Understanding the Bond of Identification: An Investigation of Its Correlates Among Art Museum Members

Identification is defined as the "perceived oneness with or belongingness to an organization" of which the person is a member. The authors propose that customers, in their role as members, identify with organizations. They use social identity theory to propose and test a model that relates members' identification with the focal organization to (1) organizational and product characteristics, (2) members' affiliation characteristics, and (3) members' activity characteristics. Their empirical setting consists of the members of an art museum. Their survey findings show that members' identification is positively related to perceived organizational prestige, donating activity, tenure of membership, visiting frequency, and confirmation of member expectations with the organization's services. However, members' participation in similar organizations is negatively related to identification with the focal organization. The authors discuss how this study can be extended to other marketing contexts and how managers can use the notion of identification in implementing marketing strategies.

In recent years, several articles have appeared in both the business press and academic literature related to the themes of socially responsible buying (e.g., Drumwright 1994), corporate alliances with nonprofits (e.g., Smith 1994), and cause-related marketing (Arnott 1994; Vangelova 1994; Varadarajan and Menon 1988). Many reasons have been cited for these initiatives; an underlying theme seems to be that these programs enable consumers to identify with the corresponding organizations. By aligning themselves with worthy causes or implementing policies that are radically different from industry practice, organizations enable consumers to identify with what the organization represents. For example, Ben & Jerry's actively supports the rainforest (Lager 1994), Harley-Davidson, Inc. sponsors regional and national events for the Harley Owner's Group (HOG) (Reid 1989), Tom's of Maine uses only natural ingredients in their products (Chappell 1993), and Saturn sells its cars at a fixed price (Aaker 1994). In addition, organizations can resort to more direct strategies to ensure identification on the part of consumers: For example, nonprofit entities such as museums seek to build identification by drawing consumers "inside" by making them members.

The phenomenon of identification has been well studied by organizational researchers (see, e.g., Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Mael and Ashforth 1992; O'Reilly and Chatman 1986). These studies have been either of employees of an organization or the alumni of educational institutions. When a person identifies with an organization, he or she perceives a sense of connectedness to an organization and defines him- or herself in terms of the organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992, p. 104).

Organizational researchers have consistently shown that the identification of members, such as employees or alumni, leads to increased member loyalty to the organization (Adler and Adler 1987) and decreased turnover (O'Reilly and Chatman 1986). Anecdotal evidence suggests that identification in the customer arena also has desirable consequences of high brand loyalty and positive word of mouth: Peter and Olson (1993) note that 94% of Harley-Davidson buyers would again buy a Harley, and, according to Aaker (1994), 95% of Saturn buyers said they would recommend the car and retailer to others—a percentage higher than that found for owners of Lexus, Mercedes, or Infinity.

The benefits of increased loyalty to the organization and positive word of mouth are well documented: Some studies show that, on average, retaining existing customers is six times less expensive than luring new customers (Rosenberg and Czepiel 1984) and reducing customer defections by as little as 5% can, in some circumstances, boost profits by 25 to 85% (Reichheld and Sasser 1990). Marketing researchers, therefore, must investigate the antecedents and conse-
quences of identification for customers. Beyond theory enrichment, a better understanding of identification can lead to sustainable competitive advantage and improve the bottom line.

We emphasize that the notion of identification differs from the related notions of brand loyalty (cf. Kahn and Meyer 1989, Raj 1985) and organizational commitment (cf. Hunt, Chonko, and Wood 1985; Hunt, Wood, and Chonko 1989) that have been discussed in the marketing literature. According to Kahn and Meyer (1989), the definition of brand loyalty proposed by Brown (1952) closely parallels modern views on the subject. Brown defines brand loyalty as a deliberate prior tendency to purchase a brand, often stemming from positive past experiences with its use. In most instances, therefore, brand loyalty may well be an outcome of the functional utility that consumers derive from the brand. In contrast, identification is necessarily tied to the causes of the goals that an organization embodies. Thus, when organizations stand for specific causes (e.g., preservation of rain forests by Ben & Jerry’s), consumers may be loyal to its products because they identify with the mission of the organization. In other words, ceteris paribus, all persons who identify with what an organization represents are likely to be loyal to its products or services, but all brand loyal customers need not identify with the organization.

Similarly, in the organizational behavior literature, though some research treats organizational identification as being equivalent to organizational commitment (e.g., Podsakoff, Williams, and Todor 1986; Porter et al. 1974), more recent work argues that identification is a separate construct (e.g., Adler and Adler 1987; Mael and Ashforth 1992; O’Reilly and Chatman 1986), because identification is necessarily organization specific, whereas commitment is not (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

What are some of the natural marketing settings that are likely to facilitate organizational identification? Although corporate philanthropy and cause-related marketing programs can enhance identification, drawing consumers inside the organization as members is, perhaps, a more viable way of building identification. Conventional wisdom suggests that membership, by definition, creates a sense of belongingness. One survey suggests that membership has become a pervasive social bond: The top 50 organizations that sell individual memberships represent approximately 165 million people (Association Management 1994). Hence, membership-based organizations seem to be one appropriate setting for studying identification.

