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Antecedents and Consequences of Customer–Company Identification: Expanding the Role of Relationship Marketing

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This article presents an empirical test of organizational identification in the context of customer–company (C-C) relationships. It investigates whether customers identify with companies and what the antecedents and consequences of such identification are. The model posits that perceived company characteristics, construed external image, and the perception of the company's boundary-spanning agent lead to C-C identification. In turn, such identification is expected to impact both in-role behavior (i.e., product utilization) as well as extra-role behavior (i.e., citizenship). The model was tested in a consultative selling context of pharmaceutical sales reps calling on physicians. Results from the empirical test indicated that customers do indeed identify with organizations and that C-C identification positively impacts both product utilization behavior and extra-role behavior even when the effect of brand perception is accounted for. Second, the study found that the organization's characteristics as well as the salesperson's characteristics contributed to the development of C-C identification.

Keywords: identification, social identity theory, extra-role behavior, branding, buying behavior

The concept of *organizational identification*, viewed as the sense of connection between an individual and an organization (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), has often been discussed as the primary psychological substrate that mediates corporate actions on the one hand and stakeholder responses on the other (see, e.g., Scott & Lane, 2000). Formally, identification has been defined as the degree to which organizational members perceive themselves and the focal organization as sharing the same defining attributes (Dutton et al., 1994). Originally developed in the areas of social psychology and organizational behavior, identification satisfies the need for social identity and self-definition and, in turn, has been demonstrated to positively impact organizational member loyalty (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) as well as organizational members' cooperative and citizenship behaviors (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002).

Findings such as these have attracted marketing scholars to research this construct because the natural analogues of these outcomes in customer contexts are customer and/or brand loyalty and customer advocacy (such as positive word-of-mouth). There are many purchase situations in which customers interact extensively with the selling company and form judgments not only on economic factors but also on various corporate dimensions. Similar to the findings in the employer–employee context, such corporate evaluations, if positive, could also result in positive evaluation of the company's products. Recently, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) extended the concept of identification to develop a conceptual framework of customer–company (C-C) identification. The authors suggested that customers may have their self-definitional needs partly filled by the companies they patronize, and thus customers can identify with a company (Pratt, 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000). Despite this potentially useful route to building stronger customer relationships and thereby expanding the domain of relationship marketing, there is virtually no empirical research on the antecedents and consequences of identification in a for-profit, customer context.

In this study, we present a conceptual framework and empirical test of C-C identification, examining the roles of both the selling company and the selling company's boundary-spanning agent on the buyer's identification with the company. The model proposes that given a set of conditions when identification is likely to occur, the customer's identification with a given company leads to behaviors—both in-role and extra-role—that are much desired by companies. To develop the model, we drew on theories of social identity (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1985), employee identification (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994), and customer identification (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). We tested the model in the context of pharmaceutical companies, their salespeople, and the physicians who prescribe their products. The pharmaceutical industry, in

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which the physician is the "decider" but not the final consumer of the product, is similar to many consultative purchasing situations, such as with travel agents, independent insurance agents, stock brokers, and so forth. As we elaborate later, this context matches well with the proposed conditions under which C-C identification is likely to be manifested. Our study contributes to the marketing and business literatures by demonstrating the existence of identification in the customer realm and also providing insight into how such identification can be fostered and the subsequent benefits companies are likely to reap. From an applied psychology standpoint, we show that in their quest for social identity enhancement, individuals can also turn to companies of which they are customers.

Conceptual Framework of C-C Identification

Turner (1982) noted that people often socially identify with groups, even when they have no contact with specific members. What is paramount is that impersonal bonds can exist and be derived from a common identification with some symbolic group or social category (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Because identity is not deterministic (Schlenker, 1986; Turner, 1982) and is often negotiated and chosen by individuals on their own will (Swann, 1987), it is conceivable that customers who are not formal members of an organization could identify with the organization if they find it to be attractive and capable of enriching their social identity. Not surprisingly, researchers have alluded to the idea that other stakeholders—including customers—of an organization may also identify with the organization (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Scott & Lane, 2000).

Drawing on the extant literature, our model proposes that C-C identification is determined by three general factors. The first factor relates to the customer's perceptions about what the company represents, based on personal experiences as well as his or her perceptions of its culture and climate: Identification is likely only if the customer finds the company to be attractive. The second factor deals with the customer's perception of what relevant others think about the organization (i.e., construed external image of the company), in which identification is likely to be stronger when referent others hold the company in high esteem. Finally, understanding the impact of boundary spanning and those involved in these activities is becoming increasingly important to organizations as more and more organizational members participate in boundary-spanning roles. Boundary-spanning agents reveal a lot about the quality and character of the company they represent; thus, we posit that identification is likely to be stronger when customers have favorable perceptions of the boundary-spanning agent with whom they interact (e.g., the company's salesperson, customer service, technical representatives, etc.). The model (see Figure 1) proposes that these three perceptions influence the cognitive connection that customers have with the company, which, in turn, influences the kinds of behaviors that follow. We examine the influence of each of the three antecedent factors individually, but it is important to note that these will often correlate with each other, as shown in Figure 1.

