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# Consumer Behavior In Firm-hosted Online Travel Communities

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## CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN FIRM-HOSTED ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITIES

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### Abstract

Online travel communities are an increasing phenomenon that is motivating deep changes in the travel industry. The purpose of this work is to explain consumer intention to participate in these communities and loyalty to the firm that hosts the community. To do that, we propose a model that integrates Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Identity Theory in order to explain the intention to participate in online travel communities. In addition, we analyze the link between the intention to participate in the community and two behavioral intentions that may benefit the host firm: intention to use the firm products/services and the intention to recommend the host firm. Results reveal that TPB, TAM and Social Identity Theory form an appropriate framework to explain the intention to participate in the community. In addition, we find a positive effect of intention to participate in an online travel community on the two behavioral intentions considered. Based on these results, some conclusions and implications are proposed.

**Keywords:** *Online Travel Communities, Participation, Consumer Behavioral Intentions, Identification, TAM & TPB*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly turning to the Internet to contact fellow consumers with similar interests. They are using several online formats to share ideas about a given product or brand and contact other consumers who are seen as more objective information sources (Kozinets, 2002). All these online relationships have motivated the creation and development of social groups in the Internet, the so-called online communities, which are motivating great changes in consumer behavior (Casaló, 2008). Therefore, understanding these communities is especially relevant for marketers since it may allow the obtaining of valuable information regarding consumers. At the same time, online communities have come out as a new medium that favors the communication among consumers and organizations (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Indeed, in order to offer a greater value to their consumers, more and more firms are starting to use several online tools (e.g. social networks, virtual worlds) to contact their consumers and to allow interaction among them.

More specifically, the importance of online communities is especially relevant in the travel industry. The reason behind this may be found in the fact that travelers are increasingly using several online sources to search information in order to plan their travels and share experiences about travel destinations (Hock, 2007). Among these sources, online communities represent a great opportunity for travelers due to the fact that they can find out what other people think about potential destinations and its facilities (e.g. hotels, restaurants and so on). Hence, online communities are deeply changing consumer behavior and choices in the travel sector.

However, although the importance of online travel communities is continuously increasing, there is still a lack of consensus about which are the major drivers and outcomes of consumer intention to participate in these online communities in the travel sector. Therefore, this study is designed to move on this topic by identifying some of the factors that influence the consumer intention to participate in an online travel community and the effect of this intention to participate on consumers' behavioral intentions. More specifically, the research framework is based on two well-recognized models in technology adoption: TAM and TPB. These theories have been usually combined to explain the intention to use information systems (e.g. Liao *et al.*, 2007; Wu and Chen, 2005), but their combination has not been employed to predict the intention to participate in an online community yet. Second, this research adds to these ideas by integrating Social Identification Theory into the research model. Indeed, recent studies on social identification in the context of brand communities (e.g. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005) and Linux User Groups (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) have noted the importance of identification in fostering engagement to the collective and membership continuance intentions. Finally, we also analyze the influence of the intention to participate in the community in two behavioral intentions that may benefit the firm that hosts the community: the intention to use the firm's products and services, and the intention to recommend the host firm. The selection of these two behavioral intentions is based on the importance that online communities has for marketers:

- Firstly, online communities can be used by members to take part in discussions in order to inform and influence fellow consumers (Kozinets, 2002). Thus, in the travel sector, consumers could participate in online communities' to give advice to fellow travelers and recommend diverse travel services, organizations or potential destinations.
- Secondly, participation in an online community favors the development of affective ties toward the firm that hosts the community, which may help to increase the levels of consumers' loyalty (Koh and Kim, 2004). As a result, a key aspect of the participation continuance intentions is the ongoing use of the host firm's products (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005).