A second setting relates to the type of organization that is likely to foster membership and, therefore, identification. Indeed, business organizations have increasingly begun to use the vocabulary of membership ostensibly to create a sense of identification: American Express extols “membership privileges,” and Harley-Davidson has started the HOG. However, nonprofit organizations, such as museums, the World Wildlife Fund, or the Audobon society, have routinely incorporated consumers as members (Hansmann 1986). Furthermore, by dealing with a gamut of social causes, nonprofits enable consumers to identify with the goals of the organization. In fact, in contrast to many corporate membership programs, consumers must pay to be members in nonprofits.

The context of paid memberships in nonprofit organizations, therefore, seems to be a good starting point for understanding better the identification construct as it relates to consumers. Specifically, we study the correlates of member identification in an art museum. In subsequent sections, we discuss how future research endeavors can investigate identification in other customer and organizational contexts.

The findings of our study are relevant for both academics and practitioners. In the marketing literature, research on both identification and membership is sparse; to our knowledge, there is no reported study on identification in the marketing literature. Moreover, research on membership has been confined to the development of different types of taxonomies (see, e.g., Cross 1992; Gruen and Ferguson 1994; Levin 1993; Lovelock 1983). From a theoretical perspective, this study sheds light on the notion of identification as it relates to membership. Our study can be extended (1) conceptually to other arenas, such as cause-related marketing or for-profit organizations, or (2) methodologically to build causal models of identification. In terms of practical implications, our findings should help managers develop ideas about how identification may be used as a customer retention strategy.

First, we use social identity theory to develop a conceptual framework for member identification and propose hypotheses. Second, we describe the survey methodology and the measures we used to test the hypotheses. Third, we discuss the results. Fourth and finally, we discuss how our results extend the literature of consumer behavior, membership, and identification.

Social Identity Theory and Members’ Identification

Social identity theory maintains that in addition to a personal identity, the self-concept is also composed of a social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1985). Personal identity consists of idiosyncratic characteristics, such as abilities and interests, whereas social identity consists of salient group classifications that, in turn, may be based on demographic categories, gender, or race, as well as membership in central organizations, such as clubs or religious, educational, or cultural institutions. According to Turner (1985), classification enables people to order the social environment and locate themselves and others within it.

Social identification, then, is the perception of belonging to a group with the result that a person identifies with that group (i.e., I am a member). Identification enables the person to partake vicariously of accomplishments beyond his or her powers (Katz and Kahn 1966). According to this line of thought, organizational identification is a specific form of social identification in which the person defines himself or herself in terms of membership in a particular organization. Specifically, when a person identifies with an organization, he or she perceives a “oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth 1992, p. 104). Similarly, Dutton, Duk-
erich, and Harquail (1994) view organizational identification as the cognitive connection that is created when a person’s self-concept contains the same attributes as those perceived in the organizational identity.

Identification and Membership

The conceptual model of members’ identification with a focal organization, which we propose and test in our research, is drawn from theories of social identity and organizational identification. To elaborate, social identification theory asserts that organizational images are systematically linked to members’ self-concepts and maintains that organizational membership can confer positive or negative attributes on a member. From the social identification perspective, the extent to which a perceived organizational identity influences the level of identification of a member hinges on the attractiveness of the image. In turn, the attractiveness of an organizational image depends on the extent to which it enables self-continuity (i.e., consistency of self-concept), self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). More concretely, social identification researchers propose that satisfaction with the organization, the reputation of the organization, frequency of contact, and the visibility of affiliation influence the members’ level of identification (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Mael and Ashforth 1992).

In our model, we consolidate these ideas from the literature and propose that members’ identification with a focal organization is related to a set of three broad factors: (1) organizational and product characteristics, (2) affiliation characteristics, and (3) activity characteristics. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the conceptual framework. In the subsequent sections, we discuss how each of the factors in our conceptual framework relates to identification.

Organizational and Product Characteristics

Organizational and product characteristics is a factor that concerns members’ perceptions of the focal organization and its offerings. We expect that members are likely to identify strongly with the organization if they (1) perceive the focal organization to be more prestigious and/or (2) are satisfied with the membership benefits offered by the focal organization.