In contrast to the employee context, our model also recognizes that C-C identification may not occur in all situations but is more likely to be manifest under a set of contingent conditions. First, the product or service must be important enough to the customer to make the company salient to the customer (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) and to make it a valid target for social identity fulfillment. Second, identification is more likely to occur when the customer perceives there to be a distinct comparison set and when compa-

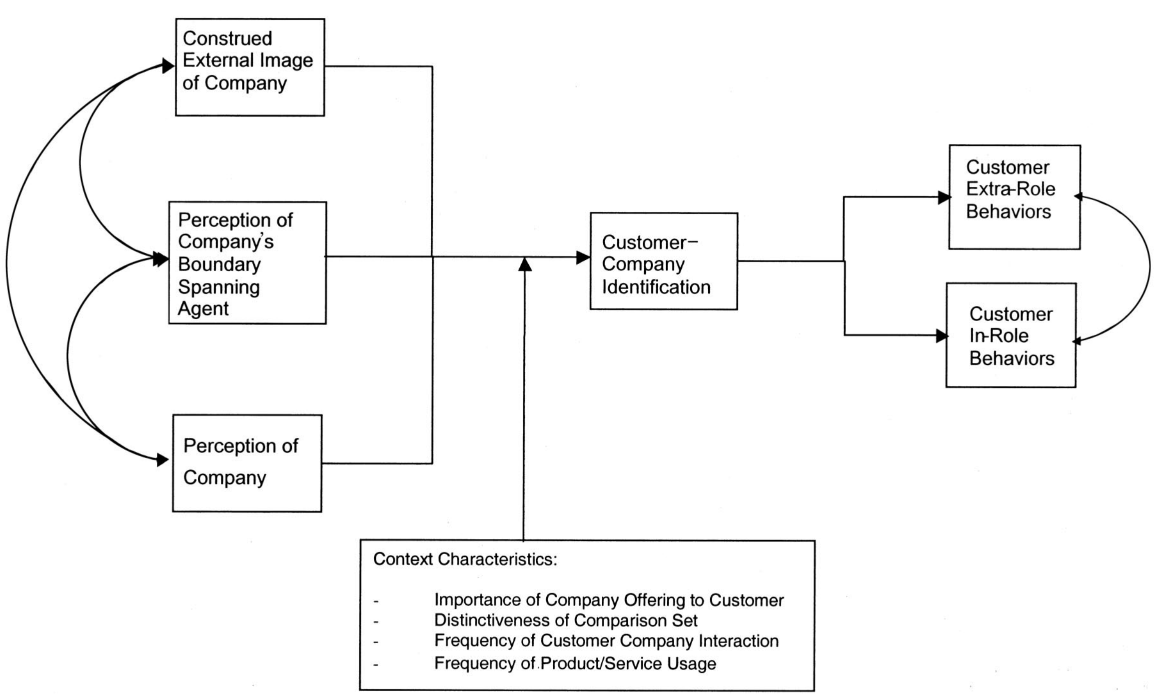

Figure 1. Organizational identification: Conceptual model—across contexts.

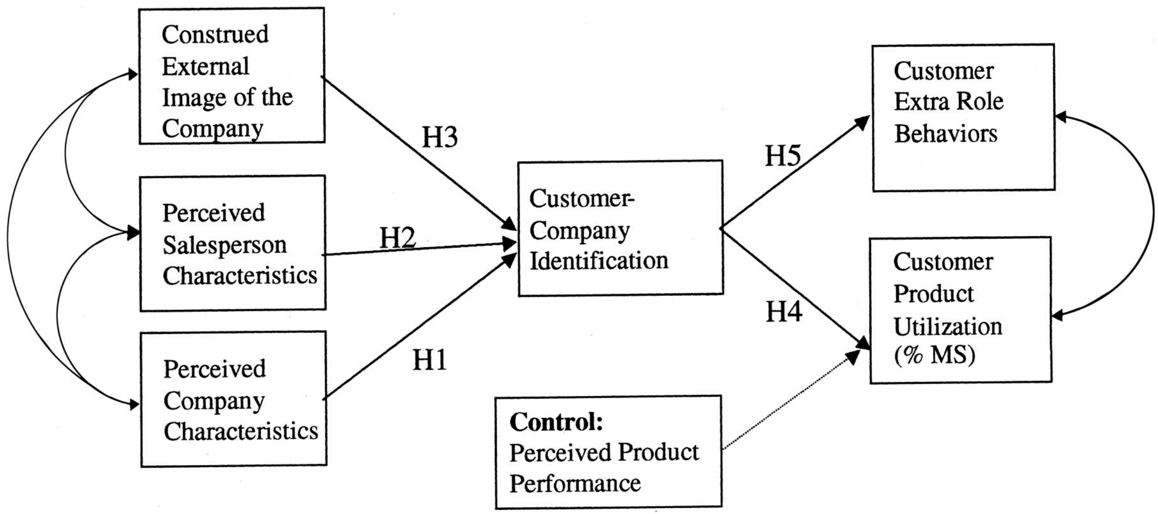

Figure 2. Organizational identification: Hypothesized model. H = Hypothesis; MS = market share.

