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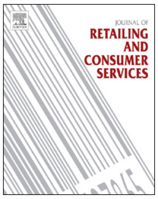

The role of identification in frontline employee decision-making

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ABSTRACT

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 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 is 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 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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evaluative sense of their identity (i.e. how good we are) by contrasting their group (the in-group) with a salient out-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1985:16). By classifying themselves and others into various social categories with prototypical characteristics, individuals can locate themselves and others in the social environment and enhance self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner, 1985).

Therefore, social identification leads to the perception of oneness with, or belongingness, to a human aggregate (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Through this perception of oneness, individuals perceive themselves as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group, and thus personally experience the successes and failures of the group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Organization identification is a specific form of social identification that leads individuals to perceive themselves partly in terms of characteristics shared with other members of the organization (i.e. the in-group) (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), and to feel pride in being part of the organization (Tajfel, 1978).

Individuals can identify with other referents or entities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), though, without acquiring formal membership (Pratt, 1998). These entities need not be ‘objectively’ human, but can just be imbued with human characteristics. Brands, for example, can be imbued with humanlike characteristics, such as values (e.g. Aaker et al., 2010) and personality (Aaker, 1997), communicating desirable identities to consumers (e.g. Underwood et al., 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Lam et al., 2010). Brands can also communicate desirable identities to employees (e.g. Gammoh et al., 2014; Punjaisri et al., 2013). Thus, employees who identify with the brand define themselves by characteristics they believe define the brand (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010), and feel pride in being associated with the brand (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky and Rudd, 2013).

However, identification with groups is only one way a person may self-identify if asked the question ‘who are you?’ Individuals can self-identify with many possible overlapping identities at individual or group levels. For example, individuals can define themselves by other social or group categories/membership (e.g. based on event attendees, sport, professional or political affiliations, online communities; Cheng et al., 2014; Popp and Woratschek, 2017; Theodorakis et al., 2009), role (e.g. wife; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), or attributes and skills (e.g. creative, good at sport; Polzer et al., 2002). These identities have different probabilities of being invoked, or made salient, in a given situation (Stryker and Serpe, 1994). One factor that determines the probability of a particular identity being made salient at a point in time is the stimulus cues present in the situation, especially the social context (Forehand et al., 2002). An individual's cognitive processing of the immediate situation invokes an identity that is appropriate for that context; that is, a situationally relevant identity is invoked (Hogg and Terry, 2000). For example, theatre ushers enact different identities when speaking with different people (Scott and Stephens, 2009). Identities may change even during an interaction with someone from a particular social group; for example, the identification of individuals during a group decision-making process can be influenced by other group members' identifications (Geist and Chandler, 1984).

Another factor that determines the salience of a particular identity at a point in time is its subjective importance (i.e. how central the identity is to an individuals' sense of self, or how relevant the identity is to an individual's goals, values and other key attributes) (Ashforth, 2001). While an identity's situational relevance fluctuates greatly over time, its subjective importance is more stable (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). Thus, identities vary in their stability, or resistance to context changes, ranging from: (i) situated identities, which are identities that respond to situational cues, and are maintained as long as the cues persist (e.g. being a member of a temporary taskforce); to (ii) 'deep structure' identities, which form mental models of how individuals come to view themselves, and are sustained across roles, time and situations (e.g. 'being a Harvard professor' comprising an individual's self-schema) Rousseau (1998).

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 benefitting 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 (Badrianarayana 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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