We hypothesize that the perceived prestige of the focal organization is positively related to identification. The notion that consumers buy products to extend their selves and enhance their self-esteem is well documented in the literature (see, e.g., Belk 1988). We believe that purchasing a membership is, perhaps, another way of extending the self. For example, purchasing a membership in a prestigious museum provides people with one avenue for enhancing their sense of self and communicating it to others. Clearly, the more prestigious the organization, the better the opportunity to enhance self-esteem through identification (Mael and Ashforth 1992).

\[ H_1: \text{All else being equal, members' perception of the prestige of the focal organization will be positively related to their identification with the focal organization.} \]

Related to the notion of organizational prestige is the notion of the members’ satisfaction with the offerings of the focal organization. Researchers in organizational behavior (e.g., Hall and Schneider 1972) have shown that satisfaction with the institution’s contributions to the attainment of personal goals is associated with identification. Some personal goals that might be fulfilled through membership include the widening of a social network and personal enrichment and development. The more satisfied a person is with an organization’s offerings, the greater is the identification. In turn, several studies have indicated that satisfaction is a direct function of the extent to which a person’s expectations of an organization are unmet or exceeded (Oliver and Swan 1989a, b). Thus, we hypothesize:

\[ H_2: \text{All else being equal, the extent to which the focal organization’s offerings confirm member expectations will be positively related to members’ identification with the focal organization.} \]

Affiliation Characteristics

Affiliation characteristics are a set of variables referring to the characteristics of a person’s membership: the length of time a person has been a member in the focal organization, the visibility of membership he or she has in the focal organization, and the number of other similar organizations he or she patronizes. Each of these variables is likely to be associated with the intensity with which members identify with the focal organization.

Based on Hall and Schneider’s (1972) work, we propose that membership tenure will increase identification, but over time, the rate at which this increase occurs will diminish. Initially, as tenure in a social group increases, membership in that group becomes salient for self-categorization (Kramer 1991). As members spend time in an organization, they increase the level and breadth of exposure to the collective organizational identity, making these organizational attributes more accessible in their memories (Bruner 1957). Both Hall and Schneider (1972) and Mael and Ashforth (1992) report that the length of time a person is actively involved with an organization is positively related to identification. Beyond a point, however, tenure is likely to increase identification at a diminishing rate. In other words, there is a “honeymoon period” in which identification increases rapidly with tenure, which is followed by a period of inertia with regard to identification.

\[ H_3: \text{All else being equal, tenure in the focal organization will be positively related, at a decreasing rate, to members' identification with the focal organization.} \]

The visibility of membership (as indicated by the category of membership to which a person belongs) may also be related to members’ identification. For example, educational institutions routinely differentiate among different classes of donors and provide them with different types of recognitions. Similarly, in art museums, members of higher level categories (e.g., patrons) have their names published in the museum’s brochures and attend exclusive events organized for their benefit. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) argue that when people are visibly associated with an orga-
nization, they are more frequently reminded of their membership. Their argument is based on the notion that visible affiliations serve as vivid reminders of membership, thereby, increasing the effectiveness of the organization as a source of self-definition.

\( H_6: \) All else being equal, the visibility of membership in the focal organization will be positively related to members' identification with the focal organization.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) use social identity theory to suggest that people often retain multiple, loosely coupled identities; hence, social identities may not be mutually exclusive. This suggests that the number of organizations in the same social classification a person frequents can also impinge on the intensity with which a person identifies with any of these organizations. For example, if a member of a particular art museum also goes to other arts facilities (e.g., art galleries, the symphony, the ballet), the sense of oneness with the art museum may be obscured (March and Simon 1958). The empirical evidence for alumni's identification with their alma mater is mixed; Mael and Ashforth (1992) did not find the number of educational institutions attended to be related to alumni's identification with their college. However, though Sprecht and Greeley's (1970) study is not directly related to identification, it shows that the amount of financial contributions by alumni was inversely related to the number of colleges attended. Therefore, we hypothesize:

\( H_5: \) All else being equal, participation in similar organizations will be negatively related to members' identification with the focal organization.

**Activity Characteristics**

According to social identity theory, people tend to choose activities that are congruent with the important aspects of their identities and support those institutions that represent their identities (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Hence, a person's identification level with a museum is likely to be related to

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**FIGURE 1**

Correlates of Identification

- **Organizational and Product Characteristics**
  - Perceived Organizational Prestige (+)
  - Expectation Confirmation with Services (+)

- **Affiliation Characteristics**
  - Length of Membership (+)
  - Visibility of Membership (+)
  - Participation in Similar Organizations (−)

- **Activity Characteristics**
  - Contact (+)
  - Donation (+)

**Members Identification with Focal Organization**
a set of behavior patterns. We chose to study two such behaviors: contact with and donation of money to the focal organization.

