a perfect example of this type of opportunity.

Many companies have opted to create or integrate themselves into brand communities in order to establish long-term relationships with customers. These communities, therefore, are especially pertinent to their online strategies, both in terms of how they interact with customers and how customers interact with one another. Thus, online communities are now attractive tools for businesses, as they can be used as platforms for the co-creation of products and experiences between companies and consumers; on these platforms, customers truly become partners of brands. Furthermore, communities can provide important benefits and opportunities on behalf of companies such as increasing customer loyalty, lowering marketing costs or developing new products.

The above notwithstanding, company participation in online brand communities is not without its risks and inconveniences; e.g., the rejection of the brand's marketing efforts through negative comments, which could cause damage to the brand's image and reputation or even promote their competitors. In any event, brands must develop strategies to take advantage of and amplify the benefits that communities offer, while minimizing and appropriately managing the inconveniences and threats that will also emerge.

Throughout this chapter we will analyze the potential for value-creation offered by online brand communities to businesses and will discuss the relevant benefits and potential drawbacks. We will explain the current role that consumers play in these communities, paying special attention to their participation in the processes of value-co-creation with brands and prosumers.

11.1 Introduction

Currently, many companies are using the power of the Social Web's tools to benefit from the valuable ideas put forth by their customers (Wu & Fang, 2010), trying to build the brand beyond the organization (Ind & Coates, 2013). To this end, they are providing tools through which consumers can relate and interact with one another (Fisher & Smith, 2011). This is the case for online brand communities, which are being used with increasing regularity as tools for the co-creation of value (Porter, 2004).

These communities can be conceptualized as groups of online customers that collectively co-produce and consume content through the exchange of intangible resources (information, socio-emotional support, etc.) (Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007).

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) note that brand communities conform to the customer-brand-customer triad model; thus, they recognize the fact that brands are social objectives, built through active collaboration with consumers. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) developed a nuanced version of this model by highlighting how the existence and significance of these communities are tied to the customer's experience and not to the consumer's experience with the brand.

Most studies have analyzed how virtual communities can provide value to customers, nearly neglecting how organizations use them to gain value for themselves (e.g., Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006) or to manage their own brands (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). An example would be Seraj (2012), who studied how to create value in virtual communities based on data obtained from an aviation-centered virtual community. He suggested that, in order to explain the value-creation process in this type of setting, it is necessary to analyze netnographic results, co-creation, interactivity and the community's culture. By studying this data, he came to the conclusion that community participation leads to three types of value for the community's members, which exist simultaneously:

- *Intellectual value*: emerges through the possibility of users and professionals co-creating knowledge.
- *Social value*: is produced through the interactivity provided by the platform where the community is located. This characteristic makes the existence of strong social ties between members possible, thereby increasing levels of commitment and the number of loyal users. This value helps increase intellectual value, given that it stimulates the systems of co-creation.
- *Cultural value*: is established through the community's dominant culture (common values, rules, norms, etc.) and their self-regulation. This level is affected by the previous two categories, given that cultural norms are created through co-creation and member interaction (Dholakia et al., 2004).

Furthermore, Seraj (2012) identified seven fundamental social roles that could appear in online communities to encourage long term value-creation: (see Table 11.1)

Table 11.1 Social roles in online communities and the types of value they encourage

Category	Characteristics	Type
Seeker	Seek information and collaborate with other community members. Normally, they are the ones that keep conversations going by asking questions	Intellectual value
Educator	Are interested in sharing their knowledge. They are essential to the co-creation of content	Intellectual value and social value
Challenger	Question the information provided by other members. They also prevent any one force from dominating the community and stimulate creativity within it. They work with the educators	Intellectual value and social value
Governor	Monitor the quality of other members' content and enforce the communities' rules, participating in conversations if it is necessary to cut off possible threats to the community as a whole	Cultural value
Appraiser	Increase the motivation of the community through recognition of other members' achievements, thereby incentivizing involvement and creativity	Cultural value
Player	Incentivize entertainment in the community, through entertaining content, questions, etc.	Social value
Innovator	Share new ideas for creating content, or novel/more emotional ways of interacting	Social value

Source: Own elaboration based on Seraj (2012)

Healy and McDonagh (2013) have proposed seven co-creative roles that can co-exist in a cultural community of online consumers:

- *Voice*: users that respond cognitively and emotionally to organizations' actions. This type of user should be managed to encourage positive voices and reduce negative ones.
- *Loyalty*: members that feel a special affinity with the community or the brand. It is of utmost importance to understand such consumers' motives for loyalty in order to incentivize and exploit them. It is, therefore, interesting that organizations differentiate between community loyalty and brand loyalty, as well as the relationship between the two concepts; these topics were previously dealt with in Chap. 10.
- *Exit*: consumers that end their relationship with a brand or give up their membership to a community. In this case, organizations must try to understand the reasons why users terminate their relationships with the community, so that they can try to solve them.
- *Twist*: users that use the community's products and applications in different ways than how the brand had envisioned they would be used. When the new use is positive, companies can incentivize this type of behavior, exploiting it as a source of innovation. On the other hand, if the new use is negative, organizations should try to understand the impulse that led the consumer to act in such a way.

- *Entry*: consumers that support a community or buy a series of products for the express purpose of being a part of a specific culture or market. Organizations should determine the characteristics of the consumers who do this so that they can adopt appropriate strategies.
- *Re-entry*: users that return to a community after having reconciled with the brand. The interesting thing about these consumers is how they can help companies understand which problem-fix motivated the customer to return to the community.
- *Non-entry*: consumers that do not belong to a community or do not buy the offered products either because they do not want to or because of barriers to entry. In this case, it is of paramount importance to identify the barriers to entry in order to correct them.

Additionally, Cova and White (2010) have pointed out that the success of a brand community is a consequence of its specific value or the linking value that it provides to its members. This type of value emerges through collaborator participation between consumers and producers, and is related to the value that the brand and its products have in creating, developing and maintaining the interpersonal relationships among consumers (p. 258). Therefore, companies are growing increasingly interested in generating this type of value through virtual brand communities, where collaboration and participation of consumers is paramount. In the end, the consumers are the ones that create linking value¹; they connect this value to the brand, thereby increasing its value.

