Understanding the Motivations for Participating in a Virtual Brand Community on Instagram: A case study of an international beauty brand

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Abstract: **Aims:** This study aims to explore the motivations driving consumers to actively participate in a virtual brand community on Instagram, using Sephora's international community as a case study. It seeks to identify the different categories of motivations and understand how they contribute to engagement within visually oriented social media environments.

Study Design: An exploratory qualitative study combining netnography and semi-structured interviews. The research was conducted online within Sephora's international Instagram community. Data collection was carried out through digital observation and interviews with active community members.

Methodology: A qualitative exploratory approach was adopted. The study involved netnographic observation of interactions within Sephora's Instagram community and semi-structured interviews with 12 active users. Data were analyzed to identify underlying motivations for participation. Seven categories of motivations emerged: informational, social, hedonic, altruistic, visibility-related, identity-related, and affective. These motivations were grouped into utilitarian logics (information seeking, mutual support) and symbolic logics (self-expression, belonging, recognition).

Results: The findings reveal that engagement in Sephora's Instagram community is driven by a combination of utilitarian and symbolic motivations. The analysis highlights the central role of aesthetics, emotional expression, and interactivity in fostering user participation. Motivations related to identity, visibility, and social belonging are particularly significant in visually oriented platforms such as Instagram.

Keywords: *Virtual brand community – Instagram – Engagement – Netnography – Sephora – Consumer motivation.*

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the digitalization of marketing has profoundly transformed the ways organizations interact with their consumers. The traditional logic of transactional marketing has gradually given way to a relational and community-based approach (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2021), where value is created through exchange and co-experience. Digital social networks have introduced an unprecedented paradigm in the brand-consumer relationship: the consumer is no longer just a recipient of messages but an active participant in the creation of meaning around the brand (Kozinets, 2020).

In this context, virtual brand communities have emerged as emblematic organizational forms of this new participatory era. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), a brand community brings together consumers united by emotional attachment, shared practices, and a sense of collective belonging. These communities are hybrid spaces where social ties, expertise exchanges, and identity expressions are intertwined (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2020). They now play a central role in value co-creation (Simmons & Durkin, 2023), innovation diffusion, and the enhancement of the

brand's relational capital (Arifi, Resch, Kinne & Lenz, 2023; Mumi, 2022).

However, the motivations that drive consumers to actively participate in these communities remain a dynamic and partially fragmented field of research. Foundational studies (Dholakia et al., 2004; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008) identified several categories of motivations—informational, social, hedonic, altruistic, identity-related, and instrumental—but most of these studies were limited to textual forums or Web 1.0 communities. The emergence of visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has profoundly reshaped participation and self-expression (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2023). These environments foster interactions rich in sensory and emotional experiences, where imagery becomes a language of identity in its own right.

The literature on digital engagement (Hollebeek, 2023; Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2023) emphasizes that participation on social networks goes beyond observable behavior (likes, shares, comments) and encompasses a cognitive, affective, and behavioral experience. On Instagram, this experience is

amplified by aesthetic staging and the social visibility of interactions (Voorveld, van Noort & Smit, 2023). Understanding the motivational mechanisms underlying participation on these platforms therefore requires integrating the experiential and emotional dimensions into the analysis of community behaviors (Dessart, 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2019).

The beauty sector provides a privileged context for study, where consumption carries a strong identity and expressive dimension, blending symbolism, aspiration, and aesthetics (Rahman, 2024). Sephora stands out for its ability to orchestrate a global and inclusive digital presence, mobilizing a community of tens of millions of members. Its Instagram account (@sephora) constitutes a digital micro-society where consumers, influencers, and experts converge around shared values such as creativity, diversity, and trust (Chouaibi & Zouari, 2024). Observing this community provides a unique opportunity to analyze how an international brand leverages the emotional, virtual, and communal potential of a social platform to enhance participation and loyalty.