Identification is likely to be strongly associated with contact with the focal organization. Greater contact with an organization increases a member's readiness to categorize and define him- or herself as a member of that particular social group (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). As members' experience increasing contact with the organization, the attractiveness of the perceived organizational identity increases, thus strengthening members' identification. Therefore, the intensity of exposure with an organization should be positively related to identification. Partial support for this phenomenon is provided by Mael and Ashforth (1992), who find that alumni's identification level with their college was related to their attendance at special lectures.

$H_0$: All else being equal, frequency of contact with the focal organization will be positively related to members' identification with the focal organization.

Similar arguments can be submitted for extrarole behaviors, such as donating. O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) show significant linkages between identification levels and extrarole behavior, that is, actions for which the person receives no immediate reward and which benefit the larger organization. Mael and Ashforth (1992) find that alumni donations are significantly related to their identification levels. Therefore, we hypothesize:

$H_1$: All else being equal, donating money to the focal organization will be positively related to members' identification with the focal organization.

We emphasize that our hypotheses describe how identification is associated with organizational and product characteristics and members' affiliation and activity characteristics. In other words, the model proposed is strictly correlational in nature. We recognize that identification, over time, may also affect these variables. For example, over time, identification may contribute to perceptions of organizational prestige as people establish and maintain congruence between their sense of self and the desirability of the focal organization. Similarly, the greater the identification with an organization, the more likely is a member to be satisfied with the organization's products. Likewise, stronger identification may also prompt people to prolong their tenure in the focal organization. It is also possible that identification leads to visible membership: Highly identified people are likely to purchase that category of membership which gives them organizational and public prominence. Finally, identification can also increase contact with the focal organization and foster extrarole behaviors, such as donations: Highly identified people are more likely to devote time and energy to the focal organization. We relegate the testing of the comprehensive causal model to further research, because, as we discuss in the methods section, our study is cross-sectional in nature and does not permit the testing of these longitudinal relationships.

Methods

Research Site

The research site was the preeminent art museum of a major southeastern city. The museum had a membership base of 18,000, with several categories of membership, ranging from basic "individual" or "family" memberships ($40 and $50, respectively) to higher levels, such as "contributing" ($100) and "patron" membership (from $200 to $5,000). All membership categories offer such benefits as free admission to the museum, priority entrance to special exhibitions, subscriptions to the monthly Members Calendar (which gives advance notice of all exhibitions, lectures, gallery talks, and films), and a 10% discount at the gift shop. In addition to these general membership benefits, higher level membership categories (e.g., patrons) include the benefits of additional free guest admission passes, free admission to museum parties and receptions, and recognition in the biennial report published by the museum.

Sampling and Procedures

We mailed a questionnaire survey to 1043 current museum members. The population from which the sample was selected consisted of those who had been members of the museum for at least one year (N = 14,274) and, therefore, had an opportunity to renew their membership at least once—thereby indicating a base level of attachment toward the museum. A proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used when the strata consisted of different membership categories.

Respondents received a cover letter from the Museum Director explaining the purpose of the survey and a questionnaire with a postage paid return envelope. Two free guest passes were attached to the survey as a token of appreciation and an incentive to participate in the survey. Overall, we received 306 completed questionnaires—representing a 30% response rate.

Development of Measures and Pretesting of Questionnaire Items

Prior to mailing the survey, we conducted three focus groups of eight to ten current art museum members to develop questionnaire items and pretest measures. Information from these focus groups are reflected in the measures that we employed in the final version of the survey. In addition, the focus groups were useful in explicating the notion of identification. Many of the focus group members told us that they were staunch supporters of the museum and what it represented. In contrast, we also encountered people who did not display such an attachment toward the museum. Thus, qualitatively understanding that the intensity of identification can indeed vary within the context of membership was an important aspect of the study.

Measurement of Variables

The dependent variable in our study was the level of members' identification with the focal organization. The independent variables were members' perceptions of the prestige of the organization, confirmation of members' expectations.
with the organization's offerings, length of membership, visibility of membership, members' participation in other similar organizations, member contact, and member donation. In addition, appropriate control variables were measured and included in analyses. In the subsequent sections, we discuss the operationalization of the dependent and independent variables.

Identification. Members' identification with the focal organization was measured by adapting Mael and Ashforth's (1992) 6-item scale to the museum. This scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties in previous studies; for example its Cronbach's alpha was .88 in Mael's (1988) study of employed business and psychology students, and Ashforth (1990) reports an alpha of .83 in a sample of managers from a variety of organizations. The Cronbach's alpha found for the scale used in our study was .87.

Hypothesized correlates. Perceived organizational prestige was measured by selecting three relevant items of a perceived organizational prestige scale that both Mael (1988) and Mael and Ashforth (1992) used. Note that while adapting the scale to the museum, we could use only a subset of the items because the authors used the original scale in the context of employees and alumni. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale used in our study was .69.

