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Consumer Citizenship Behavior: the Effects of Social Identification on Interpersonal Helping Behavior Among Consumers

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Social identification at community and subgroup levels served as independent variables and three types of helping intentions were dependent variables in a multivariate multiple regression model. Identification-helping relations were stronger when identity was salient at the subgroup level. Identification was positively related to product-based helping at community and subgroup levels.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The impact of “citizenship-like” behavior, voluntary interpersonal behavior that benefits the organization, has generated a great deal of interest across disciplines. This research classifies these behaviors as Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs); that is, the extra role discretionary initiatives of employees engaged in various work behaviors (see Lepine, Erez, and Johnson 2002). This study further expands the concept of citizenship behavior to include interpersonal helping behavior that occurs among consumers in the midst of other consumers. Specifically, the relationship between social identification and helping behavior among consumption community members is investigated. The research demonstrates how this form of consumer behavior creates value for product-based as well as service-based organizations.

Social identification is the perceived belongingness to any social group, formal or informal. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals develop a social self that is attached or connected to the group and its providence (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Members of a social group are more apt to help one another because membership instills a sense of obligation to the group and its individual members (May and Hoffman 1991). It is this sense of responsibility that leads to higher levels of helping behavior (Sturmbur, Snyder, and Omato 2005).

The present study differs from current consumer behavior research on interpersonal helping behavior which implies that consumption community members will receive help and non-members will not (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Rather than an implied dichotomy, this research presents helping behavioral intentions as falling along a continuum, suggesting that interpersonal helping behavior is not influenced by membership alone. A consumer who perceives a stronger attachment to a community is more likely to engage in helping other members than a consumer with a weaker attachment.

Data for the study was collected at Biketoberfest, a biker rally held in Daytona Beach, Florida that attracts 200,000 plus bikers annually. Self-report surveys were distributed to male bikers during the event. Identification with the biker community and particular subgroup were treated as separate constructs. Respondents ($n = 152$) were first asked whether they belonged to an organized (e.g., Harley Owners’ Group, Racing Club, Antique/Restoration Club) or an informal subgroup (e.g., Iron Butt Gang, Bikers for Jesus, close group of friends) of bikers within the biker community. If a member of more than one subgroup, they were asked to specify club/group most important to them. Respondents were instructed to answer each question twice, once regarding bikers in the subgroup they specified and again for bikers not in their club/group. The helping behavior intentions are of three types: altruistic, product-related, and behavioral scenarios. All items were measured on a 7-point agreement scale ranging from 1=“Strongly Disagree” to 7=“Strongly Agree.”

Item analysis for each scale began by inspecting inter-item correlations for $r^2 < .30$ and item-to-total correlations for $r^2 \geq .50$. This resulted in deleting several items from the social identification and scenario scales. Reliability for the measures of each construct was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Alphas ranging from .74 for subgroup identification to .94 for measures of altruistic helping behavior

indicate that the scales are internally consistent (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994).

To test the proposed hypotheses, a multivariate multiple regression model using the unweighted least squares technique was employed. Social identification at the community and subgroup levels within the community served as independent variables and the three types of helping intentions were used as simultaneous dependent variables. Initially, a dummy variable was created to capture any difference in helping behavior for informal compared to organized subgroups. However, subgroup formality was nonsignificant in the model and was omitted from further analysis.

Hypothesis #1, that identification with the biker community would have a positive effect on helping other members at the community level, was supported. Estimated paths from community identification to helping behavior at that level were significant ($p < .05$) whereas paths to helping behavior at the group level were not. Hypothesis #2, that subgroup identification-helping relations would be stronger for subgroup members than for community members outside of the group, was also supported with one exception. While the path estimates were significant and stronger at the subgroup level, altruistic behavior was significantly related to identification with bikers at the community level as well (i.e., standardized β ’s = 2.24, $p < .001$ vs. 1.23, $p < .01$, in that order).

Our results support a positive relationship between social identification and helping behavior at the larger community level. However, consumption communities are comprised of subgroups in which members of each share an identity. Our findings suggest that when members’ identity is salient at the subgroup level, identification-helping relations were stronger for subgroup members than for community members not in their group. Interpersonal proximity and the collective motives arising from the group engender a strong sense of responsibility which makes interpersonal helping more likely between fellow members (Mael and Ashforth 2001; Turner 1984).

Members’ subgroup identification was not related to any helping behaviors pertaining to community members outside of their subgroup except for behavior that was altruistic in nature. Interestingly, altruistic behavior may be egoistically motivated, making it difficult to distinguish altruism from self-interest. Underlying reasons of self-interest may motivate this type of behavior, but to a lesser extent than social identification at the community level.

The current research indicates that identification was significantly related to product-based helping behavior with other bikers in the community. This behavior was also evident at the subgroup level. From a marketing standpoint, product-based organizations should develop increasingly bonded relationships with consumers, but have been less clear concerning customers’ roles compared to their service-dominant counterparts. This study demonstrates how consumers can voluntarily act on behalf of either a service- or product-based organization to contribute to its success. Together, the findings imply that consumers on their own can act as partial employees to co-create value that benefits the product-oriented organization (Pralahad and Ramaswamy 2000). One way a firm can foster consumer citizenship behavior is by forming communities around its product or service. Through organizationally sponsored community

events the bonds that are formed benefit the organization as well as strengthen the consumption community.

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