

**WHO AM I? CUSTOMER IDENTIFICATION: A QUANTITATIVE SYNTHESIS**

by

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**DEDICATION**

This dissertation is affectionately dedicated to my parents and brother for being my supporters during this hard process and in recognition of the sacrifices they made along the way. Thank you so much for helping me with this journey. I could not have done this without you. I also dedicate this work to you and all who made me believe that I am capable of accomplishing great things.

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**ABSTRACT**

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Customer identification defined as ‘customer’s perceived oneness with a company/brand’ is receiving increased attention in marketing. Despite the critical role customer identification plays, there is a lack of comprehensive work explicating the antecedents, outcomes, and possible boundary conditions of customer identification. The current study fills this gap in the literature by conducting a meta-analysis that synthesizes studies conducted over the past 25 years. The meta-analysis includes 167 independent samples ( $N = 87,538$  customers) from which 24 antecedents and 7 outcomes of customer identification are identified and tested. Significant antecedents are grouped into two categories: company/brand antecedents and customer antecedents. Findings provide support to the critical role customer identification plays in driving

outcomes such as loyalty, willingness-to-pay, word-of-mouth, resilience, and company financial performance, which all are important for marketer's success. Various research context and measurement method moderators are studied to test the robustness of antecedents-customer identification and customer identification-outcomes relationships. In addition to the bivariate analysis conducted, a meta-analytic structural equation model is proposed for the purpose of testing a causal model of customer identification. The meta-analytic model demonstrates a relational-based path that is complementary to the conventional identity-based path of customer identification. Findings provide several theoretical and practical contributions.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*“Identity is part of drama to me. Who am I, why am I behaving this way, and am I aware of it?”*

**Matthew Weiner**

The question of “*WHO AM I?*” is what Socrates and Plato refer to as “*Know thyself*” and was written on the “Temple of Apollo”. This question is still of high interest to researchers and scholars. To Socrates, it is ridiculous when individuals try to understand the obscure before knowing themselves first. According to Plato, understanding or knowing “thyself” is important to understand the nature of a human being. To answer the question of “*Who Am I?*” individuals try to form their own identities through a set of different identification they pursue with different personal and social entities, groups, and ideas. In line with human’s needs theories (e.g., Maslow, 1943; Maslow, Frager, Fadiman, McReynolds, & Cox, 1970; Max-Neef, Elizalde, & Hopenhayn, 1992), the development of a sense of identity or identification is fundamental to individuals as it is part of their basic human needs. Individuals are in need of developing a sense of identity or identification and answering the question of — “*Who Am I?*” — to properly and meaningfully relate to other personal and social entities (Gioia, 1998; Stets & Burke, 2000; Henri Tajfel, 1982). According to Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998), “*identification is the process of emerging identity. Identification, especially as expressed in symbolic terms, represents the forging, maintenance, and alteration of linkages between persons and groups*” (p. 304). Burke

(1937) reached a conclusion in which he suggests that identity is the sum of multiple identification individuals have with other entities. Burke (1937) states:

*“[Psychologists] discovered accurately enough that identity is not individual, that a man [or woman] identifies himself [or herself] with all sorts of manifestations beyond himself [or herself], and they set out to cure him [or her] of this tendency” (p. 263-264).*

“A sense of identity (or identification) helps clarify actors’ purpose, values, and beliefs; delineates their relationships with other actors; and suggests how to think and even feel about issues and what behaviors to enact” (Ashforth, 2016, p. 2). From a marketing perspective, Belk states (1988): “we are what we have” (p. 160). This phrase was elaborated by Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen, (2012) who state: “what we buy, own, and consume define us to others as well as to ourselves” (p. 406). This constitutes a clear conclusion that identification is much related to what we buy, where we buy from etc.

Customer identification is defined as a customer’s “perceived oneness with an organization” (Mael & Ashforth 1992; p. 103). Customers can identify with different social entities or organizations. In this dissertation, I focus on both companies and brands as forms of organizations that customer may identify with. Customer identification symbols the shift from “I” (customer) to “We” or “Us” (customer and company/brand) as a term of self-reference. This shift is associated with customer promoting, defending, and helping a company/brand as customer shares the success and failures of the company/brand. Because of customer identification, the goals of the company become integrated and congruent with a customer own goals. The power of shifting consumer’s self-reference from “I” - *singular*, to “We” - *plural*, is

what makes identification more effective than many of the marketing initiatives that practitioners employ. Identification possesses the power of partnership or group.

The change from “*I*” to “*We*” or “*Us*” is a change in the customer’s definition of one’s self. This change elicits other-interests beyond one’s self-interests and creates interdependent relationship where customer shares mutual concerns for certain company’s interests and goals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As described by Lewicki and Bunker (1996), identification allows an individual to “‘think like’ the other, ‘feel like’ the other, and ‘respond like’ the other” in the relationship (p. 123). The vital role identity and, thus, identification plays in individual’s life and customer relationships with companies is of interest to marketing researchers and practitioners, alike. This is evidenced in the emerging identity-motivated marketing relationships and identity-based consumer behavior research streams (Lam, 2012; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012).

Not surprisingly is then the growing body of research that focuses on the role that identification plays in both relationship marketing and consumer behavior (Bagozzi, Bergami, Marzocchi, & Morandin, 2012; Fombelle, Jarvis, Ward, & Ostrom, 2012; Homburg, Stierl, & Bornemann, 2013; Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter & Cronin, 2016). Reed et al. (2012) demonstrate the high number of articles that focus on identity, identification, and one’s self in different streams of marketing research (see p. 311).

As a social construction, customer identification involves the assimilation of perceived company/brand identity into one’s self-identity (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010), and facilitates seeing the target (collective) as more favorable leading to valuable and pro-company/brand outcomes

(Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Marketing scholars have pointed out the importance of customer identification, whether with companies/brands, non-profit entities, universities, and teams in the construction of customer's identity and development of long-term marketing relationships (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Harmeling & Palmatier, 2015).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) describe customer identification “as the primary psychological substrate for the kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers are increasingly seeking to build with their customers” (p. 76). Higher levels of identification are associated with extreme loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, willingness to pay premium prices, resilience to negative information, citizenship or extra-role behaviors, and company performance (Ahearne et al., 2005; Haumann, Quaiser, Wieseke, & Rese, 2014; Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009; Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, & Maxham III, 2010; Netemeyer, Heilman, & Maxham III, 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter & Cronin, 2016).

With the increase of competition, the improved ability of the majority of companies to provide high satisfaction levels to customers, and the decline in product differentiation within the market (e.g., Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009; Neal, 1999; Peters, 1994) are driving companies to discover improved ways for long-term bonding with customers. Harmeling and Palmatier (2015) observed that “exchange partner identification is a critical often overlooked construct that is important to relationship development” (p. 5). Identification emerges from basic human needs making it fundamental tool to marketers trying to build better relationships with customers. Marketing relationships that take into consideration the role of customer

identification are better developed and can last longer. As stated earlier, the main reason that makes identification this much fundamental in relational marketing is its origin that is based on basic human needs. In specific, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) claim that customers are attracted to a company/brand identity because such identity satisfies at least one of three self-definitional needs: self-enhancement, self-distinctiveness, and self-continuity.

The first seminal work on customer identification was by Mael and Ashforth (1992), leading to approximately 25 years of research, and allowing the formation of customer-company/brand identification theory. Consumer-company/brand identification was first referred to as organizational identification where university alumni and non-profit museum members were studied (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). To avoid the misinterpretation of organizational identification (employee) which is presented in earlier studies (e.g., Bhattacharya et al. 1995; Mael and Ashforth 1992) and that of customer, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), developed a new term that we currently use: “customer identification”.

Within the context of relationship marketing, customer identification (Ahearne et al., 2005; Homburg et al., 2009) promises a “relationship gold” which is asserted to be the answer for scholars and practitioners who are in search of finding new ways to build better and long-term relationships with customers (Haumann et al., 2014). Moreover, identification can be used by marketers to develop a sustainable competitive advantage and improve their bottom lines (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Cardador & Pratt, 2006).

It has been around 25 years of research since the introduction of 1992 seminal piece. This research would benefit with a meta analytical review to summarize what have been done so far, answer several questions raised, and fill some research gaps in the literature (e.g., Lam, 2012).

By this meta-analysis scholars and practitioners will enhance their understanding of customer identification. Moreover, new research streams and ideas for extending customer identification literature that has been moving in circular patterns lately.

Despite the importance role customer identification plays in marketing, there is a lack of comprehensive-work explicating the antecedents, outcomes, and possible moderators of customer identification. The current meta-analysis fills different gaps in the literature by conducting a meta-analysis that includes studies conducted over the past 25 years. This meta-analysis is conducted to help scholars and practitioners improve their understanding of the role of customer identification in the context of relationship marketing, thus enhancing the efforts of researchers and managers to build deeper and long-term relations with customers.

The meta-analysis includes 167 independent samples ( $N = 87,538$ ), from which 24 antecedents and 7 outcomes of customer identification are identified. Findings provide support for the vital role customer identification plays in driving outcomes such as loyalty, willingness-to-pay, word-of-mouth, resilience and company performance, which are critical for marketers' success. Various measurement method (e.g., identification conceptualization, scales) and research context (exchange type, purchase cycle, culture) moderator variables were examined to test the robustness of antecedents-customer identification and customer identification-outcomes links. In addition to the bivariate analysis conducted, a meta-analytic structural equation model is tested to test a causal model of customer identification. The results identify a relational-based path of customer identification which is complementary to the conventional identity-based path. Theoretical contributions and suggestions for future research are discussed. Further, practical implications for companies/brands and managers are identified.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Social Identity**

Humans strive for achieving a *sense of extended self* and understanding *who one is* with respect to different surrounding social entities by answering the question: “Who am I?”, a main premise of social identity theory (Burke, 1937; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This is also related to the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). “What we call identity with the self is often merely vagueness of identity” (Burke, 1937, p. 271). An individual participate in social role by means of identifying with manifestations beyond one’s self, thus, identification is a name for the sociality function (Burke, 1937).

According to Baumeister & Leary, (1995), developing an extended sense of self is considered a central human motivation. Individuals have a need to develop their social identities so they can define themselves in terms of the network of relationships they have with others, groups and social entities, and, they derive their own evaluation from such identities (Breckler & Greenwald, 1986). Social identity theory (Brewer, 1991; Henri Tajfel & Turner, 2004) posits that, in enunciating individual’s identity, an individual typically develops a social identity beyond his/her personal identity. Social identity is fundamental to individuals who “strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity” (Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 16).

According to Tajfel (1972), social identity is defined as “ the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 292). Sluss and Ashforth (2008) state that identification is more

than just considering oneself to be a member of an organization, but is the extent to which one integrates the organization in his/her self-concept. Social identity is accumulated across different social entities such as companies, brands, universities, teams, etc. Individuals seek out companies and brands for identification purposes even when they don't hold formal organizational membership (Brewer, 1991; Pratt, 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000).

People hold perceptions of belonging to certain social entities or groups which, in turn, results in social identification formation. Social identity consists of salient social entities and group classifications based on people's identification with those entities and groups. This leads individuals to use the entities they identify with to define who they are and form their identities and confirm it to themselves and others (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Kramer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). Identification includes the internalization of the characteristics and norms of the reference social entity (Triandis, 1989). These internalized characteristics and norms are more salient and accessible aspects of the self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991).