Expectation confirmation with the focal organization's services was measured by asking respondents the extent to which their expectations of the museum had been met on four key dimensions: the permanent art collection, traveling exhibitions, special events, and gift shop. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, "much worse than expected" to "much better than expected" (Oliver and Swan 1989a). The reliability of a composite scale constructed from these items was .65.

The length of membership was operationalized as the number of years of membership. To test the hypothesis that identification increases with length of membership at a diminishing rate, we took the logarithmic transformation of the variable (cf. Hair et al. 1995). Visibility of membership was operationalized by dichotomizing type of membership in the museum—patron and higher categories versus all others. For assessing participation in similar events, we asked members about the frequency with which they visited other arts facilities or events during the previous twelve months. This was measured with a 2-item scale: The first inquired about the frequency of visits to other arts facilities, such as art galleries; the second asked about the frequency of participation in other arts events (e.g., symphony, ballet, theater, opera). The high intercorrelation between these two items (r = .41) prompted us to average their scores and form one composite measure of arts participation.

Finally, contact with the focal organization was measured as the number of times the member visited the museum during the previous year. Donating practices were measured in a similar fashion.

Control variables. In an attempt to eliminate alternative explanations for our results, we included two control variables: education and income. Educational levels were measured using six categories, ranging from "completed elementary school" to "graduate degree." Similarly, income was measured using categories that had $10,000 increments. On the basis of preliminary data analysis, we collapsed the education variable into three categories: "finished high school," "college degree," and "graduate degree and above." Income was transformed into a continuous variable by assigning the category midpoint value to all the observations within a category.

Testing for Nonresponse Bias

To ensure that our survey sample was representative of the larger population from which it was drawn, we conducted two types of analyses. First, several key comparisons were conducted between the survey sample (n = 306) and the membership population from which it was drawn (N = 14, 274). Characteristics of the survey respondents and population were comparable: There were no significant differences in length of membership (eight years), percentage living in the metropolitan area near the museum (approximately 75%), or type of membership—Individual (23% of the sample versus 21% of the population); Family/Dual (49% of the sample versus 45% of the population); Contributors and Patrons (16% of the sample versus 15% of the population); and Student or Senior Citizen (13% of the sample versus 18% of the population).

Second, to further confirm that the respondents were indeed representative of the sample and, hence, the population, a telephone survey of randomly selected nonrespondents was conducted using two key behavioral items from the questionnaire. Our analysis is based on 36 completed responses. Specifically, we asked nonrespondents about the number of times they visited the museum in the past 12 months and the extent to which they visited other arts facilities. Comparison of the respondents with the nonrespondents on the central tendency measures suggest that nonrespondents are similar to respondents for both of these key dimensions. Overall, comparison of the respondents with the total member population and nonrespondents led us to conclude that nonresponse bias is not a problem.
Results

Descriptive Statistics

We found that on average, respondents were members of the museum for approximately eight years, and approximately 15% of the respondents belonged to the contributing and above membership category. Survey respondents were approximately 52 years of age; 96% were Caucasian; approximately two-thirds were female; 44% had at least a graduate degree; and approximately one half had an annual income of $80,000 or more, which is well above the 1993 national average of $33,000 for a family of four. In general, then, the demographic characteristics of our sample--educated, upper-middle class professionals--are fairly consistent with those reported in studies of arts consumers (cf. DiMaggio and Ostrom 1990; DiMaggio and Useem 1978a, b).

Table 1 provides the appropriate measures of central tendency and correlations for all the variables used in the model. Note that the average identification level in the sample is approximately 3.0; coupled with the standard deviation of .79, this suggests that members are fairly symmetrically distributed across the measure. Similar observations can be made with regard to the perceived prestige and expectation confirmation variables. As noted previously, we used the natural logarithm of length of membership. Additionally, we used a logarithmic transformation for the variable for participation in similar organizations and treated the donation variable as a dummy.

Tests of Hypotheses

To test simultaneously the proposed hypotheses, we estimated a multiple regression model using ordinary least squares regression. On inspecting the correlations and visual plots, we deduced that we were satisfying the assumptions of specification, homoskedasticity, and multicollinearity (Kennedy 1992). However, the frequency of participation in other art events was positively skewed. We improved the normality of this distribution by taking a logarithmic transformation. Similarly, the data on donating practices revealed that most respondents either did not donate or donated once; this prompted us to transform the donation variable into a dummy variable that classified members into two groups—those who had donated and those who had not.

Table 2 provides the estimation results. Because of missing values on one or more of the variables, the model was estimated using 238 observations. Overall model fit is assessed by the $R^2$ and $F$ statistics; we observe that (1) the independent variables explain 38.5% of the variation in identification and (2) the postulated model is significant ($F = 14.241, p < .001$).

