



The influence of belonging to virtual brand communities on consumers' affective commitment, satisfaction and word-of-mouth advertising

The ZARA case

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517

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore some of the effects of belonging to a virtual brand community on consumer behaviour. It also proposes the concept of belonging as a three-dimensional construct.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper proposes that belonging to a virtual community has positive effects on consumer satisfaction, affective commitment and word-of-mouth behaviour. After validation of the measurement scales the hypotheses are contrasted through modelling.

Findings – The data show that belonging to a virtual community may enhance consumer satisfaction, affective commitment and word-of-mouth advertising towards the brand around which the community is developed. In addition, the paper introduces a third dimension to the construct of belonging, called non-participative belonging. Active participative belonging influences the level of satisfaction and affective commitment more positively than passive and non-participative belonging.

Research limitations/implications – Data were obtained through surveys, web surveys and online interviews. There were also limitations of sample size and sampling procedure.

Practical implications – Managers may enhance consumer satisfaction, affective commitment and word-of-mouth advertising by developing virtual brand communities and promoting consumers' participation in them.

Originality/value – Previous works that have focused on virtual brand communities have never concentrated on virtual brand communities within Facebook. In addition, prior to this study, belonging to a virtual brand community was a two-dimensional construct: active and passive participative belonging. The paper identifies a third dimension as non-participative belonging. Thus this paper offers new areas for future research.

Keywords Virtual brand communities, Participative belonging, Non-participative belonging, Satisfaction, Affective commitment, Word-of-mouth, Customer satisfaction, Brand loyalty, Customer relationship management, Virtual organizations, Home shopping, Advertising

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The high costs every company faces in order to acquire new customers and increasingly high competition make it necessary for companies to achieve brand

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involvement and loyalty in order to establish long-term relationships with customers, involving them in a marketing dialogue. In this regard the internet has provided a new means of promoting communication among consumers and organisations and establishing relationships between them. Firms are starting to contact consumers and allow interactions among them through developing chats, forums and other entities, generally defined as virtual communities. Casaló *et al.* (2008) define the communities that are born around a brand as virtual brand communities (VBC).

This research, in part exploratory (see Research Question 1), builds on two previous works by Casaló *et al.* (2007, 2008) based on quantitative data from online questionnaires. Casaló *et al.* stated that participation in a VBC increases consumers' loyalty (Casaló *et al.*, 2007) and affective commitment (Casaló *et al.*, 2008) toward the brand around which the community is developed. In this paper we will propose the concept of participation in a VBC as being different from the concept of belonging to a VBC. The latter construct will be conceptualised with three dimensions: active participative belonging, passive participative belonging and non-participative belonging. The final objective of the paper is to test the proposed relationship between belonging to a VBC and its effects on consumers' affective commitment, satisfaction and word-of-mouth behaviour. We suggest that, aside from traditional marketing approaches (such as mass media advertising), and in addition to experiential information (i.e. evaluations of product performance), consumers' satisfaction, affective commitment and positive word-of-mouth behaviour towards the brand can also be influenced by firms through encouraging belonging to a VBC.

The first objective of this paper is to clarify the concepts of virtual community and VBC. We also believe our research is relevant in connection to the specific VBCs that are analysed. In fact they will be those born within the context of a general virtual community: Facebook. To date, there has also been no attempt to examine those VBCs developed within Facebook. Given our objectives the work is structured as follows. First, we carry out a review of the relevant literature concerning the concept of VBC and its antecedents: brand community and virtual community. Second, we develop our construct of belonging to a VBC. Third, we carry on with the literature review of the most important variables. From there we will analyse the effects of different levels of belonging to a VBC on consumer satisfaction, affective commitment and word-of-mouth advertising. For each of the three variables we developed two sets of hypotheses ("a" and "b"). After developing the hypotheses we will explain the methodology that was employed and the results. It is important to mention that "study 1" will refer to the analysis of the relationship between belonging to VBCs and satisfaction, affective commitment and word-of-mouth advertising. "study 2" will refer to non-participative belonging, which will be introduced as a third dimension of belonging to a VBC. Finally, we will discuss the main conclusions and managerial implications, as well as some research limitations and future research.

Literature review: virtual communities, VBC and VBC belonging and participation

Virtual community

A virtual community is defined as the integration of a group of individuals using the internet to maintain social relations around a common interest (Ridings *et al.*, 2002; Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005). According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997) virtual

communities help consumers to satisfy needs such as establishing relationships, living fantasies or sharing resources. The latter refers to the action of gathering product information on which to base decisions for future product purchases. Information usually comes from other online users who have previously used the same products and are willing to share their experiences. One more goal virtual communities achieve is hedonistic in nature, creating a positive, confluent experience through interaction.

The largest virtual community is Facebook. This can be considered a social networking website. On Facebook, users can create one or more profiles, often containing photos and lists of personal interests; they can also exchange private or public messages and join groups or networks of friends. On the one hand, by being registered members, users can join – free of charge – networks organised by city, workplace, school, university and region to connect and interact with other people. Only members of the same group/network or confirmed friends have access to the detailed member's profile data. On the other hand, people can also join networks based on a broad list of common social interests, such as music, arts, sport, cinema, fashion, and so on. In this case individuals hardly know each other. Based on a common interest, they use the network to look for new like-minded friends, exchange knowledge, gossip, share emotional support, and so on.

Brand community and VBC

A brand community is defined as a specialised non-geographical community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). A VBC could be defined as a brand community developed online with the characteristics of a virtual community. Our definition is very similar to the idea developed by Shang *et al.* (2006, p. 400), stating that “consumer virtual communities can also be seen as a special form of brand communities”.

The results of the analysis of our VBCs showed that members of these kind of virtual communities usually register for the community with their real names and other relevant information, such as email address, telephone number, residential address, school or university, and so on. They are very involved in the exchange of favour-for-favour interactions that characterise real-life social relations. Concerning general activities that are carried out by VBC members, many users post comments enthusiastically on discussion pages and are willing to have daily interactions with the community members.