Social identity theory posits that, at the time individuals form their social identities, they "*depersonalized*" their sense of self, or they "shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person" (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, p. 50). According to social identity theory and self-categorization theories, the depersonalization of the sense of self creates a collective self-concept that resembles the notion of social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The collective self is thus an assimilation of the prototypic representation of the in-group, with self-worth arising from the status of the in-group and intergroup comparisons (Turner et al.,

1987). Moreover, Simon and Hamilton (1994), suggest social identity can lead to self-stereotyping of one's in-group.

*From Social Identity to Customer Identification through Organizational Identification*

Social identity theory is proposed as a relevant theory in the study of individual-organization relationship (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Based on the premises of social identity theory borrowed from psychology literature (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004), organizational identification or employee identification theory was posited and developed (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Kramer, 1993). Later, the idea of developing a parallel theory of identification in marketing emerged (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), leading to what is now known as customer identification theory. The customer-company/brand identification theory benefits from the development within social identity and organizational identification theories, and has emerged as one of the most influential theories in marketing. Press and Arnould (2011) found that sense-making and sense-giving develop an informal conduit with epiphany, emulation and exploration paths that lead to customer identification. The authors also show that customer-company and employee-company identification is formed in parallel forms leading to similar outcomes.

Early researchers on customer identification primarily focused on universities, not-for-profit organizations, and companies as social entities of customer identification (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Researchers also examined customer identification with brands (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010), teams (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007), and online and offline communities (Algesheimer,

Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b). In this dissertation the focus is on customer identification which takes place offline and includes targets or social entities as companies, non-for-profit entities, brands, universities and teams.

Customer identification is rooted and motivated by, both, self-definitional and belonging needs (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Customer identification is defined to as the customer “perceived oneness” with a focal target such as company or brand. Based on and social identity and organizational identification research, Mael and Asfforth (1992) examined the identification of alumni with their college by testing a model of organizational factors (e.g., organization distinctiveness and prestige), and individual factors (e.g., relationship length, satisfaction) as antecedents of identification. They also examined the effect of identification on the support alumni have for their college (e.g., financial contribution, willingness to participate in college functions). Their study shows that organizational distinctiveness, prestige, absence of intra-organizational competition, satisfaction, relationship length, and sentimentality positively impact alumni’s identification with their college, which, in turn, leads to increases in alumni’s financial contribution, their willingness to recommend the college to other, and participation in different school’s functions. It is important to state that, in their study, Mael and Ashforth (1992) were still using the term organizational identification in their study and didn’t consider alumni students as customers. Their study was developed within the management (organizational behavior) research domain.

Later, a study within the marketing research area was conducted by Bhattacharya and his colleagues (1995). The authors identified different organizational, product, affiliation, and activity characteristics that correlate with members’ identification with an art museum, a non-

profit organization. Using social identity theory as well as the work by Mael and Ashforth (1992), the authors found that identification is positively related to organizational prestige, services expectations, visiting frequency, tenure of membership and donating behavior. Bhattacharya and his colleagues discussed how their findings can be extended across other marketing contexts and also posited managerial use of such findings in implementing marketing strategies. This study opened the door for additional research that focuses on customer identification within different marketing streams of research.

Bhattacharya continued the work on customer identification and developed a conceptual identity-based framework for the formation of customer-company identification and its possible outcomes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). These authors drew on social identity and organizational identification theories to develop their framework. In their paper, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) developed an identity-based framework in which the term customer-company identification was used instead of the term of organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and members' identification with focal organization (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) based their framework on the premise that customers are attracted to a company/brand identity because such identity satisfies at least one of three self-definitional needs: "self-enhancement", "self-distinctiveness", and "self-continuity". Customer-company identification is affected by the company's identity, which is formed from identity similarity, distinctiveness and prestige (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003).

Ahearne et al., (2005) extended customer identification research to the B2B market. Using a sample of professional physicians, Ahearne et al., (2005) found that perceived company and boundary-spanner's characteristics lead to increase in physicians-seller identification.

Further, they found that identified physicians are more likely to engage in extra-role behaviors (e.g., volunteering, word-of-mouth) and product utilization. In their study, Ahearne and his colleagues found that the effects of identification on extra-role behaviors hold even when the effects of company's construed external image, perceived salesperson characteristics, and perceived company characteristics are accounted for. Moreover, the role of customer-company identification on product utilization holds despite accounting for the effect of perceived product performance.

Based on social identity theory, Homburg et al., (2009) tested a social identity-based path of service-profit chain in addition to the conventional path that connects "employee satisfaction, customer orientation, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty". The social identity-based path "connects employee-company identification, customer orientation, customer-company identification, customer loyalty, and willingness to pay". Using a large-scale triadic data set that included employees, customers, and firms, the results did confirm that the complementary social identity-based path accounts for customers' loyalty, willingness to pay, and firm financial performance. Homburg and his colleagues found that, unlike customer identification, satisfaction has no effect on willingness to pay, which, in turn, increases firm performance. The social identity-based path adds to our knowledge of the conventional service-profit chain. This provides evidence of the positive role of identification in developing strong and long-term customer relationships, which, in turn, positively affects company's market and monetary outcomes. According to Homburg and his colleagues, one of the contributions of their study is to provide marketing scholars and practitioners with new ways other than satisfaction to build stronger relationships with customers. Based on Homburg et al.'s suggestions, firms are encouraged to

look for other constructs other than satisfaction to improve financial outcomes. Customer identification “goes beyond satisfaction with products and services” (Bhattacharya et al., 1995, p. 55).

Haumann et al., (2014) examined the effects of customer satisfaction and identification overtime. Haumann and his colleagues offered a comparative analysis of the longitudinal effectiveness of both variables in driving customer loyalty and willingness to pay. While a major driver in relationship marketing is considered to be customer satisfaction (e.g., Bolton, 1998; Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer, 2005), other studies show that satisfaction, by itself, on its own may not be sufficient (Homburg et al., 2009; Rego, Morgan, & Fornell, 2013). For example, Rego et al., (2013) found that satisfaction is negatively associated with marketing performance (market share) on the long-term. Haumann et al., (2014) compared between the effects of satisfaction and identification on customers’ long-term loyalty and willingness to pay using data from a large sample with nine measurement points spanning forty-three weeks. They found customers’ satisfaction and identification do have positive initial effects on customers’ loyalty and willingness to pay. Surprisingly, findings also show that customer satisfaction and identification differ in their ability to preserve these positive effects on the long-term performance. The positive effects of customers’ identification are more persistent compared to those of customers’ satisfaction which were found to decrease more rapidly. This is in line with previous theorizing that customer identification is persistent since it relates to customer identity which is less likely to change in the short-term. Moreover, their findings show that customer identification is more effective at protecting customers against competitors’ actions (e.g., relative competitive advertising). Based on these findings, identification is, indeed, a strategy which

managers and firms can employ to increase customers' retention and provide a sustainable competitive advantage that can't be easily mimicked by their competitors.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CUSTOMER IDENTIFICATION

#### Customer Identification Antecedents

The importance of customer identification lies in its role in relationship marketing and ability to contribute to better understanding of successful relationships with customers (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Harmeling & Palmatier, 2015). Fournier (1998) states “a fruitful way to map the psychological context of a given relationship is to specify the identity activity in which the relationship is grounded” (p. 346). Organizations, including university, non-profits, etc., seek ways to induce customers to identify with its brands after seeing the huge success of companies such as “Harley Davidson”, and “The Body Shop” who have taken advantage of the ultimate promise of customer identification. As a state, identification is continuously created and recreated (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Burke, 1937). Identification plays an important role in relationship marketing and would be an important tool to marketing practitioners to sustain a long-term competitive advantage (Cardador & Pratt, 2006; Haumann et al., 2014). Higher identification with exchange partners engenders continuous promoting and helping behaviors within the relationship, because, once identification-based relationships are formed, it is hard to change them (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

Identification can form the basis of a sustainable competitive advantage that competitors will find challenging to imitate. For example, Harley Davidson, with its H.O.G, is one of the companies that base its marketing strategy on customer identification. Harley Davidson is known for its competitive advantage and extreme customer loyalty. Customer identification “goes

beyond satisfaction with products and services” (Bhattacharya et al., 1995, p. 55). Identification is fundamental to long-term relationships nurturing and success (Harmeling & Palmatier, 2015). Higher levels of identification are found to decrease the defection rates of customers and makes competitors find in difficult to attract such customers (Haumann et al., 2014). Thus, customer identification is fundamental in implementing successful marketing strategies (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya et al., 1995).

Antecedents of customer identification are classified into two main categories, company/brand antecedents and customer antecedents (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The company/brand category includes variables such as company/brand distinctiveness, prestige, similarity, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and quality (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). On the other side, customer-antecedents category includes variables such as value, satisfaction, trust, and tenure or relationship length (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2010).

With the rapid development in customer identification research more antecedents are being proposed. Main antecedents of customer identification were identified through the literature some of which are: CSR (Homburg et al., 2013; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006), prestige (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), distinctiveness (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Wolter, Brach, Cronin, & Bonn, 2016), similarity (Lam, Ahearne, & Schillewaert, 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), value (Homburg et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2010), satisfaction (Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009), trust (Homburg et al., 2013; Keh & Xie, 2009), commitment (Homburg et al., 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), and

employee-company identification (Lichtenstein et al., 2010; Netemeyer et al., 2012). These antecedents fit either one of the two antecedents' categories identified above. In this dissertation, antecedents of customer identification are identified and included in the meta-analysis for bivariate analysis. Relationships with at least three raw effect sizes (independent sample sizes) are included.

## **Customer Identification Outcomes**

Identification causes customers “to engage in favorable as well as potentially unfavorable company-related behaviors” (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p. 77). In line with this theorizing, customer identification is known to predict positive outcomes such as customer loyalty, willingness to pay, and word-of-mouth (Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2013; Wolter & Cronin, 2016). The importance of identification also lies in its ability to enhance firms' performance. Studies found customer identification to increase company/brand financial performance such as product utilization and customer spending (Ahearne et al., 2005; Lichtenstein et al., 2010; Netemeyer et al., 2012).

Research demonstrates strong inferences that numerous favorable outcomes stem from customer identification such as: loyalty (Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2013; Wolter & Cronin, 2016), word-of-mouth (Kim et al., 2001; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), extra-role behaviors (Ahearne et al., 2005; Lam et al., 2012), willing-to-pay a premium price (Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009), resilience to negative information or publicity (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006; Wolter & Cronin, 2016), and company performance (Ahearne et al., 2005; Lichtenstein et al., 2010; Netemeyer et al., 2012). Despite that, Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) suggest potential negative or unfavorable outcomes

(e.g., stronger claim on company) of company identification. The literature lacks sufficient examination of negative outcomes of customer identification. With such a limitation in the literature, this meta-analysis does not include studies that examined unfavorable outcomes to include for analysis. Using a meta-analytical synthesis of previous studies, relevant antecedents and outcomes of identification over a period of 25 years are summarized and tested. Table 1 includes description of classified antecedents and outcomes of customer identification with their definitions and examples of representative papers. The meta-analysis includes 167 independent samples ( $N = 87,538$ ), from which 23 antecedents and 7 outcomes of customer identification are found to be significant.

