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How online self-customization creates identification: Antecedents and consequences of consumer-customized product identification and the role of product involvement



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ABSTRACT

Online self-customization (OSC) enables customers to design a product tailored to their preferences and needs via the online platform. This study mainly argues that a successful OSC experience goes beyond simply increasing a consumer's preference fit; it provides an opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with customers by allowing them to embed their sense of self into the customized products and thus identify themselves with the products. Consumer-customized product identification (C-C identification) was proposed as central to our understanding of why and under what conditions OSC processes enable consumers articulate their identities. This study is theoretically based on internal motivations from social identity theory and identification literature to develop a model. The model was tested using a scenario-based survey with respondents collected from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Structural equation modeling analyses showed that value congruence and distinctiveness of the customized products positively influenced C-C identification, which in turn positively influenced attitudinal responses. The results further showed that the relative impact of two antecedents on C-C identification varies with a consumer's product involvement. A similar pattern of results was obtained in two product categories. Theoretical and managerial implications for OSC marketers are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Online self-customization (OSC) refers to the use of a web-based user toolkit offered by a company which allow customers to design a product tailored to their individual preferences and expectations (Franke & Schreier, 2008). With advancements in technology, OSC is no more limited to provide a predefined set of configurators (e.g., colors, materials), but has developed into a more advanced service such as product visualization (e.g., 3D digital modeling) (Gandhi, Magar, & Roberts, 2014). As OSC is viewed as one of the key sources of value creation in a highly competitive and segmented market (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Valenzuela, Dhar, & Zettelmeyer, 2009), a number of companies have embedded OSC services in their websites (e.g., Nike's NikeID, Louis Vuitton's Mon Monogram).

Indeed, the adoption of OSC strategy is found in a wide range of industries including apparel (e.g., Levi Strauss), sport shoes (e.g., Adidas), computers (e.g., Dell), cars (e.g., Land Rover), food (e.g., General Mills), cards (e.g., Hallmark), etc.

With the widespread use of OSC in marketing practices, a research stream on factors affecting consumer responses to OSC has developed, such as system factors (e.g., toolkits, user-design interface) (Dellaert & Dabholkar, 2009; Randall, Terwiesch, & Ulrich, 2007), individual factors (e.g., one's ability to express preference) (Franke, Keinz, & Steger, 2009), OSC process (Atakan, Bagozzi, & Yoon, 2014a, 2014b), values of OSC (Franke, Schreier, & Kaiser, 2010; Merle, Chandon, Roux, & Alizon, 2010), and even interaction effect with brand (Miceli, Raimondo, & Farace, 2013). However, despite the importance of a customized product as a vehicle to embed one's self-concept, research on factors related to a consumer's motivation to represent his/her identity into the customized product is scarce (Atakan, Bagozzi, & Yoon, 2014b, 2014a; Miceli et al., 2013).

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Consumers attempt to signal their sense of self through product consumption (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). Levy (1959) first noted symbolic meaning in consumption in which “people buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (p.118). In this context, OSC is viewed as a means of integrating important aspect of the self into the products, beyond simply increasing preference fit. Not surprisingly then, a recent research has focused on identification (i.e., the degree to which one perceives a customized product as a representation of his/her identity) as an important psychological mechanism underlying consumer responses to the customized product (e.g., Atakan et al., 2014b, 2014a; Miceli et al., 2013). However, a comprehensive understanding about identification development during OSC process is lacking: *Do consumers experience product customization in conjunction with their identity expression? If so, what aspects of OSC processes enable consumers to identify themselves with the customized products?*

This study attempts to address the above research question by applying identification from marketing research. Identification, representing a connection between a consumer's sense of self and marketing objectives that satisfy his/her self-definitional needs (i.e., “who am I?”) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), has been viewed as the foundation for building a meaningful relationship with customers at the corporate level (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), at brand level (Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, & Elsharnouby, 2016; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013), at brand community level (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), and even at loyalty program level (Ha & Stoel, 2014). This study is designed to extend the notion of consumer identification to the *product* level (i.e., OSC products) by examining whether OSC acts as a vehicle to develop and communicate important aspects of one's identities, and thus induces favorable marketing consequences. In order to capture identity communication aspect of OSC, this study proposes the construct consumer-customized product identification (C-C identification), defined as a consumer's perception of a customized product as a symbolic representation of his/her identity.