Another way of looking at this was devised by Gyrd-Jones and Kornum (2013), who used the concept of stakeholders in place of customers. They highlighted the important role that stakeholders play in a specific brand and in its processes of co-creation in online eco-systems, like virtual brand communities. Thus, they believe that brands are created and consumed by stakeholders, which increase the value and identity of the brand. From this point of view, they have shown that, based on the LEGO brand, how well the processes of co-creation turn out depends on cultural complementarity and value. Therefore, they differentiate between values that form the brand's nucleus and are non-negotiable (e.g. a logo), and other more peripheral features that are created by interactions between the company and the different stakeholders (e.g. creation of new products); all of these fall under the umbrella of co-creation strategies for brands. This allows for, in addition to fundamental value, enough flexibility to interact with the market, always respecting the cultural identities of the different stakeholders. Nevertheless, there have been few studies on the general process of value co-creation in brand communities, either offline or online. Among the studies centered on the online context, one developed by Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) stands out. They proposed twelve practices of value-creation that are common to most brand communities, which are classified into four topics: social networking, community engagement, brand use and

¹ Linking value will be affected by affective value and cultural value, which will also be provided by communities of consumers (Cova & White, 2010).

impression management. Furthermore, they have pointed out that the end results of these practices are acquiring knowledge, awarding cultural capital to the participants, creating a place to exchange information, producing consumption opportunities and, finally, creating value.

Zwass (2010) has noted that virtual brand communities co-create value differently, for example: users, instead of the brands, are in charge of creating content; they also create spaces where leaders and users can interact. He also highlighted these communities' role in creating commitment between members and the brand, which in turn could lead to collaborating on the development of new products for the brand.

Finally, Porter and Donthu (2008) noted that, to create a true source of value in virtual communities, companies, in addition to incentivizing interaction between members, must offer high quality content and encourage member engagement. Another key element to creating value is encouraging users to interact positively and proactively in the community. To achieve this, companies can use tutorials, advance access to new products or services, or exclusive programs and applications (Noble, Noble, & Adjei, 2012).

11.2 Implications of Value Creation in Virtual Brand Communities for Companies

11.2.1 Benefits of Virtual Brand Communities for Companies

The benefits that an organization can obtain from integration into a virtual brand community are various (McAlexander et al., 2002). Moreover, they depend on the company's unique characteristics and the priority that the activity is awarded within the community (Spaulding, 2010). Generally, according to multiple authors (e.g., Flavián & Guinalú, 2004, 2005; Noble et al., 2012; Porter, 2004; Tsai & Pai, 2012), the use of virtual communities can create the following benefits for businesses:

Facilitating creation of a brand and its development. Online communities are useful to companies for communicating with customers as well as the general population (Flavián & Guinalú, 2004). In fact, brand communities can support the building of brands and incentivize those responsible for the brand to endorse the communities as a medium for creating and sharing the brand's meaning (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). These communities strengthen brand recognition and customer loyalty and can improve the perception of the products' quality (e.g., Andersen, 2005; Kardaras, Karakostas, & Papatthanassiou, 2003; McWilliam, 2000; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002; Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007).

Allowing companies to implement relationship-marketing strategies and increase their customer loyalty. Currently, online brand communities represent a

marketing tool effective at building and developing brand-consumer relationships (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010). They make it possible to establish strong and lasting affective bonds between consumers and companies (Andersen, 2005; Barnatt, 1998; Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnnavolu, 2002; Tsai & Pai, 2012), as they represent a meeting point for the organization's customers (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005). Virtual communities are effective, allowing geographically disperse people who share common interests to gather on a platform that favors exchanging ideas about multiple products or brands (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009). Therefore, the strong bonds that are created between community members, as well as between community members and the company, establish a fertile ground for the eventual success of relationship marketing strategies (Flavián & Guinalú, 2004; Kim & Jung, 2007; Muñiz & Schau, 2011).

These communities allow organizations to achieve greater control and contact with their customers (Kozinets, 2002). This allows for increased security, satisfaction, trust, consumer engagement with the brand (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; Tsai & Pai, 2012), and, in the end, customer loyalty (Andersen, 2005; Bughin & Zeisser, 2001; Farquhar & Rowley, 2006; Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008; Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2004; Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Porter, 2004; Rood & Bruckman, 2009).

Furthermore, the customer conversion rate of virtual brand communities was much greater than that of other commercial options like web portals or content providers (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010). Some loyal customers will even invest in the brand with long-term action, given that, because of feeling emotionally integrated in the community, they are betting on its success and well being (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Improving market segmentation. Virtual brand communities provide benefits related to appropriate market segmentation, given that they are directed to very specific audiences (e.g., Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; Porter, 2004).

Providing an additional source of information and a communication channel. Online communities have grown to be important sources of information that help organizations make strategic decisions (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005), and to better understand their consumers' opinions (Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007). Also, they serve as efficacious channels of communication for exchanging valuable information between participants (Laroche et al., 2012) through the use of various tools simultaneously (McWilliam, 2000).

Virtual communities can serve as sources for access to and acquisition of knowledge (Kim, Song & Jones, 2011). This knowledge is a highly valuable resource to companies trying to capture competitive advantages, given that they constitute intangible aspects that are difficult for competitors to imitate (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Hau & Kim, 2011; Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006). Moreover, these tools make exchanging information between geographically disperse parties possible (Tickle, Adebajo, & Michaelides, 2011), and they help increase organizations' speed at synthesizing and filtering information (Kane, Fichman, Gallagher, &

Glaser, 2009). Additionally, they allow for quick responses to queries or requests for information (Tsai & Pai, 2012). It has been proven that members who are involved in the community feel motivated to provide information to companies (McAlexander et al., 2002). The information provides brands with an interesting viewpoint of the consumers that use their products and their expectations, impressions and feelings about their experiences with the brand (Rood & Bruckman, 2009; Spaulding, 2010; Tsai & Pai, 2012).

On the other hand, the advance of these platforms has made it possible to improve the activities between professionals, through, for example, making it easier to develop dialogues across various levels of conventional distribution channels (Andersen, 2005).

Reducing marketing costs. Increased communication between community members and the community, as well as increasing the community's potential to promote new products, could eliminate the need for massive marketing campaigns (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Flavián & Guinalú, 2004; Wang, Ting, & Wu, 2012).

Therefore, the WOM communication that transpires between members of a community could be so effective as to become an essential source of information about the company's products (Wang et al., 2002). Even members resolving other members' problems could lead to lower customer service costs in terms of, for example, employees or time (Noble et al., 2012; Rood & Bruckman, 2009; Tsai & Pai, 2012; Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007).