A VBC can be built within a virtual community created to discuss general topics. For example, the Fashion Spot (www.thefashionspot.com) is a general virtual community developed around discussions based on the latest fashion trends. However, within this community it is possible to access narrow VBCs developed around specific brands. In these specific types of communities, people usually gather information about a brand before purchasing a product. In addition a VBC can be created by the company itself to enhance its brand equity, for example, the Coca-Cola VBC. Finally, it is important to mention that a VBC can be developed within a very general virtual community, such as Facebook. These VBCs will be analysed in this paper. They are usually created by one or more loyal customers, however, the company could also create the group. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), in general a VBC is characterised by three components: the creation of a sense of moral responsibility or commitment among virtual community members; “consciousness of kind”, which is the

feeling that binds every individual to the community members and the community brand; and rituals and traditions carried out by community members that help to reproduce and transmit the community's meaning in and outside of the community.

VBC belonging, participative belonging and non-participative belonging

The concepts of participation and belonging have often been misused or are overlapping. Different terms have been used to refer to these concepts. McWilliams (2000), for example, refers to the concept of belonging to a VBC by using the term affiliation, stating that it can represent a social benefit to a consumer for reasons of identification and social integration. According to Gangadharbatla (2008, p. 11), "people join virtual communities to remain in the loop and maintaining relationships with friends and others, irrespective of time and physical space". Thus, it can be presumed that some consumers engage in virtual community activities only for the pleasure of participating in the specific online community they belong to. By definition, belonging is a prerequisite of participation. In fact a customer will have to register for the VBC in order to participate in the community's activities.

According to McWilliams (2000) the participation process includes mutual production (i.e. writing posts) and consumption (i.e. perusal of thoughts and opinions). While each constituent is engaged in some form of consumption, not all constituents are necessarily engaged in production (Balasubramanian and Mahajan, 2001). The VBC analysis confirmed the presence of different levels of productive interaction. While a very small number of members frequently posted comments, the majority of them were only engaged in minimal levels of production. Thus, participation seems to involve two dimensions, which can be defined as active participation by both producing and consuming and passive participation by only consuming. As the results of both the netnography and online interviews will show later, there also seems to be a third dimension. Some members only register for the VBC for psychological reasons and never participate (actively or passively) in the VBC's activities. Since we believe this dimension cannot be related to participation, a third dimension that we call non-participative belonging was introduced. Our proposition adapts the participation construct and its two dimensions – active and passive participative belonging – previously studied by McWilliams (2000) and Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001), and includes that third new dimension.

Participation in a VBC (defined as participative belonging in our research), seems to influence participants' behaviours. It seems that a VBC's members feel obligated to disparage other similar products by competitors (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). In addition different studies have demonstrated that consumers' participation in a VBC increases their loyalty towards the brand around which the community is developed (Casaló *et al.*, 2007; Benyoussef *et al.*, 2006).

We understand the non-participative belonging dimension as the action of registering for a VBC developed within a general virtual community although never participating (actively or passively) in its activities. In the case of Facebook some users can create one or more personal profiles and join groups or networks of friends. This allows other Facebook members to see what groups the person belongs to. Although the user may not be accessing these groups at all, or participating in their activities, it is a way for the user to show his or her personality, interests, way of life, fashion style, etc.

The main objective of the study was not to test the construct of non-participative belonging. The research question below was formulated during a second phase of our research. It is for this reason that, in order to test this proposition, we gathered less data compared to other sections of this paper. Due to the lack of previous research on non-participative belonging and the limitations of our data collection, it is not possible to state a hypothesis. For this reason we introduced the following research question:

- RQ1.* Are there any members of virtual brand communities who register for Facebook VBCs without ever participating in the community activities and what effects on satisfaction, affective commitment and positive word-of-mouth does it have, if any?

Hypotheses setting: relating VBC belonging and participation to satisfaction, affective commitment and word-of-mouth advertising

Satisfaction

Keeping in mind the relationship between participation in a VBC and loyalty towards the brand around which the community is developed, we can introduce the relationship between loyalty and satisfaction (Ahluwalia *et al.*, 1999). Satisfaction is defined by Severt (2002) as the affective condition resulting from an overall evaluation of all aspects making up a relationship (i.e. products, prices, a firm's physical facilities, and so on) and an overall evaluation of several interactions among the parties. According to Geyskens *et al.* (1999) this is characterised first by a predisposition that is sustained by an economic advantage; then satisfaction is linked to psychological factors, such as a partner fulfilling promises. According to Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) highly satisfied customers are likely to make future purchases (Kasper, 1988) and to recommend the source to other customers (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). If it is true that consumers' participation in a VBC increases their loyalty towards the brand around which the community is developed (Casaló *et al.*, 2007; Benyoussef *et al.*, 2006), the same relationship should exist between satisfaction and belonging to a VBC. Since satisfaction is positively related to a VBC, the first hypothesis we propose is:

- H1a.* Customers who belong to a virtual brand community develop higher levels of satisfaction than customers who do not belong to any virtual brand community.

The research conducted by Casaló *et al.* (2008, p. 32) on VBC members demonstrated that "greater participation in a virtual community is related directly and positively to greater affective commitment to the brand around which the community is developed". The concept of affective commitment will be further developed in this paper. However, at this point, it is important to state that affective commitment seems to be influenced by overall satisfaction (Beatson *et al.*, 2006). For this reason the next hypothesis is:

- H1b.* The higher the level of participation in a virtual brand community, the higher the satisfaction towards the brand around which the community is developed.

Affective commitment

Affective commitment is related to the feelings of a customer towards a brand, and it is based on personal involvement with the company (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). It emerges

because of the emotions and closeness among the parties (Meyer *et al.*, 1993). Affective commitment determines the customer's desire to continue the relationship in the future (Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Casaló *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that a positive relationship exists between participation in a VBC and affective commitment. In their studies they referred to differences in terms of the ratio between participation and affective commitment measured only among those members who were accessing VBCs. However, it is important to account for the difference between customer members and customer non-members in the VBC in terms of belonging. Therefore, the third hypothesis is:

H2a. Customers belonging to a virtual brand community develop higher levels of affective commitment than those not belonging to any virtual brand community.

The next hypothesis will try to develop the conceptual framework developed by Casaló *et al.* (2008), who as mentioned above, stated that "greater participation in a virtual community is related directly and positively to greater affective commitment to the brand around which the community is developed", measured on VBC members only. However their research has only been tested on Spanish-speaking users. This paper will try to widen their research to a worldwide sample. In fact Facebook exists in most countries (see Table I). The next hypothesis, based on the studies by Casaló *et al.* (2008), is:

H2b. The higher the level of participation in a virtual brand community, the greater the affective commitment towards the brand around which the community is developed.

