

## ***Facebook Virtual Brand Communities: Why I belong and you seek it?***

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to expand the research sphere concerning the concept of Virtual Brand Communities usually referred to as VBC (Casaló et al. 2007, 2008); particularly within Facebook. Ergo, we intend to apply and test the existing community participation's motives into a Facebook's virtual brand community (a.k.a brandpage); while examining the interaction between the act of participation, the loyalty towards brand around which the community is developed and the generation of a positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

Keywords: Virtual Brand Communities (VBC), participation, participation motives, Facebook, Brand loyalty, Electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

## I-Introduction:

Maintaining their actual clients while acquiring new ones are the major concerns in marketers' list of priorities. For this reason, companies employ many tools to acquire process and exploit the valuable information that allow them to achieve this goal. However, the traditional knowledge gathering means are both costly and geographically restrained. Hence, here comes the Internet as the answer for this predicament where it has granted a new and cheaper medium for promoting communication among consumers and organizations (Royo-Vela and Casamassima, 2011). Among the tools bestowed by the Internet, online communities have emerged as a leading phenomenon. These virtual communities favor the blooming of "*collaborative groups where marketers and consumers interact to instigate more engaging products and services*" (Casaló *et al.*, 2010). Using virtual brand communities, firms found a convenient and efficient way to contact and engage consumers while allowing interactions among them through forums, chats and other entities. In the same fashion, social networking sites specifically Facebook provide greater opportunities for firms to take more advantage of the communities built within. The State of Inbound Marketing report (2012) stated that 42% of marketers report that Facebook is critical or important to their business while 93% of marketers use social media for business.

## II-Theoretical background:

### 2.1. Virtual Community, Brand Community and Virtual Brand Community

A Virtual Community is similar to a community of mind described by Tönnies (1967) who described the community as intimate, private, and exclusive as living together which is different from society, except that it takes an electronic form while being both timeless and spaceless. In other words, Virtual Communities (VCs) are places on the web where people can search, find and talk to likeminded others (Gupta *et al.*, 2004). In other words, VCs are acting as "*coffee shops*" (Gupta *et al.*, 2004) for of one mind people to gather even virtually, share and discuss.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) pointed out that VCs meet four types of consumer needs: (1) interest, (2) relationship building, (3) transaction, and (4) fantasy. Since we are interested in virtual brand community, we shall solely elaborate the communities of interests which are formed by individuals with a shared interest, expertise, and passion in a wide range of areas such as fashion, cars or antics collectors.

The concept of brand community has matured due to the noteworthy bond between the consumer and a particular brand combined with the exigency of a novel means to hold those consumers. In accordance with Holland and Baker (2001), the foremost goals of brand community participation are functional and hedonic. Functional goals specify "*the information exchange among community members whereas hedonic goals lead members to have a worthy and positive experience through their interactions*" (Hur *et al.*, 2011). Basing on those goals, companies have begun employing brand community for "*the strategic purpose*" of reaching "*a particular market segment*" through the customers "*exchange of information and/or meanings about the brand*" (Muniz and Schau, 2005). The creating of "*a brand-centred sub-culture*" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) "*will be credible and impactful in persuading, bonding customers to the brand and making them more loyal*" (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). That being the case, companies consider brand community as a low-cost and unsolicited tool to bind consumers to the offered brands thus ensuring their loyalty.

*“A Virtual Brand Community (VBC) could be defined as a brand community developed online with the characteristics of a virtual community” (Royo –Vela and Casamassima, 2011), accordingly it can be assumed it maintains most of their characteristics. “A VBC can be built within a virtual community created to discuss general topics”. On the other hand, within this community, it is feasible to “narrow the VBC developed around specific brands. In these particular types of communities, people usually gather information about a brand before purchasing a product.” (Royo –Vela and Casamassima, 2011).*

Furthermore, it is essential to point out that a VBC can be developed Social Networking Sites particularly Facebook which is the case of our study. They are frequently developed by a sole or a group of loyal customers, yet, the company might also create the set. Though the academic nomination of these is Virtual Brand Communities, VBC they are also called brand “brand pages”, “fan pages”, “groups” or “profile pages” etc. depending on the social media chosen.

From a customer-experiential perspective, the communication in these communities can head in four dissimilar directions as distinguished by McAlexander *et al.* (2002).The latter has asserted the brand community as “*a fabric of relationships in which the customer is situated. Crucial relationships include those between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers*”.