This study draws on the notion of extended self (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Kleine et al., 1993; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003) and internal motivations from social identity theory (Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Reid & Hogg, 2005) to develop a pragmatic yet theoretically sound model in which two factors of OSC processes were proposed to facilitate consumer identification: *value congruence* which concerns a cognitive match between the value derived from OSC and the value a consumer cares about and *distinctiveness* which refers to the extent to which a customized product is perceived as unique or unusual. Furthermore, this study examines the moderating role of a consumer's individual trait – product involvement – in identification development. Berger and Heath (2007) demonstrated one's tendency to signal his/her unique identities through product consumption but only in a product domain that was seen as symbolic of identity. In a similar vein, an individual difference in the importance of the product domain to one's self-concept may affect the consumer-product relationship (e.g., Mazodier & Merunka, 2014). This study examines this idea by focusing on an individual's product involvement, which concerns personal relevance attached to the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of the product being customized (Celsi & Olson, 1988).

Collectively, this study aims to develop and test a model which investigates: (1) how two factors of customization processes (i.e., value congruence and distinctiveness of customized products) influence a consumer's identification with a customized product, (2) how consumer–customized product identification influences a consumer's attitudinal responses (i.e., attitude toward the

customized product and satisfaction with a retailer), and (3) how a consumer's product involvement moderates his/her identification with the customized product.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Consumer-customized product identification

Research on extended self (Belk, 1988; Pierce et al., 2003) provides a theoretical understanding of how an OSC process changes the nature of consumer-product relationship. As people invest their time, efforts, values, and goals into products, such products become their extended self (Belk, 1988), helping them maintain and strengthen the sense of self (Dittmar, 1992; Kleine et al., 1993; Mittal, 2006). Applying this logic to the context of OSC, we consider customization as a process in which consumers create their extended self by actively and volitionally invest time, efforts, values, and preferences into products. Since all these investments reflect aspects of the self (Mittal, 2006), customized products likely symbolize consumers' identity as well as their relationship to the outside world (Belk, 1988; Pierce et al., 2003).

Drawing on the notion of extended self (Belk, 1988; Pierce et al., 2003), researchers recently have focused on a consumer's identification with the customized product (e.g., Atakan et al., 2014b, 2014a; Miceli et al., 2013). Consumers identify with the customized product to a greater extent when they integrate themselves into the product and thus see themselves reflected in the product. Consistent with these studies, this study defines consumer–customized product identification (hereafter C-C identification) as a consumer's perception of a customized product that is a symbolic representation of his/her identity.

2.2. Motives for C-C identification

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985) provides a theoretical basis to understand C-C identification development. The theory posits that a person's self-concept is partly defined by his/her membership in a category or group and a person's perceptions of the defining characteristics of the target category is fundamental to the process of identification construction (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985). In this context, this study considers customization as one category of product consumption that encompasses certain defining attributes. For example, people have a social perception that a consumer group who customizes one's own products rather than choosing mass-produced products is characterized by high need-for-uniqueness (Ruvio, 2008; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Thus, associating oneself with such a certain consumption category itself acts as a vehicle to articulate one's sense of self (Ruvio, 2008). As such, this study argues that identification occurs with a customized product but its underlying psychological mechanism is affected by a consumer's categorization into a certain consumption category (i.e., the engagement in OSC processes).

Social identity theory suggests two core individual-level motivations underlying identification development processes (Reid & Hogg, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which lead us to propose two dimensions of C-C identification: (1) uncertainty reduction motive (the need to reduce subjective uncertainty in self) (Hogg, 2000) and self-enhancement motive (the need to keep or enhance the positivity or reduce the negativity of the self) (Reid & Hogg, 2005). First, people categorize themselves into a social category that makes it distinctive from other categories (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1987). When a group's prototype fits one's self-defining attributes or makes sense of the way he/she behaves, such a group forms the basis of one's social identities (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1987).

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