Word-of-mouth advertising

Finally a high level of satisfaction leads the satisfied customer to spread positive word-of-mouth advertising (Singh and Pandya, 1991; Carpenter and Fairhurst, 2005) about the product or company. The same positive relationship has been demonstrated between affective commitment and positive word-of-mouth communication (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Word-of-mouth (henceforth WOM) is defined by some researchers as an individual's predisposition to purchase a product (Arndt, 1968) and the intention to pass along WOM communication about a specific product (Brown and Reingen, 1987). WOM is also defined as an informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, product, organisation or service (Anderson, 1998; Buttle, 1998). WOM has been shown to have persuasive effectiveness (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Royo-Vela, 2002) as well as a significant impact on consumers' choices (Beale *et al.*, 1981; Richins, 1983) and on post-purchase product perceptions (Bone, 1995). According to Gremler (1994), in many instances WOM appears to be the major source of information that people use.

Concerning online WOM around product information, according to Henning-Thurau *et al.* (2004), participants in this activity exhibit a similar set of motivations to participants in traditional WOM. Therefore, in our hypotheses, we will not distinguish between eWOM and WOM, but we will focus on the latter. WOM activities seem to not only be related to posting comments around a product-related issue. In the VBCs that we analysed, members also discussed other topics which we can define as "just-for-fun" topics, such as the members' frequency of purchase from the company; the level of addiction; the description of the last piece of clothing bought

Country	Study 1 or 1/2
Algeria	2
Argentina	3
Australia	4
Bahrain	2
Belgium	15
Bosnia Herz.	2
Bulgaria	1
Canada	3
Chile	52/9
Colombia	11/5
Croatia	2/2
Czech Republic	1
Denmark	2
Dominican Rep.	3
Ecuador	1
Egypt	15/5
France	50/18
Philippines	4/4
Greece	1
Guatemala	2
Honduras	1
Hong Kong	2
India	8
Indonesia	14/1
Ireland	1/1
Israel	15/5
Italy	5/1
Japan	4
Jordan	6
Kuwait	2
Lebanon	9/2
Luxembourg	1
Macedonia	1
Malaysia	4
Mauritania	1
Mauritius	1
Mexico	6
Morocco	60
Norway	2
Oman	2
Pakistan	1
Panama	3
Philippines	5
Poland	2/2
Qatar	1/1
Salvador	14/4
Saudi Arabia	2/2
Serbia	2/2
Singapore	4/4
South Korea	1

(continued)

Table I.
Country of origin of VBC
members invited to
participate in the online
survey

OIR 35,4	Country	Study 1 or 1/2
	Spain	4
	Switzerland	5
	Syria	3
	Tunisia	3
524	Turkey	9/9
	Uganda	1
	UK	18/8
	Ukraine	1
	United Arab Emirates	5/2
	United States	16/16
	Uruguay	2/2
	Venezuela	7/7

Table I. Note: Total mailed 436 ($n = 134$); $n = \text{responses}/121(n = 43)$

in ZARA; and so on. Thus, it can be stated that some consumers engage in VBC activities only for the pleasure of participating in the specific online community to which they belong. In this research the VBCs that were analysed were those formed by customers who already purchased products from the company. For the characteristics of the analysed VBCs, this paper will restrict the examination to include only positive WOM activities. The fifth hypothesis is thus:

H3a. Customers belonging to a virtual brand community develop more positive word-of-mouth behaviour than those who do not belong to any virtual brand communities.

Since affective commitment and positive WOM seem to be related (Harrison-Walker, 2001), keeping in mind the conceptual framework developed by Casaló *et al.* (2008, p. 32) concerning the positive ratio of participation in VBC and affective commitment, we can try to extend their conceptual framework. Therefore the sixth hypothesis is:

H3b. The higher the level of participation in a virtual brand community, the higher the positive word-of-mouth behaviour towards the brand around which the community is developed.

Considering the literature review and our hypothesis development, it is now possible to describe our conceptual model (Figure 1). According to our literature review satisfaction increases both affective commitment (Beatson *et al.*, 2006) and WOM activity (Singh and Pandya, 1991; Carpenter and Fairhurst, 2005). At the same time affective commitment is positively related to positive WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Concerning our hypotheses two dimensions (belonging to a VBC and participation in a VBC) seem to increase satisfaction, affective commitment and WOM behaviour.

Research design

Netnography

Our studies of VBCs have focussed on the ZARA brand, a Spanish company that almost entirely relies on WOM advertising (Catoira Gomez, 2008). Online ethnography, or netnography, was the core method adopted to explore the analysed VBCs. Based on

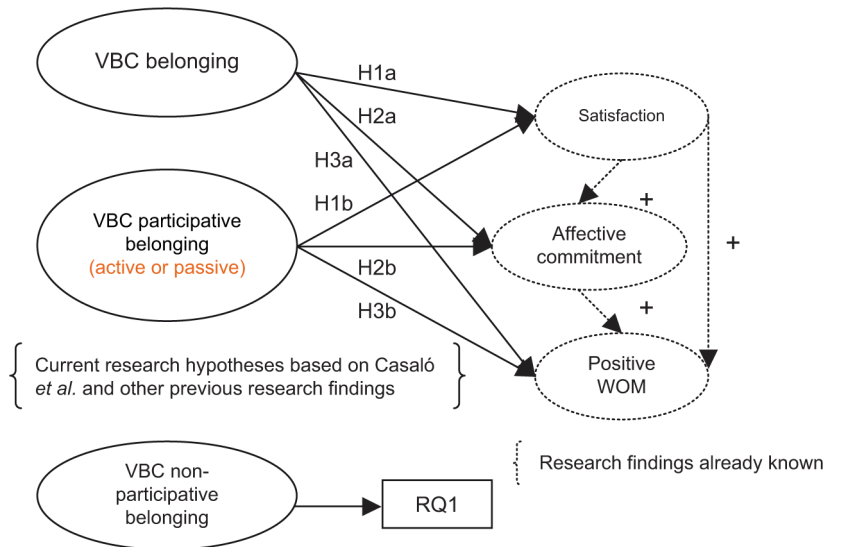


Figure 1.
Conceptual model

the collection of qualitative data, netnography is usually defined (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61) as “an online marketing research technique for providing consumer insight”. “Netnography uses information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Kozinets (2006) identified netnography as the relationship between participation and investigation. He identified three types:

- (1) netnography of observation,;
- (2) netnography of both observation and participation; and
- (3) self-netnography.

