Examining a Four-Component Model of Consumer Identification Experiences

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Past research has largely proposed unitary views of consumers' identification with the organizations they patronize. The current research extends past work by positing that consumer identification is not uni-dimensional, but that four distinct identification experiences—identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification, and neutral identification—can arise in the consumer context. Based on confirmatory factor analysis, the predicted four-factor model of consumer identification demonstrated superior model fit compared to alternative models. Further, correlation and regression analyses show that these distinct identification experiences uniquely relate to consumer outcomes such as company evaluations, perceptions of company trustworthiness, in-role behaviors, and extra-role behaviors.

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Conceptualization

An emergent theme in the marketing literature is that companies should endeavor to develop long-lasting, deep, and meaningful relationships with their customers (De Wulf et al. 2001; Palmatier et al. 2006). One way these relationships might be cultivated is through the development of a strong sense of identification with the organization (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). We conceptualize consumer-to-company identification (C-C identification; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) as when the individual feels a sense of connection with the organization, and these beliefs become self-referential or self-defining in nature (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2005).

We propose that consumer identification experiences are often more complex than existing theories can account for. Thus, we test an expanded model of C-C identification and examine the consequences of differing C-C identification experiences. To do so, we draw on theories of social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and organizational identity (Kreiner and Ashforth 2004) to explicate and test an expanded model of consumer identification with organizations. We extend emerging research on C-C identification by proposing that consumer identification is not a uni-dimensional construct. We make a contribution to the marketing literature by highlighting four distinct identification experiences—identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification, and neutral identification—as they arise in the consumer context. Further, we demonstrate the nomological validity of the expanded model by showing that it predicts company evaluations, perceptions of trustworthiness, in-role behaviors, and extra-role behaviors.

Our proposed two-dimensional model holds that consumers can experience either low or high identification *and* either low or high disidentification, resulting in four consumer identification experiences. Identification (high identification/low disidentification) occurs when the individual feels a sense of connection with the organization and beliefs about the company become self-defining in nature (Dutton et al. 1994). Disidentification (low identification/high disidentification) occurs when the individual actively separates his/her identity from the organization and experiences a negative relational categorization of the self and the organization (Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001). Ambivalent identification (high identification/high disidentification) toward organizations occurs when an individual simultaneously identifies and disidentifies with an organization (Elsbach 1999). Neutral identification (low identification/low disidentification) involves being low in both identification and disidentification with regard to an organization (Elsbach 1999).

Method

Using a market research company, 9000 people were mailed a letter inviting them to participate (8606 were received after accounting for post office returns). In total, 794 people responded (9.23%) with N=420 complete responses (*Age:* M=47.67, SD=11.98). There was no evidence of non-response bias (Armstrong and Overton 1977).

Participants were asked to think of a company that they had patronized in the past, and then completed scale measures to assess the different identification experiences (identification, disidentification, neutral identification, and ambivalent identification; αs=.88, .94, .86, and .88, respectively; adapted from Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Respondents also completed measures of company evaluations (White and Dahl 2006; α=.97), trust (e.g., Ganesan 1994; α=.93), and in-role (α=.92) and extra-role (α=.92) behaviors (adapted from Zeithaml et al. 1996). We tested for common method variance (Lindell and Whitney 2001), which was nonsignificant.

Major Findings

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to estimate the overall measurement model. Adequate reliability (e.g., CR>.70; AVE>.50), convergent validity (e.g., loadings>.60), and discriminant validity (e.g., $\sqrt{AVE}>r$) were exhibited. Our proposed four-factor model consisted of 4 items to measure each identification dimension, which demonstrated good fit to the data based on the standard criteria of fit indices (Hu and Bentler 1999). We tested four alternative models, none of which reached acceptable levels of fit compared to our proposed model.