Despite the growing research on online engagement, few studies have specifically analyzed community participation on visual platforms (Dessart et al., 2023; Mora Cortez & Johnston, 2022). Existing models, mostly developed for textual environments, only partially capture the immersive, aesthetic, and performative nature of Instagram. This study therefore aims to fill this gap by exploring the deep motivations for participation in a brand community on a visual virtual platform, through an inductive and interpretive approach.

The central question guiding this study can be formulated as follows: What fundamental motivations explain consumers' active participation in a brand community on Instagram, and how are these motivations reflected in their social, emotional, and symbolic interactions on the platform?

Theoretically, this research seeks to contribute to the literature on brand communities by proposing a conceptual model of participation motivations adapted to virtual platforms. Practically, it aims to provide actionable recommendations for brand managers to design engagement strategies aligned with the expectations of connected consumers. The article is organized as follows: the theoretical framework presents work on virtual communities, participation motivations, and the specificity of Instagram, followed by the netnographic methodology. The empirical results highlight several categories of motivations before being discussed from theoretical and managerial perspectives, and the conclusion summarizes the contributions and suggests directions for future research.

Literature Review

Virtual Brand Communities: A Space for Relational Co-Creation

Since the digital turn of the 2000s, marketing research has focused on how brand structure and maintain collective relationships with their consumers. The notion of brand community, introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), marked a major conceptual shift by proposing to consider the brand not merely as a commercial sign but as a vector of social connection. These authors define a brand community as a group of consumers sharing a consciousness of belonging, specific rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility toward other members. These dimensions give the brand a symbolic and social function, going beyond the transactional framework to become part of an identity-driven dynamic.

Cova and Cova (2002) and Cova & Dalli (2018) extended this approach by highlighting the "linking value" generated through community interaction. In a tribal logic, consumers gather around shared symbols, experiences, and narratives, transforming the brand into a space of sociality and identity construction. The brand community thus becomes a mechanism for co-creating meaning, where perceived value emerges less from the product itself than from the sharing of collective experiences (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2020).

With the rise of digital platforms, these communities have gradually migrated to connected environments, giving rise to virtual brand communities. These are characterized by high interactivity, global accessibility, and increased symbolic intensity (Chen et al., 2024). In these spaces, participation is no longer limited to passive content consumption but involves contribution and co-production of value (Alalwan, 2024). Hollebeek and Macky (2019) emphasize that value emerges from the process of collective engagement, where the brand acts as a catalyst for affective, cognitive, and behavioral interactions. Virtual communities thus embody a form of participatory marketing, in which consumers become active actors, contributing to the development of the brand's identity and meaning. Understanding this dynamic, however, requires a deep analysis of the individual and collective motivations that guide participation.

Participation Motivations: Toward a Multidimensional Model

Understanding participation motivations is essential to grasping the functioning and vitality of a virtual brand community. The academic literature agrees on the multidimensional nature of these motivations, combining utilitarian, social, and symbolic drivers (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Dholakia et al. (2004) propose a model based on social influence, distinguishing four main categories: instrumental (information seeking, uncertainty reduction), social (need for belonging), hedonic (pleasure, entertainment), and identity-related (self-affirmation). These dimensions reflect the plurality of members' expectations within a community.

Subsequent research has enriched this model. Sicilia and Palazón (2008) emphasize relational value as a central driver of participation, with members seeking to strengthen their sense of belonging and mutual recognition. Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2019), through the COBRAs model (Consumer Online Brand-Related Activities), distinguish three levels of community activity: passive content consumption, interaction with content (likes, comments), and active user-generated content production. These forms of engagement reflect increasing levels of symbolic and identity investment, contributing to collective legitimacy and individual visibility within the group (Dessart, 2017).

At the same time, recent studies have incorporated affective and altruistic dimensions. Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2023) show that participation is often fueled by emotional attachment to the brand and the desire to contribute positively to the community. Altruism strengthens cohesion and interpersonal trust, forming a durable relational glue. Participation in a brand community, therefore, does not follow a single utilitarian logic but results from a complex combination of pleasure, recognition, and identity construction.

