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Open Collaboration as Marketing Transformation Strategy in Online Markets: The Case of the Fashion Sector

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Abstract: An increasing number of companies engage with global markets due to technological advances, digitalisation and the homogenisation of consumers' tastes. Taking into account the consumers' opinion becomes more important in the current global output. On the other hand, the use of social media promotes the interaction between companies and users, and they are considered to be key elements in generating socialisation and, in addition, they contribute to generating images, communicating and improving participation. This interaction represents the moment in which value is generated in the commercial offer. In this context, the co-creation as marketing strategy is considered a very useful tool to approach the consumers and, thus, facilitate the global result, becoming social media as an important resource for management. The aim of this paper is to show the relevance of the global marketing strategy in fashion and accessories' retail sector, as well as to study the role that companies grant to co-creation such as strategy which allows approaching consumer in those international markets. For this purpose, we will focus on Spanish firms in the fashion and accessories industry. In sum, this qualitative study, analysed using Atlas.ti® software, leads to a new paradigm which represents the transition of a brand model based on proposing solutions, proposals, and collective responses, to a business model that increasingly develops proposals, solutions and individual responses.

Keywords: co-creation in virtual environments; fashion retailers; marketing transformation strategy; social networks

1. Introduction

The growing importance of social media tools has been quickly acknowledged, and it is currently one of the top research priorities established by the Marketing Science Institute, who aim to increase understanding of what social media could do for them, and to develop a clear strategy of how they could enhance customers' experience and perceptions of their brands [1]. As a result of technological progress and digitalisation, new media and platforms are being developed. As example, Allgood [2] indicates that stock brokering services are available via the Internet and investors in many countries can currently experience the benefits of Web-based share trading. Investors not only intended for communication, but also for creating tools used to generate interaction between the different participants in the commercial process, specifically customers and firms. The benefits are generated for all parties, such as satisfaction for some participants and key information for others [3].

Among these commercial strategies, there are those that give special importance to the active participation of consumers and their interaction with the firms. One of these strategies is 'open collaboration' (e.g., co-creation, personalised co-production or co-designing of products), which is an innovation tool that promotes internationalization processes. Within this frame, Jerman-Blažič et al. [4] explored a virtual-user community's influence on the design of a new, multimedia-based Internet service.

Consumers are the main subject of study in research conducted in this area. The concept of co-creation value is based on the idea that all those customers will perform a participative role in the collaboration with brands or companies with the objective to create value together [5,6]. These studies have focused on various aspects, such as: (a) a customer's motivation to participate and the effect of such participation on their satisfaction [7–9]; (b) consumers' psychological responses resulting from their participation [10]; (c) the effects of participation on the recovery of services in the event of failure [11]; (d) more favourable/positive consumer's perception of brand images [12]; and (e) the positive effects of participation on customer trust and loyalty [13,14], among others. However, there are a scarce number of studies conducted from the point of view of firms.

Therefore, the main goal of the present study was to assess the role of the Internet and social media in the internationalization strategy of the fashion and accessories industry. Due to the Spanish fashion market is a mature one, characterised by a wide range of fashion brands and a high level of competition [3], we will focus the empirical analysis on Spanish firms. Specifically, we intended to analyses the reasons that determine their use by firms, the channels used to participate in foreign markets, the adaptation of the strategies and specific policies of marketing within the firms, and the effects originated in the firms towards consumers.

1.1. Consumer as Value Co-Creator: Participation Experience, Satisfaction, Engagement, Recommendation

The value co-creation is conceptualised in the literature as a process of exchange between different individuals involved, in value processes of value creation [15,16] between two parties involved for a mutual benefit. Some research shows how important the value concept is as an approach to implement the value in co-creation activities or improvements from innovation perspectives, in the products or services development processes with consumers [17–28].

The participation of the customer in scenarios of creation or involvement, together with the organisations, can define the importance that the consumer brings in the processes of production and development of products or services of the current market [29–32]. Moreover, Kostopoulos et al. [33] indicated that the participation of the client in processes of configuration or development of new products or services implies that the expectations or needs of the client are identified in a more specific way so that in this way, the supplying companies can satisfy the needs demanded from a much more successful production.

As the researchers Lusch et al. [34] also explained, the provision of co-production actions consists of the desired level of involvement or contribution on the part of the client and in relation to the available resources or opportunities, which leads companies towards obtaining a better competitiveness and business management with respect to the products or services they can offer.

For authors such as Grönroos [15], the various service providers in the market must strive to develop processes in which the customer participates, at least partially, in the configuration of goods or resources. Therefore, individuals who participate in co-creation actions, creating value through perceived experience, are highly relevant agents for the contribution in contexts of development or testing of products and services [35].

The management of companies with regard to the approach to new sources of innovation and development, raises the need to implement actions focused on their audiences and customers to attract their commitment more effectively [36]. From this perspective, business innovation initiatives focused on actions such as participation or joint interaction between customers and organisations, allow market

companies to obtain relevant information on customer preferences, behaviour patterns or contributions in an experiential context.

Within this line, respect to personal experience of the individual's participation in co-creation actions, some research (e.g., [26,37–44]) highlighted the various benefits relating to the user's own experience for the co-creator, on its integration into co-creation actions proposed by organisations and through processes of joint creation and interaction between brands and co-creators, with the subsequent adoption of benefits for both parties involved.

Several studies (e.g., [45–47]) seek to understand how companies can design and manage service experiences in a more competitive and differentiating way, seeking those factors that can contribute to a better contribution of the experience perceived by the client. Authors such as Klaus and Maklan [46] identified the relevance of experience management in service, with factors such as customer loyalty, satisfaction or a positive electronic recommendation in digital contexts.

Other authors [48] stated that the physical and mental participation of the individual in co-creation actions and the mastery or knowledge of the action itself have a direct effect on his or her experience of perceived value and on his or her satisfaction with the co-creation.

A crucial aspect derived from this relationship between customer and firms is the feedback provided by the consumers respect to brand personality, which represents the customers' perspectives, i.e., their own criteria. The management of the brands becomes a social process in which different parties participate. It does not always comply with strategic plans of the brands; they are constantly negotiated [49]. These processes are promoted by new skills and work tools—such as the Internet and social networks—developed to produce collective creativity and co-design processes [50]. In this regard, interactive platforms can be mentioned as an example, given that they promote multidimensional relationships between the different actors of the exchange process [51]. Within the fashion sector in the USA, Cho and Fiore [52] carried out a qualitative study to eleven managers. An analysis of the interview data revealed that cognitive, emotional, and sensory dimensions were important for brand image of fashion-related products from customer perspective. Choi et al. [53] demonstrated that fashion brand authenticity consisted of several factors such as authority, fashionability, consistency, innovativeness, sustainability, origin, and heritage, through an experimental design with two sport brands focused on customer participation. Merrilees [24] stablished that the different interactive experience pathways between functional and hedonic brands imply different engagement and co-creation strategies by firms. Generally, a richer set of engagement options are relevant to the hedonic brand. However, functional brands can extend their repertoire of engagement tools by borrowing inspiration from the hedonic brands. Kennedy and Guzmán [54] carried out a double study (from managerial and consumer perspective) obtaining, as general result, that to co-create with brand identity with all stakeholders, in particular consumers. This customers' active role represents a challenge for the firms in the management of the image and identity of the brands, given that participation influences their meanings and identities [55]. As a result, this broader adaptation becomes a greater value for the consumers. In addition, it allows firms to be more efficient in their innovation and development, as well as in the optimisation of the allocation of their resources.

