

**EXPLORING WHAT MOTIVATES CONSUMERS TO
CO-CREATE VALUE IN VIRTUAL FASHION COMMUNITIES**

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Purpose –

A growing body of literature is focusing on the changing role of consumers, who are actively engaging in the value creation process (e.g. Bhalla, 2011; Füller, 2010; Grönroos and Ravald, 2011; Payne *et al.*, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Increasing attention is therefore given, both by practitioners and the academic community, to the use of social media and online activities as a marketing tool and a way to collaborate with consumers, for example to design and develop new products (e.g. Hoyer *et al.*, 2010; O’Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010). However, very limited research exists on understanding what motivate consumers to participate in the value co-creation process, in particular, through virtual communities (Füller *et al.*, 2010; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Hoyer *et al.*, 2010). This paper aims at filling this gap, exploring consumer motivations to actively engage in virtual communities and co-create value, in the context of the global fashion industry.

Design/Methodology/approach –

This is a qualitative exploratory study (Bryman and Bell, 2011). A semi-structured interview guide was designed to examine various aspects of the research problem (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) and data organised around seven codes, generated by reviewing relevant academic literature.

Findings –

Findings show that consumers tend to participate in value co-creation for personal rather than product-related motives. A range of motivations could be identified with recognition, self-expression, relationship building, and skill development being the most significant ones. Three consumer segments were generated: Fashion Lovers, Designers and Artists. These findings also clearly support the principles of the S-D logic identified by Vargo and Lusch (2008a) and provide additional evidence that consumers are increasingly interested in actively engaging in value co-creation rather than being passive recipients.

Research limitations/implications –

A limited number of in-depth interviews, in virtual communities from one industry, was carried out. While significant insights into the topic are provided, generalisation cannot be made at this stage. Future research could address those aspects.

Practical implications –

This research provides findings relevant for retailers and fashion manufacturers.

Originality/value –

This paper addresses the lack of research on what motivates consumers to co-create value in virtual fashion communities, making a contribution in understanding that and providing some empirical testing of the value co-creation literature.

Key words

Value co-creation, motivations, virtual communities, exploratory study, fashion

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Companies nowadays are no longer simply producing and pushing goods and services into the marketplace, they are having a conversation with their environment and the empowered customer (Harridge-March and Quinton, 2009). The empowered customer, who is very skilled at using the new digital platforms, better educated, well-informed, and creative, actively participates in a variety of activities within the organisation (Dellarocas, 2003), up to potentially playing a brand management role (Asmussen *et al.*, 2013). One important outcome of the increased customer empowerment is that consumers have a growing desire to play a greater role in the process of value creation (Hoyer *et al.*, 2010). Bolton and Saxena-Iyer (2009) describe this process as co-creation, which can occur in a variety of different contexts in a company. Thus, the traditional producer-consumer model, in which value was created by a producer and purchased by a customer for consumption, has been replaced by a model of co-creation of value, a process in which value is created through joint activities and interaction of providers and customers (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2009).

One way in which consumers can be seen engaging in the value co-creation process is via online virtual communities. Despite growing attention by practitioners and academics to the use of social media and customer online activities (like electronic Word-of-Mouth, eWOM) as a marketing tool, very limited research exists on understanding motivations for customers to engage in the value co-creation process through virtual communities. This paper aims at filling this gap, exploring consumer motivation to actively participate in virtual communities and co-creating value, in the context of the global fashion industry.

Literature Review

A paradigm shift from the traditional goods-dominated view to a Service-Dominant (S-D) logic was introduced by Vargo and Lusch (2004). Based on ten foundational premises, Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2008a) have developed and further refined a comprehensive framework (Vargo, 2011) for a new service-dominant logic in marketing. They argue that customers today value joint activities and seek intangible resources, interaction, and relationships rather than traditional elements, such as tangible resources, embedded value and transactions (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008a). Customers are seen as actively contributing to value creation, becoming resources for value co-creation (Grönroos, 2011).

The term co-creation is used quite broadly by marketing theory as any form of customer involvement in the construction of product or brand experience and consequently perceived value (Roser *et al.*, 2009). Co-creation has been receiving an increasing amount of attention and is frequently associated with new product development (NPD) (Hoyer *et al.*, 2010). Many scholars emphasise that joint activities between the firm and the customer through which value can be created often occur in NPD (e.g. Blasco *et al.*, 2011; Fiore, 2008, Fuller *et al.*, 2010).