Finally, the existence of communities could facilitate the realization of market research (Kozinets, 2002; Porter & Donthu, 2008), given that they allow the evaluation of eventual strategy changes by allowing companies to consult community members. Also, they facilitate the extraction of valuable information about the quality of products, the use of websites or the ease of use and the search for the application (Harris & Rae, 2009).

Creating a direct source of income. This could be achieved by allowing the insertion of ads by other companies about their products, as long as the community members give their blessing (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). In fact, many virtual communities allow for sponsored ads (Dholakia et al., 2004). Another way of generating income would be charging members for the use of specific services (Wang et al., 2002). However, we think that companies' interest in online brand communities, in particular when they are sponsored by brands, lies in improving and developing their brand and their products. Therefore, we believe that the long-term plan of offering free membership to the community with the hopes of profiting off of members in the future, through their collaboration with the brand, as will be discussed in the following point, is preferable.

Facilitating the development and launch of new products. Virtual communities serve as sources of information relevant to decision-making strategies (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). Therefore, there are more and more companies employing these tools to take advantage of the wealth of consumer ideas, applying them to the development of new products and the satisfaction their own needs (Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Nishikawa, Schreier, & Ogawa, 2013; Rood & Bruckman, 2009; Wu & Fang, 2010). Thus, the community

can be a place where new product ideas or thoughts on how to modify existing products are conceived (Hau & Kim, 2011). This makes communities into hot spots for the innovation of products (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007; Jeppesen & Molin, 2003; Sasinovskaya & Anderson, 2011; Tsai & Pai, 2012). This is closely related to the phenomenon known as open innovation, meaning, identifying and incorporating new ideas about the innovation of products and processes beyond the limits of the company (Chesbrough, 2006; Hau & Kim, 2011). Gruner, Homburg, and Lukas (2014) have recommended the technique of promoting open platforms, for cases in which companies wish to come up with completely innovative products. On the other hand, if the company wishes to make new products with incremental innovations, it would be more productive to use more restrictive communities.

Additionally, the community can function as a place where beta testing of the products in the early stages of development can occur (Flavián & Guinalú, 2004); it has been shown that user involvement in the first phases of this process can help avoid product failures and can provide new solutions, save time and money for companies (Sasinovskaya & Anderson, 2011).

Increasing sales. Company participation in virtual communities can lead to increased sales (Brown, Tilton, & Woodside, 2002; Noble et al., 2012; Porter & Donthu, 2008); in fact, communities are considered channels for additional sales (Andersen, 2005). Furthermore, organizations can use conversations that occur within the community as opportunities to recommend new products or services to the other community members (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009; Rood & Bruckman, 2009).

Additionally, due to the community members' hand in the development and launch of new products, it is possible that they will more quickly accept the company's new products (Flavián & Guinalú, 2004). Consequently, this makes customers less likely to switch brands, even when similar offers are available. Moreover, they might also be more tolerant of quality problems with products and services (McAlexander et al., 2002). This was demonstrated in a study carried out by Nishikawa et al. (2013), who showed that products created through the incorporation of user ideas, made more profits from real sales than those designed by the company itself.

Increasing the costs associated with changing providers for consumers and creating barriers to entry of the market for new competitors. The advantages provided by virtual communities to their members tend to be so important that it is difficult to find substitutes for them (Kardaras et al., 2003). For example, McAlexander et al. (2002) observed that the efforts brands made in communities significantly elevated the rate of return customers among members, even when competitors were offering better deals.

Facilitating positive WOM. Members involved in virtual communities act as evangelists for the brand, distributing its marketing messages to other communities and other consumers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Porter & Donthu, 2008). It has been shown that users who are part of brand communities come to be more able, competent and productive in the creation of advertising

content for a specific brand, and in their later distribution of said content to other users (Muñiz & Schau, 2011).

Encouraging recruitment of new customers. Users who meet up in a specific community will have more possibilities, due the bonds created, of becoming new customers for the brand. Therefore, communities can be strong platforms for identifying new segments of customers (Sasinovskaya & Anderson, 2011); moreover, users can be influenced by product ads and by the positive influence that other consumers can have on them. It is also important to keep in mind that a user who is part of an online brand community will usually have a positive attitude about the brand or the product (Flavián & Guinalú, 2004). Finally, members of the virtual community can function as marketers for the organizations, recruiting new potential customers that do not belong to the community.

Improving product sales supports and providing services. Some organizations are using virtual brand communities as tools for actions directly or indirectly related to sales activities (Andersen, 2005; Porter, 2004; Walden, 2000).

To achieve all or at least a good portion of the benefits presented above, companies need to understand how users evaluate virtual communities, how they behave in them and how loyal they are to the communities (Kim & Jung, 2007). Furthermore, to get community members to collaborate, and, therefore, build and maintain a successful community, it is not only necessary to have motivated users; they must also be firmly engaged with the company (Rossi, 2011). Therefore, organizations should develop strategies that succeed at attracting consumers to the co-creation of knowledge and the collaborative processes of innovation. For example, to incentivize these types of behaviors, companies in brand communities can do, among other things, the following (Muñiz & Schau, 2011): create a site where users can find one another and share their opinions and ideas; incentivize consumer collaboration in creating brand meaning; provide systems and tools that make it possible to collaborate and personalize the brand in order to meet the users' needs; and promote norms and the possibility of undertaking actions to spread information and content.

Moreover, it would be helpful if brands made their consumers understand that they consider them to be partners; doing this will help improve and maintain relationships with those that show interest and affect for brands (Sung et al., 2010). For example, it has been proven that communities are effective platforms of co-creation when companies seek to aggregate the knowledge of various individuals and establish intrinsic rewards for doing so (Zwass, 2010).

Additionally, it is important to notice that the benefits reaped by companies with virtual communities vary in function of the unique characteristics of each community. Scarpi (2010) concluded that the size of a community is acts as a moderator on the casual relationships between identification with the brand community, the affect for the brand, loyalty to the community, loyalty to the brand and passion for the brand and the community. Therefore, functionality differs greatly between small and large communities; members of smaller communities tend to show more loyalty to the community, due to a greater sense of identification with it. Moreover, in small communities, brand fidelity will ultimately be determined by the type of loyalty the consumer has for the community. In larger communities,

however, affect the brand will determine loyalty for the community. Finally, participants in small communities tend to have greater incentives to frequently participate in WOM. In any case, as Lee, Lee, Taylor, and Lee (2011) points out, companies should also be aware that larger communities do not always equal better performance and increased utility for brands; some communities have huge numbers of members that visit and post very infrequently. Therefore, the important thing is knowing how to maintain active relationships with members.