1.2. Co-Creation in the Internationalization Process

A challenge faced by retailers is adapting to the different countries of destination, using specific dynamic capabilities of channel management and implementation of brands [56]. The aim is to detect and take advantage of the opportunities of the environment, transforming and adapting their resources, processes, and routines [57]. Among the specific dynamic capacities are the management of the relationships with customers and the implementation of the brands, among others [58]. The dynamic capacities, within co-creation strategy framework, suppose:

- Greater coherence between the results of innovation and the expectations of the customers is proposed for a better adaptation of the company to its environment. To that end, it is essential to

know user needs [59]. The strategy of co-creation (customer participation) plays an important role in a better adaptation of the firms whose aim is to operate in international markets.

- In the context of internationalization, the construction of the brand requires: the ability to transfer the brand to new markets; the ability to manage the adaptation of the brand without losing its integrity; and the ability to promote a brand experience [58]. Therefore, bidirectional communication processes, development of commercial formats, and assortments of products and brands are required.

Bell and Loane [60] explain the existence of an emerging wave of new small global firms that are created according to the principles of Social Web and characterised by an open innovation as the basis of their strategies. These authors affirm that Social Web has brought a change of paradigm. The next computing generation is now at the age of open innovation, close collaboration, co-creation, interconnection, and creativity in the use of existing technologies to develop new supply items. This fact begins with the opening of new channels to respond to the consumers (through comments on the websites, votes via SMS or Internet, or company blogs). These channels directly ask users what they like and what they do not, or what they want. Part of the business is delivered to the external control of the customers, thus creating instant entrepreneurs (known as 'intrapreneurs') in a wave of globally oriented emerging firms.

New technologies and the use of the Internet provide a series of tools that are very useful for promoting co-creation. These mechanisms have allowed the creation of internationalization strategies. In the same way, thanks to the means offered by the network, fashion firms can be more easily internationalised. This way, it is possible to reduce the costs caused by the internationalization process and the difficulties that may arise. This internationalization process seems to be very attractive, given that it prevents many small and medium-sized firms from disappearing or being acquired by larger firms that have greater capacity. In this way, firms manage to be more competitive and productive [61]. Through online media, "firms can obtain scalability, interactivity, flexibility, brand management, and personalised consumer production in a world organised into a network" [62].

These tools allow fashion firms to improve the access to their markets. They are able to enter the market with greater knowledge and security, because they can determine the tastes and preferences of local users and make products in a personalised and consistent manner. In this way, thanks to online tools that promote co-creation, fashion firms can publicise their products and services (which are created jointly) in an optimal manner in new international markets.

As a result of the literature review, the following network is proposed at the theoretical level (Figure 1).

(1)　Adaptation to international markets:

  - facilitate the internationalization of firms.
  - takes place within the limits of brand personality.

(2)　The role of online media in the internationalization process:

  - Social networks promote knowledge of the markets that favour internationalization processes.
  - The information from the markets facilitates the adaptation to them, and the internationalization process.
  - Obtaining information represents a value for the company.
  - Customer participation favours obtaining information.
  - Strategy for the international development of social networks

(3)　The perspective of value co-creation:

  - Social networks favour customer participation.

-　　Customer participation promotes engagement with firms and represents value for consumers.
-　　The engagement with the firms represents value for the consumers and for firms (facilitates internationalization process).
-　　The value of experience contributes to generate engagement with firms.
-　　Personalisation: helps create value for the consumers, represents an experiential value for the consumers, helps generate consumer satisfaction, promotes engagement with firms, and promotes the internationalization process.

Based on this literature review, we propose the following research questions grouping in three blocks:

RQ1: How can the adaptation to international markets favour the internationalization of firms?
RQ2: How can social networks facilitate internationalization processes?
RQ3: How can social networks promote customer participation, value creation and engagement with the firms?
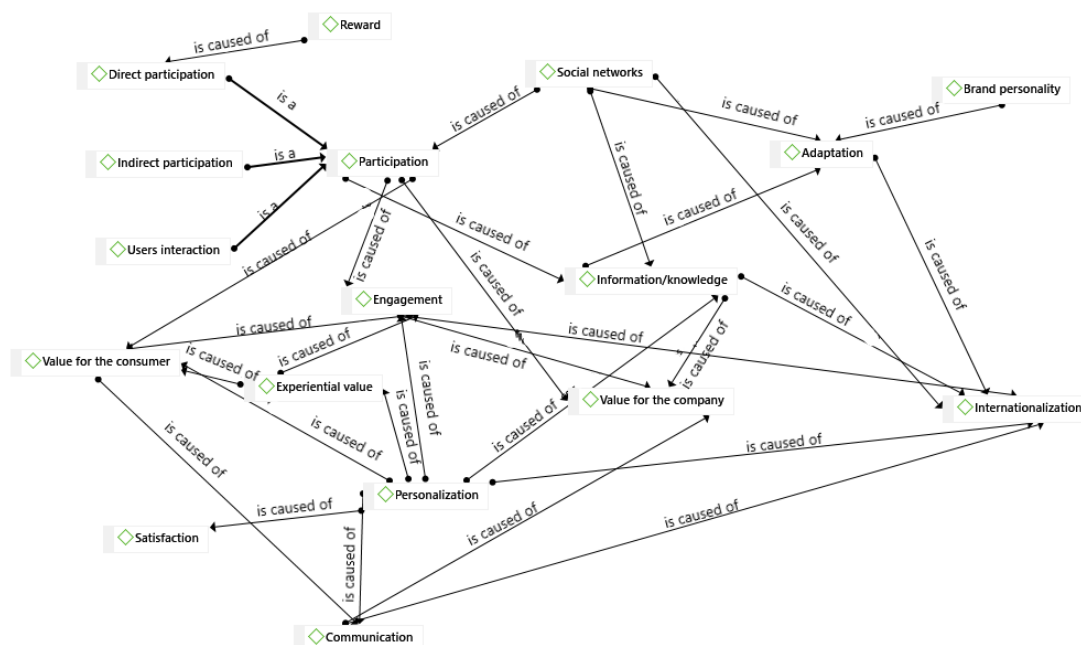

Figure 1. Theoretical basic network.

2. Materials and Methods

To answer the research questions, the qualitative research through the technique of the in-depth open interview was considered to be the most appropriate methodology.

The sample's selection were made through a quota structure based on characteristics such as location and type of product, taking into account that all companies must have online sales, as well as using internationalization strategies. The distribution of the sample is: 10 interviews in textile, 5 in footwear, 3 in accessories, and 2 in children. It was also searched for a design that allows giving an account of the possible differences by company's size (large, medium and small), and it was also considered to include a small sample of emerging Internet companies, as well as other with a consolidated career.