Taking into account the previous considerations, this work is structured as follows. In the next section, we review the literature relative to the variables and theories considered in this work. Then, we formulate the hypotheses and afterwards, we explain the processes of data collection and measures validation. Finally, we present the main results, conclusions and managerial implications of the study and outline some possibilities for future research.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Intention to participate in an online community**

Participation in an online community is considered as a crucial element to guarantee the community success in the long term (Koh and Kim, 2004) since participation promotes the development of long-lasting relationship among the group members (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). The reason behind this may be found in the fact that higher participation means a higher level of involvement with the online network and, as a consequence, it is easier to reinforce the feelings which bind every individual to the other community members, improve instruction on communal values, encourage conjoint behaviors and information sharing, and enable stronger group cohesion (Casaló, 2008). Indeed, continuance participation in joint activities in an online community helps to achieve the group's collective goals (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) and it is a crucial aspect to guarantee the network endurance (Koh and Kim, 2004). However, due to the difficulties to measure real behaviors, in this work we will concentrate on the intention to participate in an online travel community in the long-term. Indeed, intentions have been widely used to measure consumer behavior in contexts like the technology acceptance (e.g. Karahanna *et al.*, 1999; Venkatesh, 1999) since each behavioral intention anticipates that the individual will behave in a specified way (e.g. McKnight *et al.*, 2002). As a result, we consider that the intention to participate in an online community will be a good indicator of the level of consumer participation in that community.

## 2.2 Determinants of the intention to participate in an online community

First, the TAM was initially proposed by Davis (1989) and it has been extensively and successfully used to explain the acceptance of new information technologies and related applications (Kim *et al.*, 2009). More specifically, TAM derives from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and it modified TRA by not considering one of the key beliefs of TRA (subjective norm) and including two new beliefs and motivators: perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness (Kim *et al.*, 2008). As a result, TAM proposes that the intention to adopt a given system is determined by two factors: (1) the attitude toward using the system, and (2) the perceived usefulness of using the system (Wu and Chen, 2005). In addition, in this model, attitude is a direct function of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of the system, and finally, perceived usefulness is also affected by perceived ease of use. In this model, the behavioral intention represents the strength of a person's willingness to perform a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991), attitude reflects the feeling of the favorable or unfavorable assessment that the consumer makes regarding a behavior (Wu and Chen, 2005), perceived usefulness refers to the belief that using a system will be helpful and perceived ease of use is the belief that using a system is free of effort (e.g. Davis, 1989).

Second, TPB (e.g. Ajzen, 1991) is also based on the TRA and it has been also employed to predict behaviors in the online context such as the use of electronic services (Liao *et al.*, 2007) or the adoption of an online tax service (Wu and Chen, 2005). To be precise, TPB is an extension of the TRA since TPB was originally developed in order to overcome the limitations of the TRA when people deal with behaviors over which they do not have complete volitional control (Ajzen, 1991). That is, TPB proposes that the consumer intention to perform a certain behavior is determined by three key variables: attitude toward this behavior, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. In TPB, attitude refers to the same feeling as in TAM studies, subjective norm refers to the expectations of other persons regarding the individual's behavior, and perceived behavioral control reflects the fact that the individual has the resources to perform a certain behavior (Wu and Chen, 2005). Regarding subjective norm, it is important to note that this work follows the definition of Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) and we consider subjective norm as the individual perceptions of the other community members' demands on a person to interact and cooperate within the community.

Finally, Social Identity Theory has been used to explain how an individual identifies with others (Akkinen, 2005). Broadly speaking, this theory proposes that people develop a sense of self from the groups they belong to (Hogg and Terry, 2000), developing a collective identity in contrast to other identities that refer to an individual as being unique and separate (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995). As a result, a sense of unity among the group members is developed. In the context of online communities, this identification may be defined as the strength of the consumer relationship with the online community and the other members (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). In other words, we may say that identification with a community is the degree to which an individual see himself as a part of the group and this shared identity may help to increase the value of the community. Traditionally, several authors have noted that this kind of social identity includes both an affective and a cognitive component (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). On the one hand, the cognitive component implies that identification with the online community is the result of the perceived similarities with other community members and dissimilarities with non-members (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). For instance, members of a given community use to share common objectives and values. On the other hand, the affective component means that identification appears as a consequence of the emotional involvement with the group. More specifically, it is shown as feelings of attachment and belonging to the community (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Taking all these into account, we consider the concept of identification with an online community as a multidimensional construct formed by two different dimensions: cognitive and affective identification.