The above notwithstanding, there are still many companies that remain unaware of the benefits that virtual brand communities could provide them. This slows down the rate at which communities are being integrated into brand strategies for value-co-creation (Cova & Pace, 2006; Cova & White, 2010; Porter & Donthu, 2008; Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut 2008).

11.2.2 Potential Problems and Threats of Virtual Brand Communities for Companies

Despite their benefits, company participation in online brand communities can pose a number of potential problems and threats. From all the limitations that can appear, rejection of the brand's marketing efforts by the community members in the form of rumors or negatives comments is the one most often repeated across the literature. Muñoz and O'Guinn (2001) have noted that trying to control rumors can be a huge inconvenience for organizations that operate in virtual brand communities. Furthermore, negative comments in the community could seriously damage the brand's image (Noble et al., 2012; Shang et al., 2006), and its reputation (Kim & Ko, 2011). In this scenario, however, companies have to act with prudence, given that imposition of normative pressure on dissidents could have negative consequences on the consumers' intention to buy (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Tsai, Huang, & Chiu, 2012).

Noble et al. (2012) proposed a guideline of conduct that organizations should follow when managing negative comments left by members of a brand community. They believe that the company's responses need to vary depending on if the comments are about the main product or complementary features, or if the complaints are realistic or not. Furthermore, and in function of these two conditions, in some cases the brand not intervening could have different effects on sales. The following are advisable practices:

- Negative opinions about the product. These opinions are the more critical ones, so the company should try to control them to impede negative effects on their sales and the ensuing loss of potential customers. These complaints can be:
 - True/real: it is recommendable to undertake some type of promotional action to explain the advantages of the product. For example, companies could push the development of products and include ads directed at the group. Moreover, this communication can increase user satisfaction when applied together with discounts and other incentives.

- Untrue/lies: it is advisable to delegitimize these comments with strong public responses or through private communications. Hopefully, other members of the community will also intervene on behalf of the brand.
- Negative comments about the product’s complementary features. These complaints can frequently be publicly ignored as company intervention in these cases could be received defensively by the community. This type of complaint can be divided into two categories:
 - True/real: it is convenient to use a passive strategy. In other words, no acting immediately but controlling posts about the topic, with the goal of having other participants ignoring the problem.
 - Not true/lies: a correction tactic is recommended. In other words, moderators can lightly clarify or correct the forum, as long as another community member has not already done so. The comment should not be prohibited or eliminated.

Additionally, a brand participating in a virtual community could provide an opportunity for its competitors to spy on its tactics and strategies. Moreover, the competitors could infiltrate the community and act as saboteurs, altering the values and interests of the community (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Another potential inconvenience could reside in the incompatibility of the company’s and the members of the community’s goals. Thus, some members of the community might want to maintain a small group composed of few members, which would be in conflict with recruiting and retention of new consumers for the brand (Cova & Pace, 2006).

Furthermore, there is a chance that communities of consumers could develop a brand as a collective project without expectations of financial competition, which could directly or indirectly compete with the corporate brands already present in the market. This is what Cova and White (2010) have dubbed as an alter-brand community.

An extreme example of what can happen when the negative effects a community produces get out of hand would be anti-brand communities, discussed in the previous chapter; these are built around shared gripes about specific brands or corporate brands (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). As earlier noted, anti-brand communities or websites are places online where users share their negative perception about a specific brand (Bailey, 2004; Harrison-Walker, 2001a; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). Therefore, this type of community can be used as an “anti-brand movement” (Holt, 2002), or in other words, a place to denounce the brand’s activities, exchanging information about it, organizing boycotts, or even coordinating demands (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). They could also be used to create brands that compete with those that the community opposes (Cova & White, 2010).

In Table 11.2 the main potential drawbacks posed by virtual brand communities to companies are summarized.

Table 11.2 Summary of the main potential drawbacks of virtual brand communities for firms

Drawbacks	Related studies (in alphabetic order)
<i>Damage to the brand's image or reputation through rumors</i>	Kim and Ko (2011), Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), Noble et al. (2012), Shang et al. (2006)
<i>Vulnerability to spying from competitors</i>	Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001)
<i>Incompatibility between the company's and the consumers' goals</i>	Cova and Pace (2006)
<i>Conflicts within the community itself</i>	Cova and Pace (2006), Cova and White (2010)
<i>Emergence of virtual anti-brand communities</i>	Bailey (2004), Cova and White (2010), Harrison-Walker (2001a), Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009)

Source: Own elaboration

In short, companies should try to promote their brands through the management of virtual communities, trying to exploit and expand their potential benefits but also dealing with the accompanying inconveniences and limitations that are also associated with the communities.

11.3 Consumers' Role in Virtual Brand Communities: Prosumer and Value Co-creation

11.3.1 Introduction

The co-creation of products and experiences between companies, consumers, providers and other interested parties has now become one of the fundamental pillars of marketing (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010). The consumption of information in the new digital era is intrinsically linked to production (Kozinets et al., 2008); this facet underlies the process of value creation on the Social Web, where consumer participation in the development of brands is always increasing.

In this context, the communication system between the consumer and the company has become horizontal; in other words, consumers are no longer merely passive objects, but active participants that co-create their own products and experiences and are grouped into unique communities (Kotler et al., 2010). They have, therefore, come to play an active role in the process of consumption and value creation (Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Customers have come to be true partners of organizations; many are clearly involved in the processes of value co-creation, providing experiences, feelings and abilities (Cova & White, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Rossi, 2011). They also partake in the co-creation of competitive strategies and processes of innovation (Laroche et al., 2012; Schau et al., 2009). This phenomenon, where people participate not only as simple consumers, but also as producers, has come to be called "prosumption," and the participating individuals are known as "prosumers" (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008;

Seraj, 2012). Normally, a prosumer is an individual that has sufficient knowledge and ability to use relevant tools on a professional level in the co-creation of content (Lenderman & Sánchez, 2008). A prosumer can also be understood as a consumer that is capable of producing products for his own consumption (Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

The transfer of power, traditionally held by vendors, to consumers also affects the brand's meaning (Cova & Pace, 2006); a brand's meaning can now be created and modified in an ascending fashion, in other words, from the bottom up (Fisher & Smith, 2011). Thus, authors like O'Guinn and Muñiz (2009) have suggested that companies no longer control their own brand. Accordingly, customers are the ones that collaborate with the organization to completely co-create marketing programs (Schau et al., 2009). Therefore, the consumers themselves are actively participating in the process of creating brands (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Wu & Fang, 2010). This is the case for virtual brand communities.