## 2.2. Facebook: a VBC yet not like others

Facebook is one of the most Popular and fast-growing social media with remarkable marketing potential in the world. In Facebook, people can join groups based on a long list of common social interests, such as music, arts, sport, cinema, fashion etc. In these communities or groups ,individuals are barely acquainted with each other, yet they are joined by that common interest, they use the network to look for new like-minded friends, trade knowledge, chat, share emotional support, and so on (Royo-Vela and Casamassima, 2011).

Virtual brand communities on Facebook are nowadays so trendy that they draw many users with the common interest of engaging in community activities. Companies like individuals can create their own account as a free fan page, where they can invite users to become a “fan” of their products, services or brands. Facebook statistics of 2013 revealed that Worldwide, there are over 1.23 billion monthly active Facebook users which is a 16% increase year over year (Facebook statistics, 2013). Furthermore, 70% of brand marketers consider social media advertising as more valuable for building brand awareness than for driving direct response while 16 Million local business pages have been created as of May 2013 comparing to 8 million in June 2012. This offers an opportunity to reach an active and willing audience without any financial risk. The aim of Facebook is “*to make Pages more engaging and more social*” said Gokul Rajaram, Facebook’s product director for ads.

These numbers and many others can be explained by the fact that Facebook VBCs’ help lessen time and improve the results in elevating the general profitability comparing to usual communities. Besides, Facebook VBC help in cutting costs by including customers in the value creation process thus adhering to the virtual relationship marketing standpoint. Finally, it is essential to remark that the relative doubtful overuse of the conventional cyberspace marketing tools has been overshadowed by the escalating trustful use in social media.

### III-Hypothesis:

In this work we adhere to the “uses and gratification” theory (Katz *et al.*, 1974) which may provides an understanding of Facebook’s ultimate success since it has usually been used in media researches. As an “*audience-based theory*”, uses and gratification assumes” *that different consumers use the same media messages for different purposes, depending on their individual needs and goals*” (Sheldon, 2008). Therefore in the context of social media, the uses and gratifications theory categorized the benefits derived from participation into four types: cognitive, social integrative, personal integrative and hedonic benefits (Nambisan and Baron, 2007).

We shall present the relationships between VBC participation, its motives then brand loyalty and electronic Word-of-Mouth.

#### 3.1. Participation’s antecedents:

There are several motives that entice people to participate in a VBC. However, based on the work of Dholakia *et al.* (2004); Gwinner *et al.* (1998); Sicilia and Palazòn (2008) and an informal netnographic observation, we have selected only four motives to be included in our study which are practical benefits, social benefits, entertainment benefits and economic benefits.

To, Sicilia and Palazòn (2008), a VBC provides three different kinds of value for the users: first a “*functional*” one (practical benefits) such as advice, information, needed knowledge; Secondly a “*social value*” (social benefits) meaning a need for friendship, emotional support; thirdly an “*entertainment value*” (entertainment benefits) like having fun, relaxation through playing etc.

Starting with the same order, VBCs’ success depends, if not solely then mostly, on the members’ participation activity which means the generation and exchange of knowledge. Hence, this knowledge creation and exchange entice people to participate in a VBC (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Second, people participation in VBCs’ reflects the mutual feeling of solidarity fueled by the shared passion towards the brand in question. Those people are lured by the need of belonging and “*the feeling of togetherness*” (Preece, 2001). Third, entertainment advantages entice people to participate as by doing that they are seeking fun, delightful experiences even virtually. Besides, Dholakia *et al.* (2004) has already established the direct relationship between the entertainment value factor and participation behavior. Fourth, Gwinner *et al.* (1998) has already established the economic gaining as a motive for community participation. By joining people are hoping to gain discounts, get into lotteries and raffles etc.

Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

*H1.a. Practical benefits have positive effect on consumer participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.*

*H1.b. Social benefits have positive effect on consumer’s participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.*

*H1.c. Entertainment benefits have positive effect on consumer’s participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.*

*H1.d. Economical benefits have positive effect on consumer's participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.*

3.2. Participation's outcomes:

*Brand Loyalty:*

Conventionally, participation in the activities occurring in a brand community may cultivate consumer's loyalty toward the brand around which the community is built. For example, McAlexander *et al.* (2002) proved that participation in events of the Jeep community favor consumer loyalty to the Jeep brand. In like manner, once consumers participate keenly in a brand community, "*their commitment, identification and emotional ties with the brand or organization around which the virtual community is developed may increase (Algesheimer et al, 2005)*" (Casaló *et al.*, 2010). Eventually, all of these may develop higher levels of consumer loyalty to the brand around which the virtual community is developed (Koh and Kim, 2004).

Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H2. Consumer participation in a VBC has a positive effect on consumer loyalty to the brand around which the community is developed.*

*Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM):*

According to Henning-Thurau *et al* (2004) participants, in the electronic word of mouth spreading, exhibit a similar set of motivations as participants in traditional WOM. For that reason, in our hypotheses, we will not distinguish between WOM and eWOM, yet we will focus on the latter. According to Royo –Vela and Casamassima (2010), VBCs' members not only post comments about the brand in question ,they also discuss other issues which can be labeled as "just-for-fun" topics, such as the members' frequency of purchase from the company, the level of addiction and so on. In relation to our case, we believe participants in a VBC may generate eWOM about the VBC or the brand in question by gossiping with their cyber friends in Facebook or any other type of virtual communities. This assumption was academically confirmed by Royo –Vela and Casamassima (2010), who have proved the existence of a positive relation between VBCs' participation or as they named it "*participative belonging*" and positive WOM and empirically by the Facebook statistics affirming that half of all social media users under age 35 follow their online friends' product and service recommendations.

Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

*H3. Consumer participation in a Facebook VBC has a significant positive effect on eWOM activity.*

*Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and brand loyalty:*

In reality, number of studies have proven that loyalty is an antecedent to WOM (Gounaris and Stathakopoulos, 2004) which was justified by the fact that customers already loyal to a given provider tend to give positive recommendations of the company to the persons in their reference group (friends and relatives). Moreover the study conducted by Casalo *et al.* (2008a) has shown a positive effect of loyalty on WOM in the context of commercial website.

Thus, the hypothesis 4 is proposed:

*H4. The level of consumer's loyalty has a significant positive effect on eWOM activity.*

It has been already established that participation in a brand community leads to consumer's loyalty toward the brand around which the community is built (Algesheimer and al, 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Since, Casalo & al. (2008a) have demonstrated a positive effect of loyalty on WOM in the context of commercial website; hence, it is coherent to assume that a higher level participation leads to a greater brand loyalty, thus a positive eWOM. Hence, we put forward the following proposition:

*P5. Brand loyalty acts as a mediator between participation and eWOM activity.*

## IV- Methodology

### 4.1 Measurement instrument

In addition to demographic measures, respondents were solicited about the time spent on Facebook and the brandpage (the frequency and duration of each visit). As for constructs, all measures were drawn from literature ( Table 1) . All the items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale where 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 5 represents "strongly agree".

### 4.2 Sampling and data collection

A structured questionnaire of 33 items, translated in French, was distributed via Facebook to collect data from Ooredoo's brandpage. Ooredoo is a brand name introduced by Qatar Telecom, which in itself is known in Tunisia as Tunisiana. This choice of brandpage was not abrupt as it was based on the popularity of the brand both off and online (more than 50 % of the population are subscribers and near a million Facebook brandpage member. The population was limited to Ooredoo's Facebook page members, where we collected from 253 respondents. After going through a descriptive analysis of the data, it was concluded that it contains 125 male and 128 female. While the Crosstabs showed those who spend more than 3 hours on Facebook, leave between 30 mn and an hour to check on the fanpage. While the least Facebook addicts spend mostly their whole time on Facebook checking the page.

## V-Statistical analysis and results:

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted followed by a confirmatory one.

### 4.1 Exploratory factor analysis

After performing a descriptive analysis, a factor analysis was conducted via a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation. Prior to PCA, we checked the suitability of the data meaning by appraised the factorability, which is according Churchill (1995) is the primer step in the EFA. This factorability is assessed by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity. PCA when applied to brand loyalty, the latter being a tridimensional, resulted in joining the conative and cognitive component. Having an excellent KMO of 0,920 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $p = 0.000$ ), a PCA applied to the attitudinal brand loyalty resulted in the extraction of 2 components with an eigenvalues over 1, having 89,894 % of the total variance explained by them .As for the participation motives, a PCA resulted in combing the social with the entertainment benefits and the economical with the practical motives .To validate the measures, we proceeded with calculating the Cronbach's alpha which revealed a satisfactory internal consistency (a threshold of 0.6, Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) (see Table 2).

### 4.2 Confirmatory factor analysis and hypotheses testing

After that, we have proceeded with the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the results born out of the EFA, using the Structural Equation Modeling. We opted for a two-step modeling approach beginning with a measurement model that allowed all latent constructs to correlate freely. It is relevant to mention that a partial CFA for the participation motives was conducted to facilitate the work on the global measurement model. Since the EFA of the participation motives resulted in two factors, the specification, which was based on assessment of the factor loadings and suggestions from modification indices, left only the Social-entertainment factor (see figure 1).

