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 Guinalíu (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 incertitude, 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, & Guinalíu, 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, Adebanjo, & 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, & Guinalíu, 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.