In this respect, this study can be identified with the first category. In fact our main activity was based on reading other people’s comments and measuring members’ frequency of participation. To access the VBCs we created our profiles on Facebook with real information and joined the VBCs as members. Our data compilations are grounded in the collecting of the text(s) each participant posted on the walls or discussion forums of the VBCs.

We carried out two different data collections:

- (1) *Study 1* to test our set of hypotheses; and
- (2) *Study 2* to test our research question.

Study 1 was based on offline and online surveys that followed the same criteria of previous studies (Casaló et al., 2007, 2008). Our objective was to test the relationships between belonging to VBCs and satisfaction, affective commitment and WOM behaviour. To test the dimension of non-participative belonging (*RQ1*) identified in the netnography, we used online interviews and a survey (study 2). All questionnaires are available from the authors by request.

Surveys

The study 1 questionnaire was either launched through the internet (for both members and non-members of any VBC) or submitted offline through direct interviews (for the non-members of VBCs only). The offline questionnaire was conducted by interviewing people outside ZARA stores using the questionnaires written in Italian and Spanish.

Content validity. In total, 19 variables are used to capture the various constructs and other information needs (see Table II and the conversations excerpted in the “Online interviews” section below). Questions related to participation in VBCs were addressed through self-developed items, measured on a six-point ordinal scale from “rarely” being the lowest level of participation to “daily” being the highest. Questions were not asked of non-members of VBCs. Due to the results of our netnography activities we were able to verify very different levels of participation among users. During our questionnaire development, following the previous studies of McWilliams (2000) and Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001), we believed that belonging to VBC activities was a two-dimensional construct of active and passive participative belonging. For this reason two questions surveyed the levels of active participation and passive participation.

Because the existing measures could not be used directly, context-relevant measures of satisfaction and affective commitment were adapted, drawing on previous studies and the literature review. Concerning satisfaction measurements, we created five items developed within three questions. As previously found, the duration of a relationship between a customer and a service provider is longer if the customer is satisfied (Bolton, 1998). For this reason a question was introduced whose objective was to measure for how long the customer had been purchasing from ZARA. It was measured on a four-point ordinal scale with “less than one year” being the lowest value and “more than five years” being the highest value. Overall satisfaction of the customers with ZARA was measured in another question through an item adopted from Flavian *et al.* (2006, p. 10). For the three remaining items we followed the conceptual framework developed by Roest and Pieters (1997), stating that satisfaction is seen as representing an affective self-evaluation, based on perceived costs and perceived quality trade-offs. For this reason one question introduced the three items measuring satisfaction with price, quality, and the ratio of price to quality. All questions measuring satisfaction were measured on a seven-point Likert scale with “totally dissatisfied” being the lowest level of satisfaction and “totally satisfied” being the highest level of satisfaction.

We measured affective commitment through three different items developed within one question. The first two items were adapted from previously used measurements by Anderson and Weitz (1992, p. 30, Table A1). The last item was adapted from Sherma and Patterson (1999, p. 166, Table A1). In their research they measured what is called relationship commitment. Given that some authors stated that affective commitment is related to commitment to a relationship, in this case we used the construct of Johnson *et al.* (2006), stating that affective commitment determines the customer’s desire to continue with the relationship in the future. The three items used to analyse affective commitment were measured on a seven-point Likert scale with “strongly disagree” being the lowest value and “strongly agree” the highest value. The evaluation of WOM activities was measured adopting the same ordinal scale used by Royo-Vela (2006). In this case the item was measured on a four-point scale, with “definitely will not recommend” being the lowest value and “definitely will recommend” the highest.

Variable/construct	Sources of scale	Label	Measurement	Items and type of measure
Satisfaction/relation (short-long term)	Self-developed	SAT _{REL}	Single-item	Ordinal scale (less than 1 year-1 to more than 5 years-4)
VBC participative belonging: active participation	Self-developed	PART _{ACT}	Single-item	Ordinal scale (daily-1 to rarely-6)
VBC participative belonging: passive participation	Self-developed	PART _{PASS}	Single-item	Ordinal scale (daily-1 to rarely-6)
Affective commitment	Flavian <i>et al.</i> (2006, p. 10); adapted from previous authors and the authors themselves from Roest and Pieters (1997)	SAT _{TOT}	Multi-item	Interval (strongly disagree-1 to strongly agree-7)
		SAT _Q		Total satisfaction
		SAT _P		Satisfaction quality
		SAT _{P/Q}		Satisfaction price
Word-of-mouth behaviour	Anderson and Weitz (1992); Sherma and Patterson (1999)	COMM ₁	Multi-item	Satisfaction price/quality
		COMM ₂		Interval (strongly disagree-1 to strongly agree-7)
		COMM ₃		Loyalty
	Royo-Vela (2002)	WOM	Single-item	Defend when criticise Relationship indefinitely Ordinal scale (1-definitely will not recommend to definitely will recommend-4)

Table II.
Scale development and content validity

The data were coded and organised before any analysis was carried out. This included inputting the data into SPSS 13.0 software for Windows XP and Vista.

Exploratory analysis of reliability and dimensionality. Different measures were used to assess the internal consistency of the constructs. The questionnaire adopted single-item or multi-item measurements to measure the different variables. With regard to multi-item variables, satisfaction and affective commitment were assessed for reliability using Cronbach's alpha and the Pearson item-total correlation. For Cronbach's alpha we considered a minimum value of 0.80 and a minimum value of 0.15 for the correlation. The constructs' reliability was satisfactory, as the Cronbach's alpha of both measures was greater than 0.80 and the correlation was higher than 0.30. Concerning the relationship between the two items used to assess participation, we only used a Pearson correlation indicator, scoring a 0.362 ($p < 0.01$) value.