In the S-D logic, customer involvement in the core offering itself is described as co-production and accordingly identified as a subcategory of co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008a). This raises the question whether customers also differentiate between co-creation and co-production and what exactly is of value to them when collaborating with a company. Although many authors (e.g. Hoyer *et al.*, 2010; O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010) see co-creation and virtual customer integration as beneficial within product development, it remains unclear as to why customers engage

in virtual communities. According to Hoyer *et al.* (2010) specific motives of consumer participation are not yet completely understood and need further exploration. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand and explore why consumer engage in value co-creation in virtual communities, with specific reference to the global fashion industry.

Value Co-Creation in virtual communities

Firms are increasingly recognising the power of the Internet as a platform for co-creating value with customers (Sawhney *et al.*, 2005). The integration of new technologies in customer - company interactions has redefined the roles customers play in innovation and value creation (Nambisan and Baron, 2009). The virtual environment increases the speed and the persistence of customer engagement as interaction happens in real-time, synchronous or asynchronous, with a high frequency, and without geographic boundaries (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010; Sawhney *et al.*, 2005). Thus, companies are in a position to reach many influential users who provide rich information and ideas (Sawhney *et al.*, 2005) and could help to fulfil yet unmet needs or might improve existing offerings (Ernst *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, experienced users, called lead users, can offer valuable input at the different stages of NPD, communicate trends and provide market intelligence (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). As virtual communities provide a neutral and fairly low risk environment, they allow their members to build relationships with like-minded people (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010), express their opinion, as well as to communicate and create content that is relevant to themselves and to the company (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). According to Wellman (2005), communities can strengthen interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, and a sense of social belonging. Social bonds can be developed between members, but also between members and the company or the brand itself (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, firms are also able to maintain an on-going dialogue with customers, which allow them to tap into the social dimension of customer knowledge (Sawhney *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, Kim and Jin (2006) argue that many virtual communities allow creating enthusiasm for a specific consumption-related activity, as instead of simply buying fashion products, virtual communities allow the creation of an online experience around the desired product. Kozinets (1999) highlights the fact that people value a membership in virtual communities that focus on the consumption related to a person's self-image. Fashion, being a high involvement product, has a great impact on one's self-image and implies that members increasingly seek to interact with others who share the same interest (Kim and Jin, 2006). Virtual communities that focus on fashion products may therefore have promising potential, as members get the urge to present themselves to others in a social environment to strengthen their self-image (Kim and Jin, 2006).

Consumer Motivation

Customers today are considered a valuable source of innovation and their active and productive roles are getting more attention than in the previously firm dominated world (Füller, 2010). Yet, customers, their opinions and needs are complex and driven by a variety of motives. Due to the fact companies often struggle to adequately fulfil customer needs and expectations, it is important to explore their initial motivation for engaging in virtual communities.

Hoyer *et al.*, (2010) stress that specific motives for consumer participation in online communities and NPD are not completely understood. In order to inspire consumers

to engage in the co-creation process, companies primarily need to find out what consumers expect from co-creation and how consumers' motivations and personalities influence those expectations (Füller, 2010). Also, Füller (2010) emphasises that little is known as to why consumers contribute to virtual co-creation projects initiated by producers.

According to O'Hern and Rindfleisch (2010), a growing number of consumers have become active due to several "cultural developments". Cultural developments such as growing suspicion, distrust, scepticism of marketing communication in general and claims about new product performance in particular have influenced end-users in their becoming active in new product development. Furthermore, many consumers are not sufficiently satisfied by simply consuming material objects; instead, they wish to contribute creatively, thus obtaining intrinsic psychological benefits (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010). Their view that material objects are not fully able to satisfy intrinsic psychological needs supports Vargo and Lusch's view that value is not incorporated in the good itself, rather in the service, the interactions and relationships (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008a). Moreover, Bhalla (2011) discusses the importance of understanding motives, as it is naïve to believe that consumers in the co-creation process are merely motivated by altruistic reasons.