## 2.3 Consumer behavioral intentions

Obtaining consumer loyalty has been considered as a major goal for marketing strategy (e.g. Dick and Basu, 1994) since loyalty helps companies to achieve success and sustainability over time (Flavián *et al.*, 2006). In general, loyalty has at least two distinct dimensions: an *attitudinal* component and a *behavioral* one (e.g. Hallowell, 1996). This fact implies that the concept of loyalty includes a psychological link, based on consumer feelings that motivate a general attachment to the people, products or services of an organization (Hallowell, 1996), and a behavioral component, based on aspects such as the frequency of visits to a store or the percentage of expense (Nilsson and Olsen, 1995). That is, although the most habitual research practice is to measure customer loyalty as a behavior (repeated purchases), loyalty also refers to the customer's attitudinal state of intentions to repurchase (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2006). Thus, in this study we will focus on the attitudinal perspective, as the purpose of the study is to analyze the future intentions derived from consumer participation in an online community. To be precise, we will focus on two customer behavioral intentions that may help a firm such as: (1) the intention to recommend the host firm (Hallowell, 1996), and (2) the intention to repurchase the host firm products and services (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2006).

## 3 HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

### 3.1 TAM and TPB related hypotheses

Firstly, consistent with TAM and TPB formulations, in this work we adapt the relationships proposed by these two theories to the context of online travel communities. These paths are not justified in detail since they have been well documented in the literature and they are widely accepted in the academic community. However, they are included in our research model as hypotheses for the sake of completeness and to offer a more global model. In addition, the integration of both theories in the same research model becomes evident since both theories derives from the TRA, shares the attitude variable and serve to explain the intention to behave in a determined way. As a result, we propose the following set of hypotheses:

*H1: Attitude has a positive effect on the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

*H2: Subjective norm has a positive effect on the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

*H3: Perceived behavioral control has a positive effect on the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

*H4: Perceived usefulness has a positive effect on the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

*H5: Perceived usefulness has a positive effect on attitude toward participation in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

*H6: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on attitude toward participation in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

*H7: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on perceived usefulness of participating in a firm-hosted online travel community.*

### 3.2 Integration of identification into the research model

Social Identity Theory states that the sense of unity among the members of a collective favors cooperation and, hence, motivates participation within the activities conducted in the collective (Akkinen, 2005). In this sense, recent studies have found that identification with a community has a

positive influence on the motivation to interact and cooperate with other group members (e.g. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). That is, community engagement and participation are positive community-related outcomes of consumer identification with the collective. In this line, Muñiz and Schau (2005) found that members of the Apple Newton brand community still continue participating in the community although it was no longer available. Broadly speaking, if the consumer is identified with a group, participation in joint-activities in the collective will be viewed as congruent to personal values (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and, as a result, s/he will be motivated to participate actively in the community and help other members. Consequently, we propose our third hypothesis:

*H8: Identification with a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive effect on the intention to participate in that community.*

In addition, being part of a collective has several benefits for individuals due to the interactions with similar people who share their enthusiasm and interest (e.g. Wellman, 2001). In this line, Bressler and Grantham (2000) expose that the feeling of belonging to a community helps to satisfy some of the individuals' basic needs. More specifically, identification with a community may facilitate the answer to transcendent questions for the individual, such as: who am I?, where am I from?, how am I connected to the rest of the world?, to what extent am I related to other people?, what do I receive from other people?, what is important to me?, and so on. Therefore, belonging to an online community implies that the individual is involved in a social group that covers some of his/her emotional needs. As a result, these individuals may develop a positive attitude regarding their participation in the online community. Thus, bearing in mind all these ideas, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H9: Identification with a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive effect on attitude toward participation in that community.*