nies in that set are themselves distinctive: The focal organization's identifying characteristics become more salient and accessible when a distinct set of relevant comparisons are present (Bartel, 2001). Third, customers are more likely to identify when they are embedded in the folds of the organization through frequent interaction with the offering and frequent contact with the company and its agents. Research on embeddedness (e.g., Granovetter, 1985; Rao, Davis, & Ward, 2000) suggests that customers' embedded relationships with companies make them feel more like insiders than outsiders, thereby increasing the likelihood that the company is going to be designated as a viable social category, capable of shaping their social identity. As a result of creating psychological attachment to the organization, identification motivates people to commit to the achievement of the organization's goals. Building on the strong, positive consequences of identification observed in membership contexts (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), we assert that customers become strong supporters of the company they identify with. They demonstrate such support through both favorable in-role (e.g., purchase) as well as extra-role (e.g., citizenship) behaviors.

Empirical Model and Hypotheses

As the first empirical test of C-C identification, we selected a context in which customers were likely to identify with the focal company. In other words, we do not explicitly test for the moderating role of the context characteristics but rather examine the hypotheses in a setting where these contingent conditions are likely to be fulfilled. In the case of the physician (the customer in our empirical context), the product they prescribe is central to the accomplishment of their task. Moreover, both doctors and drug companies are health providers and members of the medical establishment. In partnership relationships such as these, the presence of organizational identification may be more prevalent than in other C-C contexts.[1] Also, given the potential for harmful consequences of product misuse, the relationship between a physician and the boundary-spanning agent for the company (the sales rep in our case, who is also referred to as a *detailer* in the industry) may be as important as any mission-critical sales relationship (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). In terms of the other context-specific factors, distinctiveness of the comparison set is clear, as competition in this industry involves a specific and well-known set of firms in each therapeutic category. Finally, prescribing physicians are highly familiar with the sales reps from the pharmaceutical companies. Figure 2 presents the specific model we used to test our hypotheses; these are proposed below. Note that we use the operational definitions of the variables depicted in Figure 2 in the rest of the tables and figures.

Antecedents to C-C Identification

One of the components leading to a customer's identification with a company is the perceived favorability of that company's central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Three basic principles of self-definition—the need for self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement—account for the favorability of a company's perceived characteristics and help explain why it strengthens customer identification (Dutton et al., 1994). The need for self-continuity suggests that in an attempt to understand themselves and their social worlds, people are motivated to maintain a consistent sense of self (Kunda, 1999). Moreover, when a person's self-concept is enhanced by the characteristics that define the organization, the individual is drawn to the organization because it provides easy opportunities for self-expression (Shamir, 1991). Similarly, social identity theorists contend that people need to distinguish themselves from others in social contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and thus are likely to seek out groups for affiliation that are distinctive on dimensions they value. Thus, customers who believe that a company has a configuration of distinctive characteristics (e.g., culture, strategy, structure) valued by them will find that company to be an attractive target for identification. Overall, therefore, favorable perceptions

[1] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

of a company's characteristics are likely to lead to stronger identification with that company.

> *Hypothesis 1:* The more favorable the customers' perception of the company's characteristics, the stronger their C-C identification.

The objective of boundary spanning is to link and coordinate an organization with key constituents in its external environment (Bartel, 2001). Boundary-spanning agents can signal the quality and character of their company through a variety of means, including personality, dress and other tangibles, responsiveness, empathy, knowledge, assurance, and reliability. Thus, any individual in the company with whom the customer has regular contact (such as a sales rep, customer service rep, or technician) can impact the sense of identification that the customer might have with the selling organization.[2] In other words, interactions with a boundary-spanning agent who is viewed favorably makes it more likely that the customer is going to consider the organization as a target for social identity fulfillment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Scott & Lane, 2000). This is because such interactions make it easier for the customer to retrieve favorable, self-relevant information from memory, which scholars (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Pratt, 2000; Scott & Lane, 2000) have suggested is an important driver of organizational identification.

> *Hypothesis 2:* The more favorable the customers' perception of the boundary-spanning agent (i.e., the sales rep in our case), the stronger their C-C identification.

In addition to the two previous factors in which C-C identification is influenced through their personal experiences, customer identification is also affected by how customers think relevant outsiders view the organization. Construed external image (also referred to as organizational prestige; see, e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001) refers to a customer's beliefs about outsiders' perceptions of the company. When a customer sees the construed external image of a company as attractive (i.e., customers believe that the attributes that distinguish the company are positive and socially valued by relevant others), the customer's identification with that company is strengthened. People try to maintain a positive social identity by affiliating with a prestigious company because such affiliation provides social opportunities (S. G. Brown, 1969) and heightens social prestige (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cheney, 1983; Perrow, 1961). Notably, the general link between the attractiveness of an organization's external image and identification has been shown in a number of contexts, including employees (Smidts et al., 2001), alumni (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and sports fans (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 3:* The more attractive the customers' construed external image of the company, the stronger their C-C identification.