11.3.2 Value Co-creation in Virtual Brand Communities

11.3.2.1 Introduction

The social web has made the expansion known as prosumption possible by providing several tools (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Seraj, 2012):

- Wikis: contain articles written by the users on multiple topics.
- Social networks: visual and text information is co-created and shared by the users.
- 3D games: users can create their own avatars.
- Communities: members interact to create content and applications.
- Blogs or microblogs: ideas and opinions are posted that are prosumed both by their authors and by followers.
- Video uploading platforms: video content co-created and provided by different users.

Real examples of this process of co-creation can be seen in open-code programs like Nike's, which allows consumers to create their own designs for basketball shoes (Füller et al., 2007; Seraj, 2012).

Social media all share three common components essential for co-creation: networks, relationships and interactions between brands and consumers (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thus, the user-to-user interaction facilitated by this type of system can afford opportunities to both companies and consumers (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Moreover, most of the time, these opportunities are as important as offline experiences related to the product, given that they can provide the motivation to continue participating with the company (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Accordingly, virtual brand communities are favorable environments for individuals to co-construct their own experiences (Schau et al., 2009; Wu

& Fang, 2010). Moreover, they are ideal spaces for members to find information, actively debate ideas, provide possible solutions and contribute their opinions (Füller et al., 2007; Johnson, Massiah, & Allan, 2013; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Virtual communities created based on an idea, product or entertainment tend to attract innovation-oriented consumers (Marchi, Giachetti, & De Gennaro, 2011). These are the users that are likely to participate in community activities and make important contributions with their comments (Füller et al., 2007). Moreover, they are the users that are most involved in the creative processes (Ind & Coates, 2013). In fact, the simultaneous production and consumption of content by innovators affords the community an environment of co-creation between their participants, which, additionally, incentivizes the collective consumption of the content created by the user. This will be the case as long as the co-created content has the correct structure, meets expectations of quality and is impartial and trustworthy. The process of community members leaving comments also constitutes an important part of a virtual community (Seraj, 2012), as it makes users into vital sources of innovation (Hau & Kim, 2011). Companies can also use comments as elements in their marketing campaigns (Muñiz & Schau, 2011). Even so, their creation and repetition will depend on the type of network into which the community is integrated. Therefore, Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012) have noted that brand-related user-created content occurs more frequently in social networks such as Facebook as compared with other platforms like YouTube or Twitter.

11.3.2.2 Creative Profiles in Communities

Many authors have tried to describe the behavior of consumers in the specific context of virtual brand communities. This is the case of Kim (2000), who arrived at the conclusion that member participation in a community occurs progressively by means of a process known as the “Membership Life Cycle.” In this theory, community members can be classified as:

- Visitors: people that visit the community without having a continued identity within it.
- Novices: new members that need to be introduced in the group and are yet to learn about the community’s functionality. They therefore invest time and effort into becoming a regular user.
- Regulars: users already introduced to the community and that, therefore, regularly participate in it.
- Leaders: members that act as volunteers and offer personal support in the maintenance of interactions between community members.
- Elders: consumers that have been habitually participating in the community for a long time. They are also considered leaders if they share and transmit their knowledge.

Consumers not only provide knowledge; they are also responsible for the creation and development of new products (Wu & Fang, 2010). Many authors

have recognized the collective creativity of consumers in virtual communities is distinct from individual creativity, as it can result in new interpretations and discoveries that a single individual could not have reached on his or her own (Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2011; Kozinets et al., 2008). Furthermore, in these dynamic settings, collective creativity is fostered through WOM and other community members' comments (Kozinets et al., 2008).

Creative individuals tend to operate independently of the company in the context of virtual brand communities (Berthon et al., 2007). Habitually, they are users that enjoy an above average amount of knowledge about the product and that participate in conversations about it, contributing to both resolving problems and to generating new product ideas (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008; Lüthje, 2004; Wu & Fang, 2010); these are highly qualified individuals, capable of creating their own high-quality products (Füller et al., 2007).

Furthermore, innovative members are those that facilitate the spread of new products among other community members; they propose apt technical solutions for moving forward and they help, therefore, the collective to interpret the innovation (Marchi et al., 2011; Sawhney & Prandelli, 2000). Specifically, in virtual brand communities, an innovative user is one who supports the innovation of products and provides ideas in function of the identity of the specific brand, which is fundamental if the ideas are to be accepted by the rest of the members (Marchi et al., 2011; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Therefore, he or she is an individual who is willing to pay a higher price for products on which he or she has collaborated (Franke & Piller, 2004).

Kozinets et al. (2008) studied the collective creativity of virtual communities, focusing on two dimensions: the community's orientation towards collective innovation and how focused the group's innovative contributions are. Focusing on the second dimension, they distinguished between the following types of communities:

- Communities in which small collections of individual contributions are produced naturally or as a result of the natural order of the community's cultural practices are called "swarms." Therefore, they are the type of community most associated with the characteristics of the Social Web, as its consumers are individually involved in the publication of comments or in aggregating information already created by other users. Thus, although the added value of most individual consumer contributions can be low, their aggregated value is very high. Additionally, one could say that applicable and complex solutions occur to a large number of individuals, whose knowledge base differs based on what they have learned while seeking to complete their own goals.
- "Mobs" are communities characterized by having a high concentration of innovative contributions, whose contributions are created for fun and to maintain the community's lifestyle. Therefore, mobs appear around the contributions of specialists that discuss the topics or interests specific to the group; they act as expert sources and create content for consumption by the group through

feedback. Mobs exist in communities with a high concentration of innovative contributions and, therefore, an individualistic orientation.

- “Hives” are communities in which some members contribute greatly to developing innovations in order to launch a particular project or to respond to a specific problem. Self-organization, diligence and the intent to create high-quality products are all very important to this type of community. Their members tend to be very passionate about their work and curious, with an above-average desire to acquire experience and be recognized for it.
- Finally, communities known as “crowds” are characterized by large groups that gather specifically to plan, manage or deal with a specific and well-defined problem or project. They are structures that are organized, concentrated and have a clear goal. The completion of their project or resolution of their problem usually leads to the dissolution of the group.

