The role of identification in frontline employee decision-making

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A B S T R A C T

Literature claims that frontline employees (FLEs) who identify strongly with brands and organizations are more likely to make decisions that are aligned with the objectives of brand (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009) and organization (Smidts et al., 2001). This claim is based on studies of general FLE identification and behaviors, and coheres with an implicit assumption in marketing literature that FLE identification levels are stable, with predictable behavioral outcomes. However, it is unknown whether the claim applies to specific instances of decision-making. This article is a first step toward testing that claim. A self-report survey was used that asked retail FLEs to think of a difficult situation they faced recently while serving a customer, and the factors they considered in resolving the situation; and then asked about general levels of brand- and organizational-identification. The stated likelihood of considering brand- and organization-factors was unrelated to general brand- and organizational-identification, but was related to service experience. This study suggests that: (a) FLE brand- and organizational-identification should be viewed as less stable (or more labile) than currently assumed in marketing literature, and that general levels of identification may not transfer to some specific situations of decision-making; (b) employees can distinguish between organization and brand identities; and (c) researchers studying retail FLE identification using survey methods should incorporate robustness checks to deal with lability of identification.

1. Introduction

Frontline employees who identify strongly with brands and organizations are thought to be critical to achieving a strong brand (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). Literature claims that employees who identify strongly with brand and organization are more likely to make decisions aligned with the objectives of brand (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009) and organization (Smidts et al., 2001). This claim is based on studies of general FLE behavior, and coheres with an implicit assumption in marketing literature that FLE identification levels are stable with predictable behavioral outcomes. However, it is unknown whether this claim applies to specific instances of decision-making. This void is surprising, considering the ample attention given in psychology literature to the issue of cross-situational consistency versus situation-specificity of behavior (Bem and Allen, 1974). This article is a first step toward testing this claim.

The present research examines the role of FLE brand and organization identification in a specific instance of difficult decision-making, and thus attempts to test a boundary condition on the influence of identification on frontline decision-making. Although one might expect, from numerous studies of FLE identification, that higher general levels of identification lead to greater likelihood of considering brand and organization factors in decision-making, this research indicates otherwise: the stated likelihood of considering brand and organization factors was unrelated to general brand identification and general organization identification. This study makes three contributions by suggesting that: (a) FLE identification should be viewed as less stable (or less resistant to context changes) than currently assumed in marketing literature, and that general levels of identification may not transfer to some specific decision-making situations; (b) employees can distinguish between organization and brand identities; and (c) researchers studying retail FLE identification using survey methods should incorporate robustness checks to deal with lability of identification.

2. Theories of social identity and identity

Social identity theory provides a theoretical basis for identification research. Social identity is a part of an individual’s self-concept, which derives from “cognition of membership of a group and the value and emotional significance attached to this membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Social identities help group members gain a descriptive sense of their identity (i.e. who we are, what is prototypical about us) and an

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3. Brand- and organizational- identification and FLE decision-making

Two forms of employee identification commonly studied in the marketing literature are brand- and organizational-identification. The importance of these forms of identification is underscored by statements such as "[d]eveloping brand identification ... is one strategy ... for dominating the mind space of retail salespeople and influencing activities and behaviors benefiting their brands" (Badrinarayanan and Laverie, 2011, p. 135) and "[t]he more employees identify with their organization, the more their perceptions and behaviors are governed by their organizational identity" (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014, p. 312). These statements - and others like them in marketing literature - implicitly assume that the effects of identification apply across situations and decisions made by FLE but this assumption has not been tested so far. The testing of this assumption is of practical importance because FLEs are regularly placed in unscripted and challenging customer interactions (Zablah et al., 2012). It is crucial from an organization’s point of view that they make decisions during these difficult times with brand and organization objectives in mind. For example, in a service failure situation FLEs need to act quickly and may not have time to consult supervisors, so they have to rely on their own understanding of brand values to guide their behavior (Punjaisri et al., 2013).

Two competing hypotheses can be put forward about how identification could affect the consideration of brand and organization issues in instances of FLE decision-making. One hypothesis, here labeled the ‘transfer’ hypothesis, suggests that FLEs who have higher general levels of identification with organization and brand are more likely to consider organization and brand factors in a specific decision-making situation than FLEs with lower general levels of identification - this is the orthodox view. Another hypothesis, here labeled the ‘situation-specific’ hypothesis, suggests that FLEs who have higher general levels of identification with organization and brand are not necessarily more likely to consider organization and brand factors in specific decision-making situations. The rationale for each hypothesis will now be described.

The ‘transfer’ hypothesis: FLEs who have higher general levels of identification with organization and brand are more likely to consider organization and brand factors in a specific decision-making situation than FLEs with lower general levels of identification.

The notion that strong identification with brand and organization leads to decisions aligned with brand and organization is perfectly supposable in the light of ample evidence within two research streams. In the psychology stream, experimental studies have shown that enhancing identification with certain targets in participants’ minds affects decisions they make about those targets in a wide range of situations, such as deciding legal punishment for transgressors (Granot et al., 2014), how much to take from a shared resource (Brewer and Kramer, 1986; Kramer and Brewer, 1984), and how resources/funds should be distributed among self and partners (Lawler and Yoon, 1998; Polzer, 2004). For example, in the Granot et al. (2014) experiment, participants watched a video depicting a police-civilian altercation in which the officer wrongdoing was ambiguous. Participants who fixated on the police officer’s actions and identified with the police officer decided on a lower punishment than other participants.

In the marketing stream, studies of FLEs show that they achieve greater customer satisfaction, sales effort and performance, brand advocacy and support, participation in brand development, service recovery performance, customer-oriented behavior, customer-organization identification and citizenship behavior (Badrinarayanan and Laverie, 2011; Gammoh et al., 2014; Hughes and Ahearne, 2010; Lichtenstein et al., 2010; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Schuh et al., 2012; Solnet, 2006; Wieseke et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2014). In studies of consumers, those with strong identification with a brand are less likely to switch
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