

THE ROLE OF RELATIONAL BENEFITS, CUSTOMER-RETAILER IDENTIFICATION, AND ADVOCACY IN THE CO-CREATION OF VALUE

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ABSTRACT

Advocacy is recognized as an important form of customer extra-role behavior that provides significant communication value to firms through intense customer-to-customer promotion and defense of the product and/or service. This research addresses questions raised in the literature as to what value-in-social-context “looks like” and deepens theory in the area as to how relational benefit and identity processes are implicated in value co-creation for a B2C retail context. Specifically, we examine moderated and mediated relationships among perceived retailer communication, relational benefits, and whether the customer identifies with the retailer in understanding advocacy. The framework was tested and supported and had relatively strong explanatory power with significant effects for this service context while also accounting for the effects of satisfaction and commitment constructs. Model relationships reveal insights for future marketing practice and scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Firm-customer interactions are the foundation for relational outcomes (Homburg, Jozic, & Kuehnl, 2017). Customer advocacy (informal customer-to-customer communication) has been noted as a form of customer value co-creation. (Yi & Gong, 2013; Taylor & Hunter, 2014; Sweeney et al., 2020). When customers advocate for a company, they move beyond positive WOM to intensely promote and defend the firm (Payne & Frow, 2013). As highlighted by Sweeney et al. (2020), in contrast to positive WOM, advocacy captures a more personal, relationship-oriented messaging. The impact of advocacy appears ubiquitous across industries and buying decisions (Dye, 2000; Balter, 2008). Recent evidence suggests that customer advocates are significantly more valuable than customers who provide positive WOM (Sweeney et al., 2020).

Given the potential of advocacy to have more potent effects than WOM, an understanding of the antecedents of advocacy would benefit academics and practitioners. The case has been made for deepening understanding of customer touchpoints with emphasis on mutual and reciprocal relationships that spawn the customer to repeat purchase from and advocate for the company (Urban, 2005; Walz & Celuch, 2010; Sheth, 2017). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Voorhees et al. (2017) highlight the need to connect the customer experience and subsequent customer activities such as advocacy. Yet, as noted by Sweeney et al. (2020) relatively few explorations of the advocacy construct exist. If the “ultimate test” of a firm-customer relationship is whether a customer becomes and advocate for the firm (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997) what frameworks might provide the grounding for an exploration of service dynamics associated with the construct?

Service-dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) has generated abundant attention in marketing as well as other disciplines. The framework delineates service-based logic for exchange whereby relational partners co-create value through unique, experiential interactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). SDL has broadened the conversation as to “service” in the context of actor collaboration for mutual benefit (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Lusch, Vargo, & O’Brien, 2007). Firm-customer (micro) and ecosystem (macro) thinking are prominent in the service literature with service exchange/value co-creation conceived as value-in-social-context (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

As part of the expanded SDL narrative, Edvardsson et al. (2011) and Nilsson and Ballantyne (2014) recognize the need for research that examines the role social context plays in value co-creation. The SDL and marketing literature have called for research that articulates how cooperation and coordination influence the co-creation of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Along parallel lines of thinking the consumer satisfaction-related literature called for deeper examinations of social bonding and other intervening variables not strongly accounted for in research (Davidow, 2012). Further, Vargo and Lusch (2017) highlight the need for evidenced based mid-range theory in the continuing exploration and development of SDL. In sum, an imperative for the marketing literature is to develop a deeper understanding of how social aspects of exchange are connected to customer experiences that contribute to value for both the firm and the customer.

This research addresses questions related to what value-in-social-context “looks like.” We deepen thinking in the area through an integration of how relational benefit and identity processes are implicated in value co-creation in a B2C retail context. Specifically, we examine moderated and mediated relationships among perceived retailer communication, relational benefits, and whether the customer identifies with the retailer in understanding advocacy. This study is a unique examination of these relationships in explaining advocacy. The following section includes a review and synthesis of the pertinent literature that provides reasoning for hypothesized relationships. The method and results follow. We end with future research considerations, and theoretical and managerial implications.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Nilsson and Ballantyne (2014) frame the servicescape as the context for service which contains social and symbolic elements crucial to co-creation. As such, various modes of communication can impact aspects of value co-creation (Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014). Further, in this context, following the thinking of symbolic interactionism (Blumer (1969), people may actively interpret the behavior of relational actors which points to the potential importance of the role of front-line employees and what they do *with* and *for* customers (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould, Price, & Tierney, 1998). This thinking is consistent with Vargo and Lusch (2006), Lusch et al. (2007), and Ramaswamy (2011) in which employee-customer service interaction and intentional collaboration are focal concepts in value co-creation. Yet as noted by Nilsson and Ballantyne (2014) and Breidbach and Maglio (2016) present understanding of service as social context has not adequately captured dyadic resource integration as experienced by the customer. Finally, foundational thinking in SDL points to service as inherently relational with value uniquely perceived by the beneficiary (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Based on this thinking, we believe that two prominent perspectives - identity and relational benefits - can offer insights into value co-creation in a retail setting. We briefly introduce identity and relational benefits literature and then turn attention to a more detailed synthesis of reasoning linking relationships among perceived retailer

communication, relational benefits, and whether the customer identifies with the retailer in understanding advocacy.