11.3.2.3 Community Members’ Motivations to Co-create

Another important topic is the users’ disposition to collaborating in virtual brand communities, and, therefore, on value co-creation for the brand through sharing knowledge and innovation. Gyrd-Jones and Kornum (2013) have suggested that it is of fundamental importance to be familiar with consumers’ motivations and preferences in order to involve them in this process. According to Kozinets (1999), the benefits that motivate users to participate in this type of community can be naturally very diverse. In addition to the classic economic benefits, members expect to find personal and social benefits, which will require engagement and interaction with the rest of the community members (Marchi et al., 2011). Reasons for participating in the processes of co-creation are various: seeking legitimacy, self-promotion, recognition from other participants, seeking status, needing social support, having gratifying experiences, feeling pleasure, changing perceptions or needing to maintain a conversation with similar-thinking individuals (Cova & White, 2010; Macaulay et al., 2007; Marchi et al., 2011). Zwass (2010) has added other motivations for co-creation: the altruistic desire to contribute; passion for the specific task; freedom of expression; community norms; competitive spirit; the desire to learn; or self-efficacy. Finally, the exchange of innovative knowledge represents an efficacious means of increasing and strengthening relationships with other community members (Füller et al., 2007; Hau & Kim, 2011).

Nambisan and Baron (2009) believe that users come to participate in the activities and interactions of virtual communities because of the benefits that they can reap from doing so. More specifically, they point to the following benefits as being essential for guaranteeing future customer interaction in the creation of products:

- *Cognitive or learning benefits*: are related to an increased understanding of and greater knowledge about products, their characteristics and the ways in which they are used. Communities collectively create knowledge about products and

their use, which is then perpetually shared through the continual interaction of their members.

- *Social integrative benefits*: refer to the social and relational bonds that are built between participants of brand communities with the passing of time.
- *Personal integrative benefits*: are based in improvements to one's reputation or status and the achievement self-efficacy. Virtual communities are places where demonstrating one's knowledge and abilities to solve problems can result in that increased status and a better reputation both for individuals and for the brand itself.
- *Hedonic benefits*: consist of creating a source of interest that is agreeable, pleasant and that offers experiences that stimulate the mind through interaction with the community.

Therefore, various authors have noted that repeat user participation will be influenced by how involved the customers are with the product, how much they identify with the rest of the community members and the positive or negative feelings that they derive from their interactions with the community.

Finally, we present a brief note about the Franke and Von Hippel's (2003) research into the possible effect of heterogeneity of community members' needs on their innovating activities. They found that community members who are given the possibility to make their own modifications to products are significantly more satisfied than those who do not partake in any type of innovative activity. Therefore, they confirmed that greater user ability corresponds to greater satisfaction by innovation around the product.

Chapter 12

Creating and Developing Virtual Brand Communities: Some Practical Guidelines

As non-traditional social and dynamic tools, virtual brand communities are constantly changing and evolving. This complicates the process of defining the keys to the success of their creation and development. However, there are many factors that organizations should keep in mind; furthermore, there are several stages that virtual brand communities should pass through. In this chapter, the most important general factors and considerations are synthetically analyzed, and the necessary stages for creating and developing a community are presented.

12.1 Success Factors for Creating and Developing Virtual Brand Communities

Simply put, virtual communities attain success when they achieve their objectives (Cothrel & Williams, 1999) or when they meet their members' needs (O'Sullivan, Richardson, & Collins, 2011). More specifically, one could say that a company attains success in an online brand community when they are widely accepted by the other members of that community; this means that the members do not oppose the company's activities, ignore or isolate it, leave the community or speak out against it (Spaulding, 2010). Next we review some relevant contributions to this topic.

Flavián and Guinalú (2005) have pointed out several key factors for successfully developing virtual brand communities, which we will now expand upon:

- Analyzing community members' needs: If insufficient attention is paid to community members' distinct needs, there could be problems for the organization that sponsors a community (Macaulay et al., 2007). Therefore, the community should be created and developed in function of its members' needs instead of the needs of the sponsoring company, advertisers or any other group that does not belong to the community. This is essential to facilitating collaboration between members.

- **Incentivizing self-management:** Whenever self-management is feasible, members should be the ones responsible for creating and distributing content in order to increase their engagement with the community. This situation is more likely in cases where there is a high degree of brand loyalty and knowledge about the product is valued (Noble, Noble, & Adjei, 2012).
- **Minimizing control:** It is necessary to avoid or at least minimize the use of mechanisms of control that influence how members relate with one another or what topics are discussed. However, some norms, guidelines and basic working rules are not a bad idea as long as they respect the unique personality of the community (Cothrel & Williams, 1999). Therefore, organizations should try to act unobtrusively, facilitating personal expressions by the rest of the group members (Cova & Pace, 2006) while allowing for experiences that will convert members into devotees of the brand (O'Sullivan et al., 2011).
- **Using the most convenient technological structure:** The type of technology and the systems of management used on virtual communities are especially important. Their degree of complexity will be determined by the various needs of the community members, although the software's functionality and usability should not be lost (De Souza & Preece, 2004).
- **Specialization of roles:** As noted in previous chapters, in any type of community, different members play different roles. When individuals have a predilection towards participating as experts, providers of information, critics, defenders, etc., it is because they value and want to be part of the community (Cothrel & Williams, 1999, p. 59).
- **Strengthening the sense of community:** The intensity of relationships between community members depends on how much members value group membership. Therefore, community administrators should try to foster sufficiently strong bonds between members so that the system does not destabilize or end altogether. The brand should remain actively engaged with users through repeated interactions (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). The community should be built around highly motivated people who are able and willing to participate in the group. Furthermore, it is important that companies try to improve interactions with their clients not solely online, but also through offline strategies (Lin, 2007). Another essential component is the creation of a brand image with symbolic meaning, clearly defined and based in a story that aids consumers in "recomposing one's social universe" (O'Sullivan et al., 2011, p. 892).

For the case of product-oriented brand communities, Cova and Pace (2006) have noted the following factors for success:

- Inserting personal pages and blogs in the community.
- Understanding that communities are spaces open to member contributions, without advertising and sales, where the producer's marketing strategy should be secondary to the consumers' needs.
- Facilitating the interaction and self-sharing of members, while minimizing intrusion as much as possible.

Tickle, Adebajo, and Michaelides (2011), in the B2B area, have identified four dimensions essential to the development of a successful virtual community: culture, technology, resources and community functionality. Moreover, they have shown that culture is the most important of the four elements, given that it drives member contributions and members' desire to repeatedly participate in the community.

