



Unique influences of cognitive and affective customer-company identification



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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests both the cognitive and affective dimensions of customer-company identification (CCI) influence outcomes of interest such as customer loyalty. Yet no research has empirically examined whether there are separate firm influenced drivers of the cognitive (CCI_{Cog}) and affective (CCI_{Aff}) dimensions of CCI. The current research examines how two sets of drivers, symbolic and social, uniquely affect CCI_{Cog} and CCI_{Aff} in comparison to 21 control variables. The results suggest CCI_{Cog} is primarily influenced by antecedents that assist in self-definition (e.g., identity similarity and in-group ties) whereas CCI_{Aff} is primarily influenced by antecedents that assist in self-evaluation (e.g., organizational prestige and in-group bond). In addition, social drivers enhance the effect of symbolic drivers on CCI_{Cog} whereas social drivers attenuate the effect of symbolic drivers on CCI_{Aff}.

1. Introduction

There is growing interest in customer-company identification (CCI), or the extent an organization represents one or more of a customer's social identities, as a potential tool in fostering long-term customer loyalty (Bagozzi, Bergami, Marzocchi, & Morandin, 2012; Lam, 2012). Importantly, CCI is comprised of at least cognitive (CCI_{Cog}) and affective (CCI_{Aff}) dimensions, both of which are instrumental in driving customer loyalty (Bagozzi et al., 2012; Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009). Yet, research that examines antecedents of CCI either ignores the affective dimension or combines it with the cognitive dimension. In other words, methods of uniquely creating CCI_{Aff} are unexplored and unknown. Furthermore, CCI_{Aff} influences customer outcomes uniquely from CCI_{Cog} (Wolter & Cronin, 2016). Thus, organizations can better develop and manage meaningful long-term customer relationships if the unique drivers of both CCI_{Aff} and CCI_{Cog} are established.

The objective of the current research is to alleviate this lack of attention by exploring whether antecedents uniquely affect CCI_{Cog} and CCI_{Aff}. As shown in Fig. 1, this objective is accomplished by examining the direct effects and interactions of social and symbolic antecedents on CCI_{Cog} and CCI_{Aff} over the effect of 21 control variables. The results suggest CCI_{Cog} is primarily influenced by antecedents that assist in self-definition (e.g., identity similarity and in-group ties) whereas CCI_{Aff} is primarily influenced by antecedents that assist in self-evaluation (e.g.,

organizational prestige and in-group bond). Furthermore, social drivers enhance the effect of symbolic drivers on CCI_{Cog} whereas social drivers attenuate the effect of symbolic drivers on CCI_{Aff}. Because the lack of attention on the unique influences of the CCI dimensions spans across literatures, the current research's findings contributes to the broader theory of social identification while also expanding theory on CCI specifically.

2. Conceptualizing CCI_{Cog} and CCI_{Aff}

Emerging theory considers CCI_{Cog} and CCI_{Aff} as part of two systems (see Lam, 2012, Fig. 1). These systems serve different purposes (self-definition and self-evaluation, Wolter & Cronin, 2016) based on different self-motives (uncertainty reduction and self-enhancement, Johnson, Morgeson, & Hekman, 2012) that relate to different aspects of a customer's sense of self (self-concept and self-esteem, Lane & Scott, 2007). Self-categorization theory and social identity theory separately specify the two systems that lead to CCI (Johnson et al., 2012). From this viewpoint, social identity theory's rationale that identification develops from customers' desire to feel better about themselves (i.e., the self-esteem hypothesis) is an explanation of CCI_{Aff} formation. In accord with this view, CCI_{Aff} is the connection between the identity of an organization and the evaluation a customer applies to him or herself and the subsequent emotions this connection engenders

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Conceptual models of antecedents to cognitive and affective CCI