These findings highlight the need to consider participation as a dynamic, multidimensional process, shaped by the constant

interaction between individual motivations and community norms. However, most of this research has been conducted in textual environments (forums, blogs, review platforms), leaving open the question of how these dynamics translate to visual platforms such as Instagram, where aesthetic and performative experiences play a central role in engagement.

Virtual platforms and the community experience on Instagram

The rise of Instagram marks a major milestone in the study of digital communities due to its ability to transform participation into an aesthetic and social experience. As a visual communication platform, Instagram relies on a logic of aestheticizing social experience (Manovich, 2016), where users stage their daily lives, tastes, and affiliations through stylized images, short videos, and visual storytelling. This aesthetic dimension gives virtual communities an emotional and performative scope. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) illustrate, users oscillate between authenticity and self-promotion, using the platform as a stage for personal expression and social recognition. In this context, the consumer becomes a performative actor of the brand, going beyond simple interaction (likes, comments) to embody the brand through their own image and cultural practices (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

Recent research (Dessart et al., 2023; Mora Cortez & Johnston, 2022) shows that on Instagram, visibility and the symbolic dimension of aesthetics play a central role in community engagement. The platform fosters the creation of micro-communities around shared values such as inclusion, diversity, or sustainability and offers unprecedented opportunities for co-creation through user-generated content (UGC). The community experience on Instagram is thus based on a dual logic: sensory and emotional, where visual beauty and the staging of emotions inspire and provide aesthetic pleasure; social and identity-based, where public interactions (likes, reposts, tags) enable mutual recognition and symbolic validation.

The case of the Sephora brand particularly illustrates this dynamic. By combining aesthetics, inclusion, and relational proximity, the brand has succeeded in creating a transnational community that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. Analyzing the motivations for participation in such an environment is therefore essential to understanding contemporary mechanisms of digital engagement and the creation of symbolic capital around brands.

Research Methods

Research positioning and approach

This study adopts an interpretative and constructivist perspective, considering that social reality is not objective and universally measurable, but continuously constructed by individuals through their discourse, practices, and symbolic interactions. Within virtual brand communities, the aim is not to measure quantifiable behaviors but to understand the subjective meaning that members attribute to their participation. This positioning is based on the foundations of qualitative social science research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Schwandt, 1994), prioritizing understanding lived experience over testing predetermined hypotheses.

The approach is inductive and exploratory. The objective is not to test an existing model but to develop an understanding rooted in the field, based on rich and contextualized empirical material. This approach follows abductive reasoning, combining careful observation of the phenomenon with the gradual application of relevant theoretical frameworks to build a conceptual model grounded in the lived experiences of community members rather than predefined categories.

The netnographic method was favored. Developed by Kozinets (1998, 2020), it adapts classical ethnography to digital environments, enabling analysis of internet users' social and cultural practices through systematic observation of their exchanges and content. This approach provides direct access to authentic interactions among Sephora community members on Instagram without disrupting their behavior. It allows capturing the discursive, emotional, and visual richness of practices observed in their natural context.

To enrich this analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore individual and collective motivations for participation. This methodological triangulation, inspired by Denzin (1978), strengthens the credibility of the results by cross-referencing multiple data sources and linking netnographic observations to participants' personal accounts.

Field, data collection, and analysis

The chosen field of study is the international Sephora community on Instagram, identified by the official account @sephora. This choice is justified by several criteria. First, this community represents an emblematic example of a large-scale brand community, with tens of millions of followers worldwide. Its visual and interactional richness makes it a privileged field for observing emotional and aesthetic dynamics characteristic of virtual social platforms. Finally, the diversity of members, both geographically and culturally, enriches the analysis of participation behaviors.