### **The Interchangeable Conceptualization of Company and Brand Identification**

The literature on customer identification has used company (including non-profit organizations, university, etc.), and brands as focal targets of identification. While the literature has conceptualized the focal target of customer identification as a company versus brand, the focal target can be perceived by customers as a brand and a company. Thus different studies in the literature have used company and brand interchangeably. In this meta-analysis, both customer-company identification and customer-brand identification are of equal interest. In order to understand the difference between the two main conceptualizations of the focal target of identification, I tested the moderating role of the focal target (company versus brand). This is important because it allows for understanding the differences, if any, between customer company identification and customer brand identification. The lack of any difference will allow for merging customer-company identification and customer-brand identification studies for testing bivariate relationships, moderators, and inclusion of studies for running meta-SEM model.

An example of the interchangeable use of company and brand to refer to a social entity is the conceptualization of “brand” to refer to “Apple” Incorporation, while it is, indeed, a “company” name. Other studies did refer to “Apple” as company. Further, anecdotal evidence shows that customers are less likely to differentiate between “Apple” as a company or a brand.

## **Moderators**

Customer identification referred to as customer’s perceived oneness with a focal target is predicted by different antecedents. In turn, customer identification leads to different marketing outcomes. Identifying and testing these antecedents and outcomes is one of the objectives of this study. Another important objective of this meta-analysis is to identify and test the impact of potential measurement method, and research context moderators which can explain the heterogeneity within relationships between customer identification and its antecedents and outcomes. For that, several moderators that were offered for collection from studies included in the meta-analysis were tested.

### *Research Context Moderators*

#### Service and Product Exchange

Exchange between customer and company and brand take the form of either service or product. In most services as compared to products, more interactions or encounters between customers and the company/brand and or representatives take place. Services are known to be less tangible and more perishable, thus, requiring more customer participation and involvement during the production and consumption of services (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Customers–company/brand relationships are more prone to closeness in the services context

compared to that in products because of the affection-based evaluation of these relationships in the services context (Gardner, 1985). Relationships are more important for customers when engaged in services consumption (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). As suggested by Bhattacharya & Sen (2003), more customer-company/brand interactions facilitate the process of identification, thus, companies selling services are more likely to benefit from these interactions than those that sell products. I expected that antecedents may have differential impacts on identification for companies and brands operating within the services context. Moreover, identification will have stronger effects on some outcomes for services providers.

#### Purchase Cycle and Exchange Relationship

Customer-company/brand identification is amplified by the increased interactions between a customer and the company/brand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In some cases, customers are required to engage in personal relationship with the company/brand where direct encounters take place (e.g., customer-retailer, or student-university). On the other hand, some encounters require customers to engage in regular purchases, thus, requiring more interactions with the focal target. In this meta-analysis, two contextual moderators related to the pattern of purchase behaviors of customers are examined: purchase cycle (regular [fast-food, beauty salon] versus irregular purchase cycle [mobiles, automotive]), and exchange relationship (personal [bank, beauty salon], versus impersonal [telecommunication, software]). The regular purchase cycle is found when customers buy the product/service at least per year (e.g., Baldinger & Rubinson, 1997). Personal exchange moderator was coded when a possible direct interaction with seller is provided for customers.

## Culture – Individualism

This meta-analysis includes studies that were conducted in 32 countries. The heterogeneity in the bivariate relationships identified in this meta-analysis maybe partially explained by cultural differences, specifically individualism versus collectivism, across these 32 countries. Culture theory describes an individualistic person as a person who promotes individual goals, pursues self-interests, values independence, and prefers formal ties with others (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1995). On the other hand, a person from collectivistic cultures define him/herself in the context of community membership, interdependence self and brotherhood, thus placing others' interests first (Hofstede, 1984; Schwartz, 1994). In the context of customer identification, Lam et al., (2012) found a positive effect of the interaction effect between customer-brand identification and perceived quality on customer's identity promoting behaviors (e.g., extra-role behaviors, and word-of-mouth) is stronger among collectivist customers. I expect cultural individualism (lower levels of individualism refer to higher collectivism) may moderate the relationships to be tested.

It could be argued that the relationships [antecedents → customer identification], and [customer identification → outcomes] to be tested in this meta-analysis are stronger among collectivist customers. Studies show that encouraging individuals from individualistic countries to think in terms of “*We*” instead of “*I*”, will lead them to think about the relationships they have with others, and will push them to further develop interdependent relationships (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). European-American respondents primed with “*We*”, similar to what identification can lead to, displayed shifts toward more collectivist social judgments and values (Gardner et al., 1999). Identification is a global phenomenon that holds across cultures. This brings an interesting research question to be examined in the current meta-analysis. Will some of

the relationships identified in the meta-analysis be moderated by the level of individualism of the country?

### *Measurement Method Moderators*

#### Identification Conceptualization

Early work by Mael and Ashforth (1992), and Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) conceptualized identification as a cognitive state. With the subsequent development and advancement of customer identification literature, some studies have conceptualized customer identification as a second order construct that includes in addition to cognitive dimension, an affective dimension, and or effective dimension (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a, Wolter & Cronin, 2016). To better understand the predictors and outcomes of customer identification, the moderating effects of the single dimension versus multi-dimension conceptualization of identification (cognitive versus multiple – cognitive, affective and/or effective) were tested in this study.

#### Measures

Another related issue within the literature lies in the conceptualization of identification. The most used measure of customer identification has been that based on Mael and Ashforth's (1992). The measure is based on six items and was adopted from previous work in organizational identification literature (Mael, 1988). The measure includes items such as "*When I talk about the (company), I usually use we rather than they*", "*The (company's) successes are my successes*", and "*When someone criticizes the (company), it feels like personal insult*". Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) criticized the measure of Mael and Ashforth (1992), and, thus, developed and tested another measure within the organizational identification literature that is also often used for

measuring customer identification. This measure includes a Venn-diagram scale (zipper scale shape) and one verbal item, “*Please indicate to what degree your self-image overlaps with Organization Image*”. Some studies employing this measure dropped the use of the verbal item and kept on the Venn-diagram measure on its own (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2005). The Venn-diagram item asks customers to choose between sets of circular pairs that have different degrees of overlap between their identities and that of the focal target. Mael and Ashforth’s (1992), and Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) scales are shown in tables 3 and 4. Other measures were also utilized in the literature by numerous articles (e.g., Homburg et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

#### Other Methodological Moderators

Other methodological moderators which can help explain the variability in some of the effect sizes such as: study design (non-experimental [survey] versus experiment), publication status (published versus unpublished), sample/respondents (non-students versus students), gender (male %), and response rate (%) are also tested as possible moderators.

#### *Specific Relationships Moderators*

##### Near versus Far versus Mix Word-of-Mouth

In addition to the moderators identified previously, more moderators are proposed to explain the variability in specific relationships were examined. The focus was on two relationships: identification and word-of-mouth, and identification and loyalty. For the relationship between customer identification and word-of-mouth, the target of the word-of-mouth based on the scales used was identified, and then grouped them into three categories: near

(family members, friends, etc.), far (strangers, other customers, etc.), and mix (when near and far targets are included).

### Attitudinal versus Behavioral versus Mix Loyalty

The loyalty construct has been the subject of different operationalizations across studies. This is due to the lack of clear definition and measurement of the construct. Two major operationalizations of loyalty are found: attitudinal operationalization (examples of the items used: “*I am a loyal customer of this company/brand*”, and, “*I consider this company/brand the best choice as compared to its competitors*”), and behavioral operationalization (examples of the items used: “*I will continue to buy from this company/brand*”, and, “*Next time I need something I will buy from this company/brand*”). Moreover, some studies include both perspectives when measuring loyalty. In this meta-analysis, the operationalization of loyalty measures used was examined. Three categories are formed based on the way loyalty was operationalized: attitudinal versus behavioral versus mix (mix includes attitudinal and behavioral).

## **Meta-Analytic Model**

### *Hypotheses Development*

The customer-company identification framework (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) suggests that corporate social responsibility and product offerings – possibly including their quality – are communicators of company/brand identity that allow customers to form a unique identity of the company. Companies and brands implementing corporate social responsibility initiatives and providing customers with high quality of offerings are more likely to be perceived by customers as more prestigious and distinctive. Identity including prestige and distinctiveness are associated

with company's/brand's instrumental and symbolic associations (e.g., Keller, 1993). In line with previous theorizing to identity prestige and identity distinctiveness are referred to as company/brand identity (Balmer & Balmer, 2001; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994; Lam et al., 2012).

Customers are more likely to feel satisfied with and trust companies/brands employing corporate social responsibility strategies, and offering services and products with high quality. Corporate social responsibility can positively impact company/brand identity, including distinctiveness and prestige (Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009; Dean, 2003; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004), and enhance customer relationships characterized by satisfaction, trust and commitment (Homburg et al., 2013; Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009).

Companies/brands with the use of the quality of their services and products, and employees, can communicate their identities to customers who, in turn, are more likely to perceive such companies/brands as prestigious and distinctive (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). identity of a company depends, to some extent, on individual members' behaviors (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994). In line with previous literature, perceived quality is highly associated with a prestigious and distinctive identity of the focal company/brand (Garvin, 1987; Ghodeswar, 2008; Powell, 1995). Findings from prior studies provide ample evidence of the positive impact of quality on company/brand identity and reputation (Ghodeswar, 2008; Hu, Kandampully, & Juwaheer, 2009; Lai, Griffin, & Babin, 2009; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). Moreover, perceived quality is likely to result in stronger relationships with customers (Caruana, 2002; Chumpitaz Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Homburg et al., 2013;

Hwang & Han, 2014), characterized by satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Palmatier et al., 2006). In particular, research has demonstrated that higher levels of quality are positively related to satisfaction (Chiou & Droge, 2006; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Olsen, 2002), trust (Berry, 1995; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Eisingerich & Bell, 2008), and commitment (De Ruyter, Moorman, & Lemmink, 2001; Fullerton, 2005; Gounaris, 2005). In sum, corporate social responsibility and perceived quality have positive impacts on company/brand identity – prestige, and distinctiveness, and customer-company/brand relationship quality – satisfaction, trust, and commitment (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2006). Based on prior work, I hypothesize the following:

*H<sub>1a</sub>: Corporate social responsibility is positively related to company/brand identity.*

*H<sub>1b</sub>: Corporate social responsibility is positively related to relationship quality.*

*H<sub>2a</sub>: Perceived quality is positively related to company/brand identity.*

*H<sub>2b</sub>: Perceived quality is positively related to relationship quality.*

Company/brand identity can favorably impact customer relationships by enhancing customers' satisfaction, trust and commitment. This is due, in part, to the fact that positive organizational image is associated with positive evaluations of offerings (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998; Brown & Dacin, 1997). Previous studies suggested positive relationships between company/brand identity and image, and relational factors such as satisfaction and trust (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998; Dennis, King, & Martenson, 2007; Doney & Cannon, 1997; He, Li, & Harris, 2012). Company/brand with a distinctive and prestigious identity is likely to increase customer satisfaction by delivering hedonic and utilitarian value to customers (Dennis et al., 2007; Hong & Yang, 2009). He et al., (2012) found a strong positive effect of identity

distinctiveness and prestige on customer satisfaction. Moreover, customers do evaluate firms based on their identity, which, in turn, increases customers' trust which is based on the trustworthiness this identity is likely to be associated with (e.g., Campbell, 1999; Fombrun, 1996; Keh & Xie, 2009; Lacey, 2007). Prestigious and distinctive companies/brands can drive high levels of integrity and confidence at the level of customers. This integrity and confidence is always associated with relational commitment. Customers are more likely to value satisfaction-based and trust-based relationships. Higher levels of identity distinctiveness and prestige associated with a company/brand will lead customers to exert significant efforts to maintain such relationships with the company/brand. For that, I hypothesize the following:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Company/brand identity is positively related to relationship quality.*

