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## I (heart) social ventures: Identification and social media engagement

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## ABSTRACT

**Abstract Purpose:** The emergence of social media creates new opportunities for social ventures to foster consumer–social venture (C–SV) identification. Despite the great potential of social media to facilitate social interaction, research is limited regarding social media's effectiveness in developing consumer identification. The study posits that C–SV identification is driven by consumer engagement through social media sites and attractiveness of a social venture's identity. Data was collected from 304 social venture consumers who are connected to ventures via social media sites. Findings suggest a positive influence of engagement and attractiveness on C–SV identification. Two aspects of consumer social media experience, escapism and educational value, were found to enhance consumer engagement, while identity similarity and identity distinctiveness contributed to the attractiveness of a social venture's identity. The research provides social ventures with practical knowledge about the strategic use of social media sites as a vehicle for enhancing emotional and behavioral bonds with consumers.

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## 1. Introduction

Much has been said in both scholarly and public press about the importance of customer relationships if a company hopes to maintain sustainable business growth in today's increasingly competitive marketplace. When an organization builds strong, sustainable customer relationships, customers tend to identify with the organization, leading to higher levels of advocacy, increased purchases and additional supportive behaviors such as volunteering or donating to the organization (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009; Lee, Park, Rapert, & Newman, 2012; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). These advocacy and supportive behaviors can manifest in online environments, such as social media sites, thereby increasing the ways consumers can interact with companies and their brands. According to a study conducted by Duggan and Smith (2013), 73% of online adults are active in at least one social media site, while 42% are active on multiple social media sites and Millennials are reported to actively follow between one to five organizations via social media (The Case Foundation, 2013). As consumers participate in social media and more organizations utilize social media

as a strategic part of their integrated marketing communications, more opportunities are created not only for greater consumer–organization interaction and engagement, but also for consumers to connect, interact, and engage with other like-minded consumers. These public interactions help enhance consumers' self-concepts and further build their identities as a fan of a brand, an informal member of the organization.

While the benefits of strong consumer–organization identification are well documented in the literature (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dhar & Chang, 2009), the role social media interactions play in consumer identification remains largely unexplored. Given the prevalence of social media as a facilitator of social interaction between organizations and consumers, the lack of research on the impact of social media engagement on consumer identification presents an important gap in knowledge, particularly in regard to social ventures.

The study aims to develop and empirically test a consumer–social venture (C–SV) identification model based upon social media exchanges between the social venture and the venture's customer community. The model posits that four social media experiential attributes augment consumer engagement, while both engagement and identity attractiveness drive C–SV identification. Social ventures are organizations formed to solve social problems by creating economic value through commercial transactions in the marketplace (Hall-Phillips, Chung, Park, Anaza, & Rathod, 2013). With fewer financial and human resources, social ventures often find difficulty competing with larger, traditional for-profit competitors. Moreover, the customer base for social ventures is often limited to those who are mindful of the social

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causes supported by the social venture. While the challenge of building strong bonds with consumers is something that all organizations face, understanding consumer identification may be of particular importance for social ventures. Customers of a social venture may not only identify with that organization's products or services, but also with the social venture's specific cause (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). One might argue that due to the nature of social ventures, encouraging long-term consumer relationships based on shared social goals may be even more crucial to the venture's sustainability.

The paper is structured as follows. First a brief review of social identity theory is provided, followed by a succinct review of existing literature. Next the results of the analysis designed to empirically test the proposed model of C–SV identification are reported. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and the theoretical and managerial implications.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Social identity

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) explains how an individual creates self-concept through the perceived similarities between the self and a group. If the individual identifies with the group based upon perceived similarities to the group's characteristics and values, an emotional attachment to the group is formed. As a result, the individual considers the two entities (the self and the group) as belonging to the same category (e.g., ethnicity, geographical location, and alma mater). Social identity can develop in any social group, of any size, without a formal membership (Scott & Lane, 2000). Individuals consider group membership to be part of their identity, influencing their behavior and attitude (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). For example, individuals who identify with a group often perform behaviors that favor the group, such as adhering to group norms or speaking positively of the group, in order to strengthen their sense of belonging (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003).