Going through the global measurement model specification, the fit indices for the CFA model improved noticeably ( $\chi^2 = 754,747$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 4,965$ , GFI = 0.901, TLI = 0.969, CFI = 0.916, RMSEA = 0.073). As it is noticed, the model fitness is acceptable. As for the model validity conditions, (convergent and discriminant validities), they were verified (see Table 3 and 4).

Having satisfied the various measurement issues such as measurement model fitness and reliability and validity tests, the hypotheses were tested by testing of the structural model. For a hypothesis to be valid and confirmed, its p-value should be less than 0.05 (risk error of 5%) and its regression weight significantly non null. Plus, its critical ratio (c.r) should exceed  $|1,96|$  (Akrouf, 2010, pp. 242) (Table 5). Lastly we found out that our proposed model could explain 87,7% of the variance in participation, 47,3% of the variance in brand loyalty and 84% of the variance in the electronic word of mouth. According to Chin (1998), R<sup>2</sup> values of 0,877 and 0,840 are considered substantial while 0,473 is moderate

According to this study, participation's motives hypothesis was partially validated after obliterating the practical and economical incentives and combining the social with entertainment ones. This is commonsensical since Facebook is a social media, logging to it is in, the first and last place, about being socializing and having fun. Therefore managers precisely brandpage administrators, ought to boost the number of activities and applications involving members preferably with a shared objectives among them. Also, they should endeavor to create events and experiences relating the member to your brand while benefiting from their participation to create a productive and long termed relationship.

In addition, we have found that participation have a positive effect on the member/consumer's brand loyalty and positive eWOM. While the later is also influenced positively by brand loyalty. Hence, a member participation in a Facebook's VBC will lead to a higher level of brand loyalty and the later is going to push for a greater positive eWOM activity. That's why, brand managers have to keep their fanpages up-to-date and active by responding to the members comments and links if not immediately then on a daily basis. They have to keep an open eye on the members needs, obstacles or feuds while try to compensate them (creating an offer for members only).

To conclude the CFA, we proceeded with the mediation testing. Based on the processing of Baron and Kenny (1986), which leads to testing the separated relationships between each variable in the mediate d relationship, In other words, each of the three constructs must show evidence of a nonzero monotonic association with each other, and the relationship of X to Y must diminish significantly upon adding M as a predictor of Y (Little et al., 2007). This led to the validation of the mediation proposition (see figure 2 and Table 6).

Finally, brand loyalty acts as a partial mediator between participation and eWOM. When participating, a member is ready to spread positive eWOM yet this willingness is better developed when they are already loyal to the brand. Thus, member who participates in a Tunisiana fanpage to the point of loyalty is more likely to become a source of eWOM

advertising rather than those who are participating yet not out of loyalty. Those loyal customers will advise their friends or family to use or buy that brand or just join that community. So, brand managers ought to create a more caring atmosphere in the VBC where more people can join, participate thus be more loyal and a promoter.

#### VI-Conclusion:

This study tried to figure out why people join or participate in a Facebook VBC by testing the existing participation motives, while highlighting the interactions between brand loyalty, that act of participation and positive eWOM. This aim was supported by an urge to give managers a better understanding of why consumers adhere to a Facebook VBC and if that participation can have a concrete effect on their business.

However, this study presents some limitations, beginning with the product's type chosen's results cannot be extended to other products. That's why we need to study other type of product fanpages as a redeeming suggestion. Also, Facebook VBC can hold some dissimilarity from other VBCs in other contexts. Thus, we need to scrutinize other type of VBCs with different characteristics in or out social networking sites. Finally, the testing of the conceptual variables was instantaneous which calls for a longitudinal research to monitor the oscillation of the users' attitudes and behaviors.