Finally, belonging to a group also involves behaving in certain ways inside the collective (e.g. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). This is one of the core components of communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) since identified members in a collective usually carry out processes that help to reproduce and transmit the collective meaning. Broadly speaking, the most identified members in an online community will be the most attached and committed to the group (e.g. taking on leadership roles) and the group will mean a lot to them. As a result, they will be more likely to increase not only their expectations regarding other members' behavior but also their own perceptions of what the other community members expect of them in the community (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, although identification may serve to align the own values and objectives to the community ones (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005), being identified with an online community will imply considering in more detail the collective norms in order to continue belonging to the group. Thus, identified members will perceive a greater collective pressure (subjective norm) in order to regulate different member's behaviors such as participation in the community, knowledge contribution and so on. That is, this identification will influence how members respond and act within the group (Akkinen, 2005). Taking into account the previous considerations, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H10: Identification with a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive effect on subjective norm.*

#### Effects on customer behavioral intentions

Traditionally, consumer participation in an online community has been considered to have an impact on the consumer behaviors related to the firm/brand that hosts the community (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). In this sense, some researchers have proposed first that participation may foster consumer loyalty (Andersen, 2005; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). For instance, McAlexander *et al.* (2002) found that participation in events of the Jeep community favors consumer loyalty to the Jeep brand. That is, once consumers participate actively in a community, their emotional ties with the brand or organization around which the community is developed may increase (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Finally, all of these may favor higher levels of consumer loyalty (Koh and Kim, 2004).

Focusing on the travel sector, it is possible to note that online communities also provide an added value to users. This added value comes from the different benefits that consumers may gain in them (obtaining information about potential travel destinations or establishing relations with people who share the same interests). In other words, online communities are useful to satisfy some needs of the consumers (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997); so that the development of these communities by travel agencies and organizations may serve to differentiate the firm from its competitors (Flavián and Guinalíu, 2005) due to the greater services offered by the company. Thus, if a consumer participates in an online travel community and observes that s/he can satisfy some of his/her needs there; this consumer will be more likely to develop affective feelings toward the firm that provide the added service that may result in a greater intention to use the firm's products and services. Indeed, previous studies have noted that a key aspect of the intention to participate and remain engaged in a community is the ongoing purchase and use of the brand/firm products (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Taking into account these considerations in the travel sector, we propose the next hypothesis:

*H11: The intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive effect on the intention to use the host firm's products and services.*

In addition, consumer loyalty may be a sign of other favorable behaviors related to the host firm. In this respect, a second consumer behavior related to loyalty is the development of positive word-of-mouth and recommendation (Hallowell, 1996; Casaló *et al.*, 2008). In the context of online communities, a consumer may be motivated to promote the host firm products and services by the fact that s/he believes that the quantity of value received from the host firm (in part due to the online community) is greater than the value received from its competitors. Thus, in response to this greater value obtained, it is reasonable to believe that the individual will be motivated to remain loyal to the firm and promote it by, for instance, the intention to recommend the firm to fellow consumers. In this line, Muñiz and Schau (2005) already noted that members of the Apple Newton brand community usually recommend the use of the product to non-members and emphasize the product characteristics. Thus, following all these ideas, we propose our last hypothesis:

*H12: The intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive effect on the intention to recommend the host firm.*

#### **4 DATA COLLECTION**

Data were collected in the spring of 2008 thanks to a web survey using members of several firm-hosted online travel communities in Spain, which is consistent with the habitual research practice in collecting data in the online context (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006). In order to obtain the responses several banners and posts were included on popular websites, email distribution lists and well-known electronic forums, all of them related to the travel sector. Potential interviewees were linked to a specific website where they could answer the questionnaire and obtain all the information about the research project. Finally, all latent variables were measured using a multiple-item measurement scale. These measures use a seven-point Likert type response format, and respondents rated them from 1 ("completely disagree") to 7 ("completely agree").

During the process, subjects were allowed to choose the online community to analyze as the objective of this project was to understand members' behavior regardless the specific characteristics of each online community. However, it was a pre-requisite that: (1) the subject was registered as a member of the online travel community and, (2) the online community was hosted by a travel company, so that we could measure consumer behavioral intentions related to the host firm. The online communities selected by the interviewees were well-known in the Spanish travel sector and included the following communities: *Minube.com* (with more than 60.000 registered users), *Geoplaneta* (the community of LonelyPlanet.es, which has more than 20.000 registered users), *Trivago.es*, and *Tripadvisor* (with more than 10 million users worldwide).