### 2.2. Consumer–social venture identification & social media experience

Previous research on group identification has been primarily nested within the context of organizational identification, however recently marketing scholars have broadened the notion of identification to include consumers based on the assertion that social bonds can also exist between consumers and companies (e.g. Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Fombelle, Jarvis, Ward, & Ostrom, 2012; Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) were among the first scholars to characterize consumer–company identification; a form of identification in which the consumer's active, selective, and volitional acts define the self in relation to a company. According to their model, the attractiveness of a company's identity largely depends on the consumer's perceptions of the similarities between their own identity and that of the company along with the distinctiveness and prestige status of the company's identity. Consumers evaluate a company's identity through a variety of communicators including other customers, employees, and media (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identity attractiveness points to the tendency of people to like, adopt and support their relationships with a company based on the firm's enduring traits (Ahearne et al., 2005). As a result, when an individual perceives an organization's identity to be attractive, the person is more likely to identify with that organization (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Given the variability in company systems, additional research has explored consumer identification from various organizational contexts including socially responsible companies (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Marin, Ruiz, & Rubio, 2009), nonprofit organizations (Bhattacharya et al., 1995), and industrial service firms (Keh & Xie, 2009), however no studies address a consumer's identity and the relationship to social ventures.

In this study, C–SV identification is defined as the psychological attachment a consumer feels/has to a social venture based on the

perceived commonality between their self-concept and a social venture's perceived identity. The notion of C–SV identification is conceptually distinct from past variations of identification, focusing more on the evaluative component of identification examined from the loci of a social venture. Moreover, social venture consumers differ from traditional for-profit consumers, where a consumer is characterized as a user of commodities. Within this study's context, consumers are described as individuals who (a) acknowledge the social value that a social venture creates for society-at-large; (b) help the social venture achieve the venture's mission through purchases, donations, volunteering, or advocacy; and (c) interact with employees and other like-minded individuals through social media sites.

Social media sites are web-based social services that allow individuals to construct a profile, interact with other entities (e.g., friends, family, organizations, strangers, and other consumers), and view and engage with others through text, photos, videos, and games. With growing popularity, companies including social ventures, are actively engaging consumers through their brand/company fan pages on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Consumers' active participation and engagement in group activities and networked communities contribute to a symbolic tie between the consumer and the company (Bagozzi, Bergami, Marzocchi, & Morandini, 2012). Given social media's importance as a platform for both consumers and social ventures to directly engage with each other (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012; Zaglia, 2013), investigating the dynamics of consumer engagement in social media sites can have significant implications to the literature on consumer identification with organizations. Based on the theoretical discussion above, this study proposes a model for C–SV identification (see Fig. 1) that includes social media engagement and identity attractiveness. The study further explores the antecedents of engagement, which includes four aspects of social media experience, and identity attractiveness, which is triggered by identity similarity and identity distinctiveness.

## 3. Hypothesis development

### 3.1. Antecedents of consumer–social venture identification

The study posits that consumer identification with a social venture is related to the perceived attractiveness of the social venture and consumer engagement through social media sites. Identity attractiveness refers to the favorable evaluation of the social venture's identity by consumers in terms of the social venture's ability to meet the consumer's self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Dutton et al., 1994). A customer's favorable evaluation of a company's characteristics can lead to identification with the company (Ahearne et al., 2005). Customers may find a social venture's identity more attractive in terms of defining and expressing their self-concept over other companies, which could lead to further engagement with the venture. In an effort to address engagement from a social media perspective, this study defines consumer engagement as the degree to which a person participates in and relates to an organization, the organization's offerings, and activities through social media sites, which goes beyond service encounters and transactions. Boyd and Ellison (2007) assert that customers who go out of their way to engage with a company by actively participating in the firm's social media sites share a level of connection with the firm that is difficult to find in other virtual environments. These interactions help develop social attachments and foster a sense of camaraderie within the group, aligning individual interests with the social venture's values. When consumers are attracted to a social venture or engage with a social venture, such as liking, commenting, and/or sharing company or personal posts with other site members, identification with the collective group begins to take shape.

**H1.** Engagement with a social venture's social media sites positively affects C–SV identification.

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