Netnographic observation was conducted over three months (January to March 2025), covering several international campaigns (Valentine's Day, spring beauty, seasonal promotions, and collaborations with Fenty Beauty and Dior). This period allowed collection of diverse content reflecting different forms of participation. In total, 120 official posts, approximately 6,000 comments, and 240 user posts were examined, selected using representative hashtags such as #SephoraCommunity, #SephoraFavorites, and #BeautyTogether. Observation focused on public interactions, message tone, exchanges between members, and the nature of visual content.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with active members aged 20 to 35, from France, Canada, the United States, Morocco, and Tunisia. Participant selection was based on engagement level, measured by interaction frequency (comments, shares, content creation). Each interview, averaging 45 minutes, was conducted online via Zoom or direct messaging, recorded with participants' consent, and fully transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis (Bardin, 2013; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2018) and was conducted using NVivo 12 Pro. Coding proceeded in three stages: open coding, identifying units of meaning; axial coding, grouping into thematic categories; and selective coding, final structuring around seven main themes: information-seeking, sociability, enjoyment, altruism, visibility, identity expression, and emotional attachment.

Several measures ensured scientific rigor. Result credibility was enhanced through source triangulation and member checking. Transferability was supported by a detailed description of the context, enabling study replication in similar environments.

Reliability was reinforced through a research journal documenting each analytical step. Finally, the study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2019), treating public data anonymously and obtaining informed consent for interviews.

This methodology, combining netnographic observation and qualitative interviews, enables understanding the complexity of motivations for participating in a brand community on a virtual platform, providing an in-depth view of the affective, identity-based, and social dynamics at play in the Sephora community.

Results and Discussion

The combined analysis of netnographic observation and semi-structured interviews shows that participation in the Sephora Instagram virtual community is driven by intertwined utilitarian, symbolic, and emotional motivations. Members do not merely interact with the brand; they actively participate in producing and circulating meaning around it. This participation manifests in various practices: regularly consulting posts, commenting on tutorials, sharing personal experiences, responding to other members' questions, and creating content inspired by products.

The interactions analyzed show that the community functions as a true space of digital sociability, where users co-construct social and symbolic capital. Comment threads under official posts serve as venues for spontaneous exchanges, where users recommend products, congratulate peers, or express emotions regarding new releases. Several excerpts illustrate this conviviality: "I'm so happy to finally see this palette, I've been waiting for months!" or "Thanks for the tips, girls, I'll try this foundation tomorrow." These exchanges reflect an atmosphere of closeness and mutual trust, rarely observed in traditional digital brand environments.

Sephora also manages to establish a strong affective bond with its community through inclusive and emotional communication. Posts emphasize diversity, creativity, and kindness, strengthening the sense of belonging and identity recognition. Followers show genuine attachment to the brand, perceived not only as a product distributor but also as a relational and aesthetic universe. Instagram's very structure, favoring individual visibility, aesthetic enhancement, and emotional expression, acts as an amplifier of this community bond.

Thematic analysis identified seven major categories of motivations structuring participation: information-seeking, sociability, enjoyment, altruism, visibility, identity expression, and emotional attachment. These dimensions overlap and reinforce one another, reflecting utilitarian and symbolic logics oriented toward creating personal and collective value.

Table 1. Motivational Dimensions of Participation in Sephora's Instagram Community with Illustrative Verbatim