On the other hand, taking into consideration the MINECO (Spanish Economy Ministry) [63], we have differentiated four profiles according to the information that is sought to obtain. Therefore, Academic Institutions such as the European Institute of Design (IED) was interviewed in order of pointing out what companies are important in the sector. Professional Associations such as Business

Association of Textile and Accessories Trade (ACOTEX) and Valencian Association of Footwear Businessmen (AVECAL), in order of giving us a vision about the fashion and accessories sector. In addition, finally, distribution companies and manufacturers of the sector such as Nikita Nipone (Madrid, Spain), Wonders (Elche, Spain), Trucco (Alcobendas, Madrid, Spain), etc. that give us specific information about their companies.

Regarding the final obtained sample by sectors, size and geographical area, we have found that some brands have presence in more than one geographical area (with the headquarters in one and the production in others), and also certain brands work different product categories. Therefore, the final distribution regarding the fixed quotas for the selection of the sample is the following, which is a very close distribution to the initially planned: 1 academic institution (sector textile/footwear/accessories) in Madrid; 2 professional associations (sector textile/footwear) in Madrid and Alicante; 1 distributor (sector textile/footwear/accessories/children) in Madrid; and 16 manufacturing companies (sector footwear -4-, accessories -4-, textile -8-) in Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante and Almansa (Albacete) (Table 1). Regarding the size of the interviewed manufacturing companies, 6 are big, 3 medium, 3 small, and the last 4 are start-ups.

Table 1. Profiles interviewed (area and sector).

Entity	Number	Sector	Area
Academic Institutions	1	Textile/shoes/accessories	Madrid
Professional Associations	2	Textile, footwear	Madrid, Alicante
Distributor	1	Textile/shoes/accessories/children	Madrid
Manufacturing companies	16	Footwear (4), accessories (4), textile (8)	Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante, Almansa

The field work was developed through a market research company in 2016, by personal interview at companies' facilities. In total, 20 interviews were held with people in charge of the digital marketing department of the company or people capable of giving us this approach, such as founding partners in start-ups. The technique used to collect information was an open interview following a script of questions (Appendix B), which was divided into five sections: international challenge, multichannel distribution, client-client and client-company interactions, co-creation (value generation through the active participation of individuals with the company, and co-creation experience; with an approximate duration of ninety minutes each interview. Interviews lasted until the saturation of the speech was obtained, which provides research reliability.

To analyse the information the computer software Atlas.ti® (Berlin, Germany) was used. For this, the inductive and deductive coding of the interviews was carried out, following the coding strategies inspired by Miles et al. [64]. In this sense, we have codified the interviews using 14 codes (Table 2). After the coding process, we have used two analysis tools (which are the most used in qualitative research) to analyse the information and to get the main results:

- Use of query tool to discover the frequency of each code in total, and in each sector (Table 2).
- Co-occurrence table, to explain the strength of the relationship between the categories (codes), in order of answer the research questions (Tables 3 and A1, Tables A2–A4). This technique provides us the number of times in which two codes are mentioned in the same quote. Although the table contains frequency of relationships, in the text we have include the average of relationships in each interview and by sectors.

Table 2. Code frequency in each interview.

Type of Companies	Adaptation	Communication	Engagement	Information/ Knowledge	Users Interaction	Internationalization	Participation	Direct Participation	Indirect Participation	Brand Personality	Personalisation	Reward	Social Networks	Satisfaction	Experiential Value	Value for Consumers	Value for Companies	Total
D 1: 1 Big footwear brands	10	0	6	14	3	6	7	7	6	4	0	5	13	0	0	4	2	87
D 2: 1 Footwear start-ups	1	1	6	2	0	2	2	1	4	2	19	0	6	2	4	8	1	61
D 3: 1 Small accessories brands	2	2	2	3	0	0	2	3	1	4	12	0	9	1	2	10	1	54
D 4: 1 Distributors	5	0	2	9	7	7	9	4	4	3	5	5	15	0	4	8	6	93
D 5: 1 Experts	11	2	4	9	2	9	5	2	4	4	6	0	11	0	0	7	6	82
D 6: 1 Start-ups	8	1	10	4	4	2	13	3	0	5	0	3	14	0	0	6	4	77
D 7: 1 Medium textile brands	9	0	6	11	2	2	8	4	2	3	0	2	18	0	0	5	1	73
D 8: 1 Small textile brands	5	0	8	9	2	3	7	1	0	4	2	0	15	6	3	6	0	71
D 9: 1 Big accessories brand	16	1	6	13	0	9	6	0	0	4	4	0	21	1	0	3	2	86
D 10: 2 Big footwear brands	4	3	8	9	2	5	16	4	0	2	13	1	16	3	0	9	1	96
D 11: 2 Small accessories brands	4	1	6	11	1	8	9	0	1	2	3	0	15	1	1	5	7	75
D 12: 2 Experts	9	1	3	8	0	8	10	1	0	1	1	1	7	0	0	4	1	55
D 13: 2 Start-ups	9	0	5	9	0	2	15	4	0	2	1	4	9	0	0	2	1	63
D 14: 2 Medium textile brands	12	0	6	12	0	4	14	1	0	0	4	1	11	0	0	5	2	72
D 15: 2 Big textile brands	15	0	2	13	1	3	20	5	1	7	6	1	19	4	1	13	7	118
D 16: 3 Experts	7	0	2	7	0	3	5	0	0	3	4	0	8	0	0	5	1	45
D 17: 3 Start-ups	14	0	5	11	0	5	17	5	0	3	1	3	18	0	1	3	3	89
D 18: 3 Medium textile brands	2	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	1	8	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	25
D 19: 3 Big textile brands	12	0	4	17	2	7	8	1	0	3	4	0	17	1	1	1	6	84
D 20: 4 Big textile brands	9	0	12	14	4	0	14	5	2	8	0	1	20	4	0	5	1	99
Total	164	12	103	187	30	87	188	51	26	72	85	27	271	23	17	109	53	1505

Table 3. Overall co-occurrence.

Uses of Open Collaboration through Social Media for the Internationalization Strategy	Participation	Direct Participation / Indirect Participation / Users Interaction	Networks (Online Media)	Engagement	Information/ Knowledge	Adaptation	Brand Personality	Internationalization	Experiential Value	Creation of Value for the Consumer	Personalisation/ Customisation	Creation of Value for the Company	Satisfaction
Participation													
Networks (online media)	106	31 / 16 / 22											
Engagement	55	12 / 5 / 8											
Information/knowledge	88	28 / 16 / 10	117										
Adaptation			90		117								
Brand personality						30							
Internationalization			41	2	26	50							
Experiential value				3									
Creation of value for the consumer	46	12 / 5 / 1		34									
Personalisation/ customisation				15				3	9	43			
Creation of value for the company	23	8 / 5 / 5		12	31								
Satisfaction												8	

Note: Diagonal of the table (grey color): The co-occurrence between the same code is not exist.