Correlation analysis (controlling for demographics) revealed that each identification experience was related to consumer outcomes in predicted ways (all p<.01): Identification was significantly positively correlated with evaluations of the company (r=.478), trust (r=.492), in-role behaviors (r=.362), and extra-role behaviors (r=.573). Disidentification was strongly negatively correlated with evaluations of the company (r= -.828), trust (r= -.777), in-role behaviors (r= -.786), and extra-role behaviors (r= -.746). Ambivalent identification was weakly to moderately negatively correlated with evaluations of the company (r= -.319), trust (r= -.373), in-role behaviors (r= -.195), and extra-role behaviors (r= -.295). Neutral identification was weakly negatively correlated with evaluations of the company (r= -.277), trust (r= -.311), in-role behaviors (r= -.263), and extra-role behaviors (r= -.320). Regression analyses also supported predictions.

Conclusions

This research reveals the complexity of consumers' identification experiences with the companies they patronize. An expanded four-factor model of C-C identification provides superior fit to the data compared to alternative models, revealing that consumers can experience four distinct organizational identification patterns—identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification, and neutral identification. This finding has important implications for both researchers and practitioners. From a theoretical standpoint, the results show that different forms of organizational identification can and do arise even under conditions where the individual is not a formal group member. From a practical perspective, this research delineates the full range of consumer identification experiences and enables enhanced insight into how customers develop relationships with the companies they patronize. Elucidating the complexity of consumer identification experiences, then, is a step toward further understanding positive consumer-company relationships and resilient consumer loyalty.

Our findings show that identification is associated with the most favorable consumer outcomes, whereas disidentification is associated with the least favorable consumer outcomes. Both neutral and ambivalent identification were related to consumer outcomes in predicted ways—more negative evaluations, perceptions of trust, in-role behaviors, and extra-role behaviors were reported as feelings of neutrality and ambivalence toward the company increased. Ambivalent identification is more strongly related to disidentification than identification and negatively related to consumer outcomes, indicating that it has largely negative consequences. Marketers need to ensure, even with a loyal consumer base that highly identifies with the company, that nothing negative occurs to simultaneously activate feelings of disidentification. The ambivalent consumer also represents an untapped and accessible market that has the potential to be positively swayed to more strongly identify with the company. The current research is an important first step towards elucidating the multi-faceted nature of consumer identification.

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The Defensive Trust Effect: Consumers' Defensive Use of Belief in a Just World to Cope with Consumption Threat

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Consumers cope with many stressful situations: poor service, difficult decisions, and misleading persuasion attempts. Existing evidence suggests that consumers react with distrust towards marketers to avoid being wronged. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) show that consumers respond to salesperson flattery by attending to potential ulterior motives, and lowering trust when such motives are plausible. Darke and Ritchie (2007) show that consumers respond to being misled by an advertiser with generalized suspicion towards all advertisers.

This research examines whether some consumers respond in exactly the opposite way—by displaying increased trust. Our research uses Cognitive Experiential Self Theory (CEST; Epstein & Pacini, 1999) and the notion of secondary control (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982) to suggest that some consumers respond to threats by evoking basic beliefs about the world, leading to increased trust of the marketer, and reassurance of positive outcomes. This coping strategy is herein termed *defensive trust coping (DTC).*

CEST posits that humans adapt through the development of two systems, termed *rational* and *experiential*. These systems serve multiple goals, including accuracy (maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain) and defense (protecting self-esteem). Individuals hold basic beliefs about the nature of the world, such as the extent to which the world is meaningful vs. chaotic. We use Lerner's (1980) Belief in a Just World (BJW) as a proxy. BJW predicts certain behaviors, especially blaming victims (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Attributing a victim's fate to his or her own failing reduces the perceived threat to BJW holders. Such coping strategies fit with secondary control (Rothbaum et al., 1982), where individuals adjust their beliefs or perceptions to reduce threat.

Given a choice between differentiable alternatives, threat is greater post-choice. Consumers experience anticipated regret following choice (Brehm, 1956). Moreover, primary control is reduced post-choice because the control exercised through the act of choosing has been lost to the past. Thus, we predict that consumers enlist basic beliefs to a greater extent post-choice than pre-choice.

In study 1, 84 undergraduates were randomly assigned to a between-participants design with choice stage as the experimental factor. Participants imagined themselves interacting with a salesperson while shopping for a digital camera they needed right away. The salesperson presented two alternatives, and recommended one over the other. Product specifications were provided in a comparison matrix, based on the local market.