Category	Subcategory	Verbatim
Information seeking	Practical advice	"I always watch reels and stories before buying a product. It's more concrete than ads or the website descriptions." "I check tips from other users; it feels more realistic than official tutorials."
	Experience feedback	"Other members' reviews are more reliable than the official product descriptions." "I like reading personal experiences—it helps me decide if a product is right for me."
Sociability	Group belonging	"We end up knowing each other, even without ever meeting." "Being part of this community makes me feel connected, like we share a common space online."
	Sharing and support	"I enjoy exchanging experiences and helping other members." "When I give advice and people thank me, it feels like I'm contributing to the community."
Enjoyment	Aesthetics and creativity	"I love scrolling through Sephora's page; it's my wellness break, everything is beautiful and inspiring." "The visuals and curated content spark my creativity and make me want to experiment."
	Playfulness and discovery	"It's fun discovering new products and beauty tips." "I enjoy trying out trends I wouldn't have found otherwise."
Altruism	Mutual help	"I like helping; it keeps the community alive. When someone thanks me, I feel like I've contributed." "Answering questions feels rewarding and makes the community stronger."
	Informal mentoring	"I often respond to new members' questions to guide them." "Helping beginners navigate the platform gives me satisfaction."
Visibility	Recognition	"When Sephora reposted my photo, I was so proud. It felt like validation." "Seeing my post liked and commented on by others motivates me to share more."
	Notoriety	"Posting content that's seen and appreciated by the community motivates me." "It feels good to gain recognition for sharing creative looks."
Identity expression	Style and values affirmation	"Sephora is more than a brand. It's a universe I identify with." "Through my posts, I express my style and the values I care about."
	Collective belonging	"We share the same aesthetic and cultural codes; it makes me feel part of a group." "Being part of this community strengthens my sense of identity."
Emotional attachment	Emotional bond with the brand	"I discovered makeup through Sephora. It's a brand that has been with me for a long time." "Sephora feels like a friend that accompanies my beauty journey."
	Loyalty and nostalgia	"Sephora reminds me of special moments and milestones in my beauty life." "I feel nostalgic seeing products I've used for years—it's a connection to my past experiences."

The results obtained confirm and enrich the literature on brand communities while highlighting the specificities of virtual platforms such as Instagram. Participation in the Sephora community illustrates how utilitarian, relational, and emotional motivations intertwine in a hybrid space of consumption and identity co-construction. The discussion is structured according to the categories and subcategories identified in the results analysis.

Information Seeking

Informational motivation remains a central driver of participation. Members consult content to obtain practical advice, visual demonstrations, and user experiences considered more reliable than the brand's official information. This confirms the work of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) on the cognitive value of brand communities. However, the analysis shows that this information-seeking is not purely utilitarian: it is accompanied by aesthetic pleasure linked to the visual quality of the content and the sensory experience offered by Instagram. Users do not merely collect data; they use it as a basis for interaction, discussion, and co-creation of meaning. This hybridization between cognitive logic and hedonic dimension illustrates the evolution of brand communities toward more integrated forms of participation (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2019).

Sociability

Sociability emerges as a key factor of engagement. Interactions between members—sharing experiences, providing support, offering recognition—help strengthen the sense of belonging and build social capital within the community. These findings confirm the analyses of Cova and Cova (2002) on brand communities as symbolic spaces of exchange and solidarity. The virtual camaraderie, highlighted by numerous verbatim accounts, shows that affective bonds between members contribute to the sustainability of engagement. The brand acts as a mediator here, facilitating interactions and consolidating social cohesion.

Pleasure

Pleasure, a transversal dimension, is closely linked to the aesthetics and creativity of content. Instagram provides an immersive framework where sensory and visual experiences stimulate engagement. Users experience hedonic satisfaction in browsing the page, discovering new products, and participating in exchanges. This dimension supports the results of Dessart (2017), indicating that engagement goes beyond mere interactive behavior to include an affective and aesthetic experience. Pleasure thus plays a structuring role, amplifying both information-seeking and sociability.

Altruism

Altruism manifests in the desire to help, advise, and support new members. These behaviors strengthen community cohesion and create a sense of collective contribution. Informal mentoring and mutual aid promote social and symbolic recognition among participants. This dynamic illustrates the relational and normative dimension of brand communities: engagement is not

solely individual but oriented toward collective construction and the vitality of the community bond (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Visibility

The pursuit of visibility constitutes a specific driver on public platforms such as Instagram. Participants seek recognition, validation, or reposting by the brand. This pursuit is not superficial but reflects a desire for legitimacy and social integration. Visibility

thus becomes a symbolic reward, conferring recognition and status within the community. These findings support the approach of Marwick and Boyd (2011), according to which social platforms serve as stages for identity performances, where attention and recognition structure engagement.