Outcomes of C-C Identification

Once individuals identify with an organization, they are likely to support it in a variety of ways. In the employer–employee context, researchers have demonstrated that members' identification with an organization results in lower turnover (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994) and even increased rivalry with and derogation of competitors. In the context of members of educational and cultural institutions, identification has been linked to greater financial and membership-related support (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Wan-Huggins, Riordan, & Griffeth, 1998). In the customer context, one of the key outcomes that marketers try to influence is brand choice.

A steady stream of research has demonstrated that corporate image affects consumer product judgments and responses in a positive manner (Aaker & Keller, 1993; Belch & Belch, 1987; Wansink & Kent, 1998). Overall, a positive image of the organization leads to positive product evaluations (T. J. Brown & Dacin, 1997), and on the basis of these studies, we suggest that identification may be the key underlying psychological variable that drives these outcomes. From a social identity standpoint, once a customer identifies with a company, purchasing that company's products becomes an act of self-expression.

> *Hypothesis 4:* The stronger the C-C identification, the stronger the customer's exhibition of in-role behaviors supportive of the company (i.e., the greater the customer's product utilization).

People who strongly identify with the organization are likely to focus on tasks that benefit the whole organization rather than on purely self-interested ones, often referred to as extra-role behaviors. Some of the types of extra-role behaviors are organizational citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983), prosocial behaviors (George & Bettenhausen, 1990; Puffer, 1987), spontaneous behaviors (George & Brief, 1992), and contextual behaviors (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). In a customer context, a number of extra-role behaviors have been studied, such as word-of-mouth, product improvement suggestions, recruiting other customers, and proactive communication of anticipated problems (Bettencourt, 1997; Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000). In linking extra-role behaviors to identification, we build on research (e.g., Dukerich et al., 2002; Dutton et al., 1994; Scott & Lane, 2000) that suggests that effort directed toward preserving, supporting, and improving the organization proceeds naturally from identification. Performing such extra-role behaviors is a way to express one's identification.

> *Hypothesis 5:* The greater the level of C-C identification, the more willing the customer will be to perform extra-role behaviors on behalf of the company.

Perceived Product Performance

Regardless of the level of C-C identification, both product utilization and customer extra-role behaviors may be affected by the perceived performance of the company's offerings. This will particularly be the case in buying situations that are typically

[2] A customer's perception of organizational characteristics and the characteristics of the boundary-spanning agent of the company are distinct. This view parallels the customer satisfaction literature that has demonstrated that satisfaction with retail service personnel is distinct from the satisfaction with the store (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999).

characterized by high levels of objective decision making criteria as well as experience with products through ongoing repeat purchasing (e.g., pharmaceuticals and/or financial services). Therefore, a control for product performance is necessary to understand the true effects of C-C identification on product utilization (as illustrated in Figure 2).

Method

As previously discussed, the pharmaceutical industry provides a setting where the contingent context characteristics (shown in Figure 1) are present. An added advantage of this context is the availability of objective information for one of the dependent variables, because the pharmaceutical industry reliably tracks product prescription information for the individual physician. Objective prescription data can be obtained for a specific physician, because each physician has a unique United States Drug Enforcement Agency number linked to each patient prescription. Finally, in this context, physicians have ongoing opportunity to engage in a variety of extra-role behaviors such as participating in seminars and sharing product-related information with colleagues.

A sample of 2,000 high-prescribing physicians was randomly drawn from a population of over 30,000 high-prescribing physicians in the focal drug category. We considered only high-prescribing physicians for this research to ensure that each physician wrote a sufficient number of prescriptions in the category and that the sales representatives would have had regular contact with the physicians (e.g., industry records indicate that the representative calls on the high-prescribing physician on average 26 times per year). A professional market research company contacted these 2,000 physician offices by telephone and invited physicians to participate in a survey that was being conducted and independently funded by a major U.S. university. Questionnaires were distributed to this sample of physicians via fax. Participants were assured that their individual responses would be confidential and received a $30 industry-standard honorarium for their participation. Completed surveys were faxed directly back to the researchers, yielding a final sample of 178 physicians.

A key indicator demonstrating the lack of bias toward the focal company is the fact that the average market share for the focal product among surveyed physicians (both self-reported, 41.15%, and objective, 39.28%) was actually less than the product's market share in the sampling frame (41.8%). If there was a bias, we would have expected the market share to be higher than that of the sampling frame (all responders and nonresponders). Approximately three fourths of the respondents (77%) were primary care physicians and the rest (23%) were specialists, which is consistent with the general market composition. The age of respondents ranged from 27 to 78 years (average = 47 years). The respondents' practice tenure ranged from 3 to 43 years (average = 16 years).

The focal company in the survey was a major pharmaceutical manufacturer that was the market leader in the focal drug category. The drug category of interest in this study is one of the five most-prescribed categories of drugs, with three major competitors representing the vast majority of prescriptions, along with several minor competitors. Prescription drugs are classified in categories on the basis of their ability to treat similar medical conditions; for example, antidepressants include all drugs that can be used to treat depression.