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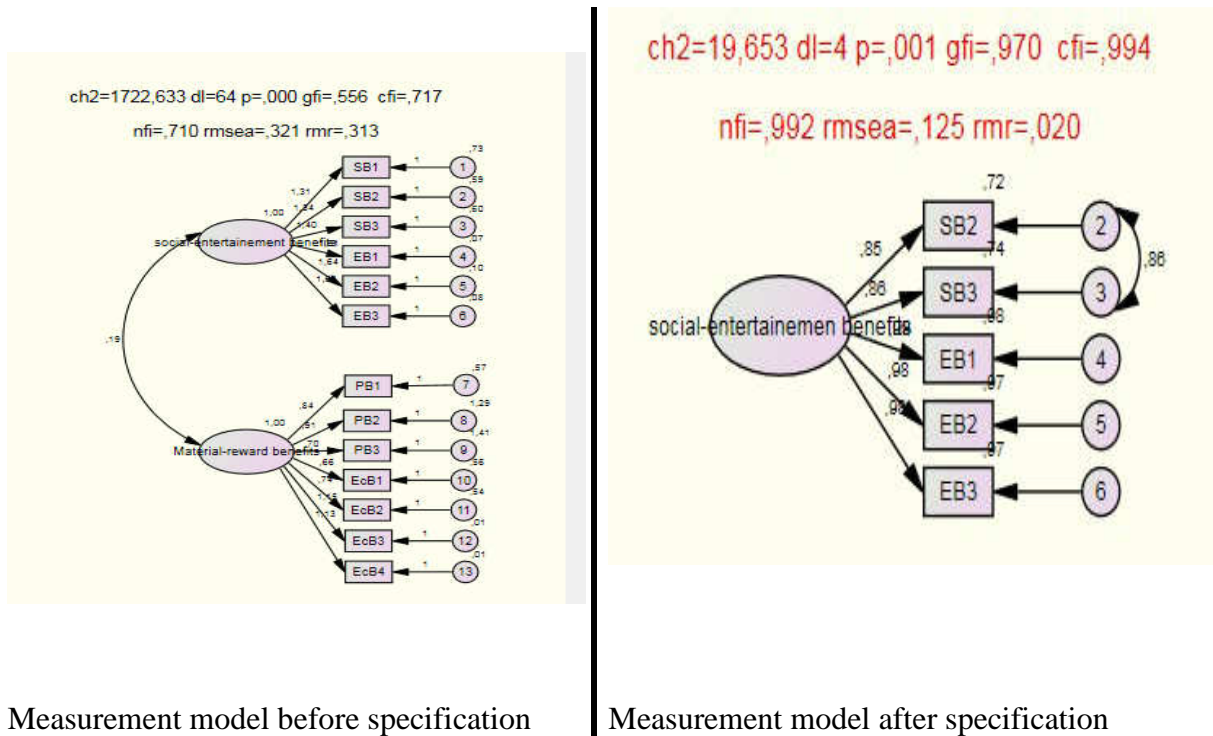
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## Appendix

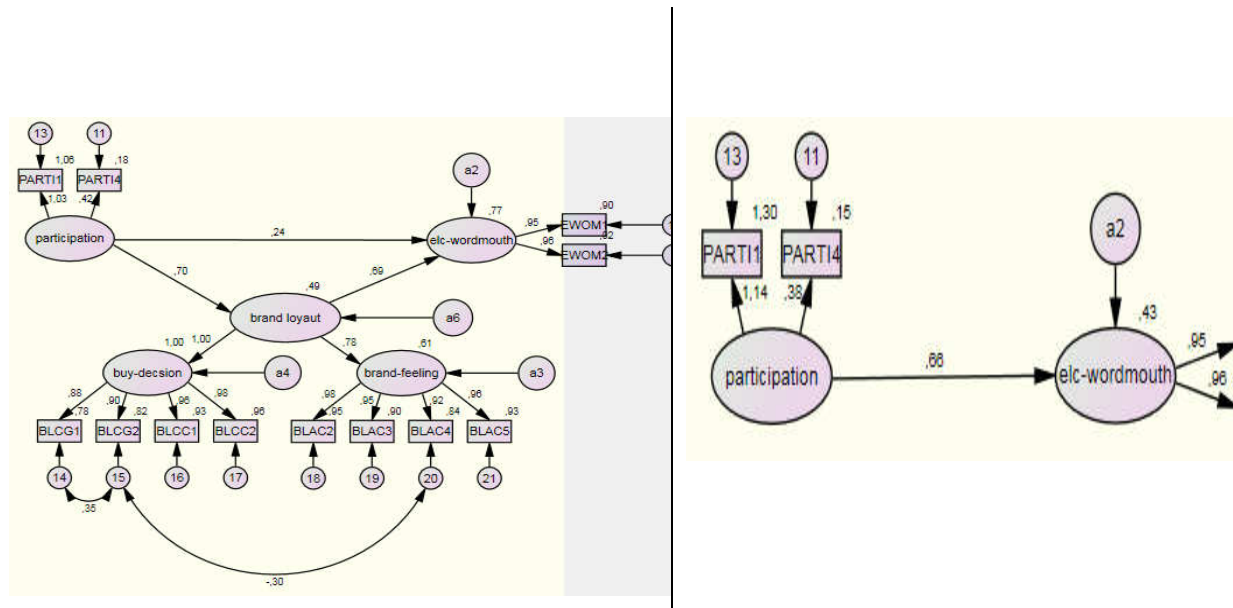
**Figure 1:** Participation motives construct