Füller (2010) suggests that consumer motives may be heterogeneous and depend on one's personality. On the contrary, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) point out that many modern consumers are experimental by nature, which may encourage them to take part in the co-creation processes without any great passion for example for fashion or for a particular brand. The main motivator may then be enjoyment and playfulness. According to Zwass (2010) potential motivators in co-creation may be for example an altruistic desire to contribute, identity construction, a desire for social standing, recognition, and learning through co-creation from and with others.

Nevertheless, Füller (2010) argues that consumers only engage voluntarily if they consider co-creation to be rewarding. In this context, Moisio and Rökman (2011) note that not only the outcome, but also the experience of interacting can be rewarding for some people.

Füller (2010) stresses the fact that firms need to understand what people expect from virtual co-creation projects, as consumers are only willing to share their creative ideas, honestly state their product preferences, and spend significant amounts of time modifying existing product concepts, if their expectations are met. If these expectations cannot be met, co-creation projects can rapidly collapse and, in the case of businesses that heavily rely on consumer participation, not meeting customer expectations can lead to failure (O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010). Expectations may differ depending on the kind of product and innovation task, the extent of participation, expected incentives (monetary/ non-monetary) or the desire to meet and interact with like-minded consumers (Füller, 2010). As motivations influence these expectations, Füller (2006) referred to a self-determination theory to investigate the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of consumers to engage in leisure activities which virtual co-creation can be considered as. Consumer motivation is considered intrinsic if an activity is valued for its own sake; extrinsic if they focus on potential outcomes is separated from the activity itself (Füller, 2010). Most users are motivated by a combination of intrinsic (fun and altruism), internalised extrinsic motives (learning, reputation) and entirely extrinsic motives (payment, career prospects) (Füller, 2010). With regard to a rich body of motivation research in related fields, Füller (2010) identified ten categories of motives: intrinsic playful task, curiosity, self-efficacy, skill development, information seeking, recognition (visibility), community support,

making friends, personal needs (dissatisfaction), and compensation (monetary reward).

Hoyer *et al.* (2010), who see the motivation of consumers as an antecedent of the degree of co-creation, distinguish four types of motivation: financial, social, technical, and psychological. First, financial motivation can be triggered directly through monetary prizes or profit sharing as well as indirectly through intellectual property which a consumer may receive. Second, consumers who seek social benefits are motivated by enhanced reputation, social esteem, and strengthened ties with like-minded users (Nambisan and Baron, 2009). Third, technical motives are characterised by the pure knowledge a user obtains by engaging in communities and co-creation activities. Fourth, psychological factors are often of intrinsic value and difficult to understand. Nevertheless, pride, self-expression (Etgar, 2008), and the pure enjoyment of contributing in terms of creativity (Nambisan and Baron, 2009) are often considered as psychological motivators. In their study, Hoyer *et al.* (2010) clearly state that research should be carried out to investigate when consumers are motivated to become involved and appreciate co-creation.

Fashion products being high involvement products usually activate powerful feelings in people (Kim and Jin, 2006). This may result in consumers having very personal motives and expectations connected to feelings of passion and self-fulfilment (Moisio and Rökman, 2011). Although customers should be the centre of attention when developing a virtual fashion community rather than focusing on the product (Kim and Jin, 2006), very little research exists on what motivates consumers to contribute and disclose their personal preferences and needs online.

The literature on virtual communities often focuses on co-creation within a technological setting and the development of features (e.g. open source software development), but there are no studies concentrating on the fashion industry in particular (Dahlander *et al.*, 2008), although it plays a central role in the global economy. The fashion industry is predicted to grow steadily in all parts of the world in the coming years (Datamonitor, 2011), further pointing out opportunities for businesses to gain competitive advantage engaging with consumers. Although some fashion retailers have started researching ways to improve company-customer communication and are becoming active online, this process is still underdeveloped. Due to the fact that the fashion industry is in a mature phase, during which value creation occurs through intangibles (Dahlander *et al.*, 2008), it is essential to understand what motivates customers to engage in the co-creation of value. Particularly fashion companies could benefit by creating attractive communities and inducing consumer to participate, capturing valuable customer input and insights for up-to-date fashion development and design.