Remember that our model and subsequent inferences are correlational in nature. Moreover, given the directional nature of our hypothesis, the significance tests we conduct are all one-tailed. With regard to organizational characteristics, we observe that higher levels of perceived organizational prestige are clearly associated with higher levels of identification ($p < .001$), which supports $H_1$. Similarly, $H_2$, proposing a positive relationship between expectation confirmation and identification, is supported ($p < .05$).

With regard to affiliation characteristics, we find strong support for two of the three hypotheses. $H_3$ is supported: The log transformed membership tenure term is significantly and positively related to identification ($p < .001$). Similarly, $H_5$ is supported: Participation in other arts is significantly and negatively related to identification ($p < .05$). However, $H_4$ is not supported: Visibility of membership (as measured by membership category) is not significantly related to identification.

Of the two activity characteristics we studied (i.e., visiting and donating), only the coefficient associated with visiting frequency ($H_6$) is significant ($p < .05$).

Of the two control variables, income is insignificant. Education appears to be more interesting; the identification of only those members who have a master's degree or higher (relative to those who have finished high school) is significant ($p < .01$) and negative. There are several possible reasons for this result. Perhaps, more educated persons, instead of being attached to any particular organization, indulge in greater variety seeking behavior (McAlister 1982). Such broad-based participation in a wider range of activities that are not necessarily arts related may dilute the bond of identification with any one institution. Furthermore, it is also possible that these people are more selective in choosing the organizations with which they identify. Unfortunately, our data did not permit the testing of these relationships; we leave this for a future research endeavor.

We conjectured that the relative insignificance of the visibility of membership is possibly due to its correlation with income ($r = .26, p < .001$). However, as we mentioned previously, running a model without the income variable failed to produce any noteworthy improvement in the results. Perhaps the "visible consumption" effect takes place only at higher levels of membership (e.g., supporting patron, benefactor patron). For example, roundtable patrons and higher are recognized by a plaque in the museum atrium. Unfortunately, we did not have sufficient observations at these levels to test our hypothesis.

Discussion

Do consumers, in their role as members, identify with the focal organization? Is such identification systematically related to a set of (members') beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors? The results of our research suggest a positive response to both questions and point to theoretical and practical implications to strengthen the understanding and management of the bond of identification.

Implications for Marketing Theory

The notion of identification has heretofore not been applied to customers, but our findings add to the marketing literature. Researchers have long emphasized that purchases enable consumers to extend their personal identities by incor-
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<td>10. Income (in $1000)</td>
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**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Meas.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identity</td>
<td>Organizational and Product Characteristics</td>
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<td>2. Perceived Organizational Prestige</td>
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<td>3. Expectation Confirmation</td>
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<td>4. Length of Membership</td>
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<td>5. Log (years)</td>
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<td>6. Participation in Similar Activity Organizations Log (per month)</td>
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<td>7. Contact (interpersonal frequency)</td>
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<td>8. Giving (yes = 1)</td>
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<td>9. Education</td>
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<td>10. Income (in $1000)</td>
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</table>

**The Bond of Identification / 53**
TABLE 2
Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficient (T Statistic in parenthesis)</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.2422 (.426)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational and Product Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived organizational prestige</td>
<td>.4587 (6.932)**</td>
<td>.3982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation confirmation of services</td>
<td>.1636 (2.236)*</td>
<td>.1304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of membership</td>
<td>.1794 (3.410)**</td>
<td>.1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of membership</td>
<td>.2320 (1.321)</td>
<td>.0741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in other organizations</td>
<td>-.1145 (-2.290)*</td>
<td>-.1301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact (visiting frequency)</td>
<td>.0277 (1.923)*</td>
<td>.1075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donating</td>
<td>.1447 (1.458)</td>
<td>.0813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (college)</td>
<td>.3111 (.671)</td>
<td>.0362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (graduate)</td>
<td>-.2398 (-2.822)**</td>
<td>-.1519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.0012 (-.963)</td>
<td>-.0545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of observations</td>
<td>238</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.3816</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F statistic</td>
<td>13.83**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.

porating the intangible attributes of the product into themselves; consumers even indulge themselves with “self-gifts” (Belk 1988; Mick and DeMoss 1990). However, the extended self-perception seems to overemphasize having things at the expense of constructing relationships with groups and organizations. Indeed, our study suggests that membership is not only an acquisition that extends the self, but is also a relationship that extends a person’s identity by enabling him or her to belong to an organization.

The finding that visiting other arts institutions has a significant negative effect on identification suggests that identification is not simply a bilateral relationship between a person and an organization, isolated from other organizations, but a process that unfolds in a competitive arena. A promising future research exercise would be to develop cognitive maps that delineate the nature of perceived competition in the context of cultural and social causes.