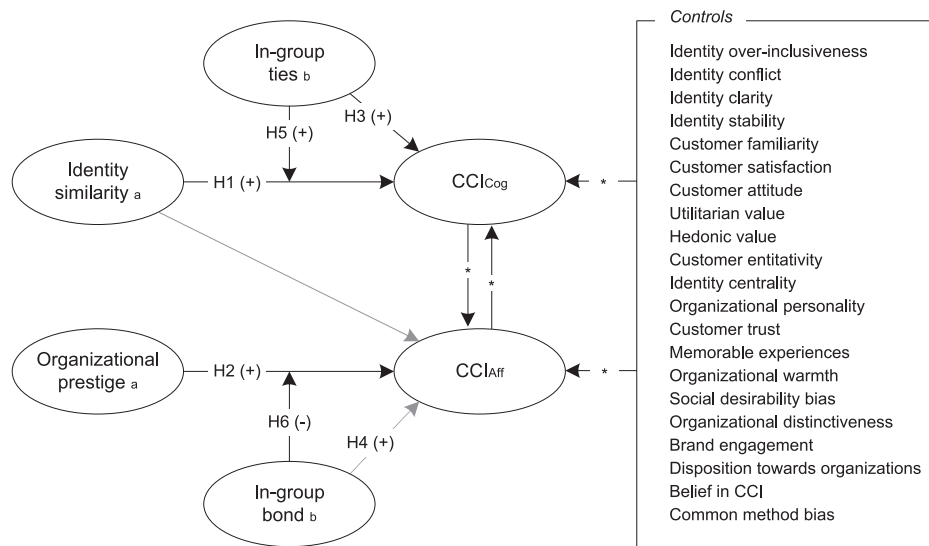


Fig. 1. Conceptual models of antecedents to cognitive and affective CCI.

Notes: a = symbolic drivers. b = social drivers. Dotted grey lines represent hypotheses not supported by the data. Solid grey lines represent empirically determined non-hypothesized effects. Lines with “*” represent non-hypothesized effects that are controlled.

(Harris & Cameron, 2005). In contrast, self-categorization theory's rationale that identification develops from customers' desire to reduce painful social uncertainty (i.e., the uncertainty reduction hypothesis) is an explanation of CCICog formation (Johnson et al., 2012). Given this link, CCICog is a connection between the definition of an organization and the definition a customer applies to himself or herself (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

3. Antecedents to CCICog and CCIAff

3.1. Symbolic drivers of CCI: identity similarity and organizational prestige

There are three main groups of antecedents that influence CCI: symbolic, social, and instrumental (Lam, 2012). However, emerging research suggests the effects of instrumental drivers decay quickly leaving symbolic and social drivers as the two primary influences of CCI (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013). Symbolic drivers represent the central, distinctive, and enduring aspects of an organization's identity that must be signaled through marketing communications and product design to customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Though companies do not fully control these aspects nor how they are communicated, symbolic characteristics are integral to crafting an appealing social identity for customers (Press & Arnould, 2011). Two symbolic characteristics, identity similarity and organizational prestige, are often linked to organizational identification across the marketing and management literatures (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002). However, research has not considered these drivers in relation to both CCICog and CCIAff as the current research does below.

3.1.1. Identity similarity

Identity similarity is the recognition that a company's identity matches a customer's identity, either on an attribute-by-attribute basis or as a gestalt match (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Engaging with a company that matches one's personality allows a customer to signal relevant identity attributes to others (Ahearne et al., 2005; Lee, Park, Rapert, & Newman, 2012). Thereby, social uncertainty is reduced through the construction of “viable, cognitively consistent social identities” (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p 80). As a result (and as denoted in Fig. 1 by the path marked H1), a customer will self-categorize as a

symbolic member of an organization to acquire the organization's identity attributes and self-definitional properties (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). Because one's identity can be viewed negatively or positively, high identity similarity does not ensure a company reflects well on a customer. For example, a sports team may comprise residents' social identities despite not being the best or even that good. Customers may perceive congruity with Apple's identity even if the company is viewed unfavorably by many of their peers (Arsel & Stewart, 2015). Thus, we propose the following:

H1. Identity similarity influences CCI primarily through CCICog rather than CCIAff.

3.1.2. Organizational prestige

Organizational prestige is the extent others whose opinion matters consider an organization well-regarded (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Stated differently, prestige represents how a company reflects on a customer in the eyes of people who matter. The value, then, of high prestige is one of self-enhancement (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). If a customer's friends think highly of an organization that engages in CSR, then that customer will share in the high regard. As a result, an organization high in prestige is one that is likely to elicit CCIAff (denoted by the path marked H2 in Fig. 1). However, many companies are well regarded. So having high prestige does not specifically help customers separate their self and others into meaningful categories. More simply, being well regarded does not enhance one's self-knowledge nor define the content of the self-concept. Instead, prestige functions as a barometer of the merit of a company and by extension, how the company reflects on a customer's self-worth (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). As a result of the above reasoning:

H2. Organizational prestige influences CCI primarily through CCIAff rather than CCICog.

3.2. Social drivers: in-group ties and in-group bond

In comparison to symbolic influences of identification, the social influences are not nearly as well studied. To facilitate exploration of the social forces, we turn to social cohesion which is recognized as a theoretically viable explanation of identification formation (Friedkin,

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