To evaluate the unidimensionality of the proposed multi-item scales we applied a factor analysis. Factor extraction was based on principal components procedure and eigenvalues higher than 1, factorial loadings higher than 0.5 and a total explained variance higher than 60 per cent. The results can be seen in Table III.

Online interviews

The results of the netnography seemed to show low levels of both active and passive participation by members of the analysed VBCs. The quantitative results of the questionnaire collected for VBC members confirmed this assertion: most people rarely participate either actively (78 per cent) or passively (38 per cent). In order to test this proposition we first interviewed seven members from the VBCs. We designed a second questionnaire from the results of these interviews (see the following excerpts from conversations).

Conversation 1

Researcher: Last question and I leave u alone . . . have u accessed more than twice-3 times the ZARA group?

Respondent 1: Honestly, I never even red a comment.

Researcher: Why?

Respondent 1: I don't really participate in this group. I mean I luuuuvvv ZARA . . . but I don't participate. . .

Conversation 2

Researcher: Can I ask u one more question abt ZARA? Please please. . .

Respondent 2: Yes.

Researcher: Realistically, do u ever access ZARA group or u registered the group and u never access it? U know many people do that. . .

Respondent 2: Sorry, but I don't really undurstant. . .

Researcher: Usually, do u access the ZARA group? Or u only registered? But never access it?

Respondent 2: Oh I only registered.

	COMM ₁	COMM ₂	COMM ₃	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Explained variance (%)
1				4.69	1.8	0.913	0.901	83.62 (KMO = 0.752; $\chi^2 = 497.69$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$)
COMM ₁	0.775**	1		4.48	1.919	0.924		
COMM ₂	0.731**	0.757**	1	4.85	1.68	0.906		
COMM ₃			SAT _{P/Q}					
SAT _{TOT}		SAT _Q	SAT _P					
1				5.59	1.223	0.881	0.823	66.86 (KMO = 0.68; $\chi^2 = 523.9$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$)
SAT _{TOT}	0.703**	1		5.29	1.462	0.754		
SAT _Q	0.488**	0.252**	1	5.21	1.422	0.740		
SAT _P	0.657**	0.518**	0.699**	5.43	1.243	0.885		
SAT _{P/Q}			1					
QUAL								

Note: Item-total Pearson correlation: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table III.
Exploratory analysis of reliability and dimensionality: satisfaction and affective commitment dimensions (study 1)

Researcher: Do u know more people like you.

Respondent 2: yes!...

Conversation 6

Researcher: Do u participate in the ZARA group? I mean ... do u ever enter? Write comments or post them?

Respondent 6: NO ...A why?

Researcher: There u go! That's my idea ... nobody ever wrote abt that ... abt people registering to group on facebook but never participating ... u know what I mean?

Respondent 6: Of course I do, most people register to this group but very few participate ... I think is because they want to show what they like ... at least ... I do the same...

Recently, Facebook developed chat software to connect its members. This tool usually refers to a kind of one-on-one text-based communication over the internet. A chat is based on an instant messaging system. It differs from discussion pages or forums developed within a VBC because when members leave a comment on the pages or forums they do not receive a reply until hours or days later. Usually, the chats involve a two-person conversation. In order to gather our online interviews we contacted people ($n = 7$) belonging to our ZARA groups (see Table IV) and asked them to chat. Afterwards, we tried to focus the conversation on ZARA and its VBCs. Finally, the users were asked what their real level of participation was.

Following the results of our interviews we created a separate set of questions. Since the main objective of our research was not to test the existence of non-participative belonging, the second questionnaire was developed with only three questions. While the first two questions (age and gender) were the same as in the first questionnaire, the objective of the third question was to test our *RQ1*. A two-point scale (“agree” or “disagree”) was used; the question was formulated as follows:

Please state your agreement with the following assertion. “I am a member of the ZARA group on Facebook. However, I never enter the group, post comments or read other people’s comments. I only registered for the group or added the group because I like ZARA!”

Data collection and analysis

We collected a total of 268 questionnaires from two sets of data. Different ZARA customers were analysed: half of them ($n = 134$) belonged to a VBC and half of them

Virtual brand community	Interviewed	Members	Nationality
I love ZARA	1	318	United Arab Emirates
ZARA is my shopping paradise	1	283	Spain
ZARA	3	53,694	Italy, Chile, France
All my clothes are from ZARA	1	772	Morocco
Hello, my name is ... and I am a ZARA addict	1	1,277	France

Note: $n = 7$

Table IV.
Chat interviews:
sampling

($n = 134$) did not. In the first case the analysed VBCs were those accessible from Facebook. Table V lists the VBCs that were analysed and the number of members up to 27 June 2008.

Customers belonging to VBCs: multistage sampling procedure

Participants were first invited through ten texts posted on discussion forum pages and public walls of the VBCs to fill out our questionnaire by clicking on a specific link. In order to increase the number of responses we also contacted a high number of VBC members ($n = 436$), inviting them to fill out the survey (see Tables I and V). They were randomly chosen from the most important VBC, measured by the number of members (see Table IV). Finally, 134 individuals answered the questionnaire ($n = 134$).

The 436 virtual community members were chosen from 62 different nationalities, shown in Table V. Due to the anonymity of the questionnaires it is not possible to establish where the final sample ($n = 134$) respondents came from.

Customers not belonging to VBCs: sampling procedure

For ZARA customers not belonging to any VBC, two different techniques were used. First, we invited 93 people who had purchased at least once from ZARA to fill out an online survey. Table VI shows the country of origin of the people invited to respond to the online survey. A total of 36 responses were returned ($n = 36$), giving a response rate of 39 per cent. Due to the anonymity of the latter, it is not possible to establish where the respondents were based. Finally, we conducted an offline survey on a convenience sample of 98 customers not belonging to any VBC. Respondents coming out of ZARA shops were interviewed. They were asked whether they had previously bought from ZARA.

In the case of a positive response they were invited to participate in the questionnaire. Surveys were gathered in the following cities: Pescara and Rome in Italy, and Valencia and Madrid in Spain. Table VII describes in detail the origins of the total sample.

Table VIII describes the demographic characteristics of both studies' respondents. On the one hand, there are no relevant differences with regard to gender between the sample of customers belonging to VBCs and the non-belonging sample. On the other hand, we can notice very different trends with regard to the age of the people belonging to VBCs. The majority of them seem to be under 24 years with a significant proportion under 18.