The results of our study also expand the generalizability of extant research on organizational identification. As was noted previously, much identification research has focused on employees and alumni. Our findings suggest that the consumer-seller relationship may, in some contexts, also be characterized by identification. Thus, developing identification is not simply an employee retention strategy, but also a customer retention strategy.

Implications for Marketing Practice

Our study also has several practical implications for understanding member identification. The most direct implication is that members do identify with organizations; therefore, it may be worthwhile for managers to think strategically about strengthening the identification bond. Our findings direct attention to both the potential importance of identification for marketers and the tactics for building identification among consumers who may not be members of the organization.

First, one practical implication of the results is that managers should develop more focused communication strategies. For example, the membership application and renewal forms and the brochures and other communication tools of art museums emphasize free admission and other tangible benefits of membership. However, that members do identify with the organization suggests that these organizations should reinforce (1) their mission and (2) that members support a socially worthwhile cause through their membership. In addition to the tangibles, creative explication of the intangible benefits that consumers derive from their membership is an imperative.

Second, managers may strengthen identification by providing opportunities for contact. For example, we learned through our focus groups that casual, social events at the museum fostered a sense of belongingness among members. The monthly calendar of events also seems to play a similar role—it keeps members informed of the activities at the museum.

Third, the results indicate that identification can also be strengthened by enhancing the prestige of the focal organization and enabling members to fulfill their goals of membership. Perhaps managers should focus on product offerings—for example, events such as “celebrity renting,” in which well-known personalities come for special exhibition openings or endorsements—that accomplish these objectives and thereby help build identification.
Fourth, there are also implications for pricing. Because
identification is positively related to visiting behavior in
general, members who visit less often identify less with the
museum. These members are the most likely to lapse their
membership because they seem to lack a "reason" for con-
tinuing it. To improve the possibility of retaining these
members, managers may consider developing a menu of
pricing options. Currently, museums charge a flat fee for
membership. Under this scheme, members who neither
identify with the museum nor visit it often enough may feel
that because they are not making use of their membership,
they should drop out. Museum managers may be better able
to retain this segment by decoupling the benefit of "unlimit-
ed free admission" from the other benefits of being a muse-
um member. In the context of a conceptual classification of
service industries, similar issues were raised by Lovelock
(1983); the findings from our empirical analysis strongly
endorse the exploration of such options.

**Generic Strategies to Create Identification**

If identification has desirable consequences, then to achieve
those consequences marketing managers must know how to
create identification. Enhancing the prestige of the focal or-
ganization and enabling members to visit the museum or
meet socially are ways of strengthening the identification
bond. It is interesting to note that many of these practices
have been adopted by organizations such as the Saturn Cor-
poration, Ben & Jerry's, Harley-Davidson, Tom's of Maine,
and The Grateful Dead. These organizations enjoy customer
identification. In other words, a review of books and articles
on these organizations suggests that their customers have a
"shared sense of values" with the organization that goes be-
yond satisfaction with products and services. The strategies
adopted by these organizations suggest a preliminary list of
the different ways in which identification can be created.

**Dedication to the customer.** Our review suggests that a
strong and often distinctive customer orientation is a neces-
sary condition for fostering identification. For example, an
important part of Saturn's identity is that its customers be
"treated intelligently, with respect and like a friend" (Aaker
1994). Similarly, anyone who buys or sells Harley-Davidson
products automatically is a stakeholder in the company
(Reid 1989). Finally, The Grateful Dead, one of the sharpest
business operations in popular music, have information hot
lines and an in-house mail-order service that enables their
fans to buy tickets without waiting at a box office. They
allow fans to tape their concerts, a practice the rest of the
recording industry abhors (Barrett and Abramson 1988; Peter
and Olson 1993). It appears that these strategies and
actions on the part of the organization enable them to sur-
pass customer expectations and, thereby, foster
identification.

**Customer support groups.** Similar to the members' only
functions sponsored by the museum, Harley-Davidson cre-
ated HOG in 1983, which currently has approximately
200,000 loyal members around the world who keep in touch
through a bimonthly newsletter (Allen 1993; Reid 1989).
Run by Harley-Davidson employees, HOG sponsors motor-
cycle events almost every weekend from April to November
across the country. Similarly, the Saturn "family picnics"
have been much talked about—44,000 people came at their
own expense to Spring Hill, Tennessee, in June 1994 to cel-
ebrate Saturn's first national homecoming weekend (Jones
1994). Saturn is currently contemplating a Saturn owner's
club, as well as smaller regional homecomings. In addi-
tion, approximately 70,000 fans of The Grateful Dead
communicate with one another and obtain up-to-date infor-
mation on the band via the Internet. Finally, Ben & Jerry's
sponsors the Ben & Jerry's folk festival in Newport, R.I. and
has a traveling show that tours cross-country.