Measurement model before specification

Measurement model after specification

**Figure 2:** Structural model of the direct and indirect effect



**Table 1:** Measurement of variables

| Constructs             | Authors                      |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Practical benefits     | Dholakia et al. (2004)       |
| Entertainment benefits | Dholakia et al. (2004)       |
| Economic benefits      | Gwinner et al. (1998)        |
| Social benefits        | Dholakia et al. (2004)       |
| brand loyalty          | de Ruyter et al., 1998       |
| Participation          | Woisetschläger et al. (2008) |
| eWOM                   | Dolen (2007)                 |

**Table 2:** PCA results

| Original scale          | KMO   | Bartlett Test | Scale after purification      | Cronbach's alpha |
|-------------------------|-------|---------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Participation's motives | 0,831 | p = 0.000     | Material rewards benefits     | 0,923            |
|                         |       |               | Social-entertainment benefits | 0,978            |
| Participation           | 0,606 | p = 0.000     | Participation                 | 0,834            |
| Brand loyalty           | 0,920 | p = 0.000     | Faithfulness component        | 0,968            |
|                         |       |               | Affective Component           | 0,977            |

**Table 3:** Construct reliability and convergent Validity

| Construct                     | Factor                 | Rh  de J reskog ( $\rho\xi$ ) | AVE ( $\rho_{vc}$ ) |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Brand loyalty                 | Affective component    | 0,964                         | 0,872               |
|                               | Faithfulness component | 0,974                         | 0,905               |
| Social-entertainment benefits |                        | 0,973                         | 0,879               |
| Electronic WOM                |                        | 0,952                         | 0,908               |
| Participation                 |                        | 0,909                         | 0,833               |

**Table 4:** Discriminant Validity

| Factor | AC            | FC            | SEB           | CS            | eWOM          | Pa            |
|--------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| AC     | <b>0,872*</b> |               |               |               |               |               |
| FC     | $\Phi=0,609$  | <b>0,905*</b> |               |               |               |               |
| SEB    | $\Phi=0,416$  | $\Phi=0,145$  | <b>0,879*</b> |               |               |               |
| CS     | $\Phi=0,487$  | $\Phi=0,459$  | $\Phi=0,355$  | <b>0,846*</b> |               |               |
| eWOM   | $\Phi=0,427$  | $\Phi=0,741$  | $\Phi=0,050$  | $\Phi=0,346$  | <b>0,908*</b> |               |
| Pa     | $\Phi=0,817$  | $\Phi=0,582$  | $\Phi=0,622$  | $\Phi=0,820$  | $\Phi=0,477$  | <b>0,833*</b> |

**Table5:** Hypotheses Testing

| Hypotheses | Paths                     | Beta  | C.r    | P   | Supported |
|------------|---------------------------|-------|--------|-----|-----------|
| H.2        | Parti<--Social-enter bene | ,904  | 9,197  | *** | Yes       |
| H.2        | Brand-loy<--parti         | ,688  | 8,008  | *** | Yes       |
| H.3        | Elec-wom<--parti          | ,504  | 4,947  | *** | Yes       |
| H.4        | Elec-wom<--brand-loy      | 1,129 | 13,090 | *** | yes       |

Note: Beta = standardized regression weight; SE = standard error; \*\*\* p < 0.05

**Table6:** Hypotheses Testing relating to the brand loyalty mediation

| Hypothese               | Paths | Beta | S.E. | C.r.  | P    | supported |
|-------------------------|-------|------|------|-------|------|-----------|
| Brand-loy <-<br>-parti  | a     | ,698 | ,093 | 7,310 | ***  | Yes       |
| Elec-wom<-<br>Brand-loy | b     | ,691 | ,073 | 9,047 | ***  | Yes       |
| Elec-wom<-<br>parti <   | c'    | ,244 | ,073 | 3,089 | ,002 | yes       |
| Elec-wom<-<br>parti     | c     | ,655 | ,100 | 5,495 | ***  | Yes       |

Note: Beta = standardized regression weight; SE = standard error; \*\*\* p < 0.05