Regarding netnography and online interviews (study 2) we invited 121 people (see Table IV) from the same VBCs used for study 1. Table V shows in detail the country of

Virtual brand community	No. mailed		Members
	Study 1	Study 2	
I love ZARA	50	10	318
ZARA is my shopping paradise	50	10	283
ZARA	206	81	53,694
All my clothes are from ZARA	50	10	772
Hello, my name is ... and I am a ZARA addict	80	10	1,277
Total	436	121	

Table V.
Virtual brand communities analysed and number of people mailed

OIR	Country	No.
35,4	Australia	1
	Belgium	1
	Brazil	1
	Canada	1
532	China	3
	Cyprus	1
	Egypt	1
	England	5
	France	5
	Germany	3
	Hungary	1
	India	1
	Italy	45
	Kazakhstan	1
	Mexico	1
	Pakistan	1
	Russia	3
	Spain	3
	Taiwan	1
	United States	14

Table VI.
Country of origin of customers not belonging to VCBs invited to participate in the online survey (study 1)
Note: $n = 93$

	City	No.	%	Nationality	No.	%
Offline	Pescara	19	14	Italian	46	35
Offline	Rome	27	20			
Offline	Valencia	30	22	Spanish	52	38
Offline	Madrid	22	16			
Online	Random	36	27	Random	36	27

Table VII.
Total characteristics of respondents not belonging to VBCs (study 1)
Note: $n = 134$

	VBC members ($n = 134$)		Non-VBC members ($n = 134$)		VBC members (study 2) ($n = 42$)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Sex</i>						
Male	40	30	42	31	13	31
Female	92	69	92	69	29	69
Missing	2	1	0	–	0	–
<i>Age</i>						
Under 18	42	31	21	16	16	38
19-24	49	37	55	41	16	38
25-27	19	14	37	28	5	12
28-35	19	14	16	12	5	12
36 or older	4	3	5	4	0	–
Missing	1	1	0	–	0	–

Table VIII.
Demographics of study 1 and study 2

origin of the population that was contacted. A total of 43 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 36 per cent. In this case also it was not possible to verify the country of origin of the respondents due to the anonymity of the responses. The demographic characteristics of this second sample are very similar to those of the sample in study 1 (see Table VIII).

Results and discussion

Group of "a" hypotheses

Previous research has measured and demonstrated the effects of different levels of participation within the virtual brand community, but not the effects on satisfaction, affective commitment and positive WOM about the brand between members and non-members. As Table IX shows, for each item we can see higher means from members of the VBC. Only one item (SAT_P) in the measurement of satisfaction is not statistically significant. However, we can see that the item would be accepted at the 90 per cent confidence level ($t = 1.55$; $p < 0.1$; d.f. = 265). These results support *H1a*, *H2a* and *H3a* and we can therefore conclude that belonging to a VBC is positively related to a higher level of satisfaction, affective commitment and positive WOM activity towards the brand around which the community is developed.

Group of "b" hypotheses

As discussed in previous sections this paper is grounded in the research carried out by Casaló *et al.* (2007, 2008) proposing that higher participation in VBCs is related to higher levels of affective commitment and loyalty to the brand around which the community is developed. However their work had an important limitation: the sample was limited to Spanish speakers. In this research we tried to re-test their assumption on an international sample. Also, we extended the research to two more variables – satisfaction and positive WOM – that the literature review confirms to be related to affective commitment. In Table X the dependent variables satisfaction, commitment

Hypothesis	Item	VBC	No.	Mean	St. Dev.	t -value/ χ^2 value	d.f.
<i>H1a</i> (scale 1-7)	SAT _{TOT}	Yes	133	6,08	0.970	7.134 *	265
		No	134	5.10	1.252		
	SAT _Q	Yes	134	5.90	1.182	7.353 *	266
		No	134	4.70	1.477		
	SAT _P	Yes	134	5.34	1.377	1.550	266
		No	134	5.07	1.459		
SAT _{P/Q}	Yes	133	5.62	1.165	2.506 *	265	
	No	134	5.25	1.295			
<i>H2a</i> (scale 1-7)	COMM ₁	Yes	133	5.33	1.613	6.370 *	265
		No	134	4.02	1.741		
	COMM ₂	Yes	133	5.22	1.768	6.908 *	265
		No	134	3.72	1.766		
	COMM ₃	Yes	132	5.49	1.531	6.661 *	263
		No	133	4.22	1.583		
<i>H3a</i> (scale 1-4)	WOM	Yes	132	–	–	$\chi^{2**} = 48,557$	3
		No	133				

Note: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table IX.
The set of "a" hypotheses results

Table X.
Set of “b” hypotheses
results

Hypothesis	Item	Participation	No.	Gamma	No.	Mean	t-value/ χ^2 value	d.f.	Conclusion		
<i>H1b</i>	SAT _{TOT}	Active	29	0.370 *	29	6.45	1.717 ***	80	Partially accepted		
		Passive	53	0.287 **	53	6.09					
	SAT _Q	Active	30	0.416 *	30	6.43	2.863 **	81			
		Passive	53	0.197	53	5.75					
	SAT _P	Active	30	0.093	30	5.50	0.543	81			
		Passive	53	0.118	53	5.32					
	SAT _{P/Q}	Active	30	0.140	30	5.80	0.864	81			
		Passive	53	0.092	53	5.57					
	<i>H2b</i>	COMM ₁	Active	29	0.349 *	29	6.00	2.171 *		80	Partially accepted
			Passive	53	0.205	53	5.26				
COMM ₂		Active	29	0.383 **	29	6.03	2.222 *	80			
		Passive	53	0.244 **	53	5.21					
<i>H3b</i>	WOM	Active	28	0.211	28	5.86	1.274	79			
		Passive	53	0.142	53	5.42					
			30	0.208	30		$\chi^2 = 1.605$	2	Not accepted		
			52	0.103	52						

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.1$

and WOM are measured in relation to participation in VBCs (active or passive). The two levels of participation were measured on a 6-point scale from “rarely” being the lowest level of participation to “daily” the highest.