**Opportunities for public displays of association.** Many
of these organizations provide their customers with opportu-
nities to display their association or attachment toward the
organization. Harley-Davidson has catalogs of "Harley-
Davidson Motorclothes and Collectibles" and there are
Harley-Davidson boutiques opening around the world
(Allen 1993). Similarly, the Grateful Dead have a separate
organization called Grateful Dead Merchandise (with anual
sales exceeding $2 million) that sells bumper stickers, T-
shirts, calendars, and so on. Ben & Jerry's has a variety of
merchandise, such as teddy cows, T-shirts, and rainforest
soaps, that can be ordered through the mail.

**Active alignment with and support of social causes.** By
the nature of their business, many nonprofits naturally sup-
sport social causes. Ben & Jerry's actively supports the rain-
forests and other social causes, such as world peace; and it
donates 7.5% of its pretax profits to a variety of nonprofit
organizations (Lager 1994). The Grateful Dead have their
own nonprofit group, The Rex Foundation, which donates to
the homeless and other social groups (Barrett and Abramson
not only supports a variety of nonprofits monetarily, but also
encourages its employees to donate 5% of their time at
work—for regular pay—to community needs.

**Distinctive human resource policies.** Ben & Jerry's is
one of the few organizations that provides employee bene-
fits to unmarried couples and homosexual partners (Laabs
1992). Such policies, when publicized, can potentially cre-
ate an attachment to the company among a large target seg-
ment who share similar values.

Note that our list of strategies is by no means exhaustive;
issues such as socially responsible procurement policies
(Drumwright 1994) and employee and customer involve-
ment in new product development also merit investigation.
Moreover, all strategies are not practiced by all
organizations.

The previous discussion of the potential consequences of
identification suggests (1) how the concept of identifica-
tion may be applied to the wider context of marketing and
(2) the ways identification may be applied to help marketing
managers. Rigorous testing and subsequent validation of the
propositions are required to further demonstrate the value of
developing and strengthening the bond of customer
identification.
Limitations and Future Research Directions

The generalizability of the findings in this study is limited in two respects. First, our results may be applicable only to members of nonprofit arts organizations; hence, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to nonmember and for-profit settings. Second, our results may be further limited because we studied a preeminent urban art museum; our sample was, thus, drawn primarily from an urban area. Blau (1988) contends that the effects of context must be incorporated into models of arts consumption; she finds that individual socioeconomic characteristics associated with arts participation (e.g., education, income, gender, marital status, age) may be true primarily for metropolitan areas and not necessarily for small towns. Furthermore, to increase generalizability to other arts organizations, it would be helpful to conduct similar studies in less prestigious art museums, as well as in other types of arts organizations, such as symphonies, opera guilds, and ballet companies.

Other limitations also point to directions for further research. This study was primarily a correlational investigation and not a causal account of organizational identification. Indeed, a cross-sectional study of this sort may potentially suffer from the common method bias. Further research must distinguish between the antecedents and consequences of member identification and understand the mediating role that identification plays in eliciting certain behavior patterns. Another issue deserving scrutiny is the effect of identification on other prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering and the giving of membership to family and friends. Volunteering not only allows for self-enhancement, but also provides increased exposure to the organization. Also, the impact of identification on member loyalty is a critical relationship that should be tested. For example, by collecting longitudinal data on actual behavior, rather than self-reports, and using continuous time hazard rate models (cf. Allison 1984), we can investigate how identification influences the renewal of membership.

In addition, an important research area relates to investigating whether and how consumers identify with organizations in other purchase contexts. To make the notion of organizational identification more managerially relevant, the next crucial step is to conduct studies similar to ours in nonmember contexts (e.g., visitors to museums) and/or in for-profit contexts. We provide empirical evidence and the anecdotal evidence on the for-profit organizations that may be used to develop theories and testable propositions regarding the sources and consequences of identification in marketing. For example, in future endeavors, we can explicitly test whether identification indeed leads to higher levels of brand loyalty, multibrand loyalty, and positive word of mouth.

Further research should recognize that customers may also identify negatively with organizations in contexts in which customers do not approve of certain organizational policies. An interesting study would be to investigate the relative impact of positive and negative identification on purchase behavior.

Finally, there is a need to understand the competitive context in which memberships are purveyed and identification is fostered. For-profit firms increasingly position membership in competitive space. A well known example is the battle between American Express, Visa, and MasterCard. American Express emphasizes "membership privileges" and underscores the elitist overtones of membership, whereas Visa highlights the "convenience of membership." Similarly, MasterCard focuses on the card's universality. Research on the use of membership as a competitive weapon to build identification is essential to broaden the scope of marketing strategy.

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