The data were collected via self-reports (see the Appendix for items), except for customer product utilization data that were collected via self-report as well as by a directly observed measure. Customer product utilization was operationalized as the market share of prescriptions for the branded product represented by the salesperson that were written by the physician. We obtained the data for the 1-month period corresponding to the administration of the questionnaire. The directly observed prescription behavior data were obtained from one of two major syndicated data houses that compile individual-level physician prescription tracking data from federal government records. Because the survey was conducted among experienced or high-prescribing physicians in this particular drug category, conceivably none of the utilization involved "trial"—it is better characterized as "repeat purchase"—which is consistent with the notion of loyalty discussed in the identification literature.

Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) proposed a simple scale based on a cognitive representation process to measure identification and demonstrated that their measure was better reflection of identification than scales previously used (e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael, 1988; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Since its advent, the Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) scale has been used by several other researchers (e.g., Bartel, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Tropp & Wright, 1999). We used this scale to measure a customer's identification with the company. As shown in the Appendix, a series of Venn diagrams indicating a lesser to a greater degree of overlap between the physician and the focal company was provided, and respondents chose the level of overlap that best represented their relationship with the focal company.

The other variables were measured using multiple-item scales. We measured construed external image of the company using a scale from an earlier study (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), adapting the wording to fit our context. We measured perceived company characteristics and perceived salesperson characteristics using scales similar to those previously used by Bagozzi and Bergami (2002), Bartel (2001), and Sen and Bhattacharya (2001). We asked the physicians to indicate how well each of the characteristics (e.g., compassionate, innovative, progressive, socially responsible, sensitive) in the scale described the focal company and, separately, the salesperson from the focal company. The scale to measure extra-role behaviors was based in part on the empirical work of Podsakoff, Ahearne, and MacKenzie (1997). Given that the previous studies were conducted in an employee context (thus focusing on voluntary behaviors on the part of an employee directed toward another employee in the same organization), we modified the items to focus on the extra-role behaviors of the physician (customer) that are directed at the salesperson or his or her company that go above and beyond the job of the physician. The internal consistency reliabilities of these measures were respectable, with all scales attaining Nunnaly's (1978) suggested Cronbach's alpha level of .70 or higher (see Table 1).

The measures used in this study were analyzed with confirmatory factor analyses, and the hypothesized structural model was tested with structural equation modeling (LISREL 8.52; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). Because the total number of measured variables was large (55), a single-factor item parceling approach was used when estimating all models (Hall, Snell, & Foust, 1999; Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000). To control for the effects of perceived product performance, we used the same procedures as a number of previous researchers (Draper & Smith, 1980; Green, 1978; Smidts et al., 2001). A stepwise linear regression was run with all dimensions of perceived product performance (see Appendix for measures) as the independent variables and the objective product utilization measure as the dependent variable.[3] We stored the unstandardized residuals from this regression and used them as a surrogate for product utilization in all models. Thus, we were able to partial out the effects of the perceived product performance from product utilization.

Results

Taken together, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis demonstrate that the hypothesized six-factor model (construed external image, perceived company characteristics, perceived salesperson characteristics, C-C identification, customer product

[3] For space considerations, objective product utilization is used throughout the remainder of the article. Using self-report and objective product utilization yields similar model results and provides further support for our findings.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations

Construct	*M*	*SD*	Construed external image	Perceived company characteristics	Perceived salesperson characteristics	Customer–company identification	Customer product utilization objective	Customer product utilization self-report	Customer extra-role behavior
Construed external image of the company	6.01	0.96	.91**						
Perceived company characteristics	3.81	0.55	.48**	.92**					
Perceived salesperson characteristics	4.04	0.62	.34**	.55**	.93**				
Customer–company identification	3.88	1.77	.31**	.56**	.42**				
Customer product utilization objective (after control)	0	.157	.19	.14	.20	.21*			
Customer product utilization self-report (after control)	0	.159	.08	.11	.21*	.19	.47**		
Customer extra-role behavior	3.98	0.66	.46**	.58**	.62**	.48**	.21*	.26*	.81**

Note. Cronbach's alpha for each of the measures are shown on the main diagonal.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

utilization, and extra-role behavior) fits the data well. First, the solution was proper in that there were no negative variance estimates or other improprieties. Second, the overall goodness-of-fit indices showed that the model adequately accounted for the sample variances and covariance. Bentler's (1990) comparative fit index was .96, the Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993) goodness-of-fit index was .90, the nonnormed fit index was .95, the standardized root-mean-square residual was .043, and the chi-square statistic was 145.78 with 77 degrees of freedom. Third, the hypothesized measurement factor loadings were all statistically significant ($p <$ .01) and substantial in size, and the construct reliabilities were large, providing evidence for the convergent validity of the constructs. Finally, there was evidence of an adequate level of discriminant validity. All the construct intercorrelations (provided in Table 1) were significantly less than 1 ($p < .05$). The average variance extracted (proportion of the total variance in all indicators of a construct accounted for by the construct; Fornell & Larcker, 1981) exceeded the squared correlations between the factors, indicating strong discriminant validity.