To interpret the gamma we used the recommendations of Frankfort-Nachmias *et al.* (2000, p. 259, cited in Babbie *et al.*, 2007), stating that a score of (0.00) would show no relationship, a score of $+/-$ (0.20) would show a weak relationship, $+/-$ (0.40) would mean a moderate relationship, $+/-$ (0.60) a strong relationship, $+/-$ (0.80) a very strong relationship, and $+/-$ 1 a perfect relationship. The association should be confirmed by the significance. In our case all variables showed weak or moderate relationships. Satisfaction was determined by four different items. Only the first item (SATTOT) confirms some level of relation with both active participation (0.370; $p < 0.05$) and passive participation (0.287; $p < 0.01$). The satisfaction with quality shows a moderate relation to active participation, with a score of 0.416 ($p < 0.05$).

All of the other items measuring satisfaction failed to show relations in terms of both gamma and statistical significance. Affective commitment was measured with three different items. The first item showed a moderate relation with active participation (0.349; $p < 0.05$). The second item showed a moderate relation with active participation (0.383; $p < 0.01$) and a weak relation with passive participation (0.244; $p < 0.01$). The last item measuring affective commitment (COMM₃) showed uninteresting values. Finally, WOM was measured with only one item. In this case no interesting relation was seen for either active or passive participation. To test differences between active and passive participation, mean and frequency tests were applied. The results confirm and clarify the gamma scores (see Table X).

One important aspect that we noticed in our results is that “rarely” is the most common answer for both active participation (78 per cent) and passive participation (38 per cent) for the analysed VBC. However, the values are much more homogeneous for passive participation than for active participation. For this reason it seems that the most frequent way of interacting with VBCs is by passive consumption, i.e. reading other people’s comments, rather than actively participating by posting comments. Due to the results of study 2 that are explained in the next section, we also assumed that most of the responses that were labelled as “rarely” could have been people who were registered for VBCs but who never participated in the community activities either actively or passively. For this reason we also measured the dependent variables satisfaction, affective commitment and WOM in relation to passive participation, removing the values labelled as “rarely”. In this case the evidence of association between participation in VBCs and satisfaction, affective commitment and WOM was similar to the previous test (see Table XI).

Based on these results we cannot totally confirm strong evidence of positive relationships between participative belonging and satisfaction, affective commitment and WOM. However, some positive trends can be seen. While satisfaction and WOM were not tested previously in relation to participation, Casaló *et al.* (2008) had formally demonstrated the positive relationship between affective commitment and participation in VBCs. Our results are not as clear as theirs. First, all their gammas were statistically significant (Casaló *et al.*, 2008, p. 31, Figure 1). In our case the highest gamma measuring the relationship between participation and affective commitment scored 0.383 ($p < 0.01$). The same situation can be observed for the relationship between satisfaction and participation in VBCs, where few gammas are statistically

OIR 35,4	Hypothesis	Item	No.	Gamma	Conclusion	
536	<i>H1b</i>	SAT _{TOT}	81	0.362 [*]	Partially accepted	
		SAT _Q	82	0.370 ^{**}		
		SAT _P	82	0.184		
		SAT _{P/Q}	82	0.215		
	<i>H1b</i>	COMM ₁	81	0.277 [*]	Partially accepted	
		COMM ₂	81	0.235 [*]		
		COMM ₃	80	0.290		
	<i>H1b</i>	WOM	81	0.120	Not accepted	
	Note: [*] $p < 0.05$; ^{**} $p < 0.01$					

Table XI.
Passive participation

significant. With regard to the relationship between participation and WOM, we found no statistically significant values in any of the tests applied.

In addition our *t*-values and chi-square values showed some trends of positive relationships among active participation and the latent variables satisfaction and affective commitment (see Table X). In fact, we can observe that two of the items measuring satisfaction – SATTOT and SATQ – had values that were statistically significant at the $p < 0.1$ and $p < 0.005$ levels respectively. Moreover, the relationship between active participation and affective commitment is statistically significant in two out of three cases (COMM₁ and COMM₂ scoring 2.171, $p < 0.05$ and 2.222, $p < 0.05$). This shows that active participative belonging affects our variables more than passive participative belonging. However, we have to keep in mind that the most common way of interacting with VBCs is through passive participative belonging rather than active participative belonging. Therefore, it seems that very few VBC members are highly involved with the community's activities.

Regarding our research question the online interview results showed that six out of seven people never participated in the VBC's activities or even entered the VBC; three people confirmed that they registered for the ZARA group only because they liked ZARA. Of the three, one stated that she even forgot she belonged to this group; two more respondents declared that they would participate more in the community's activities if discounts were offered in the VBCs. Of the people interviewed, one declared that she only registered for the group, but never even read a comment. Moreover, she knew other people who acted in the same manner. Finally, one of our respondents declared that, in his opinion, people register only to show that they like the product or company, but very few participate (see conversation excerpts). This latter statement seems to accurately describe the non-participative belonging dimension developed in the previous literature review. However, the only respondent we interviewed who admitted participating in VBCs declared that he often accessed the community looking for more information and were also willing to participate more.

The results of the second questionnaire clearly confirmed the existence of this trend. Most (91 per cent) of our respondents, in fact, stated that they had registered for the VBC and belonged to that community because they liked the company. However, they never participated in the community's activities or even entered the community. Although only seven people were interviewed for this second study, and only 43 responded to our second questionnaire, the results seem to show a definite trend for these VBCs. Thus, the existence of non-participative belonging as a third dimension of

the construct of belonging to VBCs has been identified. However, it is important to keep in mind that non-participative belonging can occur only in those VBCs that are developed within general virtual communities, such as Facebook, MySpace, and so on. In these cases people can activate their membership of the VBC by registering for it. Then they can show off their membership to other community members. By registering and creating a profile they will describe their interests, passions, style, way of life, and so on. It is therefore not necessary to participate in these communities.

Finally, to test the effects of the three dimensions of VBC belonging on satisfaction, affective commitment and WOM, ANOVA and chi-squared tests were applied. As can be seen in Table XII the results are not very different from those obtained when comparing active and passive belonging. In this case there are very clear differences between non-participative belonging and active participative belonging. Participative active belonging increases, regarding the brand, the general satisfaction, quality satisfaction, loyalty and brand defence from criticism compared to non-participative belonging. Moreover active belonging increases brand quality perception more than passive belonging.