3. Results

Next, the main results obtained in the research (see Tables 2 and 3 and Tables A1–A4 in Appendix A) are described regarding the use of open collaboration on Internet through social media for the internationalization strategy.

The results are divided into blocks: first, the internationalization process of companies is analysed, making reference to the process of adaptation to markets. Afterward, the influence of social media in the internationalization process is explained, starting with the market knowledge until covering the social networks field. In addition, finally, the co-creation perspective in the internationalization process is analysed, both relational and personalisation approach.

Globally (Figure 2, and Table 2), the code with the highest number of citations (E/G: groundedness) is social networks (271), followed by participation (188), and information and knowledge (187).
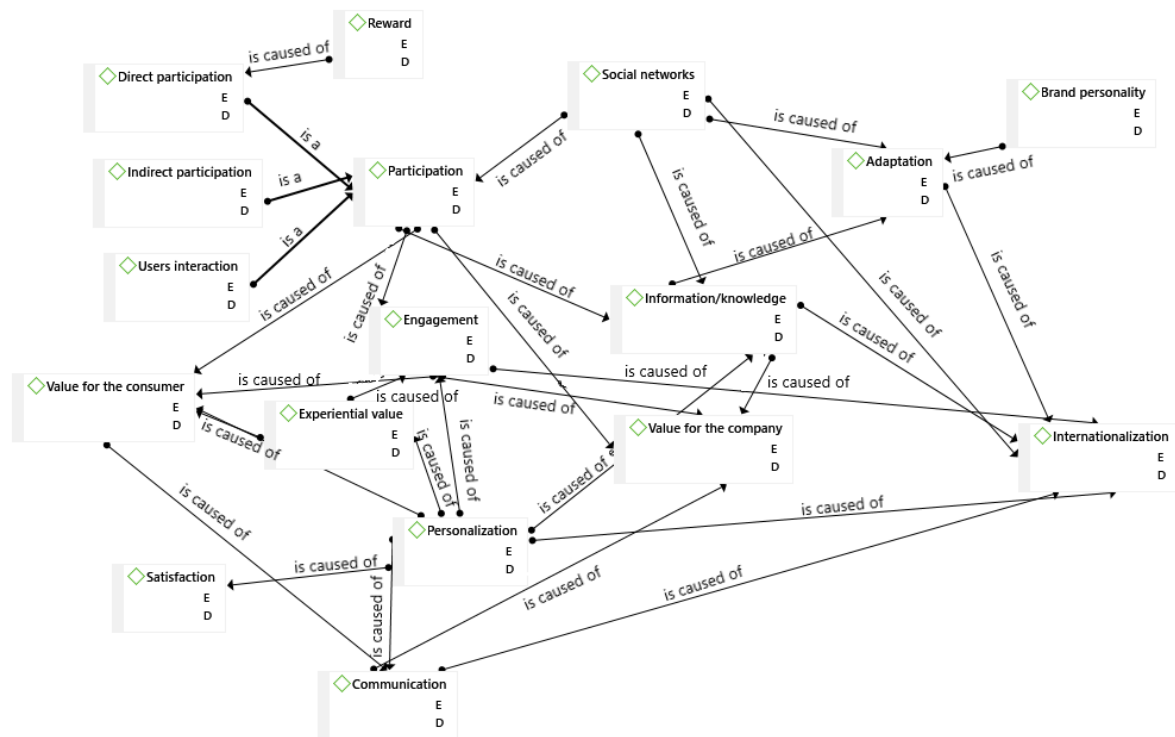

Figure 2. Theoretical basic network: Groundedness.

3.1. Antecedents and Internationalization Process

Internationalization represents a historical trend within the fashion sector. However, in recent years it represents a rising trend mainly driven by the weakening of domestic demand due to the economic crisis, and as a way of differentiation, since a large part of the supply of several companies was aimed to satisfy the domestic demand. Such was the case that several companies of the sample underline that prior to the crisis the Spanish market means 70% of billing; however, presently, this percentage is covered by the international market.

The internationalization strategy can combine different offline and online actions, representing a system that each company develops in a particular way. Generally, fashion companies begin their internationalization strategy through online sales, since this does not require large investments. Once the international demand starts to grow, companies look for different ways, for example, in the opinion of one of the experts interviewed "*the figure of franchisee, as a way to open shops and look for a partner to work together because he knows the market, or look in shopping centres or multi-brand stores to introduce the product to later creating your own stores*".

Fairs are one of the main supports and with a long weight in the historical trajectory of internationalization. Fairs represent a privileged means of contact with the international market and local distributors. Some of these fairs have a more international character, with visits of distributors from different countries, which represent a greater chance of access to different markets. The online support is added as a means of extension of the first contact established in the fairs. In this way, one of the small accessories brands interviewed states that "*When you go to the fair, you take business cards; then the first thing people do is to get into web and social networks; the entrance is easier*".

3.2. Adaptation to International Markets

The internationalization process represents a balance between the adaptations to the idiosyncrasies of different markets. The adaptation process to the different markets is related to the marketing processes, and fundamentally to communication, product's selection, or design aspects such as materials, colours, etc., following the principle of adapting without losing the essence of the brand.

Thus, the number of citations in which interviewees state this relationship between adaptation and internationalization was verified, finding a total of 50 citations (Table 3), in 14 of the 20 interviews.

If that relationship is analysed by sectors, the greatest consensus is observed in institutions (academics, professionals, and distributors) with an average of 3.5 citations per interview; followed by the accessories sector (3), textile (2.125) and, lastly, the footwear sector (1.75) (Tables A1–A4).

From the point of view of the product, the adaptation is placed in offering the part of the assortment that best suits those countries, by functional aspects, in product materials, or in stylistic aspects (local trends, colours). In this line, an interviewee belonging to large brands of accessories states that "*the selection of product is different according to the county; we have a catalogue for emerging countries, and another catalogue for mature ones*". In the same line, another interviewed expert says that "*the product has some characteristics depending on the market; manufacturers have specialised in making a suitable product to each market*".

Nevertheless, although there are differences between countries, there are also some common points, so the current international offer represents a global and local character at the same time, known as "glocal" strategy. In this sense, a large footwear brand interviewed maintains that "*There are some models that work globally and other characteristic models by areas*".

Therefore, this process of adaptation is established in line with the maintenance of the essence of brand values; this idea is defended by large accessories brands "*... the challenge is that your brand adapts to each country without losing the essence*"; and it is also maintained by some experts from the sector "*... what changes is how I address the target, but the brand and the philosophy do not change*".

As a resul, of the use of consulting tools in Atlas.ti® software, 30 citations were obtained in which the concepts of adaptation and brand personality are related (Table 3), in 13 of the 20 interviews. The analysis by sectors show us that the accessories sector is the one that most supports this relationship (2.25 citations on average per interview), followed by the textile sector (1.5) that of footwear (1.25) and, lastly, the grouping of institutions (1) (Tables A1–A4).