Research Methodology

The main objective of this study is to understand what motivates customers to engage in the co-creation process, participating in virtual fashion communities. In particular, it explores customer motives, trying to understand whether those are product-related and linked to being integrated in the product development processes or connected with user experience triggering personal values.

As highlighted in the literature review, there is a very limited body of research on what motivates consumers to engage in the co-creation of value in virtual communities. Those existing, do not specifically address the issue nor are contextualised in the fashion industry. It seems therefore appropriate, in order to

better and further understand the phenomenon and the nature of the problem (Bryman and Bell, 2011), to conduct an exploratory study.

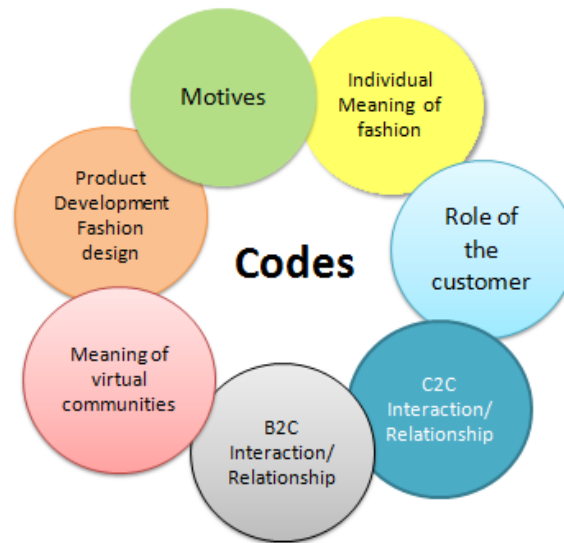
The need for explorative research is emphasised by Hoyer *et al.*, (2010) who point out that future research should examine in more detail what motivates consumers to co-create. Füller *et al.* (2010) also posit that little research exists on consumers' experiences during virtual co-creation tasks. Moreover, only very few authors (Füller, 2006; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004) have dealt with how appropriate incentives can be created to motivate customers to freely share their knowledge and ideas up to now. Füller (2006) investigated why consumers engage and spend considerable time and effort actively contributing to a producer's NPD process whereas Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) explored what motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet (eWOM) and Liang *et al.* (2013) the antecedents of eWOM. Furthermore, the fact that few empirical studies have investigated the use of virtual communities by fashion retailers for product development underlines that the field of this research topic is still under-researched (Kim and Jin, 2006).

Given that this study is looking at generating in-depth understanding of motivations for value co-creation in virtual fashion communities, a qualitative approach is employed (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). Data were collected conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews via Skype, as when appropriately designed and carried out, interviews provide a great range of insight and understanding of a phenomenon (Rowley, 2012). A non-probability sampling strategy, using purposive judgement sampling, was chosen (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010), as the key driver of the sampling strategy was to generate data using 'knowledgeable' informants, who were identified as being fashion conscious males and females, aged between 18 and 35 (generation Y or Millennials), actively engaging in virtual fashion communities anywhere in the world and fluent in English. As the scope of the research was not limited to one or a few countries, given that the fashion industry is increasingly global, Skype seemed to be the most appropriate and suitable medium to conduct the research (Hanna, 2012).

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to examine the different components of the research problem (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), starting with warm up questions and progressively increasing the level of complexity. Interviewees were also offered the option of a Skype instant messaging chat, in case they were feeling more comfortable and less distressed in writing - like when participating in virtual fashion communities - rather than speaking (Hanna, 2012) in case English wasn't their native language.

Suitable interviewees, selected researching virtual fashion communities, were contacted via email and a total of 12 interviews were conducted, with participants from 10 different countries and 7 different virtual fashion communities. Names were coded to ensure anonymity, interviews recorded, fully transcribed (where necessary) ready for data analysis and summarised (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). On basis of the proposition of the previous literature review (Yin, 2003), data were organised around seven codes, as shown by fig. 1.

Fig. 1: Seven codes for interview analysis



The seven codes were selected with a view to answering the research question, thus aiming at understanding different motives for participating in interactive co-creation through virtual communities in the fashion context. Codes were organised into categories and then analysed using conceptual analysis, in order to recognise patterns and frequency of concepts (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010), which helped to discuss findings and draw some preliminary conclusions.