Company/brand identity, including identity prestige, identity distinctiveness, and identity similarity, is positively related with customer identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identification refers to the process of “social construction that involves the integration of perceived brand [company] identity (or brand image) into self-identity” (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010, p. 84). Prior research (e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) has found prestige and distinctiveness to be drivers of customer identification. More evidences of the positive impacts of prestige and distinctiveness are presented in recent studies (Lam et al., 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter et al., 2016). Company/brand identity is more attractive when such identity is said to be prestigious and distinctive (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The effects of prestige and distinctiveness on identification correspond to three self-definitional needs of self-enhancement, self-distinctiveness, and self-continuity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Based on the previous discussion, I hypothesize the following:

*H<sub>4</sub>: Company/brand identity is positively related to customer identification.*

The identification based relationships are posited to be as sustainable and long-term consumption of the company's/brand's different products (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). According to the customer identification framework by Bhattacharya et al., (2009), identification is the strongest company/brand-customer relationship demonstrated in sustainable and strong relationships, followed by satisfaction, commitment and trust. According to this framework, relationships start with satisfaction, trust, and commitment that all together can lead to identification. Identification strength in relational marketing lies in its ability to bring two entities, customer and company/brand, to become one. This is recognized in the shift of customer-company/brand relationship from the customer being "I" and company/brand "It", to customer-company/brand becoming one "We". Previous studies show positive effects of satisfaction (Boenigk & Helmig, 2013; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), trust (Homburg et al., 2013; Keh & Xie, 2009), and commitment (García de Leaniz & Rodríguez Del Bosque Rodríguez, 2015; Homburg et al., 2013) on identification. For customers to identify with a company/brand they should be engaged in pleasing relationships in which they experience company/brand integrity, and, in turn, make sure to maintain such relationships. Based on previous discussion, I hypothesize the following:

*H<sub>5</sub>: Relationship quality is positively related to customer identification.*

Taking into consideration hypotheses three, four and five together, the possibility of mediated relationship between company/brand identity and customer identification is proposed.

In this study, it is posited that the positive effect of company/brand identity on customer identification is partially mediated by relationship quality. Thus, company/brand identity leads to identification through developing and enhancing better customer-company/brand relationship. This mediated path is an indirect effect of company/brand identification on customer identification, complementary to the direct conventional path of company/brand identity on identification. Based on previous discussion, I hypothesize:

*H<sub>6</sub>: Company/brand identity positive relationship with customer identification is mediated by relationship quality.*

In their customer-company identification framework, Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) claim that customer loyalty is a key outcome of customer identification. Customers who identify with a company/brand will keep on buying company/brand services and products, but not all loyal customers need to identify with the company/brand (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). In other words, customer identification is said to predict customer loyalty, but the inverse of this relation is not necessarily true. Loyalty is one of the main constructs of interest to marketing researchers and practitioners since in itself is one of the most enduring assets of companies/brands (Aaker, 2012; Kumar & Shah, 2004; Reichheld & Teal, 2001). Loyal customers are the ones who have strong relationships with companies. It is critical for companies to develop and maintain an extensive base of loyal customers because of the critical role such customers play in driving financial performance on the long-term. Satisfied, trusting, and committed customer relationships result in strong customer loyalty (Palmatier et al., 2006). Loyalty is the most studied outcome of customer identification, with prior studies showing a positive effect of identification on loyalty (Haumann

et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter & Cronin, 2016).

Therefore the following relationship is hypothesized:

*H7: Customer identification is positively related to customer loyalty.*

Once identified with a company or brand, customers are likely to engage in word-of-mouth behaviors as one of customers' identity promoting behaviors (Lam et al., 2012). This is in line with previous theorizing (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), who claim that customer identification leads customers to engage in social behavior (e.g., talking about and recommending the company/brand), and purchase behavior (adopt company/brand markers) that promote the identify-with company/brand. Mael and Ashforth, (1992) found identified alumni to recommend near and far others to attend the college in the future. The positive effect of identification on word-of-mouth is one of the effects studied extensively by researchers (Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter & Cronin, 2016). Word-of-mouth is critical as a marketing initiative because of the positive effect such initiative has on financial performance of companies (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Villanueva, Yoo, & Hanssens, 2008). Thus, a positive relationship between customer identification and word-of-mouth is proposed:

*H8: Customer identification is positively related to word-of-mouth.*

Customers strive to maximize the goals of the company/brand they identify with to strengthen their company/brand identity, and, thus their own identities. This results in increasing companies' financial performance (e.g., Lam et al., 2012; Netemeyer et al., 2012). Customers share the successes of identified-with company/brand and consider these successes as their own (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). For example, identified alumni (Mael &

Ashforth, 1992), and museum members (Bhattacharya et al., 1995) were more likely to contribute and donate to their identified-with organizations compared to those who are less identified. Ahearne et al., (2005) found that identified physicians tend to increase their product utilization (operationalized as the market share of prescriptions of the identified-with company products compared to competitors' products). The positive effect of identification on financial performance of companies is also supported by Lichtenstein et al., (2010), who found customer-identification with retail stores to increase percent change in average annual customer spending. Based on previous discussion, I hypothesize the following:

*H<sub>9</sub>: Customer identification is positively related to company performance.*

In addition to the relationships hypothesized and based on prior research (e.g., De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Palmatier et al., 2006), this study controls for the effects of relationship quality on loyalty, word-of-mouth, and company performance. Further, the effects of, both, loyalty and word-of-mouth on company performance were also controlled for.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHOD

#### Literature Search and Coding of Studies

Multiple search strategies were employed to collect relevant empirical articles found before January 2017. First, key databases such as EBSCO, Emerald, Google Scholar, ISI Web of Knowledge, JSTOR, ProQuest, PsycINFO, SAGE, and Science Direct were searched using the keyword identification or identity in combination with company, corporation, brand, university and other keywords such as oneness. Second, publications that referenced seminal articles in the field such as (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In addition, references of qualitative and review papers (e.g., Lam, 2012) were sought. Then a manual search of all issues of leading marketing, management and related journals such as: “*European Journal of Marketing, Industrial Marketing Management, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, Journal of business ethics, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, Journal of Retailing, and Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*” was conducted. Finally, in order to generate an accurate estimate of effect size, I searched for unpublished research such as proceedings, theses, and dissertations using online databases such as *American Doctoral Dissertations ProQuest Dissertation and Theses*, as well as conference

proceedings for the annual meetings of “*Academy of Marketing Science, American Marketing Association, Society of Marketing Advances*”, etc. were sought.

## **Inclusion Criteria and Coding Procedures**

The following criteria to include manuscripts in the meta-analysis were followed. First, studies were included on the basis of the theoretical definition of “customer identification” as customer “perceived oneness with an organization”, where an organization in this meta-analysis can be presented as company and brand (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 103), taking into consideration the operationalization of the identification construct in each study. Second, the study had to address identification with a company, brand, university, or team. No studies about online communities, brand communities, social networks, social media groups, destinations, and cities were included. Third, a study had to be an empirical one with reported effect sizes and sample size. Correlations were the most common effect size metric included. Fourth, conceptual or qualitative studies were not included. Fifth, manuscripts with multiple independent samples were treated as separate effect size estimates as it is the procedure used in prior meta-analyses (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2006; Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011). All manuscripts that analyzed the same sample data in multiple article or studies were included. The initial search found 286 published and unpublished manuscripts that were considered for inclusion. After applying all the inclusion criteria, the database set included 145 manuscripts with 167 independent samples, representing 87,538 customers. In ninety-seven manuscripts the social entity used was either company/corporate or organization – including team and university. The remaining forty-eight independent samples used brand to refer to the social entity of interest.

The antecedents and outcomes of customer identification were coded in line with the definitions used (table 1). All articles identified for inclusion were examined in terms of an initial coding scheme that includes variables such as authors, year, publication status, measure used, measure reliability, method, country, etc. Also included was information needed to code context related variables that differ between studies such as exchange, purchase cycle, etc. This was important to test all possible moderators.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ANALYSIS & RESULTS

#### **Bivariate Analyses**

In the following sections, results of the bivariate and meta-analytic model analyses structured around focal research findings (figure 2) are reported. Company identification and brand identification are used interchangeably in the past literature with unclear criteria to differentiate between a company name and brand name. To discover if company name is different than that of brand to customers, manuscript conceptualization of identification whether with a company or brand was tested. The results demonstrate that out of thirty-one bivariate relationships tested in this meta-analysis only one relationship which is between value and identification is higher in studies where identification was with brands compared to that with companies. Thus, merging between studies is possible<sup>1</sup>.

Statistical evidence show that companies and brands are not perceived or treated differently by customers. Second, customer-company identification and customer-brand identification studies have based on customer-company identification framework with the majority of antecedents and outcomes that were borrowed directly from studies within the customer-company identification and before from organizational identification literature. Additionally, anecdotal evidence collected from customers reveals that customers are likely to not distinguish between a company name and brand name. In sum, theoretical and empirical

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<sup>1</sup> *Customer orientation, employee–company identification, and relationship duration are antecedents of customer-company identification and not customer-brand identification. Further, brand love is an antecedent of customer-brand identification only. Psychological-ownership is an outcome of customer-company identification.*

evidence show that combining customer-company identification and customer-brand identification studies in one meta-analysis is applicable.

Twenty-four antecedents of customer identification were identified and grouped in two categories: company/brand antecedents and customer antecedents. The testing of the effects of these antecedents on customer identification is provided and discussed. Next, findings concerning the relationships between customer identification and seven outcomes are reported. Boundary conditions explain the heterogeneity in some of the bivariate relationships. The significant moderating effects of several research context moderators and measurement method moderators on relationships between customer identification and its antecedents and outcomes are provided, and later discussed. Finally, the meta-analytical model estimation and the results of Hypotheses 1 to 9 are included.

## **Customer Identification Antecedents**

Antecedents of customer identification identified in this meta-analysis were grouped into two categories (figure 2). The first category includes antecedents that are related to the company/brand. In this category, nine antecedents are presented (e.g., attractiveness, customer orientation, corporate social responsibility, prestige, and employee-company identification). All antecedents in this category have positive and significant effects on customer identification with correlations range between (quality,  $r_{cw} = .45, p < .01$ ), and (personality,  $r_{cw} = .63, p < .01$ ). The average effect size of customer identification on these outcomes is equal to ( $r_{cw} = .53$ ). The most frequently tested antecedents in this category are: corporate social responsibility, prestige, quality, and distinctiveness.

The second category includes antecedents of customer identification that are related to the customer. In this category, fifteen antecedents were tested. The effect of one of these antecedents, age, was not significant. The other antecedents were all found to positively and significantly impact customer identification with correlations range between, low for relationship duration ( $r_{cw} = .09, p < .01$ ) and high for community identification ( $r_{cw} = .66, p < .01$ )<sup>2</sup>. The average effect size of customer identification on these outcomes is equal to ( $r_{cw} = .50$ ). The most frequently studied antecedents in this category are satisfaction, trust, similarity, commitment, and value.