Identity Expression

Identity expression is a core motivational element of engagement. Participants use the community to affirm their style, values, and personality while integrating into a shared collective identity. This articulation between individual and community identity shows that participation goes beyond consumption: it becomes a tool for self-construction and social integration. Sephora's inclusive and creative universe reinforces this process, offering a space for aesthetic and cultural legitimization.

Affective Attachment

Finally, affective attachment to the brand is distinct from transactional loyalty. Members demonstrate a lasting emotional bond based on trust, satisfaction, and nostalgia. This emotional loyalty translates into regular interactions, active sharing, and the valorization of the brand in daily life. It confirms the relational dimension of the consumer–brand bond described by Albert et al. (2022) and illustrates the transformation of relational marketing in the digital era: the brand becomes an affective partner, contributing to identity construction and online sociability.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the motivations driving consumers to participate in a virtual brand community on Instagram, using Sephora as a case study. The qualitative approach, combining netnographic observation and semi-structured interviews, highlighted the complexity and richness of engagement dynamics in such social spaces.

The results show that participation in the Sephora community goes beyond a purely utilitarian or informational logic. It involves a multidimensional experience, encompassing cognitive, affective, social, and identity-related dimensions. Seven major motivational categories structure engagement: information seeking, sociability, pleasure, altruism, visibility, identity expression, and emotional attachment. These dimensions interact and reinforce each other, revealing a dynamic where rationality and emotion coexist. Instagram's visual and interactive nature acts as a catalyst for this hybridization, facilitating the circulation of meanings, symbolic recognition, and the construction of shared social capital. The community thus becomes a space for expression, personal valorization, and identity co-construction.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches our understanding of brand communities on visual social media platforms. It demonstrates how image-centered platforms and virtual storytelling transform members' behaviors and engagement, highlighting the role of aesthetics and emotion in structuring community bonds. Overall, the Sephora community exemplifies a space of authenticity and symbolic capital where visibility, creativity, and emotion enhance the consumption experience while reinforcing social ties.

Practical Implications; Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study offer actionable insights for brand managers seeking to foster engagement on visual social media platforms. First, participation in virtual brand communities extends beyond transactional or promotional purposes; these

spaces are also arenas for social interaction, emotional connection, and identity expression. Brands should therefore focus on creating content that is not only informative but also visually appealing and emotionally engaging, as aesthetics and sensory experience significantly enhance user involvement.

Second, facilitating interaction among members is crucial. Encouraging users to share experiences, provide advice, and engage in co-creation strengthens social bonds and cultivates a sense of belonging. Recognition of members' contributions—such as reposting content or highlighting user stories—reinforces emotional loyalty and motivates continued participation.

Finally, supporting identity expression within the community can deepen brand-consumer relationships. By providing opportunities for users to express their personal style, values, and creativity, brands enable both individual and collective identity construction, which transforms the community into a space of co-created meaning and shared symbolic value. Overall, the study emphasizes that engagement strategies on platforms like Instagram should integrate cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions, moving beyond traditional marketing metrics toward experiences that foster lasting community bonds.

While this study provides valuable insights into the motivations driving participation in virtual brand communities, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the focus on a single brand (Sephora) and platform (Instagram) limits the generalizability of the findings to other brands or social media environments. Second, the qualitative approach, though rich in depth and context, does not allow for the measurement of the relative influence of different motivational factors. Third, the study represents a temporal snapshot, and user behaviors may evolve over time in response to platform changes, emerging trends, or marketing initiatives.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Comparative studies across multiple brands, industries, or platforms would help identify variations in engagement patterns and motivational drivers. Quantitative approaches could complement qualitative insights by assessing the relative weight of different motivations. Longitudinal studies would capture the evolution of community interactions and participation over time. Finally, deeper exploration of the brand's role as a social and emotional mediator could shed light on how brand strategies influence community dynamics and the co-creation of value.

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