Findings and discussion

The key findings are presented in the following section and structured around the seven selected codes (see fig. 1), with the aim of discussing and understanding the complex and multifaceted features of consumer motivations to engage in value co-creation in virtual fashion communities.

All 12 interviewees showed a positive attitude towards fashion, but offered different perspectives on the role of fashion in their lives. Their connection with fashion is either a leisure interest, a passion, a hobby, an inspiration for art work, related to one's job as a designer, or related to the desire to be active in this industry in the future. In all cases, it became clear that the respondents associate fashion with beauty and aesthetics or consider it to be a creative source of inspiration that enriches their lives. Moreover, it was found out that the respondents use fashion to express something personal, connected either with personal characteristics or a certain style. They believed that it allows them to express uniqueness and show people what kind of person they are:

"[...] fashion or style is something that expresses your personality. I mean what you wear is who you are. It resembles what you want people to think of you and how people should look at you". (Andrew)

These differences in the perception of the role of fashion subsequently would lead to the existence of a broad range of motives. In fact, depending on the respondents' connection with fashion, their engagement in the community differs. Some show an intense involvement by posting personal styles via photos, commenting on other members' posts, sharing ideas, participating in fashion contests or uploading artwork

related to fashion, whereas others design T-shirts, submit designs, vote, and comment. Due to the fact that respondents interact and participate in different ways, depending on their connection to and perception of fashion, three segments have been identified, as shown in Table 1: “*fashion lovers*”, “*designers*” and “*artists*”.

Table 1: Interviewees segments

Segment	Members (community)	Activity/Way of engaging
“Fashion Lovers”	Kathy (Zara) Maria (Zara) Enrico (Zara) Andrew (Uniqlo) Michelle (Uniqlo) Emily (Zaggora)	Posting, commenting, sharing, voting
“Designers”	Tim (Threadless) David (Threadless + La Fraise) Phil (La Fraise) Brian (La Fraise)	Designing T-Shirts and graphics, uploading them to the community, voting on designs of others
“Artists”	Suzanne (Benetton) Eve (Benetton)	Upload of artwork, posting, commenting, sharing, voting

All respondents, when discussing today’s role of customers, acknowledge a change in customer behaviour and believe that customers are increasingly empowered by interacting and communicating with the brand, apart from having a wider choice when deciding what and where to buy.

“They are much more creative. They are more open today. They can show the world what they made, what they know”. (Eve)

Customers are described as having the necessary skills and knowledge to take on a meaningful role, which might lead to the desire of playing a greater role in the process of value creation as suggested by Hoyer *et al.* (2010).

“Smart, informed, very aware of their needs and wants”. (Michelle)

This is in line with scholars who describe today’s customer as being more skilled, better educated, creative, and active, thus having the possibility of taking part in a variety of organisational activities (Asmussen *et al.*, 2013; Dellarocas, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b) and communicating. Furthermore, respondents believe that customers are increasingly seeking to engage with the brand itself, becoming part of a brand and talking to a brand via various channels.

The fact that the respondents want to become part of a brand they love is one indicator that the traditional producer-consumer model, in which the consumer acts as buyer only, is out-of-date, as argued by Vargo and Lusch (2008a) and McColl-Kennedy *et*

al. (2009). In fact, co-creation of value as a concept reflects the principle that value is not created exclusively by the company, but through the interaction of different participants, including the customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Several other authors (e.g. Grönroos, 2011; Payne *et al.*, 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b) have stated that interaction becomes the central feature in the value creation process and that value-creating interactions can include many members (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). It was therefore key to understand how respondents perceive interaction, in the sense of communication and dialogue between virtual community participants, and whether that could represent a motivational factor for engaging in their chosen virtual communities. The majority of respondents acknowledged that interaction and dialogue with the other members is one of the most important factors for their involvement in the community. For many respondents C2C interaction is purely fun and entertaining. They enjoy posting, sharing, and commenting with people from all over the world, who share similar interests and provide new fashion ideas. This illustrates that these users value the main features of virtual communities, such as building relationships with like-minded people (Pitta and Fowler, 2005), and sharing information without geographic boundaries (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010). Other respondents, who design clothing themselves, see C2C communication as essential for their work. Although some have been freelance illustrators or graphic designers for years, they consider interaction as a source of valuable feedback to improve their abilities and/or skills.