Noble et al. (2012) have noted four basic elements necessary for success in a virtual community:

- *Intervention.* This refers to “the extent to which intervention occurs in appropriate negative posting situations” (p. 478). In this case, the most common situation is official moderators evaluating whether actions need to be taken, basing their decisions on the effects the post will have on the brand and its legitimacy. These moderators can be employees of the company or members that, without financial incentives, decide to defend the brand, becoming “super users” or community leaders. These “super users” can play an active role in correcting information, providing customer service or even rebuffing those who disparage the brand. In function of intervention, other participants will be able to evaluate how an incident was resolved and adjust their perception of the brand company accordingly. Therefore, occasionally, it is recommendable for organizations to leave comment management to other members, or to act when another individual, not economically tied to the company, has already done so.
- *Conversion.* Unsatisfied members should be transformed into brand advocates that act as a positive origin of WOM. Authors believe that companies that make use of a combination of experts and professional moderators can succeed in converting this type of community member. This can be achieved through rapid and proactive responses to complaints, a technical understanding of the facts, by adapting to an individual's unique characteristics and by providing effective solutions.
- *Value creation.* Organizations should focus the community's activity on positively and proactively creating value. Authors have shown that in the more sophisticated brand communities, the community managers tend to dedicate a lot of time to improving and increasing the community's attractiveness and the value provided to members.
- *Harvesting.* This deals with extracting benefits from the virtual community. The creation of an active community that responds appropriately to its members' questions and comments leads to increased engagement with the brand and, therefore, increased sales of the brand's products. Furthermore, it reduces various costs, for example, that of creating new goods or services. In this way, companies can harvest value through proactively helping the community through experts or managers, or encouraging participation in the generation of new product ideas through incentives.

Kane, Fichman, Gallagher, and Glaser (2009) have noted that, to have success in a community, organizations should rely on teams of professionals that identify new participation opportunities and avoid damage to the brand. They have also highlighted that this aspect of community management should combine a series of

marketing tools, such as public relations or the company's own abilities, adapted to this type of technology.

Moreover, there are authors who have studied strategies for converting visitors of online brand communities into members. Zhou, Wu, Zhang, and Xu (2013), through studying Chinese communities, have demonstrated that for companies to convert simple visitors into true community members, it is essential to promote informative and social value. They should incentivize the exchange of online information and encourage a harmonious community for members, thereby promoting social exchanges. However, their strategies must differ based on whether or not the visitor has previously tried the brand that originated the group; visitors who have tried the brand will be motivated to join the community by both informative and social value, while those that have not tried the brand will mainly be attracted by the social value that the community can offer them.

With regards to the previous information, some examples of successful virtual brand communities are Harley-Davidson motorcycles (Harley Owners Group), Apple and Volkswagen (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a).

12.2 General Considerations for the Creation and Development of Virtual Brand Communities

In the current environment, where consumer resistance to marketing strategies is on the rise, the creation and development of brand communities is an interesting alternative for attracting consumers to companies (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). As previously mentioned, brands can participate in online communities in different ways including (Godoy, 2009):

- *Creating brand community spaces within a specific social network.* This possibility entails creating a fan page for the brand, where consumers can discuss their affinity for a company or make comments about it on social networks (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Users that voluntarily follow this type of community tend to be more loyal and committed to the brand, which translates to their being more open to receiving information about it (De Vries et al., 2012).
- *Integrating into preexisting communities created by users.* Organizations should understand and follow user-propelled communities, as they are interesting places for gleaning information about the brand and its products as well as for discovering potential collaboration opportunities.
- *Creating a site for the community.* For example, brands can use their corporate website to create interest groups through chats, forums, classified sections or pages about products (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

Woisetschläger, Hartleb, and Blut (2008) have noted various reasons why a brand would decide to establish a virtual community; among them, the belief that the brand's image is strengthened through the exchanges between group members with common ideas stands out. They have pointed out that creation of a community is an opportunity to increase the brand's number of consumers, given that they normally gain members through recommendations of people who are already members.

Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a), from a marketing perspective, have noted two reasons why virtual brand communities help to improve the efficacy of companies' marketing strategies:

- These communities do not present many of the same difficulties as traditional marketing. Specifically, they do not have to face the fragmentation of traditional communication media, the imprecision of some massive advertising campaigns, or consumer resistance to direct marketing campaigns.
- Brand communities have the advantage that consumers are ready to interact with companies to satisfy their own needs, becoming partners of the brand. The communities' structure facilitates mutually beneficial cooperation between the two parties.

However, it shouldn't be forgotten that virtual brand communities constitute a new type of non-traditional, non-hierarchical organization (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2011). Due to the virtual nature of this type of system, organizations have greater need than ever to create coherent strategies for spreading their message through the medium; this means that they must constantly develop new abilities and adaptation techniques (Kane et al., 2009). Additionally, they must understand that the reaches of their actions will often depend on the platform providers, community members and the owners of many content distributors (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2011).

Contributions from marketing are especially useful and have been carried out to understand the process of creating a virtual community; these highlight the creation of value in the exchange process that goes hand-in-hand with this type of community (Tsai, Huang, & Chiu, 2012). This is the case for Kubicek and Wagner (2002), who have noted the absence of a model or standard design for developing a virtual community. Tickle et al. (2011), noticed that in the context of B2B, there is no ideal size for establishing an online community. In any case, there are some key points that should be kept in mind.

Although we will later share an approximation of an appropriate process for creating a community, it is important to note that, especially towards the beginning of a community's life, the brand should try to gather elements of value with the goal of developing those elements (Powell, Groves, & Dimos, 2011). Once the community begins to develop, constant improvements to the benefits offered by the company are of the utmost importance; this will make it easier to retain members (Weber, 2007). Furthermore, once a brand has made it to this point, it should decrease its level of participation and delegate the delivery of value to the members (Powell et al., 2011).

Another important factor for the development of a community is the formation of the company's personnel that will be in charge of this field. Thus, the company's

employees should be available to interact within the community, listening, providing information and always acting with respect (The Slogan Magazine, 2007).