In this scene of adaptation-maintenance of the brand essence, the web segmentation tools play an important role as a means to offer more adapted proposals to the uniqueness of each country. The capacity of public segmentation represents a valuable tool for companies as long as it allows a greater personalisation of communication according to each profile and/or geographical location. Thus, the brand message is differentiated by countries according to their idiosyncrasy, of its cultural parameters, developing a type of communication appropriate to each area, either in the type of messages or even in the communication codes or the calendars of each country (father's day, periods of sales, etc.). One of the big textile brands interviewed affirms that "*the same message can have negative connotations in different countries while in other not [...], not only specialisation at the level of social networks but also specialszation at the market level [...] by a language topic, but also by a cultural issue*".

In the design of these communication contents, an interaction with each market is generated. For example, one of the big textile brands interviewed states that "*We do as a basis and then in each case*

we talk to the insiders of those countries; we are very careful to see what is going to work, because it is reflected in the results".

In the case of start-ups which have a greater volume of business development, the internationalization strategy through social web follows a similar pattern. Thus, in the same way, as in established brands, the main purpose is the connection with the brand, dissipating the brand-consumer distances. This is carried out through a strategy of brand-approaching to the social space, to the own space, and particularly to the social, cultural context market, as a necessary means to develop a link with the brand (engagement). All this requires a market segmentation strategy and the development of a social network in each country where the brand wants to be developed.

3.3. The Role of Online Media in the Internationalization Process

Online media represents an important complement to the presence of fairs for internationalization, as long as they represent a showcase of the brand, where the fair visitors can increase the information and establish contact with the brand. However, it also represents a channel in itself, which allows developing a first speculation of the market destination response to the brand. In this sense, Internet is considered to be a facilitator of the internationalization process, especially social networks such as Instagram and Facebook.

In some cases, Internet represents a means to overtake the certain state barriers to product within the internationalization process and facilitates the access to international markets.

As a result, of the analyses carried out, 41 citations were obtained in which the use of social networks is connected with the internationalization process (Table 3), in 17 of the 20 interviews. The analysis of this relationship by sectors shows that the greatest consensus is found in the accessories sector (3 citations on average by interview), followed by institutions (2.25), textile (2.125) and, lastly, the footwear sector (0.75) (Tables A1–A4).

Additionally, social media represents a channel to create social demand which mobilises the demand of local distributors, thanks to collaboration with international prescribers. Thus, in opinion of one of the big footwear brands interviewed, "*Collaborating with local bloggers has caused an increasing interest by the brand there [. . .]. Collaboration with international influencers is the engine that fuels part of our internationalization*".

3.4. Market Knowledge

The distinctive features of each international market and the need for adaptation to it, make the need to conduct a market research such as a prior step to the internationalization process. However, the implementation in international markets, beyond the market research, was done by incorporating the market information by the sales data, distributors, commercial agents, and the brand's own experience; elements to which joins the important value of knowledge social networks. Thus, in the opinion of one of the large footwear brands, "*There is a joint effort between we see, what people demand and what our distributors and agents there tell us [. . .]. Social networks and web have helped us to obtain an immediate response from them*".

As a result, of the analyses carried out, 117 citations were obtained that relate the social networks codes with information and market knowledge (Table 3), in a total of 18 of the 20 interviews. The analysis by sectors shows a greater consensus in the textile sector (7.625 citations on average by interview), followed by accessories sector (6), institutions (4.75) and footwear (3.25) (Tables A1–A4).

In the same way, the 117 citations found that relate the information with adaptation (Table 3), in 18 of the 20 interviews, support the statement of information need to adapt to the markets; textile sector has the highest consensus (8.125 citations on average by interview), followed by footwear and institutions (4.5) and accessories (4) (Tables A1–A4).

On the other hand, 26 citations are obtained that relates information with internationalization (Table 3), in 13 of the 20 interviews. This relationship has the greatest consensus among institutions (1.75 citations on average by interview), followed by footwear and accessories (1.25) and, finally, textile sector (1.125) (Tables A1–A4).

Additionally, in the international context, the market information provided by the active participation of clients through social networks represents an outstanding value of knowledge for companies within the internationalization process. The value that this information provides is contrasted by the analyses carried out; thus, 31 citations that relate information with value for the company are obtained (Table 3), in a total of 13 of the 20 interviews. Highlighting the accessories and institutions sectors (2.25 citations on average per interview), followed by textile sector (1.375) and, lastly, footwear (0.5) (Tables A1–A4).

In addition to the information, the participation of clients also contributes to the value of a company, this statement is supported by 23 citations founded (Table 3) in 12 of the 20 interviews. This statement has greater support in the accessories sector (1.5 citations on average per interview), followed by textile (1.375), institutions (1.25) and, with little support, by footwear sector (0.25) (Tables A1–A4).

Thus, on the one hand, social networks allow a first approximation to the target (market potential, its characteristics, communication in networks, bloggers, etc.). However, the great contribution at informative level (market knowledge) is represented by the participation of consumers in social networks of brands, because it produces valuable market information that allows companies to develop more adapted actions to each market; as it happens in the national market. This is possible because currently, according to an expert "... *the final consumer dares with things that he did not dare before, [...], now he will give his opinion and suggestions*". Therefore, it is a different consumer, much more involved with the purchase and post-purchase process (repeat of purchase and/or recommendations).

As a result, of the analyses carried out, 88 citations were found that relate participation of users with obtaining information (Table 3), in a total of 18 of the 20 interviews. This relationship is supported in the first place by textile sector (6.375 citations on average per interview), followed by institutions (3.75), footwear (3.25) and, lastly, by the accessories sector (2.25) (Tables A1–A4).

Regarding the forms of participation (Figure 3 and Table 2), it is observed that direct participation (basically asking questions to participate) is the most frequent (E = 51), followed by the interaction between users (E = 30) and, finally, indirect participation (E = 26).
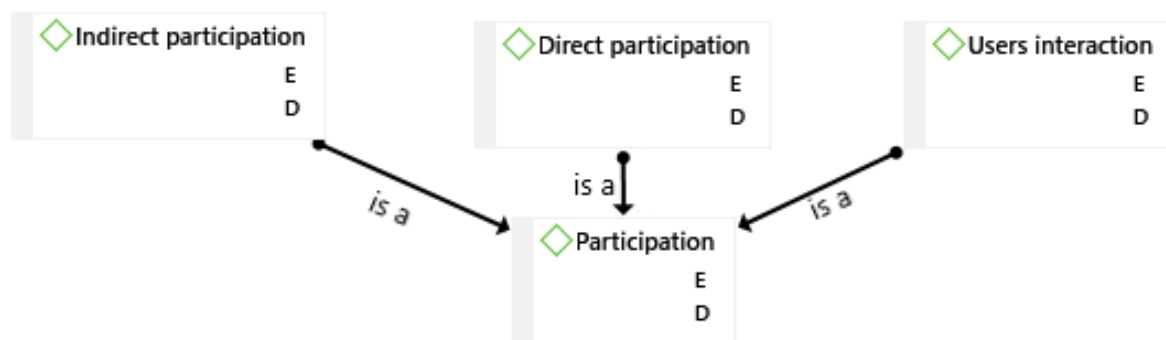

Figure 3. Participation network.