Our non-random method of collecting the data (volunteer sampling) generated 456 valid questionnaires. As it is not possible to statistically assess the reliability or possible bias of non-random samples, we aimed to compare some of our sample characteristics with available information about the population. However, due to the lack of studies on online communities in the Spanish travel sector, we finally compared the socio-demographical characteristics of our sample with two of the most important studies on the online Spanish-speaking population (AIMC, 2008; RED.ES, 2007). The results are very similar, as can be seen in table 1.

	Current research project	AIMC (2008)	RED.ES (2007)
Sample size	456	41.667	19.131
Age < 24	21.7%	24%	21.9%
Age (25 – 34)	42.7%	38.74%	31.4%
Age (35 – 44)	21.9%	22.08%	23.7%
Age > 44	13.7%	15.18%	23%
Sex (males)	48,2%	68.5%	52.9%
Educational level (non primary education)	97,85%	89.8%	93.7%
Internet experience (more than five years experience using the Internet)	83.4%	72.1%	-

Table 1. *The representative nature of the data collected*

## 5 MEASURES VALIDATION

An in-depth review of the relevant literature concerning online communities and e-marketing was developed to propose an initial set of items to measure the latent constructs. This review helped to guarantee the content validity of the scales. We also tested face validity through a variation of the Zaichkowsky method (1985). Following this method, each item was qualified by a panel of experts as “clearly representative”, “somewhat representative” or “not representative of the construct of interest”. Finally, items were retained if a high level of consensus was observed among the experts (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1990).

The first step in the process of measures validation was an exploratory analysis of reliability and dimensionality. In this sense, the Cronbach’s alpha indicator -considering a minimum value of .7 (Nunnally, 1978)-, the item-total correlation -considering a minimum value of .3 (Nurosis, 1993)-, and principal components analysis were used to assess the initial reliability and dimensionality of the scales. All items were adjusted to the required levels and only one factor was extracted from each scale: identification, perceived usefulness, perceived ease-of-use, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, intention to participate, intention to use the host firm’s products and intention to recommend the host firm.

In order to confirm the dimensional structure of the scales, we used the Confirmatory Factor Analysis. For these tasks, the statistical software EQS v.6.1 was employed and we used Robust Maximum Likelihood as an estimation method. The criteria proposed by Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993) were followed in order to depurate the scales. To be precise, these criteria are:

- The weak convergence criterion, which means eliminating indicators that do not show significant factor regression coefficients ( $t$  student  $> 2.58$ ;  $p = .01$ ).
- The strong convergence criterion, which involves eliminating non-substantial indicators; that is, those whose standardized coefficients are lower than .5.
- According to the suggestion of Jöreskog and Sörbom, we also eliminated the indicators that least contribute to the explanation of the model, taking  $R^2 < .3$  as a cut-off point.

Following these recommendations, no item had to be eliminated and we obtained acceptable levels of convergence,  $R^2$  and model fit. Besides, in order to confirm the existence of multidimensionality in



identification, we developed a Rival Models Strategy (Hair et al., 1999; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). In this strategy, we compared a second order model in which the construct is measured by various dimensions with a first order model in which all the items formed only one factor. As can be seen in table 2, results showed that the second order model (SOIDENT) fits much better than the first order one (FOIDENT). This implies that identification with an online community is a multidimensional construct formed by two dimensions: cognitive and affective identification.