From a theoretical perspective, this meta-analysis provides strong evidence of the difference between identification, and each of commitment and attachment constructs. As the results show, commitment is positively related to identification ( $r_{cw} = .59, p < .01$ ), and 95% confidence interval [.49, .67]. The difference between the attachment construct and identification is evidenced with a positive correlation between the two constructs ( $r_{cw} = .63, p < .01$ ), and 95% confidence interval [.51, .72]. The bivariate results provide evidence of the discriminant validity of identification when compared to commitment and attachment constructs. Practitioners seeking to execute customer identification initiative to assure higher loyalty of customers and increase financial performance of their companies/brands, are encouraged to employ some of findings of this meta-analysis, as it summarizes significant antecedents, and provides empirical evidence of the most influential antecedents of customer identification so practitioners can focus on such factors.

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<sup>2</sup> Brand love is exclusive antecedent to customer-brand identification with ( $r_{cw} = .71, p < .01$ ).

## Customer Identification Outcomes

Bivariate analysis shows the favorable impacts of customer identification on seven outcomes. The average effect size of customer identification on these outcomes is equal to ( $r_{cw} = .52$ ), ranging from moderate ( $r_{cw} = .39, p < .01$ ) for company/brand performance, to high ( $r_{cw} = .60, p < .01$ ) for loyalty, and word-of-mouth. The most frequent outcomes of customer identification examined in the literature are loyalty, and word-of-mouth.

The favorable influence of customer identification is evident with positive impact on six favorable outcomes—company/brand performance, extra-role behaviors, loyalty, resilience, willingness-to-pay, and word-of-mouth. Further, customer identification is positively related to psychological-ownership. Another important purpose of this study is to provide explanation for the heterogeneity of the bivariate relationships examined by testing possible moderators of these relationships<sup>3</sup>.

## Moderator Results

### *Research Context Moderators*

#### Service and Product Exchange

The studies included in this research differ from each other with respect to their different research contexts. For that reason, the effect of the offering exchange: service versus product was tested. The analysis illustrates that relationships between identification and its antecedents: corporate social responsibility [service  $r_{cw} = .69$  vs. product  $r_{cw} = .40, Q_b = 4.12, p < .05$ ], quality

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<sup>3</sup> Subgroups moderation comparisons were conducted when three or more correlations were found in each subgroup. Meta-regression analysis was conducted for continuous moderators (culture – individualism, gender [male percentage], response rate).

[service  $r_{cw} = .49$  vs. product  $r_{cw} = .33$ ,  $Q_b = 3.86$ ,  $p < .05$ ], community identification [service  $r_{cw} = .83$  vs. product  $r_{cw} = .63$ ,  $Q_b = 6.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and trust [service  $r_{cw} = .64$  vs. product  $r_{cw} = .50$ ,  $Q_b = 3.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ] are stronger when the exchange is service based. Furthermore, identification is likely to drive more loyalty [service  $r_{cw} = .62$  vs. product  $r_{cw} = .50$ ,  $Q_b = 5.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ] in the service exchange context. This finding is in line with previous theorizing (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Palmatier et al., 2006).

### Purchase Cycle

The frequency of interaction between customers and a company/brand is related to whether the purchase cycle is regular or not. Antecedents-identification and identification-outcomes links are strengthened when the purchase is regular compared to irregular. Results support this assumption. Stronger relationships between antecedents: corporate social responsibility [regular  $r_{cw} = .63$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .35$ ,  $Q_b = 5.93$ ,  $p < .05$ ], customer orientation [regular  $r_{cw} = .55$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .44$ ,  $Q_b = 2.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ], quality [regular  $r_{cw} = .49$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .34$ ,  $Q_b = 5.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and trust [regular  $r_{cw} = .64$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .44$ ,  $Q_b = 2.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and identification are found. The same effect of regular purchase is also found between identification and some outcomes such as company/brand performance [regular  $r_{cw} = .53$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .30$ ,  $Q_b = 3.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ], extra-role behaviors [regular  $r_{cw} = .60$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .49$ ,  $Q_b = 2.88$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and loyalty [regular  $r_{cw} = .67$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .51$ ,  $Q_b = 7.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. In one of the comparisons, irregular purchase strengthened the relationship between attitude and identification [regular  $r_{cw} = .37$  vs. irregular  $r_{cw} = .59$ ,  $Q_b = 3.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ].

## Exchange Relationship

Some of the exchanges between customers and companies/brands are relational in nature - where customers do interact directly with focal company/brand. Stronger effects of prestige [personal  $r_{cw} = .50$  vs. impersonal  $r_{cw} = .39$ ,  $Q_b = 4.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ] and relationship duration [personal  $r_{cw} = .17$  vs. impersonal  $r_{cw} = .04$ ,  $Q_b = 6.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ] on identification when the exchange context allow personal customer-company/brand relationships are found.

## Culture - Individualism

The moderating effect of individualism was examined using meta-regression analysis with maximum-likelihood model on identification-antecedent and identification-outcome correlations as the dependent variables. Higher scores on individualism represent lower collectivism tendencies (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Individualism (collectivism) negatively (positively) impacts satisfaction-identification [ $Z_r = -.003$ ,  $p < .05$ ]<sup>4</sup>, and trust-identification [ $Z_r = -.004$ ,  $p < .05$ ] relationships. Further, identification-loyalty relationship is weaker (stronger) [ $Z_r = -.004$ ,  $p < .05$ ] in countries with higher scores of individualism (collectivism).

## *Measurement Method Moderators*

### Identification Conceptualization

Another purpose of this meta-analysis is to provide some insights into different research questions and gaps raised in the literature (e.g., Lam, 2012). By testing the possible moderating effects of several research context moderators and measurement method moderators on the antecedents → identification → outcomes bivariate relationships, this study provides insights. In

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<sup>4</sup>  $Z_r$  = Fisher Z

testing the measurement method moderators, different customer identification conceptualizations (single dimension [cognitive] versus multi-dimension [cognitive, affective, and /or evaluative]) were tested.

The use of multi-dimensional conceptualization of identification is found to inflate some of the correlations found (e.g., quality [single  $r_{cw} = .37$  vs. multi  $r_{cw} = .6$ ,  $Q_b = 8.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ], satisfaction [single  $r_{cw} = .48$  vs. multi  $r_{cw} = .63$ ,  $Q_b = 3.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and word-of-mouth [ $r_{cw} =$  single  $.52$  vs. multi  $r_{cw} = .72$ ,  $Q_b = 8.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ]). This finding is likely to support the importance of maintaining the original conceptualization of identification as a cognitive state (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Moreover, the multi-dimension conceptualization is likely to go beyond the scope of identification as defined by “perceived oneness”.

## Measures

The two major measures of customer identification found in the literature were developed by Mael & Ashforth, (1992), and Bergami & Bagozzi, (2000). Other measures were introduced to the literature (e.g., Homburg et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) and have been employed by several studies. All “other” measures were grouped into one category. Pairwise comparisons between the three different categories (Mael and Ashforth 1992 versus Bergami and Bagozzi 2000), and (Mael and Ashforth 1992 versus Other Measures) were conducted.

Since the Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) measure was the most used scale, it was compared with Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) measure. The comparison shows that Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) and Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) measures provide similar results. When comparing Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) scale to other measures, results show that Mael and Ashforth’s

(1992) measure is a more conservative measure compared to other measures which are likely to inflate several relationships with identification such as quality, similarity, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth. Future studies should continue using either the Mael and Ashforth's (1992) measure or Bergami and Bagozzi (1992) measure. Both measures are appropriate for the measurement of customer identification defined as customer's perceived oneness with a company/brand.

### *Other Methodological Moderators*

#### Non-experiment versus experiment

Few of the studies included in the meta-analysis employed experimental design compared to the majority which used surveys. The moderated relationships are summarized as: corporate social responsibility-customer identification [non-experiment  $r_{cw} = .62$  vs. experiment  $r_{cw} = .32$ ,  $Q_b = 7.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ], trust- customer identification [non-experiment  $r_{cw} = .61$  vs. experiment  $r_{cw} = .48$ ,  $Q_b = 3.70$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and customer identification-loyalty [non-experiment  $r_{cw} = .61$  vs. experiment  $r_{cw} = .51$ ,  $Q_b = 3.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. On the other hand, community identification- customer identification relationship is stronger in studies that employed experimental design [non-experiment  $r_{cw} = .61$  vs. experiment  $r_{cw} = .83$ ,  $Q_b = 8.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ].

#### Published versus Unpublished

Further, effect sizes of published versus unpublished studies (proceedings, theses, and dissertations) included in the meta-analysis were compared. The effect sizes of the relationships between identification and corporate social responsibility [published  $r_{cw} = .61$  vs. unpublished  $r_{cw} = .36$ ,  $Q_b = 3.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ], prestige [published  $r_{cw} = .50$  vs. unpublished  $r_{cw} = .30$ ,  $Q_b = 5.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ], satisfaction [published  $r_{cw} = .55$  vs. unpublished  $r_{cw} = .37$ ,  $Q_b = 6.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and trust

[published  $r_{cw} = .62$  vs. unpublished  $r_{cw} = .48$ ,  $Q_b = 5.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ] reported in unpublished studies are weaker compared to those reported in published studies.

#### Non-students versus students

Some of the studies recruited students as respondents. The use of students is not a limitation as the results show that the use of non-students doesn't inflate the correlations between identification and affect [non-students  $r_{cw} = .66$  vs. students  $r_{cw} = .28$ ,  $Q_b = 8.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ], commitment [non-students  $r_{cw} = .66$  vs. students  $r_{cw} = .42$ ,  $Q_b = 10.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ], value [non-students  $r_{cw} = .48$  vs. students  $r_{cw} = .24$ ,  $Q_b = 6.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ], or extra-role behaviors [non-students  $r_{cw} = .55$  vs. students  $r_{cw} = .39$ ,  $Q_b = 4.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ].

#### Gender

The moderating effect of gender on some of the bivariate relationships was conducted using meta-regression analysis with maximum-likelihood model and identification-antecedent, and identification-outcome correlations as dependent variables. Higher scores represent a higher percentage of males within a sample. Gender has a significant moderating effect on several relationships. Prestige is likely to drive higher identification for males than females [ $Z_r = .007$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. On the other hand, identification levels of males are less affected by relational benefits [ $Z_r = -.007$ ,  $p < .05$ ], and value perceived [ $Z_r = -.009$ ,  $p < .1$ ]. Moreover, identified males are more likely to engage in word-of-mouth compared to females [ $Z_r = -.009$ ,  $p < .05$ ].

#### Response Rate

Using a meta-regression technique similar to the one ran for gender, the moderating effect of percentage response rate was tested. The results show no evidence of nonresponse bias as only two relationships are relatively affected by the increase in response rate.

### *Specific Relationships Moderators*

#### Near Other versus Far Other versus Mix Other Word-of-Mouth

The target of word-of-mouth can be different as the scales used by studies have different targets of the word-of-mouth behavior. Customers can target their word-of-mouth to “near” others (family members, friends, etc.), “far” others (strangers, other customers, etc.), and “mix” others (“near” and “far” targets are included: family members, friends, strangers and other customers). Results show that identified customers are likely to engage more in word-of-mouth that is targeted toward far other compared with near other [“far” other  $r_{cw} = .70$  vs. “near” other  $r_{cw} = .45, p < .05$ ]. Moreover, “mix” other was different from “near” other [“mix” other  $r_{cw} = .59$  vs. “near” other  $r_{cw} = .45, p < .05$ ].