It is also important that the brand understand how to enhance social interactions in this type of virtual community. To help with this, De Souza and Preece (2004) have proposed a framework that makes it easier to understand and analyze online communities, relating the entity's structure, their interactions and the communicative elements of human interaction in virtual media. These authors have based their framework on the supposition that the keys for building an online community are people, purposes or objectives, policies and software, which in turn are affected by sociability and usability. Thus they recommend that organizations keep the following in mind when developing a virtual community (p. 602):

- Procuring current conversations in accordance with the community's goals.
- Incentivizing reciprocity, encouraging members to contribute to the community.
- Promoting empathy and confidence within the community.
- Allowing individuals to develop their own virtual identities.
- Encouraging shared understanding or common knowledge.
- Preserving the community members' privacy

Moreover, they have noticed that each community will have its own unique problems depending on: their profile, their phase of development, their size, and the culture established within the community. This last element is also covered by Tickle et al. (2011), who believe that the main challenge in creating this type of community lies in developing a culture of participation and contribution.

Spaulding (2010) believes that any entity that wants to create a virtual community should keep the following two essential features in mind: first, those seeking to create a virtual community should assess whether there are enough potential participants who want to join the community; the second consideration is the network effects or externalities related to the consumers' use of products/services that are related to the community or, in other words, the degree to which a member's use of products/services that are related to a community motivates other community members to use those products/services (Chun & Hahn, 2007). In theory, there is a key moment where the community is valuable enough to attract members and maintain its numbers without the need for external incentives. Although, organizations must consider whether creating a community could possibly provide some type of potential value. Furthermore, Spaulding (2010) points out several principles that should govern launching this type of community:

- The company's participation requires a contribution-based attitude.
- The brand's main concern should not be spreading marketing messages through the community.
- Developing and maintaining a virtual community leads to various resources, which should be considered ahead of time.
- The company should be open to experimentation.
- It is important to try to align the company's needs with those of the community at large.

With regards to more specific features, brands should also try to resolve questions about communication. They will need to establish if members will be the ones distributing content or if the company itself will participate in publishing and responding to comments (Thorbjornsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2002).

Finally, it is worth noting that some brands will have a more difficult time developing a virtual community than others. There are some categories of products that do not lend themselves to customer engagement or customer participation (e.g., home cleaning products). However, in other cases the characteristics of the products offered by the company might naturally incentivize users to seek out a place to discuss their doubts (e.g., electric tools) (see McWilliam, 2000). Furthermore, according to Sasinovskaya and Anderson (2011), there are several elements that can act as impediments to the creation of a brand community: a lack of competency or resources; excessive worrying about negative comments that could be made about the brand; the conservative nature of a certain industry; the need to adhere to a pre-determined strategy; and the belief that it is not necessary to seek out new sources of ideas.

12.3 Overview of the Process of Creating a Virtual Brand Community: Key Stages

As has been discussed through this chapter, reviewing the existing literature has revealed that there is no one ideal way to create and develop a virtual brand community (e.g.: Kubicek & Wagner, 2002; Tickle et al., 2011). On the other hand, there are multiple factors that require adaptation and, therefore, a different process. Moreover, it is difficult to specify an effective process, as consumers are continually changing when and where they consume (Canniford, 2011). However, we conclude with several authors' suggestions on how to create and develop a community:

- First, marketing strategies, especially CRM programs, should be used; so information about the existing consumers (e.g. market research, mailing lists, etc.). Current websites should also be analyzed in order to discover consumer preferences. Together these elements will serve as the base on which the community is created, in harmony with the company's philosophy.
- Next, the specific objectives the company hopes to accomplish with the community should be established; this is necessary in order to later measure the undertaking's success. Increasing traffic to a corporate website is not the same as obtaining a medium through which the brand's notoriety can be grown or through which a brand can test new products. Depending on the goal, it might be necessary to increase the community's ranking on search engines or to provide surveys or forums related to the company's products. In these cases, among their communities' functionalities, companies should include customer service forums or online seminars that offer advice about specific products. In any case, it is advisable to have the company's goals for creating the community be reflected in the community's homepage (El Morr & Maret, 2011).

- Once the company's objectives are clarified, it will be necessary to establish which part of the target audience will be part of the virtual brand community. In this case, companies should decide if they are interested in attracting the brand's current customers, new customers, current users of the company's website, a specific segment of the population or even the entire population. The target audience will define all aspects of the community, e.g., its look (color, design, style, etc.), the sign up process and the degree of participation from different members.
- Later, the company should establish the topics to include in the online community and plan the activities that its users are going to develop. It is important to choose activities that fit well with the established goals and attract long-term members. Among the most used activities, one finds: interactive blogs; forums; photo or video sharing; shopping lists; product accessories; or interactive games. It is also necessary to establish the design of the website that houses the community. Some aspects that will almost universally need to be established are: the community's site and its location; the home page; the log in page; the members' profile pages; the conditions of use; the help or company information page.

With regards to the activities companies develop to reach their objectives of creating a virtual community, Spaulding (2010) has made a list of which objectives companies should include depending on what they want to achieve. He distinguishes between communities focused around transactions, interests, relationships and fantasy. In function of this, he has provided the following business tactics:

- In transaction-oriented communities, the company does not provide product-related support, nor does it communicate about product development. These communities depend on the brand having a strong reputation
- In interest-oriented communities, companies should actively pay attention to members' comments and try to solve their problems. Moreover, it is important to not excessively advertise their products and to allow experimentation with and discussion about their products.
- In relationship-oriented communities, direct service or customer support from the company is not easy, but these communities can be designed to allow members to offer support. In this type of community strong bonds between members and the brand can be forged, which means that marketing actions should be minimal, with the company instead relying on the effect of word of mouth. This can lead to consumers who are interested in developing and trying new products.
- In fantasy-oriented communities, companies should incentivize consumers to stay with the group and position themselves as virtual support for the development of the company's products. Furthermore, companies will have to offer value and interesting experiences to the consumer.

Despite the existence of these general recommendations, on many occasions virtual brand communities often do not begin with rational and objective analysis of the characteristics of possible members or with the planning of long-term group activities. Therefore, as Yang (2010) noticed, brands do not always have clear and concise purposes for their communities, which leads to members being unsure of what to do within them. This type of uncertain behavior will have a negative effect on the community, given that members who feel unhappy with their experience will be unlikely to return to the site. It can even lead to negative attitudes and opinions about the brand that will spread to other users or groups.

Thus, not all techniques for creating online brand communities are appropriate. The important things to keep in mind are (El Morr & Maret, 2011):

- Brand communities should not be thought of as weak tools for the company.
- The company must be present not only during the community's construction but also for its management.
- A brand's strong market positioning does not guarantee success for the community.
- Technology is an important factor
- Virtual brand communities need to have strategies that are in line with the company's offline strategies.

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