		Recommended Value	FOIDENT	SOIDENT
ABSOLUTE FIT	$\chi^2$	$p > .05$	146.236; 5 d.f.; $p < 0,001$	17.224; 4 d.f.; $p = .00175$
	RMSEA	RMSEA < .08	.125	.022
	90% Confidence Interval of RMSEA		(.091; .162)	(.000; .077)
INCREMENTAL FIT	NFI	NFI > .9	.962	.995
	NNFI	NNFI > .9	.932	.995
	CFI	Close to 1	.966	.999
	IFI	Close to 1	.966	.999
PARSIMONY FIT	Normed $\chi^2$	[1; 5]	29.2472	4.306

Table 2. Multidimensionality Analysis

Additionally, we used the composite reliability indicator to assess construct reliability (Jöreskog, 1971). We obtained values above .65, exceeding the benchmarks that are suggested as acceptable (Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006). Finally, convergent validity was tested by checking that the factor loadings of the confirmatory model were statistically significant (level of .01) and higher than .5 points (Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006). On the other hand, to test discriminant validity, we compared the squared root of the AVE with the correlations among constructs. In other words, we checked that the construct shares more variance with its measures than the variance it shares with the other constructs in the model (Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2007). Results showed an acceptable level of convergent and discriminatory validity.

## 6 RESULTS

To test the hypotheses, we developed a structural equation model using the statistical software EQS v.6.1 (results are shown in table 3). On the one hand, results reveal the confirmation of hypotheses 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 to a level of .01. On the other hand, hypothesis 2 was not supported. In addition, the model fit also showed acceptable values, as can be seen in table 4.

Hypotheses	Effects	Structural coefficient	Remarks
H1	ATT→PARTI	.350**	Supported
H2	SN→PARTI	-.087*	Not supported
H3	PBC→PARTI	.471**	Supported
H4	USEF→PARTI	.175**	Supported
H5	USEF→ATT	.164**	Supported
H6	EOU→ATT	.379**	Supported
H7	EOU→USEF	.557**	Supported
H8	IDENT →PARTI	.290**	Supported
H9	IDENT →ATT	.609**	Supported
H10	IDENT→SN	.498**	Supported
H11	PARTI→USE	.442**	Supported

H12	PARTI→REC	.833**	Supported
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Table 3. Results from hypotheses test.

Notes: (\*) indicates that coefficients are significant at the .05 level; (\*\*) indicates that coefficients are significant at the .01 level. ATT = Attitude; SN = Subjective Norms; PBC = Perceived Behavioral Control; USEF = Perceived Usefulness; EOU = Perceived Ease of Use; IDENT = Identification; PARTI = Intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community; USE = Intention to use the host firm's products and services; REC = Intention to recommend the host firm.

		Recommended Value	MODEL FIT
ABSOLUTE FIT	$\chi^2$	$p > .05$	972.5961; 198 d.f.; $p < 0,001$
	RMSEA	RMSEA < .08	.075
	90% Confidence Interval of RMSEA		(.068; .081)
INCREMENTAL FIT	NFI	NFI > .9	.900
	NNFI	NNFI > .9	.912
	CFI	Close to 1	.926
	IFI	Close to 1	.926
PARSIMONY FIT	Normed $\chi^2$	[1; 5]	4.9121

Table 4. Model Fit

Firstly, in accordance with standardised coefficients, it has been proved that the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community is positively affected by attitude toward participation ( $\beta=.350$ ,  $p < .01$ ), perceived behavioral control ( $\beta=.471$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and, in a lesser extent, by perceived usefulness ( $\beta=.175$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and identification with the community ( $\beta=.290$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These findings supports hypothesis 1, 3, 4 and 8 respectively. On the contrary, we found a significant negative effect of subjective norm on the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community ( $\beta = -.087$ ,  $p < .05$ ), so that hypothesis 2 was not supported. Secondly, in line with previous TAM studies, we found that attitude is positively influenced by both perceived usefulness ( $\beta=.164$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and ease-of-use ( $\beta=.379$ ,  $p < .01$ ), confirming hypotheses 5 and 6 respectively. In turn, perceived usefulness is also affected by perceived ease-of-use ( $\beta=.557$ ,  $p < .01$ ), so that hypotheses 7 was also confirmed. Thirdly, the hypotheses related to the integration of Social Identity Theory into the research model were also supported. In addition to its positive effect on the intention to participate in the community (already mentioned above), we found that a greater identification with the online travel community favors higher levels of attitude toward participation ( $\beta=.609$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and subjective norm ( $\beta=.498$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which confirm hypothesis 9 and 10 respectively. Finally, the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive influence in two consumer behavioral intentions that may benefit the host firm: the intention to use the host firm's products ( $\beta=.442$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the intention to recommend the host firm ( $\beta=.833$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results allow us to accept hypotheses 11 and 12.