#### Attitudinal versus Behavioral versus Mix Loyalty

The effects of identification on loyalty, whether operationalized as attitudinal, behavioral, or a mix between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, were not significantly different from each other. Customer identification has a strong effect on loyalty. This research indicates that identification drives attitudinal and behavioral loyalty of customers alike (attitudinal loyalty  $r_{cw} = .59$  vs. behavioral loyalty  $r_{cw} = .60$  vs. mix loyalty  $r_{cw} = .61$ ).

### *Other Moderators*

Other moderators such as data type (cross sectional versus longitudinal), market (business-to-business versus business-to-consumer), and institution or company purpose (for-profit versus non-for-profit) were examined. The majority of studies included in this meta-analysis has used cross sectional data with business-to-consumer market. Neither of the moderators explained any variance in the bivariate relationships reported likely due to the lack of

studies to compare between different subgroups. Regarding the comparison between the different purposes of the institution/company for-profit and non-for-profit, relationship duration has a stronger effect on identification for non-for-profit institutions [for-profit  $r_{cw} = .04$  vs. non-for-profit  $r_{cw} = .17, p < .05$ ]. On the other hand, identification drives higher extra-role behaviors in the context of for-profit institutions [for-profit  $r_{cw} = .56$  vs. non-for-profit  $r_{cw} = .33, p < .01$ ].

## **Meta-Analytical Model**

Through bivariate analysis, statistical relationships are examined separately between predictor and criterion variables. This is one of the limitations in bivariate analysis. To overcome this limitation, this meta-analysis tested a meta-analytic structural equation model that allows the testing of multivariate relationships simultaneously through a hypothesized meta-analytic model (figure 2). To run a nomological causal model, a correlation matrix of the most commonly studies constructs was created. One limitation of this technique is the need to for more data since all correlations between a construct and all other constructs examined within the model are required for analysis. For that, not all antecedents and outcomes of identification included in the bivariate analysis are examined in the causal model. A solution for this limitation lies in combining other correlation coefficients from previous meta-analytic studies (Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013). This method has been used in previous meta-analyses (Goad & Jaramillo, 2014; Y. Hong, Liao, Hu, & Jiang, 2013; Ng, 2015). For this meta-analysis, meta-analytic correlations from prior meta-analyses (De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Palmatier et al., 2006; Pan, Sheng, & Xie, 2012) were borrowed to produce a correlation matrix with 11 constructs. For a sample size of the structural equation model, the harmonic mean ( $n = 3,239$ ) of the cumulative sample size of each meta-analytic correlation included in the matrix was calculated. Harmonic means assign less

weight to large sample sizes as compared to arithmetic means, and, thus, are more conservative parameter estimate (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1995). The meta-analytic correlation matrix was then added into SPSS for structural equation modeling analysis using AMOS. To test mediation hypothesis, the procedures outlined by (Iacobucci, Saldanha, & Deng, 2007) were employed.

### *Meta-analytic Model Estimation and Findings*

The meta-analytic model tested is shown in figure 2. The proposed meta-analytic model provides poor to adequate fit to the data:  $\chi^2(31) = 2,086.75, p < .01$ ; “goodness-of-fit index” (GFI) = .90; the “comparative fit index” (CFI) = .91; and “standardized root-mean-square residual” (SRMR) = .04. Modification indices suggest adding direct paths between corporate social responsibility and customer identification, quality and loyalty, and, loyalty and word-of-mouth. These paths are in line with prior research (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Du et al., 2007; Sen et al., 2006; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). The revised model results in an improved model with better fit:  $\chi^2(28) = 1,350.10, p < .01$ ; GFI = .94; CFI = .95; and SRMR = .03. Testing the significance of chi square difference between the two models show that the second model is better than the first model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 736.65, \Delta d.f. = 3, \text{Critical } \chi^2_{.05} = 7.82$ ). Following are the results found.

Corporate social responsibility is positively related to company/brand identity ( $\beta = .40, p < .01$ ), but not to relationship quality ( $\beta = .02, n.s.$ ). Corporate social responsibility has an indirect effect on relationship quality through identity. Quality is positively related to both, identity ( $\beta = .43, p < .01$ ) and relationship quality ( $\beta = .54, p < .01$ ). The results provide support for H<sub>1a</sub>, H<sub>2a</sub>, and H<sub>2b</sub>. Identity is positively related to relationship quality ( $\beta = .37, p < .01$ ), supporting H<sub>3</sub>. As predicted by H<sub>4</sub>, identity is positively related to customer identification ( $\beta =$

.18,  $p < .01$ ). As hypothesized in H<sub>5</sub>, relationship quality and customer identification are positively related ( $\beta = .45, p < .01$ ). To test H<sub>6</sub>, which proposes that the effect of identity on customer identification is mediated by relationship quality, the procedures proposed by Iacobucci et al., (2007) were followed. The positive direct effects of identity on both relationship quality and customer identification are supported (H<sub>3</sub> and H<sub>4</sub>). Further, the results support the positive effect of relationship quality and customer identification, H<sub>5</sub>. When the path between relationship quality and customer identification is dropped, the effect of company/brand identity on customer identification becomes higher ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ , versus  $\beta = .63, p < .01$ ). The difference between the two effect sizes is significant ( $t\text{-value} = 9.78, p < .01$ ). A Sobel test conducted shows that the mediated relationship tested is significant ( $Z\text{-value} = 14, p < .01$ ), providing support in favor of H<sub>6</sub>. As predicted in H<sub>7</sub>, the relationship between customer identification and loyalty is positive ( $\beta = .19, p < .01$ ). Further, customer identification is positively related to word-of-mouth ( $\beta = .27, p < .01$ ) and company/brand financial performance ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ). These results support H<sub>8</sub> and H<sub>9</sub>. Discussion and implications are provided below.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Discussion and Implications

#### **Discussion and Theoretical Implications**

This study tested the antecedents and outcomes of customer identification by summarizing the findings of 167 independent samples from 145 manuscripts over a period of 25 years. The study examined the antecedents and outcomes of customer identification using meta-analytical design that includes bivariate analysis. Further, subgroup moderator and meta-regression moderator analyses were conducted to explain part of the heterogeneity within the different bivariate relationships tested. Moderator analysis revealed the existence of different boundary conditions of the bivariate relationships tested. The study also purposed and tested a meta-analytical causal model of customer identification. Although previous studies have established various links between variables examined, this meta-analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of what has been studied and tests a relational-path of customer identification. Meta-analytical results show that the relational-path tested is complementary to the conventional identity-based path of customer identification.

Meta-analysis allows the estimation of the true population effect size, thus overcoming the limitation of studying certain phenomena with a single sample data (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). The bivariate analysis resulted in identifying 23 antecedents, and 7 outcomes of customer identification. Antecedents found were grouped into two categories: company/brand antecedents, and customer antecedents. The estimated effect sizes of the antecedents tested ranges from low to high magnitudes. Significant relationships between customer identification and several

favorable outcomes critical to marketing success such as loyalty, willingness-to-pay, word-of-mouth, extra-role behaviors, resilience to negative information, and company financial performance. Bivariate relationships were further analyzed by testing various research context and measurement method moderators. These tests provide additional understanding of the heterogeneity of relationships between studies examined. Beyond the estimated bivariate relationships, the meta-analytic model tested provides additional compelling support for the favorable marketing outcomes of customer identification.

Using meta-analytic techniques, this study illustrates the unique importance of customer identification, and the value it can bring to marketing, especially relational marketing. Relational factors including, satisfaction, trust, commitment that, together, develop quality customer relationships have direct and indirect effects through identification on critical marketing outcomes such as word-of-mouth, loyalty, and company performance. Company/brand identity communicates company's/brand's orientation, values, and marketing initiatives which, in turn, will lead customers to form their perceptions about the focal company/brand based on the different associations related to what is communicated by the company/brand.

The development of quality customer relationships will encourage customers to identify with the company/brand. The meta-analytic structural equation model proposed and tested demonstrates a relational-based path of customer identification which is complementary to the conventional identity-based path. Further, the findings reveal that identification is important for driving loyalty, word-of-mouth, and more important company/brand financial performance. The positive effect of customer identification on company financial performance still holds even after controlling for the effects of relationship quality, word—of-mouth, and loyalty. Moreover,

identification remains a predictor of word-of-mouth and loyalty when accounting for the effect of relationship quality on word-of-mouth, and relationship quality and loyalty on word-of-mouth. The explanatory power of identification found is, in large part, due to its reflection of “visceral unity” (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016, p. 32). The study also provides many managerial implications to marketers and practitioners.

The difference in exchanges between services exchange and products was one of the significant moderators of some of the relationships examined in this study. From a theoretical perspective, the results stress the importance of identification in service exchange context. This is important to consider especially with the emerging development in the marketing theory such as the service-dominant logic of marketing, servitization, and other related streams of research (Neely, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Customer identification in service exchange contexts is affected by customers identifying with other customers or company/brand community members. In turn, customer identification with service providers is more likely to increase loyalty compared to that with product providers.

Moderator analysis suggests that companies/brands would benefit from a more frequent purchase cycle of their products, as well as the personal relationships with. The regular purchase cycle and personal relationships play a key role in different marketing initiatives that lead to identification. The purchase life cycle is also another boundary condition that was found to moderate some of the bivariate relationships found. The results show that regular purchase, which is indication customers buying more, engages customers in extra role behaviors, be more loyal, and thus increases company performance. The regular purchase cycle allows companies to benefit from strategies like corporate social responsibility and customer orientation initiatives in

driving higher customer identification. Moreover, quality and trust are important for customers when the purchase is more frequent. The positive relation between relationship duration and identification is enhanced by personalizing customer relationships.

This meta-analysis presents empirical evidence of the moderating effect of individualism as a cultural value, thus contributing to both culture theory and customer identification theory. In more individualistic countries, satisfaction and trust have higher positive effects on customer identification. Moreover, customer identification is a weaker (stronger) predictor of customer loyalty in countries with higher scores of individualism (collectivism). Despite the moderating effect of individualism reported, it is important to mention that many bivariate relationships are not affected by individualism. The relationships moderated by individualism remain strong in countries that are more individualistic than collectivistic.

Identification was found to be a strong predictor of word-of-mouth targeted toward “far” others, and a moderate predictor of word-of-mouth targeted toward “near” others. Word-of-mouth is an identity promotional tool for identified customers. These findings add to our knowledge about the positive effect on customer identification of word-of-mouth. Studies interested in examining word-of-mouth construct must distinguish between the different possible targets of word-of-mouth behaviors these can impact the relationships tested. Customer identification can be easily resembled to near others through different channels than word-of-mouth such as the usage of the company’s/brand’s product or service. “Near” others are more frequently available at the time of identified customers consume the product or service, a possible reason why identified customers will engage less on word-of-mouth with “near” others compared to “far” others. On the other hand, customers have a lower chance to promote their

identity to other customers or prospects that may have a one and only one encounter with. This encourages them to share information about what they know about the company/brand they identify with. Moreover, it is much easier for identified customers to recommend and convince friends or family members to buy and use some of the offerings of the company/brand they identify with resulting in less word-of-mouth behaviors compared to recommending and convincing other customers or prospects who might require more deliberation in order to try the recommended offerings. The moderating effect of the target of word-of-mouth (far other versus near other) illustrates interesting findings and provides contribution to customer identification and word-of-mouth literature. Despite the different operationalizations of the loyalty construct, customer identification is found to have consistent and strong impact on customer loyalty, whether attitudinal, behavioral or mixed.