For all relationships between components of participation and other variables, direct participation is always the strongest (Table 3).

3.5. Strategy for the International Development of Social Networks

The formulas of how to approach the international market are diverse. Some companies use undifferentiated formats. However, others follow a *"glocal"* strategy, i.e., on the one hand they carry out global approaches, using global social networks in international languages (mainly English/Spanish) and global online store, and on the other they carry out local approaches, using local social networks with their own language, and local online stores; as is the case of one of the major textile brands, which argues that *"Instagram account is universal, that is why we write in English because we only have one account, in the end as it is an image, the language is not so important, like maybe Facebook that creates conversations, and you need to express yourself in your language [...]. In the main countries for the business we have a Facebook account, apart from a global one that encompasses the whole world, but if in a country we do not have much business we do not have a Facebook account, it is published in the global account; Twitter then we have two versions one in English and other in Spanish, Pinterest and LinkedIn are global"*.

When the market is strategic, even if it belongs to an international language, it is developed an own web because the development of the community depends not only on its own language, but based on the characteristics of that local collective: cultural elements, contents, communication codes, offer, etc., and act under those rules represents a means more adapted to that social and market reality.

As a result of the analyses carried out, 90 citations were obtained that relate the codes of social networks and adaptation (Table 3), in 17 of the 20 interviews. The textile sector had the greater consensus (6.625 citations on average in each interview), followed by the accessories sector (4.5), institutions and, finally, footwear (1.25) (Tables A1–A4).

3.6. The Perspective of Co-Creation Value

The active participation of the consumer represents two fundamental values: information about the consumer and about the acceptance of the proposals of the brand, and the connection (engagement) with the brand through the relationships that are generated, all this made possible by the creation of an active community. Thus, 55 citations were found that relate participation with engagement (Table 3) in 18 of the 20 interviews. For this statement, the greatest consensus is found in the accessories sector (3.25 citations on average in each interview), followed by the textile sector (3), footwear (2.75) and, lastly, by institutions (1.75) (Tables A1–A4).

In this sense, the predominant approach is relational, although it also implies an experiential side. The value of the relational experience (through its participation by comments, interaction, dialogue, etc.) is appreciated by consumers and generates emotional ties.

According to the results, 46 citations were found that relate participation with value creation for the consumer in 17 of the 20 interviews; 34 citations that relate engagement with value for the consumer, in 19 of the 20 interviews; and three citations that relate experiential value with engagement, in only three interviews (Table 3).

The analysis by sectors shows that the relationship between participation and value creation has greater support in the textile sector (3.125 citations on average per interview), followed by the accessories sector (2.25) and, lastly, in footwear and institutions (1.5 in both cases). For the relationship between engagement and value creation for the consumer, there is greater support in the sectors of footwear and accessories (two appointments on average per interview in both cases) followed by the textile sector and institutions (1.5 in both cases). Finally, for the relationship between experiential value and engagement the three citations are distributed in the footwear, institutional and textile sectors, being in any case a statement with little support (Tables A1–A4).

The most experiential approach, in accordance with the role of the consumer's web actor, corresponds to internet brands, which transfer their participatory model to their international development space. In the case of established brands, the development of the experience through the customisation platforms and the move to international markets, stands out. The performance on the Internet of the brands interviewed within the international markets follows the same pattern observed at the national level, since the objective is the same and the way are identical. Actually, it is a process in

which the proposal of the brand is also adapted to the social and market reality of its context, and in which the contribution of value represented by the information generated by the customer's feedback and the value generated in the engagement processes that occur is highlighted.

The analyses carried out identify two citations in 2 of the 20 interviews (one in a footwear's company and another in textile) which relate the engagement codes with internationalization, being a statement little supported by the sample interviewed (Tables A1–A4).

This new paradigm, in which the consumer has become a co-creator, is present in the digital actions of fashion brands, which have enabled web spaces for the development of this new active role of the digital consumer, being the start-ups, the Internet companies, which have incorporated these logics of culture and the digital economy to a greater extent. However, it is also found in large brands of accessories.

In this way, based on the analyses carried out, 106 citations were obtained, in 19 of the 20 interviews, which relate social networks with participation (Table 3). This widely supported relationship obtains its maximum support in the textile sector (7.875 citations on average per interview), followed by the accessories sector (4.25), footwear (4) and institutions (2.5) (Tables A1–A4).

3.7. The Relational Approach

Brands connect to the consumer's own space, as a means of generating a greater relationship and establishing a link (engagement), and in the case of internationalization processes, require the use of the client's own language, and a performance personalised according to the cultural and market parameters of that context. Therefore, in cases where it is decided to develop an international market in greater depth, the strategy is in some cases for the creation of a community under the guidance of the native Community Managers of that country, who dominate the language and know the cultural context and the country's own market.

Thus, according to the analyses carried out, 12 citations were obtained in 11 interviews that relate engagement with generating value for the (Table 3). The analysis by sector shows that the limited consensus with the previous statement is shared in the different sectors (textiles, footwear, accessories and institutions), obtaining in all of them an average of appointments per interview of less than 1 (Tables A1–A4).

In the process of internationalization, the participatory approach helps in the internationalization of the company, sharing content and establishing a dialogue according to the characteristics of that country.

3.8. The Offer of Customised Products—Co-Creation with the Consumer

The customisation of the product represents a high experiential value for the consumer and a space with a significant demand. The association of this type of product with a higher productive cost and, therefore, its relationship with the purchasing power of the client, together with the idea that there may be a greater predisposition in public sensitised with fashion, suggest that the success of this proposal can be located in those geographic locations that meet both premises: greater purchasing power and greater interest in fashion.

According to the analyses carried out, 43 citations were obtained that relate personalisation with creation of value for the consumer (Table 3), in 12 of the 20 interviews. The analysis by sector shows that the sectors of footwear, institutions and accessories (on average 3.25; 3; 2.75 citations per interview, respectively) are where the relationship between personalisation and the creation of value for the consumer is the most; while in the textile sector, support is much lower (0.875 average appointments per interview) (Tables A1–A4).

In the same way, we have obtained nine citations that relate personalisation with experiential value (Table 3), in 7 of the 20 interviews. Low support shared by all sectors, which on average do not reach one appointment by interview in each sector.

On the other hand, the customisation capacity speaks to us in some cases about the production close to the artisanal; this ad-hoc production capacity enables the segmentation of the offer on the premise of making an offer for each market based on the parameters of value of the product (materials, functional aspects, etc.).

According to the analyses carried out, three citations that relate personalisation to internationalization were obtained (Table 3), in 3 of the 20 interviews; these are two appointments in the footwear sector and one in the accessories section (Tables A1–A4).

Product customisation spaces produce significant value effects for brands. Thus, the dissemination and prescription of the product by consumers is increased: the consumer comments and presents in his environment what in a certain way bears his stamp.