Lastly, it is also remarkable that the research model is able to partially explain the endogenous variables of the study: perceived usefulness ( $R^2 = .311$ ), attitude toward participating in a firm-hosted online travel community ( $R^2 = .610$ ), subjective norm ( $R^2 = .248$ ), intention to participate in the community ( $R^2 = .593$ ), intention to use the host firm's products ( $R^2 = .195$ ) and intention to recommend the host firm ( $R^2 = .694$ ). This proves that the integration of TAM, TPB and Social Identity Theory is a fine and simple way to explain the intention to participate in an online travel community. As well, this participation intention becomes a good predictor of some potential consumer behavioral intentions related to the host firm.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

Online travel communities is an increasing phenomenon that is motivating deep changes in the travel industry. The reason behind this may be found in the fact that tourists and travelers are increasingly turning to the Internet in order to get information on which to base their decisions about travel planning and potential destinations (Hock, 2007). Thus, in order to offer an added value to customers and satisfy their needs, travel agencies and organizations are continuously developing this kind of communities. However, little is still known about consumer behavior in firm-hosted online travel communities and therefore, the growing development of these communities is producing a need to understand what motivates the consumer intention to participate in them and the possible impact of this participation on other consumer behavioral intentions, especially those related to the firm that hosts the community. To move on this topic, the objective of this work has been twofold: (1) to explain the intention to participate in an online travel community based on three well-recognized theories (TAM, TPB and Social Identity Theory), and (2) to investigate the effect of the intention to participate in an online travel community on consumer behavioral intentions related to the host firm.

First of all, the combination of TAM, TPB and Social Identity Theory has been found to successfully predict the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community ( $R^2 = .593$ ). As expected, attitude toward participation, perceived behavioral control, perceived usefulness of participating in the community and identification with the online community have a positive influence on the consumer intention to participate in these communities. On the other hand, and contrary to expected, we have found that subjective norm do not exert a positive effect on the participation intention. Moreover, although non-significant, the effect of subjective norm appeared to be negative. The reason behind this may be found in the fact that a greater pressure on members to behave in a certain way (in order to meet the group norms and objectives) makes the interaction and participation in the community more difficult in the case that members do not privately accept these subjective norms. As a result, members may be less inclined to engage in the group activities (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005).

In turn, consistent with TAM studies, perceived usefulness has been found to positively influence attitude toward participating in a firm-hosted online travel community and perceived ease-of-use has been found to positively affect both attitude and perceived usefulness. Finally, identification with the community has been proved to exert a positive effect on both attitude and subjective norm, which confirms the successful integration of Social Identity Theory into the research model. Indeed, the development of this global model may suppose an initial contribution of this work since, although TAM and TPB have been successfully combined to explain behavioral intentions in several contexts (e.g. Wu and Chen, 2005; Lu *et al.*, 2009), the integration of Social Identity Theory into these two theories had not been conducted previously. Therefore, due to the success obtained in this work, this theoretical framework could be use to predict the intention to participate not only in online travel communities, but also in any kind of online communities or brand communities.

Finally, the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community favors the development of consumer behavioral intentions that may benefit the host firm. To be precise, we have found that the intention to participate in a firm-hosted online travel community has a positive effect on the consumer intention to both recommend the host firm and use its products. These consumer responses are explained by the higher perceived value provided by the host firm through the online community. Thus, the results of this study allow us to conclude that online travel communities may help to develop affective links and preference for the firm that hosts the community due to the added value that these communities represent for tourists and travelers. Indeed, this research has shown that the intention to participate in an online travel community may increase the consumer intention to use the host firm's products and services, which is a key goal for most of the organizations (e.g. Andreassen, 1999). Besides, the development of a consumer intention to recommend the host firm is an additional outcome of the intention to participate in the community. This effect is especially relevant since consumer advocacy is one of the most powerful forces that influence consumer choice, so that travel companies have a good

opportunity to increase their market share by developing positive recommendations among customers (Chung and Darke, 2006).