“Some designers have been in the community for years, they are like friends. We give each other feedback and comment on work. They are often very experienced graphic designers so their opinion is very important to me”. (Phil)

The fact that respondents use communities to develop skills and knowledge emphasises the importance of knowledge transfer, relationships and interaction within value creation, as indicated by Vargo and Lusch (2008a). Moreover, respondents seemed to agree upon the fact that interaction leads to close friendships, meaningful and appreciated feedback, and a collaborative atmosphere.

The new approach to service marketing posits that firms should actively market with customers instead of marketing to customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2008b; Grönroos and Ravald, 2010). It was therefore important to explore the role played in value co-creation by B2C communication, in the sense of communication and dialogue between the firm and the customer. Most respondents argued that, while B2C communication is not a direct motivation to become part of a virtual community and to engage, it can quickly become a demotivating factor, when the company doesn't handle properly the interaction. For those respondents, who are also interested in and seeking for feedback from the company, then interaction could be generally motivating and encourage further involvement. It is quite interesting to note that many respondents expressed views as to how firms should interact, as that could be an indicator that the respondents still perceive B2C communication not fully satisfactory. As interaction takes place in different directions, the respondents believe that it is essential for companies to manage, read, and listen to what customers talk about concerning the brand.

“[Dialogue is] [...] the most important thing today and you have to centre the customer. It’s a customer-centred communication. And companies really have to rethink their all whole marketing area and engagement, activities, their whole marketing and brand strategy [...]”. (Maria)

The international mix of respondents helped find out that the cultural context and background are very important and companies should take those into account when engaging in an open dialogue with customers, fully embracing their culture, as otherwise it may again be a demotivating factor.

Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2008a) suggest that value is experiential and co-created as a result of joint collaboration with other resource integrators. However, in the product innovation literature, scholars claim that co-creation specifically within NPD processes can lead to value creation for the customer (Blasco *et al.*, 2011; Hoyer *et al.*, 2010). In order to find out whether these joint activities are perceived product-centred or other factors are considered, the respondents were asked whether their involvement in the online community was driven by the desire to getting involved in the fashion design process. The answers given by the respondents can generally be divided into three categories: respondents whose involvement was clearly driven by engaging in the fashion design process; respondents whose involvement was not driven by that; and respondents who would like to be more involved in fashion design process and would value such initiatives by companies.

Only two of the twelve respondents describe their involvement as being solely related to the fashion design process, as they see themselves as designers. On the other hand, the remaining ten respondents engage in a chosen community not with the intent of contributing in the design process. One, for examples, stated:

“[...] But that’s where we are coming to the point [where] it is not only about the product it’s about the whole experience, engagement with other people about the brand. It doesn’t really matter whether you are actually improving or developing the product”. (Andrew)

This can already be seen as an indicator that the customer does not necessarily want to become a co-producer, as the creation of units of output is not essential for their involvement (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a). Consumers, in this case, seem not to be motivated to engage by the idea of creating a new product in cooperation with the firm, but rather value the creation of real customer experience as suggested by Goldgaber (2010).

Nevertheless, the initial reason as to why the respondents become active is highly diverse. Some simply like the product or the brand, some want to show that they agree with the brand, some love sharing and enjoy being part of a network of people who all like the same brand and others want to present their artwork and visuals by means of fashion design. These motives show that customer involvement has to do with the brand and the product in a broader sense, but not necessarily with improving or developing the product. Thus, the research findings support the argument by Vargo and Lusch (2008a) that co-production is a subcategory of co-creation, as it is less compulsory and more effortless for consumers.

Despite that, most of the respondents express potential interest in being more involved in the fashion design process, if companies approached them. They believe that communities are a great way of integrating new, fresh, and interesting ideas into the process of creating new products, consider that a fulfilling experience, and take it as a chance to learn new things.

Several motives have been explored so far, discussing respondents view also with reference to the literature presented. The final part of this work discusses some findings coming from more explicit questions that, at the end of the interview, interviewees were asked to address around three areas: why they engage in that specific community, what would demotivate them and what value they perceive when engaging in that community. Answers were classified into the different categories identified and discussed in the literature review.