As the proposed measurement relationships were consistent with the data, the next step in the analysis was to estimate the hypothesized model shown in Figure 2. Table 2 reports the completely standardized parameter estimates for the hypothesized model and the overall goodness-of-fit indices. Table 2 shows that the hypotheses received a considerable amount of support, as all but one of the expected relationships were statistically significant. More favorable perceptions of both company and salesperson characteristics led to higher levels of identification ($p < .01$), showing support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. Higher levels of identification led to both higher levels of product utilization ($p < .01$) as well as higher levels of extra-role behavior ($p < .01$), indicating support for Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5. The only nonsignificant relationship was between construed external image of the company and customer identification with the company ($z =$ .81, $p > .50$).

We fit three additional models (beyond the hypothesized model) to test the mediating role of C-C identification (R. L. Brown, 1997; MacKinnon, Lockwood, West, & Sheets, 2002; Sobel, 1982). The

Table 2
Goodness-of-Fit Statistics for All Models Tested

Model	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	CFI	NNFI	SRMR
Saturated model (CFA)	145.78 (77)	<.01	0.96	0.95	0.04
Null latent model	419.12 (92)	<.01	0.91	0.88	0.31
Hypothesized model	189.32 (83)	<.01	0.94	0.92	0.14
Hypothesized model with additional direct paths to customer product utilization	186.77 (80)	<.01	0.94	0.92	0.13
Hypothesized model with additional direct paths to customer extra-role behavior (best model)	153.98 (80)	<.01	0.96	0.95	0.05

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; NNFI = nonnormed fit index; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; CFA = confirmatory factor analysis.

first model included all paths in the hypothesized model as well as direct paths from the three independent variables to both dependent variables (product utilization and extra-role behaviors). The second model included all paths in the hypothesized model as well as direct paths from the independent variables to product utilization. The third model included all paths in the hypothesized model as well as direct paths from the independent variables to extra-role behaviors. These models were then compared with the (baseline) hypothesized model to test for mediation.

These model comparisons showed that no significant improvement in chi-square was found by including direct paths from the independent variables to product utilization (nor were any paths found to be significant). However, a significant chi-square improvement was found by including direct paths from the independent variables to extra-role behaviors (all three additional paths were found to be significant). This "best" model fit significantly better than both the hypothesized model and the saturated model (model with both indirect and direct paths to both dependent variables). The fit statistics for all four models are reported in Table 2, and the results of the "best" model are depicted in Figure 3. Further information relating to mediation, including detailed effects decompositions, is reported in Table 3.

Discussion

This study extends the concept of organizational identification beyond the realm of formal memberships (e.g., employees, alumni, museum members) into the C-C relationship realm. We provide empirical validation that customers do indeed identify with companies and that such identification has strong, positive consequences both in terms of in-role (e.g., product utilization) and extra-role (e.g., word-of-mouth) behaviors. Specifically, we demonstrate that customers who identify more strongly with a company tend to purchase more and recommend both the company and its products more often. The study also shows how identification itself is influenced by customers' perceptions of both the company as well as the boundary-spanning agent. It is important to note that the study provides evidence that suggests that the effect of company identification on customer behavior is above and beyond the effect of product evaluation.

Our findings show that C-C identification has differential effects on the outcome variables for each of its hypothesized antecedent variables. First, C-C identification fully mediates the effect of perceived company characteristics on both product utilization and extra-role behaviors. This finding is in line with the theory expressed by Dutton et al. (1994) that suggests that one's view of the organizational "picture" influences their identification with the organization. Second (and alternatively), our findings show that construed external image—in the presence of perceived salesperson characteristics and perceived organizational characteristics—does not significantly influence C-C identification but has a direct effect on customer extra-role behaviors. Thus, extra-role behavior is positively affected on the basis of how referent others view an organization but not on the basis of product utilization. A possible explanation for this finding is that extra-role behaviors are not only intrinsically motivated (i.e., driven by identification) but also, perhaps in light of the visible social settings in which they are performed, extrinsically motivated (i.e., the need to conform to expectations of referent others).

We also find that C-C identification only partially mediates the impact of perceived salesperson characteristics on both utilization and extra-role behaviors. Thus, the boundary-spanner's characteristics have direct influence over the exchange relationship as well as extra-role behaviors. Although the sales literature has considered the extra-role behaviors of the sales reps themselves (MacKenzie, Ahearne, & Podsakoff, 1998), it has not considered the ways in which sales reps, as the company's boundary-spanning agents, can generate extra-role behaviors by their customers. Our study provides strong evidence that customers are willing to take the extra step to support the company if they are attracted to the characteristics of the boundary-spanning agent.