Another important aspect is related to the level of satisfaction with the product, which is reflected in lower rates of return compared to standardised ones. It is considered that customisation represents a prominent means to increase the link (engagement) with the company, and to produce greater brand loyalty.

According to the analyses carried out, eight citations that relate personalisation with satisfaction (Table 3) were found in 6 of the 20 interviews. There were four appointments in the footwear sector, three in accessories and one in textile, with an average of appointments per interview less than one unit (Tables A1–A4).

In the same way, we found 15 citations that relate personalisation with engagement (Table 3), in 9 of the 20 interviews. The analysis by sectors shows greater support for this statement in the accessories sector (1.5 citations per interview), followed by the footwear sector (1), textiles (0.5) and institutions (0.25) (Tables A1–A4).

While all companies agree that the interest represents or may represent such actions within fashion brands, in some cases it is considered irrelevant for the brand as it can represent a way out of the socioeconomic profile of the target by the price increase that this type of products can represent.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

From an academic and managerial point of view, with this research we demonstrate that online media represents another important way in the internationalization process, acting as a facilitator, given that more information favours adaptation. On the one hand, it allows access and direct and immediate contact with international distributors, coming to represent a stimulation of the direct demand of this segment; but it also enhances the social demand of the brand and this also serves as a stimulus for the demand of local distributors.

From the point of view of the product, the adaptation is to offer the product ranges that best suit the local market. From the point of view of communication, adaptation occurs looking for those contents, target market language, calendar and communication codes of that context and location, for which the segmentation capacity of the networks provides an outstanding tool. Therefore, with this result we have obtained an answer to the first research question and we can conclude that the adaptation to international markets favour the internationalization of firms.

On the other hand, social networks also represent a way of knowing the local market (supply and demand) and allows a first approach to it; the textile sector being the one that most identifies this potential and the footwear as the smallest; because, among other things, social networks favour the participation of consumers, especially considered for the textile sector. Therefore, it is an excellent market research tool, mainly for consumer, sector and competition analysis. The methods of developing digital strategy in international markets are diverse; the predominant position combines social networks and local e-commerce with social networks and global e-commerce. Thus, a local infrastructure is developed in those markets that represent a greater interest for the brand, and the rest is approached

from global platforms. This adaptation through social networks is considered to a greater extent by the textile sector and to a lesser extent by the footwear sector.

In the case of brands with customization spaces, these platforms represent a prominent internationalization value. On the one hand, they represent a means of meeting a growing demand; and, on the other hand, it represents a means of adapting to the idiosyncrasy of the market through an ad-hoc offer (product customization by market). Therefore, we are able to obtain the answer to our second research question and we can affirm that social networks favour internationalization process

From the point of view of value co-creation, we witnessed the creation of an outstanding value for brands: (a) of information, which allows us to develop more appropriate and more successful actions, (b) of linkage with the brand, loyalty, prescription, (c) consumer collaboration by providing resources (creating content, spreading the brand, defending it, collaborating with other consumers, etc.), etc.; value recognized more by the accessories sector and practically null by the footwear. However, we also witnessed the creation of an important value for the consumer: (a) a value derived from the relational process (psycho-social, affective, emotional contributions, recognition of the value of their participation: esteem, belonging to a community, etc.), (b) but that also represents an experiential value, an experience with the brand totally different from that of the "distant" models of the previous relationships; recognised to a greater extent by the textile sector, and less by the footwear and institutions.

On the other hand, we also collected the digital proposals of emerging brands, "internet brands", brands that are born in the digital space and that integrate into their proposals the logic of digital culture, a digital culture in which the user represents a role active as an individual but also collective actor, a culture in which the collaborative becomes natural (open collaboration programs, crowdsourcing, forums, etc.), a culture in which the role of the user is not passive but active, becoming an actor, a relational actor, but also a creator, an actor that seeks to "impact", influence. A new actor in a new space, to which this type of brands offers a platform for the development of this new role as "web actor": creating spaces for co-decision, for creation of contents, for collaborative action, for collective action, etc. In short, brands that offer spaces of participation according to this new reality and this new role and that therefore offer appropriate proposals to this new social space: the digital space. To sum up, we understand the performance of these brands as platforms for the co-creation of an experience in accordance with the principles that govern digital culture.

Therefore, we are able to obtain the answer to our third research question and we can affirm that social networks favour customer participation, value creation and engagement with the firms. We can see how the active participation of the consumer provides two fundamental values for the company: information (through consumer feedback) and engagement. The value of the information is most considered by the textile sector and less accessories; while in the case of engagement, it is a more frequent value for the accessories sector, and less for the institutional one.

This same criterion is taken to its maximum consequences in the practice of some companies that make customised products (co-created). Activity that although represents a minority proportion in the sector, and hardly extrapolated by its high symbolic and economic value (bridal wear), speaks of the emergence of a new space of brands that considers and integrates the expression and individual criteria of each consumer. This value of customization for the consumer finds greater support in the footwear sector, but much less in the textile sector.

All this, conclusively, leads us to a new paradigm which represents the transition of a brand model based on proposing solutions, proposals, collective responses, to a business model that increasingly develops proposals, solutions and individual responses. The path of development of the vector of individuality also affects the space of brands, thus we have seen the beginning of a new current, embodied in our country by the accessories brand and others that follow in its wake, whose approach, lies in a criterion of individualization of the brand. Thus, in the face of the idea of the brand that tries to compete by doing things better than other brands, which represents a great challenge for emerging brands, this model proposes moving to its own individual space. For this, it proposes a break with some of the principles that contribute to the collective space of brands, we refer to the break with

disciplinary marketing and all those frames that stifle or hinder the individualized and differential creativity of the new brands. This model makes us think about the possible transition towards a model of the less uniform brand system, in which although there is still a space of certain similarity, uniformity between brands, this coexists with more particularized positions.

Although this study contributes to the current literature by exploring and improving the understanding of the open collaboration as marketing transformation strategy in online markets, it is not free of some limitations that invite continued research. Firstly, the sample is limited to Spanish firms in the fashion and accessories industry. More detailed research should be performed considering other countries and other sectors to generalize results and/or to analyze whether there are differences between them.

This study also opens several areas for further research through the developing of a quantitative research from a customer and a company viewpoint, to confirm the results and to analyze the impact of this open collaboration strategy in the consumer behaviour and their consequences in their engagement and value co-creation, and in the internationalization process and marketing results for the company.

Author Contributions: C.L.R. designed the study, performed the qualitative data and wrote a part of the manuscript; M.C.-R. analyzed the data and wrote a part of the manuscript; M.C.A.-A. wrote a part of the manuscript and reviewed all paper.

Appendix A Co-Occurrence Tables in Four Fashion Sub-Sectors

Table A1. Co-occurrence table – footwear sector (4 companies).