Conclusions and managerial implications

The potential relevance of this paper is first related to the clear distinction made between a virtual community and a VBC. In addition, unlike previous studies, we clearly defined the difference between belonging to a VBC and participating in a VBC:

Item	Participation	No.	Mean	F -value/ χ^2 value	HSD Tukey (mean difference)
SAT _{TOT}	Non-participative	51	5.86	$F2/130 = 3.506$ $p < 0.033$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.232
	Passive	53	6.09		(Passive-Active) - 0.354
	Active	29	6.45		(Non-participative-Active) - 0.586 *
SAT _Q	Non-participative	51	5.75	$F2/131 = 4.073$ $p < 0.019$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.010
	Passive	53	5.75		(Passive-Active) - 0.679 *
	Active	30	6.43		(Non-participative-Active) - 0.688 *
SAT _P	Non-participative	51	5.27	$F2/131 = 0.262$ $p < 0.770$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.046
	Passive	53	5.32		(Passive-Active) - 0.179
	Active	30	5.50		(Non-participative-Active) - 0.225
SAT _{P/Q}	Non-participative	53	5.57	$F2/130 = 0.440$ $p < 0.645$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.014
	Passive	50	5.58		(Passive-Active) - 0.234
	Active	30	5.80		(Non-participative-Active) - 0.220
COMM ₁	Non-participative	51	5.02	$F2/130 = 3.629$ $p < 0.029$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.245
	Passive	53	5.26		(Passive-Active) - 0.736
	Active	29	6.00		(Non-participative-Active) - 0.980 *
COMM ₂	Non-participative	51	4.76	$F2/130 = 5.062$ $p < 0.008$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.443
	Passive	53	5.21		(Passive-Active) - 0.827
	Active	29	6.03		(Non-participative-Active) - 1.270 **
COMM ₃	Non-participative	51	5.37	$F2/129 = 1.019$ $p < 0.364$	(Non-participative-Passive) - 0.043
	Passive	53	5.42		(Passive-Active) - 0.442
	Active	28	5.86		(Non-participative-Active) - 0.485
WOM	Non-participative	50	-	$\chi^2 = 5.904$, d.f. = 6	
	Passive	52	-		
	Active	30	-		

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.005$

Table XII.
Differences by level of
VBC belonging

the first is a prerequisite for the existence of the second. Moreover, we introduced a study of those VBCs that are developed within a general virtual community such as Facebook. We discovered an interesting tendency among members of those VBCs: most of them (91 per cent, study 2) registered for the community as well as other groups of interest although they never participate in the community's activities. Registering for the VBC seems to be caused by the members' willingness to be identified by other virtual community members as having specific interests, passions, styles, etc. We defined this dimension of belonging as non-participative belonging.

We distinguished the latter from passive participative belonging (which is consumption-based) and active participative belonging (which is made by both consumption and production).

First, the value of this study is that the intra-VBC sample is made up of people living in 62 different countries. Second, the research has identified differences between consumer members of VBCs and consumer non-members of VBCs. In contrast to previous research findings we did not find a strong and clear relationship between level of participation in a VBC and satisfaction and affective commitment, although it seems to have some positive effect on general satisfaction, quality satisfaction, loyalty and defence from criticism about the brand. In addition, the results do not clearly show that participation in a VBC is related to positive WOM. In this research merely belonging to a VBC, by at least registering for the community, boosts satisfaction, affective commitment and positive WOM activities. In addition active belonging brings higher levels of satisfaction and affective commitment than non-participative belonging.

From a marketing perspective several implications have arisen from the results of this research. First, companies should consider setting up VBCs as a way to enhance consumers' levels of satisfaction and affective commitment. The high costs companies face when reinforcing ties with their customers can be reduced through VBCs. It is also important to establish good relations with customers because WOM communication among members is much more effective than advertising activities. In this regard we also verified that belonging to a VBC increases the level of positive WOM developed by customer members. VBCs can help companies identify the needs and desires of particular individuals or groups of people. However, few consumers currently seem to be highly involved in VBC activities even though active participation is much better for the brand than non-participative or passive belonging. For this reason it is important to stimulate active participative belonging to VBCs in order to be able to classify different customers and different needs; in order to do so it is important to have quite a high number of comments from different people. In addition, in VBCs an individual member can terminate his or her membership in the community conveniently and effortlessly simply by ending the navigation session and never returning to the virtual community domain (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). For this reason also, active participation should be increased and stimulated by the company. In order to keep participation high the VBC should satisfy some of the consumers' needs, such as offering detailed information about products, making special offers to community members (Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005) or increasing consumers' familiarity with the VBC (Casaló *et al.*, 2007).

Finally, the VBCs that we analysed were on Facebook, the largest virtual globally-developed community. Facebook can be a powerful tool with which

companies can develop VBCs easily. A company, for example, could develop a VBC and invite members of other VBCs developed around a brand directly to the new community. In addition, instead of creating a new VBC, companies could decide to sponsor those that already exist. By using VBCs companies can interact with registered members to identify their needs. Knowing what the consumer wants before products or offers are created increases the efficiency of the marketing transaction, its ultimate effectiveness and brand equity. Aside from the active interaction with customers through VBCs, companies could identify customers' needs through the use of netnography.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this study. First, due to the large number of VBCs, the study may not be representative of all of the VBCs that are developed on the internet. The VBCs that we used were developed on Facebook and, for this reason, they could be very different from other VBCs. It would be a good idea for future studies to analyse other VBCs with different characteristics that are not developed within a general virtual community such as Facebook, MySpace, or the like. VBCs that are developed by a company and have a higher number of activities are likely to increase the levels of active participative belonging and involve more members, boosting satisfaction, affective commitment and positive WOM behaviour. Limitations could be caused by the specific case we used. ZARA is in fact unique; its business model and its characteristics are very different from those of other companies.

Moreover, we have to point out that the conceptual framework of non-participative belonging was only tested on a total of 50 respondents and can only exist in those VBCs that are developed within a general virtual community such as Facebook. Future research may test in a broader way the potential effects of different levels of belonging on satisfaction, affective commitment and positive WOM as well as those on brand equity.

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