In the area of identification research in marketing, our study extends the findings of Bhattacharya et al. (1995) by empirically

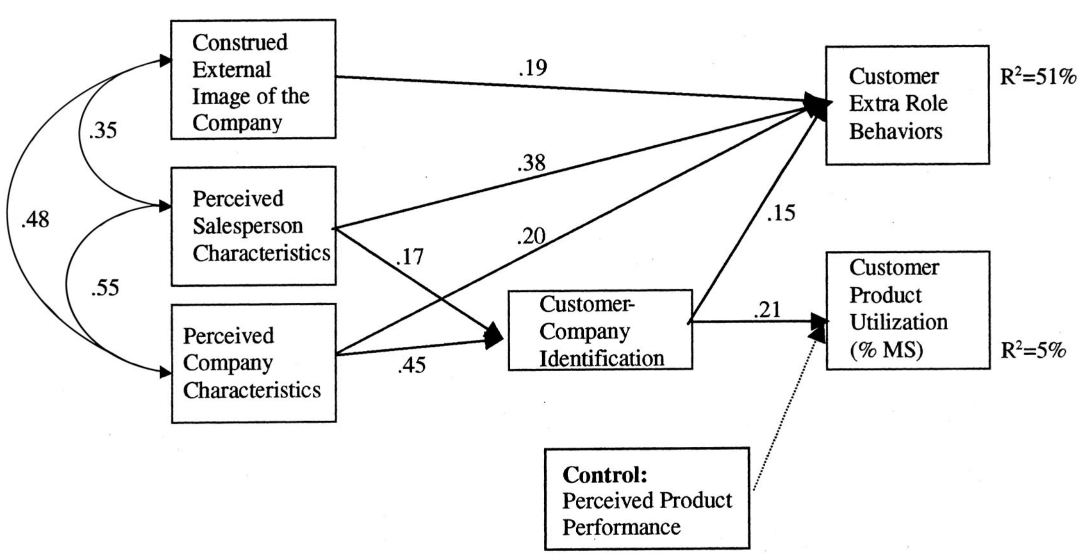

Figure 3. Organizational identification: Best model. H = Hypothesis; MS = market share.

Table 3
Standardized Effects Decomposition

Independent variable (IV)	Mediating variable	Dependent variable (DV)	Effect of IV on mediator	Effect of mediator on DV	Direct effect of IV on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV	Total effect of IV on DV	Degree of mediation
Construed external image of company	Customer–company identification	Customer extra-role behaviors	.03	.15*	.20*	.01	.18*	None
Perceived salesperson characteristics	Customer–company identification	Customer extra-role behaviors	.17*	.15*	.41*	.02	.40*	None
Perceived company characteristics	Customer–company identification	Customer extra-role behaviors	.45*	.15*	.27*	.07*	.27*	Partial
Construed external image of company	Customer–company identification	Customer product utilization	.03	.21*	−.01	.01	.14	None
Perceived salesperson characteristics	Customer–company identification	Customer product utilization	.17*	.21*	.15*	.04*	.04*	Full
Perceived company characteristics	Customer–company identification	Customer product utilization	.45*	.21*	.14*	.10*	.27*	Full

Note. Standardized beta coefficients are used.
* $p < .05$.

establishing the antecedents and consequences of identification even when the customer is not a member. Second, this study contributes to the emerging research stream (e.g., T. J. Brown & Dacin, 1997; Drumwright, 1996; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) that expands the scope of marketing beyond management of the brand. Generally, we would expect that both consumers' and business customers' relationships with a company would be influenced by their relationships with its brands in general and product performance in particular. However, a key theoretical contribution of our study is in establishing the important role that nonproduct aspects of a company (T. J. Brown & Dacin, 1997) play in influencing customer behavior. This is a particularly interesting finding given the professional nature of the customer in our context (i.e., physicians prescribing drugs). The object of identification is the company rather than the brand, and thus companies with a focused product mix targeted to a focused segment (e.g., pharmaceutical firms marketing to physicians) are likely to see the benefit of C-C identification across its various brands. Overall, given the positive consequences of identification we showed in the buyer–seller context, marketers should factor the level of resources required to manage the elements that drive C-C identification into their marketing strategy decisions.

Finally, this study contributes to the applied psychology literature in at least two ways. First, this study establishes that in certain contexts, affiliating with companies is also a possible avenue to social identity fulfillment. To date, social identity theorists have focused on the roles played by religious or cultural organizations and clubs; our results suggest that companies can be added to this list of organizations that help satisfy individuals' self-definitional needs even in the absence of formal membership. Second, although the role of the organizational characteristics and the views held by referent others in social identity construction are well understood, our results surrounding the salesperson inform applied psychologists of the critical role played by boundary-spanning personnel. It appears that such boundary-spanners make it easier for individuals to define themselves as part of the in-group and hence socially categorize themselves in terms of the organization.

A key limitation of this study relates to generalizability. The context tested here provides a view of a single industry in which the product adoption decision is important to the customer's self-definition, customers interact extensively both with the company and the salesperson, and customers have considerable discretion in their purchases. Although the nature of the C-C interaction in the pharmaceutical industry is similar to that of a number of other industries such as financial services and insurance sales, which make up a large percentage of the sales jobs worldwide, our context and indeed the C-C identification phenomenon are not necessarily generalizable to many other business-to-business selling situations. Testing the more general model of identification (in Figure 1) that would be applicable across a wider spectrum of buyer–seller contexts— both business-to-business and business-to-consumer—is a very worthwhile future research endeavor. Moreover, testing in additional organizational settings is necessary to fully understand whether and how the role of identification changes across contexts. For example, how will identification function when there is a buying center with various individuals involved in the purchase decision? Another worthwhile extension is an examination of C-C identification when the offering is (rather than product based as was the context in this study) service or knowledge based. It is possible that C-C identification may have a greater impact when the offering is intangible as in the case of services. Similarly, knowledge-based service offerings (which would include most professional services) could potentially be influenced by C-C identification.