Findings show that motives are heterogeneous and fall within the ten categories identified by Füller (2010) and the four types identified by Hoyer *et al.* (2010), as previously discussed. O'Hern and Rindfleisch (2010) see cultural developments such as growing suspicion, distrust, and scepticism as indicators as to why customers become active in communities. These factors, however, are not confirmed by the majority of answers of the respondents. O'Hern and Rindfleisch (2010) further argue that consumers enjoy contributing to material objects; however, this can only be backed up occasionally by 2 answers given. Moreover, some scholars argue that consumers only become involved when they receive a reward. With the exception of a few reward-oriented consumers, monetary incentives or a reward in the form of a prize were not found to be important for their engagement in virtual fashion communities. Most respondents seem to value interaction within the community, social benefits (reputation, strengthened ties with like-minded people) and psychological factors (self-expression, recognition) most. Moreover, one extrinsic motive that seems to influence a few of the respondents is the hope of career development through networking.

Conclusions, managerial implications and limitations

Although marketing theory has used the term co-creation quite broadly as any form of customer involvement in the construction of product or brand experience (Roser *et al.*, 2009), many scholars use the term in the sense of collaborating with customers to design and develop new products (e.g. Hoyer *et al.*, 2010; O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2010). They claim that value can be created through joint activities between the company and the customer via virtual platforms. Yet, it needs clarification as to why customers engage in virtual communities and whether the involvement into the development process of new products is a key motivator to engage in online activities. The results of this study show that consumers who participate in value co-creation through virtual fashion communities do so for personal motives rather than product-related motives. A range of motivations could be identified with recognition, self-expression, relationship building, and skill development being the most significant ones. The results also indicate that the value customers perceive lies within the community itself rather than in activities related to the development or the design of fashion products. Especially C2C interaction and relationship building with like-minded people were identified as being of great importance, given that customers perceive them as being fun and entertaining, ideal for feedback and skills development. In addition to that, these findings clearly support the principles of the S-D logic identified by Vargo and Lusch (2008a) and emphasise the fact that customers today want to actively engage in the value co-creation rather than being passive

recipients. Although B2C communication was not found to be a direct motive for becoming part of a community in the first place, interaction and dialogue fostered by the firm would encourage further engagement of members.

This study makes a twofold contribution, exploring consumer motivations to engage in value co-creation in virtual communities and also contributing to empirically demonstrate that customers are prepared and would like to interact with companies to co-create value with a specific brand and other community members. Business organisations should therefore encourage them to take part in virtual communities, as customers identify value co-creation with the participation and the engagement in the community rather than just with the material offering provided by fashion companies. Furthermore, this paper provides some valuable insights and has the potential to generate managerial implications also relevant to the design of a more effective and engaging co-creation experience in virtual communities, as understanding customer motivations should help companies to manage expectations. Some fashion manufacturers have already developed tools and systems to improve the communication between consumers and the company; others, in that sense, as explored in this study, have implemented virtual communities. As the fashion industry is highly widespread and expected to grow even more, a compelling, interactive, engaging, and supportive community, bearing in mind customer motivations to engage, can lead to satisfaction, brand loyalty and value co-creation in a the long-term perspective. If virtual communities allow customers to co-create their own value, that can become an important source of competitive advantage for fashion companies who are facing empowered customers in a highly competitive environment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). Therefore, companies should look beyond their traditional approaches and develop effective strategies for identifying and utilising ideas, skills and talent of empowered customers, without neglecting their primary motives for engaging in the interactive co-creation of value.

Limitations of this study refer to the number of interviews carried out and to the fact that one industry only – fashion – was considered. The paper is not claiming that findings from the study are generalisable, but, it is aiming at providing a first insight into the topic, supported by some initial findings in an under-researched area. A higher number of in-depth interviews or a mix-methods approach (e.g. in-depth interviews and netnography in virtual fashion communities) would generate greater insights into the topic. In addition to that, research on virtual communities in other industries would also provide a clearer and more general understanding of what motivates consumer to engage and co-create value in virtual communities.

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