As a consequence, it is possible to state that online travel communities may be helpful for both consumers and the travel organizations that develop them. On the one hand, tourists and travelers may satisfy some of their needs in these communities (e.g. finding information about potential destinations, obtaining advice for planning their travels more efficiently, establishing relationships with other travelers, etc.). On the other hand, the intention to participate in the community produces in the consumer the intention to behave in a more beneficial way for the host firm. In conclusion, travel organizations may do well to take advantage of the opportunities that online communities present.

### **7.1 Implications for practice**

Our results suggest that online travel communities, because they favor the development of affective links and preference for the firm that hosts the community, may increase consumer intentions to use the host firm's products and services. As well, consumer intentions to recommend the host firm may also result from intentions to participate in the community. Therefore, travel companies that develop these communities should understand the drivers of the intention to participate in them in order to take advantage of these consumer behavioral intentions. In this line, our work suggests some of the methods that travel organizations may use to predict and manage consumer participation in online travel communities. Recommendations for reinforcing intentions to participate in an online travel community, as derived from our research, include the following.

First, community characteristics such as usefulness and ease of use help form more positive consumer attitudes. Thus, the promotion of the benefits that participation in these communities provides to consumers may serve to enhance the intention to participate in the travel community. As well, ease of use must be a prior issue when developing an online travel community. Our results suggest that the most effective community may not be the most sophisticated one but rather the one that is easiest to use.

Second, travel organizations should promote group cohesion and communication among community members. This would help to develop a shared identity, which may enhance the intention to participate in the online community. To do that, organizing off-line meetings among the community members, promoting discussions about topics of interest (e.g., favorite tourist destinations) or asking members for suggestions about the firm's products and services might be useful.

Third, according to our findings, travel organizations should be aware that normative pressures inside the collective may have a negative influence on participation. Therefore, in order to compensate for this effect, travel companies should conduct other actions that increase member's perceptions that others think it is popular and trendy to participate in the community. For instance, it would be useful to promote the online community in well-recognized blogs and high-traffic Web sites.

Lastly, we have found that the intention to participate in an online travel community also depends on external factors beyond the host firm's control, such as members' perceived behavioral control. In spite of this, travel firms still can carry out actions in order to improve access to the community through different mobile devices and Internet access methods. All these would help consumers access the community any time they want.

Due to these recommendations, a travel company would be able to enhance travelers' intentions to participate in its online community. Then, as a result of the added value offered by the community, potential consumers might increase their affective links toward the host firm. In response to these ties, consumers would be more likely to engage in behaviors that may affect the host firm's profitability in a positive way such as the ones considered in this work, namely, intention to use the host firm's products and services and intention to recommend the host firm.

## 7.2 Limitations and future research lines

Despite the contributions of this work, we acknowledge the limitations of this research that open some possibilities for future research. First, it is important to note that the sample includes only online travel communities, so that care must be taken when extrapolating the findings to other communities out of the travel sector. A second limitation of the study is the fact that our sample only represents Spanish-speaking members of online travel communities, so that results must still be interpreted with caution. Therefore, in order to generalize the results obtained, it would be useful to replicate the study using a wider sample of consumers representing nationalities from diverse cultures.

Besides, an interesting route to extend this research would be to analyse other effects derived from consumer participation in online travel communities. To be precise, it would be very useful to analyse the link between consumer participation in an online travel community and the consumer intention to follow the advice s/he obtains in the community. Thus, it would be possible to assess the effect of fellow consumers' recommendations on consumer behavioral intentions. Finally, going one step further, it would be useful to analyse in more detail not only the intention to participate in an online community, but the precursory factors of the different levels of participation since consumers may participate in an online community from mere observers to active contributors to the collective.

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