As with all survey research, our study likely suffers from common method bias; however, we believe that this is not serious in our case, given that one of our key outcome variables (product utilization) was measured through an independent, objective source. One additional limitation (and a need for further research) concerns the causality suggested in the findings. Because the data used in this research are cross-sectional in nature as are data used in previous studies found in the literature, evidence of causality through longitudinal and/or experimental studies is needed.

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(*Appendix follows*)

Appendix

Scale Items

Perceived product performance (control)

Taking into consideration your knowledge and experience with [category name], rate [brand name] on each of the following areas on a scale from 1–5, where 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent.

a. Effective in [Disorder A]	e. Patients respond quickly
b. Effective in [Disorder B]	f. Low incidence of side effects
c. Effective in [Disorder C]	g. Good value for the money
d. Effective in [Disorder D]	h. Ease of use

Construed external image of the company

(Four items, 7-point Likert scale)
a. People in my profession think that [target company] is a well-known company.
b. People in my profession think that [target company] is a respected company.
c. People in my profession think that [target company] is an admirable company.
d. People in my profession think that [target company] is a prestigious company.

Perceived company characteristics

Please indicate how well each of the characteristics listed describes [target company] (5-point scale)

Industry Leader	Exploitive (r)	Responsive
Caring	Friendly	Secure
Compassionate	Honest	Selfish (r)
Cooperative	Innovative	Sensitive
Dynamic	Progressive	Sincere
Efficient	Reliable	Socially Responsible

Perceived salesperson characteristics

Please indicate how well each of the characteristics listed describes [salesperson of target company] (5-point scale)

Industry Leader	Friendly	Responsive
Boring	Honest	Secure
Caring	Humorous	Selfish (r)
Compassionate	Innovative	Sensitive
Cooperative	Knowledgeable	Sincere
Courteous	Likeable	Socially Responsible
Dynamic	Manipulative (r)	Trustworthy
Efficient	Progressive	
Exploitive (r)	Reliable	

Customer extra role behaviors

(Six items, 7-point Likert scale)
a. I would recommend [target company] products to other physicians.
b. I would recommend that a close friend or relative accept a position at [target company].
c. I would volunteer to participate in seminars sponsored by [target company].
d. I would pass on literature to fellow physicians in my practice given to me by a [target company] sales representative.
e. I would fill in my [target company] sales representative on competitive initiatives.
f. I would let my [target company] sales representative know if a competitor was badmouthing his/her company.

Product utilization (self-report measure)

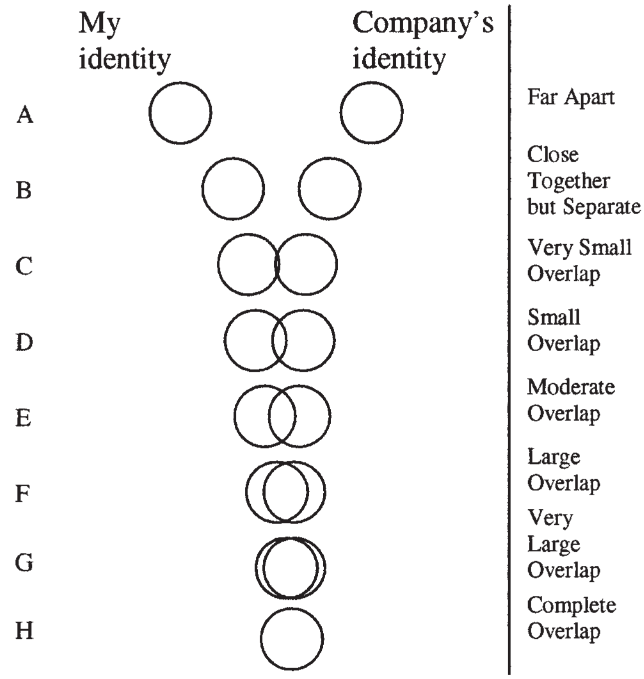
Please indicate approximately how many prescriptions you write for each of the following products in a typical month (8 brands listed in alphabetical order).

Appendix (*continued*)

Customer company identification

We sometimes strongly identify with a company. This occurs when we perceive a great amount of overlap between our ideas about who we are as a person and what we stand for (i.e., our self image) and of who this company is and what it stands for (i.e., the company's image).

Imagine that the circle at the left in each row represents your own personal identity and the other circle, at the right, represents the company's identity. Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the level of overlap between your and the company's identities. (Circle Appropriate Letter)



Note. An r in parentheses indicates that the item was reverse coded.

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