The results show that males are affected by the prestigious levels of the company/brand more than females. Moreover, males expect higher return from what they consume as evident in the negative slopes of relational benefits-customer identification and value-customer identification when the samples are composed of more males. In turn, male customers compared to females with similar identification levels are less likely to drive higher performance for companies/brands they identify with. Comparing between non-experiment and experiment methods used, results reported show that the use of experimental design method didn't necessarily inflate the relationships found.

The conceptualization of identification as a construct with a single dimension (cognitive) versus a second order construct with three dimensions (cognitive, affective, and evaluative) was examined. The use of multi-dimensional conceptualization of identification was found to inflate

some of the bivariate relationships tested. More support for the original conceptualization of identification construct as a cognitive state (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Moreover, multi-dimension conceptualization of identification has been used by few studies, compared to the majority of studies that employed a cognitive conceptualization of identification based on the early studies within the identification literature (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The multi-dimension conceptualization is likely to go beyond the scope of identification as defined by “perceived oneness”.

Identifying the best scale to use for measuring customer identification was a main issue in the literature. The most used measure in the literature is the measure developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) scale is the second most used scale. Together, these scales are employed by the most of the studies. Both scales are developed based on the conceptualization of identification as a cognitive state. The comparison shows that Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) scale and Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) scale yield similar results in most cases. When comparing Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) scale to other scales, results show that Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) scale is a comparatively more conservative scale compared to other scales which are likely to inflate many of the relationships. For that reason, future studies are encouraged to employ the scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) that has proven to be conservative and consistent with the definition of identification as “perceived oneness”.

This study provides meta-analytic evidence of the discriminant validity of the identification construct in comparison to commitment and attachment constructs. Prior research has called for the need to differentiate between identification and constructs such as commitment

and attachment. The bivariate results of the antecedents of identification show clear evidence that commitment and attachment are different than identification.

## **Practical Implications**

Some useful guidance is offered concerning the strategies companies and brands can follow to effectively manage customer identification and customer relationships. It is clear, based on the meta-analytic evidence, that identification on its own can result in favorable marketing outcomes even after accounting for the effects of main factors in relationship marketing such as satisfaction, trust, and commitment. This study provides additional support to the call for the need to identify new factors such as identification that can add to and go beyond what we know about relationship marketing, thus assuring improved financial performance outcomes (Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009). As stated by Bhattacharya et al., (1995), customer identification “goes beyond satisfaction with products and services” (p. 55).

Practitioners and managers experiencing difficulty in the development of marketing strategies based on traditional marketing practices, such as satisfaction must think of employing customer identification initiatives as “relationship gold” in order to assure achieving planned objectives and goals such as loyalty and financial performance. The results reported in this meta-analysis show that companies and brands should try to develop higher identification levels of their customers. The most examined outcomes of identification are summarized thus opening the door for researchers to examine new and neglected outcomes such as that suggested in literature such as customers’ stronger claim on company, stereotype, and oppositional loyalty.

Service companies and manufacturing companies are provided with numerous recommendations to better implement identification initiatives that add to relational marketing strategies implemented. Not implementing tactics that can increase customer identification, such as corporate social responsibility, quality, relational benefits, employee-company identification, in addition to examining other antecedents identified in the meta-analysis can lead companies to lose part of the effects of traditional relationship marketing since identification mediates the effect of relationship quality on critical marketing factors such as word-of-mouth, loyalty, and company financial performance.

As noted before, identification delivers additional value to relational marketing tactics to reach different marketing objectives such as loyalty, word-of-mouth, and the more important, company financial performance. For greater identification at the customer level, managers are encouraged to implement more corporate social responsibility initiatives and focus on delivering better quality. In addition, company/brand identity characterized by identity prestige and identity distinctiveness is a main factor to drive customers to identify with the company/brand. A prestigious and distinctive identity of the company/brand has direct and indirect effects, through satisfaction, trust, and commitment, on identification. Company/brand identity not only increases customer identification but also strengthens the relationship customers have with the company/brand. Moreover, bivariate analysis illustrates several antecedents of identification that managers can use to strengthen customers' identification such as, value, relational benefits, customer orientation, employee-company identification, etc.

Different boundary conditions related to the research context and measurement were tested to obtain a complete understanding of the bivariate relationships tested. Research context and measurement method moderators tested provide additional understanding to the variation of the

relationships between studies. In service exchange contexts, marketers have a greater chance to increase their customers' identification by means of developing corporate social responsibility initiatives, delivering higher service quality, and maintaining higher trust levels with customers. Services providers are required to focus on the delivery of higher quality services in order to provide more tangible cues to customers and create a strong competitive image in the market. With that, practitioners can overcome the intangibility limitation of service offerings, which makes it hard to communicate service benefits to customers. Practitioners providing services to customers must take the advantage of service exchanges that requires customers' presence and more customer-seller interactions to implement better identification initiatives, which, in turn, can increase loyalty. On the other hand, manufacturers should focus servitization of their products to take advantage of service exchange.

Regular purchase cycles are indicative of identified customers to buying more, thus, increasing company's performance, while these customers engage in more extra role behaviors and become more loyal. The ability of customers to engage in more personal relationships with the company/brand will lead to higher identification levels driven by company/brand prestige. Practitioners should seek to personalize the relationships with consumers where customers are provided the chance to direct and regular interaction with sellers. Researchers should differentiate between regular and irregular purchase cycle for the importance such differentiation can play. For companies/brands, results also imply that identification has more effects when customers are engaged in regular purchase cycle. Thus, it should be useful for companies to try shifting some of the irregular purchases to more regular for the benefits such change can have on different outcomes such as company/brand performance, extra-role behaviors, and loyalty.

Customer identification remains an important phenomenon in both individualistic and collectivistic countries. The results found in this study imply that relational factors such as satisfaction and trust are more vital predictors of customer identification in collectivistic culture. Moreover, customers in collectivistic cultures are more loyal to their companies/brands because of their identification. In other words, similar levels of satisfaction and trust can lead to higher identification levels in collectivistic countries compared to individualistic countries. Findings, however, do not suggest that the effects of satisfaction and trust disappear in individualistic cultures. Thus, these effects should still be considered by companies and marketers operating in individualistic cultures since these effects are still of moderate to high magnitudes. This is also true to identification-loyalty relationship in individualistic countries. Customer identification is also an important indicator of customer loyalty in highly individualistic cultures. Despite the evidence found concerning the effect of individualism on three relationships examined in this meta-analysis, it is important to mention that the majority of relationships were not affected by such moderating effect. Thus, customer identification remains an important phenomenon that practitioners should be aware of when it comes to marketing planning. Managers should try to implement some of the marketing tactics identified in this study to achieve higher customer identification in both individualistic and collectivistic countries.

Findings show that customer identification is a strong predictor of word-of-mouth targeted toward “far” others (e.g., other customers, strangers), and a moderate predictor of word-of-mouth targeted toward “near” others (e.g., family members, friends). Identified customers promote their identification with a company or brand through word-of-mouth to “far” others such as customers and/or strangers who they don’t necessarily know or have relationship with,

but less to “near” others as friends and/or family members. Practitioners are provided with additional evidence of the important role of identification in recruiting new prospects by means of word-of-mouth behaviors of current customers. Customers do use other than word-of-mouth behaviors to promote their identity and, thus, the identity of the company/brand they identify with, such as the consumption of use of the company’s/brand’s products and services. The results show how identified customers are key for company/brand advocacy, socially toward far others.

The results provide support for the high levels of loyalty identified customers hold. Whether attitudinal or behavioral loyalty, both demonstrate the willingness of customers to repatronize a product or service of certain company/brand regularly in the future, in spite of external marketing sways intended to switch customers’ behaviors toward competing companies/brands. Practitioners are provided strong evidence of the persistent effect of identification in driving extreme customer loyalty, as suggested in the literature. While the relationship between customer identification and psychological-ownership is based on three independent samples, the positive relationship reveals that higher levels of identification will lead customer to feel a sense of ownership of the company he/she identifies with. For some marketers, such ownership might lead to unfavorable outcomes.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

While (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) suggest that identification can lead to favorable and unfavorable outcomes, this meta-analysis shows that the focus in the literature is on favorable outcomes. This also true to identification antecedents where all antecedents found in this meta-analysis are the ones with positive impact on identification. This could be due to the reason that

researchers are more likely willing to understand the different ways to enhance customer identification. This creates a critical gap in the literature. Future research needs to study the factors that can negatively affect identification and try to understand what other researchers call as dis-identification, besides studying different forms of identification such as ambivalent identification, and neutral identification, and, if possible, compare it to identification (Josiassen, 2011; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Wolter et al., 2016).

In this study, the focus was on customer identification that takes place in offline context. With the development of Web 2.0, internet and social media more studies are found to study customer identification that takes place online. With the increase focus on online marketing, researchers are encouraged to study the complementary role of online and offline identification. Moreover, the literature would benefit from scholar work aimed at qualitatively and quantitatively synthesizing the online customer identification literature.

Further, the number of correlations of subgroups-comparisons were not sufficient (less than 3) to allow for moderation testing. With more studies conducted in future, such the testing of these relationships will more likely be tested. Future studies are encouraged to replicate some of the relationships that are not well developed. The meta-analytic structural equation model tested in this study demonstrates a partially mediated model between company/brand identity and customer identification through relationship quality. The partially mediated relationship found suggests that company/brand identity and customer identification link is also mediated by further factors. Researchers are encouraged to discover additional variables that mediate this link. Filling some of the research gaps identified here is important for the development to customer identification literature as a cornerstone of relationship marketing theory.

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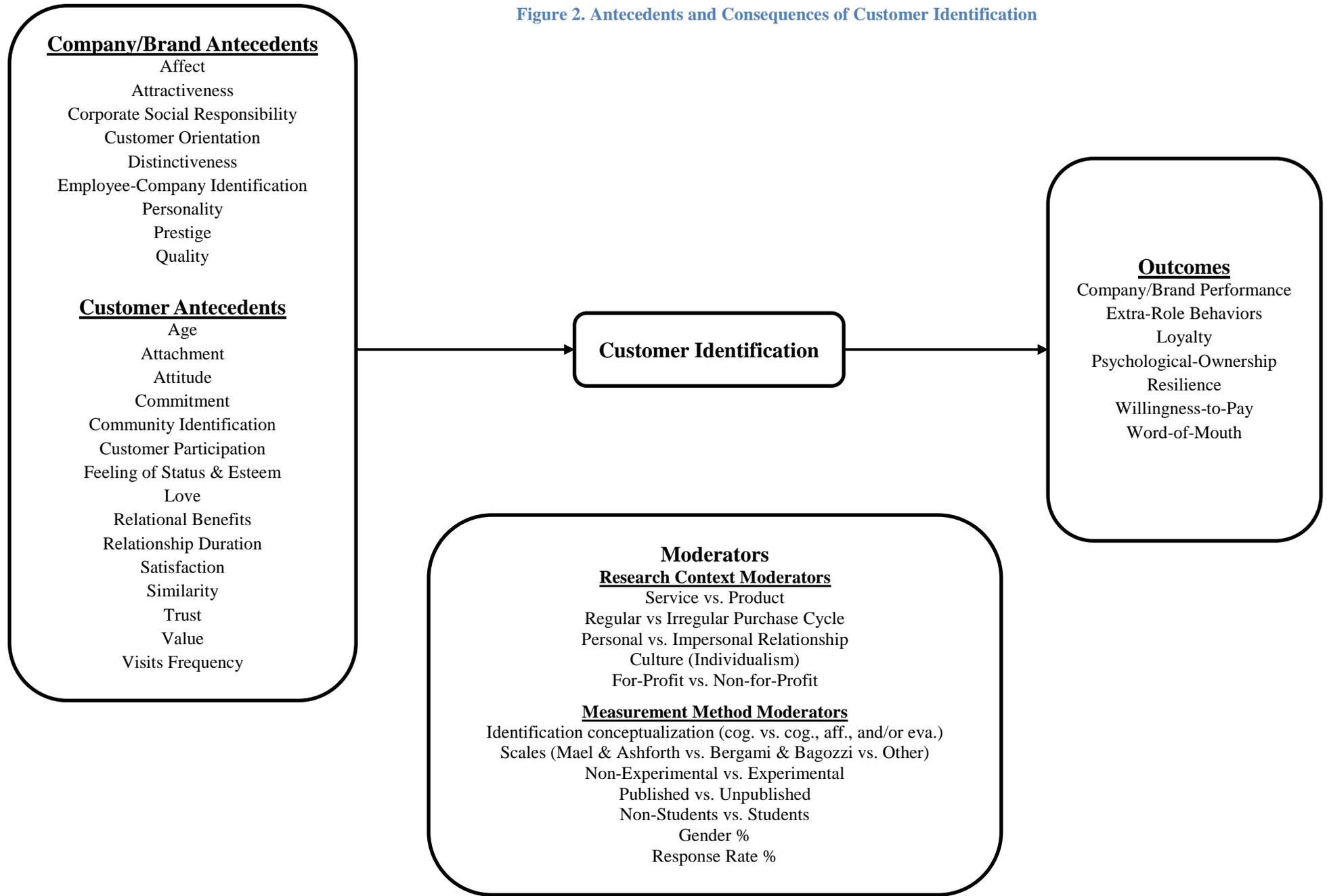
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## Figures