Uses of Open Collaboration through Social Media for the Internationalization Strategy	Participation	Networks (Online Media)	Engagement	Information/ Knowledge	Adaptation	Brand Personality	Internationalization	Experiential Value	Creation of Value for Consumers	Personalization/ Customization	Creation of Value for Companies	Satisfaction
Participation												
Networks (online media)	16											
Engagement	11											
Information/knowledge	13	13										
Adaptation		5		18								
Brand personality					5							
Internationalization		3	1	5	7							
Experiential value			1									
Creation of value for consumers	6		8									
Personalization/customization			4				2	1	13			
Creation of value for companies	1		2	2								
Satisfaction											4	

Note: Diagonal of the table (grey color): The co-occurrence between the same code is not exist.

Table A2. Co-occurrence table – textile sector (8 companies).

Uses of Open Collaboration through Social Media for the Internationalization Strategy	Participation	Networks (Online Media)	Engagement	Information/ Knowledge	Adaptation	Brand Personality	Internationalization	Experiential Value	Creation of Value for Consumers	Personalization/ Customization	Creation of Value for Companies	Satisfaction
Participation												
Networks (online media)	63											
Engagement	24											
Information/knowledge	51	61										
Adaptation		53		65								
Brand personality					12							
Internationalization		17	1	9	17							
Experiential value			1									
Creation of value for consumers	25		12									
Personalization/customization			4				0	4	7			
Creation of value for companies	11		6	11								
Satisfaction										1		

Note: Diagonal of the table (grey color): The co-occurrence between the same code is not exist.

Table A3. Co-occurrence table – accessories sector (4 companies).

Uses of Open Collaboration through Social Media for the Internationalization Strategy	Participation	Networks (Online Media)	Engagement	Information/ Knowledge	Adaptation	Brand Personality	Internationalization	Experiential Value	Creation of Value for Consumers	Personalization/ Customization	Creation of Value for Companies	Satisfaction
Participation												
Networks (online media)	17											
Engagement	13											
Information/knowledge	9	24										
Adaptation		18		16								
Brand personality					9							
Internationalization		12	0	5	12							
Experiential value			0									
Creation of value for consumers	9		8									
Personalization/customization			6				1	2	11			
Creation of value for companies	6		3	9								
Satisfaction										3		

Note: Diagonal of the table (grey color): The co-occurrence between the same code is not exist.

Table A4. Co-occurrence table – institutions sector (4 companies).

Uses of Open Collaboration through Social Media for the Internationalization Strategy	Participation	Networks (Online Media)	Engagement	Information/ Knowledge	Adaptation	Brand Personality	Internationalization	Experiential Value	Creation of Value for Consumers	Personalization/ Customization	Creation of Value for Companies	Satisfaction
Participation												
Networks (online media)	10											
Engagement	7											
Information/knowledge	15	19										
Adaptation		14		18								
Brand personality					4							
Internationalization		9	0	7	14							
Experiential value			1									
Creation of value for consumers	6		6									
Personalization/customization			1				0	2	12			
Creation of value for companies	5		1	9								

Note: Diagonal of the table (grey color): The co-occurrence between the same code is not exist.

Appendix B Interview Outline "Analysis of Online Co-Creation as an Internationalization Strategy in the Spanish Fashion Sector"

    (1) Introduction

        The UCLM is carrying out a study about the role of new ICT son the internationalization processes of fashion companies, and on the relationships between the company and the consumer.

    (2) International Challenge

- Firstly, I would like to talk briefly about the internationalization process in your company, and tell us the main features of it: When did it start? What was the motivation? What were the main characteristics?, and what have been the main obstacles you have had to overcome?
- It is possible that the international exit of your company has required an adaptation to the particularities of each market, what have been the main adaptations to those marketing strategies that your company has had to develop?
- What role has the knowledge of the client played in this adaptation process and how has it been carried out? What role has this knowledge definitely played in the international expansion strategy?

    (3) Multichannel distribution

- We have previously talked about the need of new online channels as a strategy of adaptation to international markets. What channels, online media does your company set up? What has the implementation of these online channels contributed to the internationalization strategy? (Reasons).
- What benefits does your company pursued with the participation in the digital environment?
- What changes in your company have the implementation of these channels produced?
- Which elements describe the main Trends of online channels? What elements mark these Trends? (Reasons)
- Talking specifically for each media of these online channels, what have motivated you to implement it? What are its advantages and disadvantages? What do you think the trends are?
- Are these media/channels attached to the company's website or are they external? (Reasons)
- Some of these media/channels have an interactive essence in which the consumer/users can report comments … What do you think this possibility represents for marketing? Whas does this possibility represent for your company? And, for the internationalization strategy? (Reasons)
- Since consumers can participate, what type of interactions are taking place? What example can you give us about it? What kind of values are they contributing? What are the most valued? (Reasons)

    (4) Client-cliente and client-company interactions

        Focusing on C2C interactions … .

- Regarding your experience, What would you say are the main characteristics of this interaction? What is the level of this interaction?
- What benefits do you perceive in the interaction between users?
- In the interactions that take place in your company's social media, What roles do the users play? (proactive, reactive)
- Does your company use any CRM application for customer Management? What valued does it contribute?

        Focuesin on B2C interactions …

- From your experience, What do you consider the main characteristics of this interaction? What is the level of this interaction?
- What benefits do you perceive in the interaction between users and your company?

(5) Co-creation: value generation through the active participation of individuals with the company

- As you may have Heard, the idea of co-creation is currently being manage. In your opinión, What defines this concept of co-creation?
- What do you think is the role of co-creation within brands?
- What is the role that co-creation is playing in internationalization processes? (Reasons)
- Considering co-creation as a whole, What do you think is the trend? Or How do you consider it will evolve? (Reasons)
- How do you think brands with co-creative processes are perceived by consumers?
- What type of co-creation actions are carried out in your company?
- When did you start co-creation activities?
- As a whole, What benefits has virtual co-creation generated? And, What disadvantages?
- What type of company processes does the client's participation affect in virtual physical environments?
- How does the client participate in the design of the offer?
- From the point of view of your company, What kind of contributions do the mentioned participation actins represent? And What role that they represent within the internationalization strategy?
- During the co-creation process, What freedom do they grant the client?
- Another aspects form the client's point of view is the possibility of co-creating their experience, it means, each user can personalize their experience. What is your opinión? What are the contributions of this type of options.

Focusing on product customization …

- Does your company carry out customization activities? If yes, What aspects are personalized?
- When did you start personalization actions?
- What is the purpose of personalization?
- What advantages and disadvantages does personalization entail?
- What benefits and costs does customization provide to customers?

(6) Co-creation experience

- Returning to the subject of online participation, What do you say about the social experience that take place among consumers; and, in the case of the interaction between client-company, What are the motives to carry out this participation?
- What does the participation in these processes provide the clients?
- As a result of participation in co-creation of experience the customer engagement takes place, What do you thing about this term?
- What effects has co-creation for the client? Do you consider that co-creation increases individual satisfaction? And the intention to continue co-creating?
- What other behavioral responses can the user express when a company allows him to co-create?
- How do you encourage the participation of clients? and its connection?
- Do you offer some type of compensation (monetary or non-monetary) to the clients that participate in the co-creation activity?

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