Figure 1. Number of manuscripts included in the meta-analysis according to publication year

Figure 2. Antecedents and Consequences of Customer Identification



## Tables

**Table 1. Summary of Construct Definitions and Representative Papers**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Representative Papers</b>
<b><u>Customer Identification</u></b>		
Customer-brand/company identification	“Perceived oneness with an organization” (company/brand) (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 103).	(Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012)
<b><u>Company/Brand Antecedents</u></b>		
Affect	“a brand’s (company's) potential to elicit a positive emotional response in the average consumer as a result of its use” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82).	Donavan, Janda, & Maxham, 2015; Su, Swanson, & Chen, 2016
Attractiveness	Customer evaluation of the of company’s/brand's identity to meet customer's self-definitional needs (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).	Hall-Phillips, Park, Chung, Anaza, & Rathod, 2016; Marin, Ruiz, & Rubio, 2009; So, King, Hudson, & Meng, 2017
Corporate Social Responsibility	Company's/brand's “status and activities with respect to [e.g., responsiveness to] its perceived societal obligation” (Brown & Dacin, 1997, p. 68).	Du et al., 2007; Homburg et al., 2013; Sen et al., 2006
Customer Orientation	“The set of beliefs that puts the customer's interest first” (Deshpandé, Farley, & Webster, 1993, p. 27).	Boenigk & Helmig, 2013; Homburg et al., 2009
Distinctiveness	“The perceived uniqueness of a brand's identity” (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012, p. 408).	Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter et al., 2016
Employee-Company Identification	Employee’s “perceived oneness with the organization” she/he works for (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 23).	Homburg et al., 2009; Lichtenstein et al., 2010; Netemeyer et al., 2012
Personality	“The set of human characteristics associated with a brand (company)” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347).	Ahearne et al., 2005; Chung & Park, 2015

Prestige	“Degree to which the institution is well regarded both in absolute and comparative terms” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 111).	Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012
Quality	“The consumer’s judgment about a product’s overall excellence or superiority” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 3).	Homburg et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2012
<b><u>Customer Antecedents</u></b>		
Age	Average age of the customers	Chung & Park, 2015; Karjaluoto, Munnukka, & Salmi, 2016
Attachment	“Strong disposition to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure” [company/brand] (Bowlby, 1980, p. 294).	Karaosmanoglu, Banu Elmadag Bas, & Zhang, 2011; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012
Attitude	Degree of favorableness/ unfavorableness, good/bad and likeable/dislikable and other related dimensions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997).	Romani et al., 2013; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001
Commitment	“An exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23).	Homburg et al., 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012
Community Identification	Perceived oneness with other customers/members and communities of company/brand (Bagozzi et al., 2012).	Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; Fombelle et al., 2012
Customer Participation	“Degree to which the customer is involved in producing and delivering the service (product)” (Dabholkar, 1990, p. 484).	Abosag, Baker, Hall, Voulgari, & Zheng, 2016; Teichmann, Scholl-Grissemann, & Stokburger-Sauer, 2016
Feeling of Status & Esteem	Ability of company/brand to boost customer's self-esteem, status, or confidence (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999; O’cass & Frost, 2002).	Brashear-Alejandro, Kang, & Groza, 2016; McGowan, Shiu, & Hassan, 2016

Love	“Degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81).	Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2012
Relational Benefits	“Social interaction opportunities and gains afforded by a brand” (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012, p. 409).	Homburg et al., 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012
Relationship Duration	Length of time the relationship between customer and company/brand exists.	Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Homburg et al., 2009; Mael & Ashforth, 1992
Satisfaction	“Pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment” (Oliver, 1997, p. 13).	Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009; Mael & Ashforth, 1992
Similarity	Commonality in image, traits, values, lifestyle, and goals between brand/company and customer (Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000).	Lam et al., 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012
Trust	“A willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Moorman, Deshpandé, & Zaltman, 1993, p. 82).	Homburg et al., 2013; Keh & Xie, 2009
Value	“The customer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14).	Homburg et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2010
Visits Frequency	The number of times a customer visits the company.	Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Siu, Zhang, & Kwan, 2014

### **Outcomes**

Company Performance	Company/brand performance outcomes including customer spending/expenditures, share of wallet, sales, market share, and other measurable outcomes.	Ahearne et al., 2005; Homburg et al., 2009; Lichtenstein et al., 2010
Extra-Role Behaviors	“Voluntary and supportive customer performances “that benefit the whole organization rather than on purely self-interested ones” (Ahearne et al., 2005, p. 577).	Ahearne et al., 2005; Lam et al., 2012; Wolter & Cronin, 2016

Loyalty	“Commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing” (Oliver, 1997, p. 392)	Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009; Wolter & Cronin, 2016
Psychological Ownership	“The state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is “theirs” (i.e., “It is mine!”)” (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003, p. 86)	Asatryan & Oh, 2008; Nambisan & Baron, 2010
Resilience	“Consumers’ willingness to overlook or even forgive a company when there is an occasional, possibly inadvertent, lapse on its part” (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p. 19).	Lin, Chen, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Wolter & Cronin, 2016
Willingness-to-Pay	“The maximum price a customer is willing to spend for a product or service” (Homburg et al., 2009, p. 41)	Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009; Keh & Xie, 2009
Word-of-Mouth	“Informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261)	Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wolter & Cronin, 2016

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**Table 2. Summary of Key Findings and Implications**

Key Findings	Research & Practical Implications
Antecedents	
Relationship quality including satisfaction, trust, and commitment, and identity (i.e. prestige and distinctiveness) are key antecedents of customer identification.	<i>Several company/brand and customer antecedents of customer identification are tested. Researchers are required to examine new antecedents, especially the antecedents that negatively affects customer identification. Practitioners may use different mix of customer identification antecedents.</i>
A relational-based path is complementary to the conventional identity-based path of customer identification.	<i>A complementary framework of customer identification is provided and includes an identity-based path and relational-based path. For practitioners, the focus should be on strengthening the identity of their companies/brands while maintaining quality relationships with customers. Both initiatives are found to drive high levels of identification.</i>
Discriminant validity of identification is provided. Commitment and attachment are different than identification.	<i>Meta-analytic empirical evidence of the difference between identification construct and each of the two other constructs, commitment and attachment, is provided.</i>
Outcomes	
Customer identification is positively related to critical marketing outcomes such as loyalty, word-of-mouth, and company/brand financial performance.	<i>The positive effects of identification on variables such as loyalty, word-of-mouth, and company/brand financial performance hold even when the effects of relationships quality are accounted for. Identification mediates some of the effects of relationships quality on loyalty, word-of-mouth, and company/brand financial performance.</i>
Customer identification is also positively related to resilience and willingness-to-pay.	<i>Customer identification can promise relationship gold to sellers. Identification not only makes customers extremely loyal, but also leads them to pay more, and overlook and defend the company/brand against criticism and negative information. Unlike other marketing initiatives, identification may lead customers</i>

	<i>to sacrifice their self-interests.</i>
Moderators	
<p>Identification plays a stronger role in service exchanges compared to products exchanges. Some of relationships are stronger for regular purchases. Cultural factor (i.e. individualism) weaken the magnitude of some of the relationships tested.</p> <p>Mael &amp; Ashforth's (1992), and Bergami &amp; Bagozzi's (2000) are adequate for measuring customer identification. Evidence support customer identification as a cognitive state. Identified customers are more likely to engage in word-of-mouth behaviors targeted toward far others.</p>	<p><i>Customer identification is extremely critical for service providers. Servitization can help producers take advantage of the positive effect of identification on loyalty. More frequent interactions of customers with companies/brands can facilitate the development of identification. The development of identification and its predictor power on loyalty are affected by the level of individualism of the customer country. Despite that, relationships moderated by individualism remain strong in countries that are more individualistic.</i></p> <p><i>Customer identification defined as customer's perceived oneness with company/brand is a cognitive state. Two major scales are identified relevant to measure customer identification. Identified customers are motivated to promote their identity by engaging un word-of-mouth behaviors. These behaviors increase when the target of the word-of-mouth is far others. Marketers may need to consider identification as an extremely effective tool in driving WOM.</i></p>

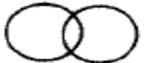
**Table 3. Mael and Ashforth's (1992) Organizational Identification Measure**

1. When someone criticizes (name of school), it feels like a personal insult.
2. I am very interested in what others think about (name of school).
3. When I talk about this school, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'.
4. This school's successes are my successes.
5. When someone praises this school, it feels like a personal compliment.
6. If a story in the media criticized the school, I would feel embarrassed.

*Organizational Identification measure adopted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). This scale was developed by Mael (1988). The items were measured based on 5-point agreement Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree). Studies adopted the scale by changing the term "school" to either company, brand, university, or team.*

Table 4. Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) Organizational Identification Measure

1. Imagine that one of the circles at the left in each row represents your own self-definition or identity and the other circle at the right represents CAMST's identity. Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the level of overlap between your own and CAMST's identities.

	Me	CAMST	
A			<b>Far Apart</b>
B			<b>Close Together but Separate</b>
C			<b>Very Small Overlap</b>
D			<b>Small Overlap</b>
E			<b>Moderate Overlap</b>
F			<b>Large Overlap</b>
G			<b>Very Large Overlap</b>
H			<b>Complete Overlap</b>

2. Please indicate to what degree your self-image overlaps with CAMST's Image. (CAMST's is an organization used in the study).

Organizational Identification measure adopted from Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000). The second item was measured based on a 7-point scale with (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). Studies adopted the scale by changing the term "Camst" (which is the organization) to either company, brand, university, or team. Many studies have used the first item separately.

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