Identity Literature

It is well known that an individual's self-concept is made up of identities that play a large role in consumer behavior (Levy, 1959; Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988). Social identity theory has directed attention to the interplay of self-concept and social structures and their effect on social behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Brewer, 1991). A person's self-conception is an architecture (supporting behavior) and a process (constantly evolving with its environment) and consists of various identities (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Terry, & Smith, 2007). An identity includes a category label with which a consumer self-associates (Reed, Forehand, Putoni, & Warlop, 2012). The label is tied to an actor's thinking, feelings, and behaviors with respect to the referent and thus represents psychological connection (Oyserman, 2009; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). As part of this process, individuals will seek out firms that help them address important self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Literature supports the notion that identities are malleable and influenced by situational factors and often determine social behavior (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Aaker, 1999; Reed et al., 2012; Frechette, Arnold, Kaikati, & Singh, 2019). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) propose a conceptual framework (but do not test) that customer-firm identification should influence customer extra-role behavior (e.g., company promotion, customer recruitment). Aharne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen (2005) conceptualize and support relationships among customer-company identification and customer extra-role behaviors (e.g., positive/negative communication, volunteering for company sponsored events) in a consultative sales context.

Relational Benefits

The relational benefits literature articulates three customer benefit categories that can influence the course of service relationships (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). In this perspective, benefits revolve around the core product/service or the relationship with the service provider (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Gremler, 2000). Relational benefits are rooted in the latter, that is, beyond the core service provided. According to this literature, relational benefits consist of confidence benefits, related to knowing what to expect and reduced anxiety from a service provider; social benefits, which refer to the familiar/friendly interaction between employees and customers; and special treatment benefits, which relate to customers receiving additional attention and incentives (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). Relational benefits have been linked to important relational outcomes (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Gremler, 2002; Kinard & Capella, 2006; Dagger & O'Brien, 2010). For the present research, we explore social and special treatment benefits as they are more relevant to developed relationships (Dagger & O'Brien, 2009) where identity processes are likely to play a salient role in firm-customer interactions.

Hypotheses Development

So how can identity and relational benefit literature help elaborate dynamics among customer perceptions and customer advocacy for the retailer? We propose that, in the present study of coffee-house customers, customer perceptions of the service experience can reinforce customer identification with the retailer so that advocating for the retailer becomes the reciprocal enactment of their "coffee house identity." While prior conceptual and empirical work has

examined aspects of our model the complete model has not been proposed and tested as the co-creation of value-in-social-context for a common B2C retail setting.

Communication is a cornerstone of relational development (Palmatier et al., 2006) with the quality of information received from the seller linked to positive relational outcomes (Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Jones, et al., 2003) with evidence of robust effects in comparison to other antecedents, such as, store design and merchandise assortment (Guenzi, Johnson, & Castaldo, 2009). Further, formal and informal communication and social connection from the company and its boundary spanners have been implicated in identity processes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Aharne et al., 2005; Amiot et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2012). Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) conclude that firms providing identity relevant information will engender stronger customer identification. Thus, prior conceptual and empirical work has established that aspects of communication from the retailer is positively related to identification with the retailer.

Beyond communication quality, social benefits, such as rapport and personal connection, are focal to the interaction with front-line employees and represent a communal aspect of the relationship (Goodwin & Gremler, 1996; Smith, 2021). Building rapport between individual customers and front-line employees, as well as creating personal connection has been found to be a strong driver of relational outcomes. These benefits have been conceptualized and found to have indirect and direct effects to outcomes such as loyalty, satisfaction, commitment, WOM, and advocacy (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Sweeney et al., 2020) particularly for more experienced customers (Dagger & O'Brien, 2009).

While theoretical and empirical work points to the importance of communication quality and social benefits considered separately or as main effects, we extend thinking in this area by considering their combined effect. We expect customer perception of social benefits associated with front-line employees to interact with perceived quality of the communication from the retailer to impact identification with the retailer with the impact of communication quality on identification enhanced when perceived social benefits are stronger. We detail below theoretical justification synthesized from the identity literature for the combined influence of communication quality and social benefits on identification.

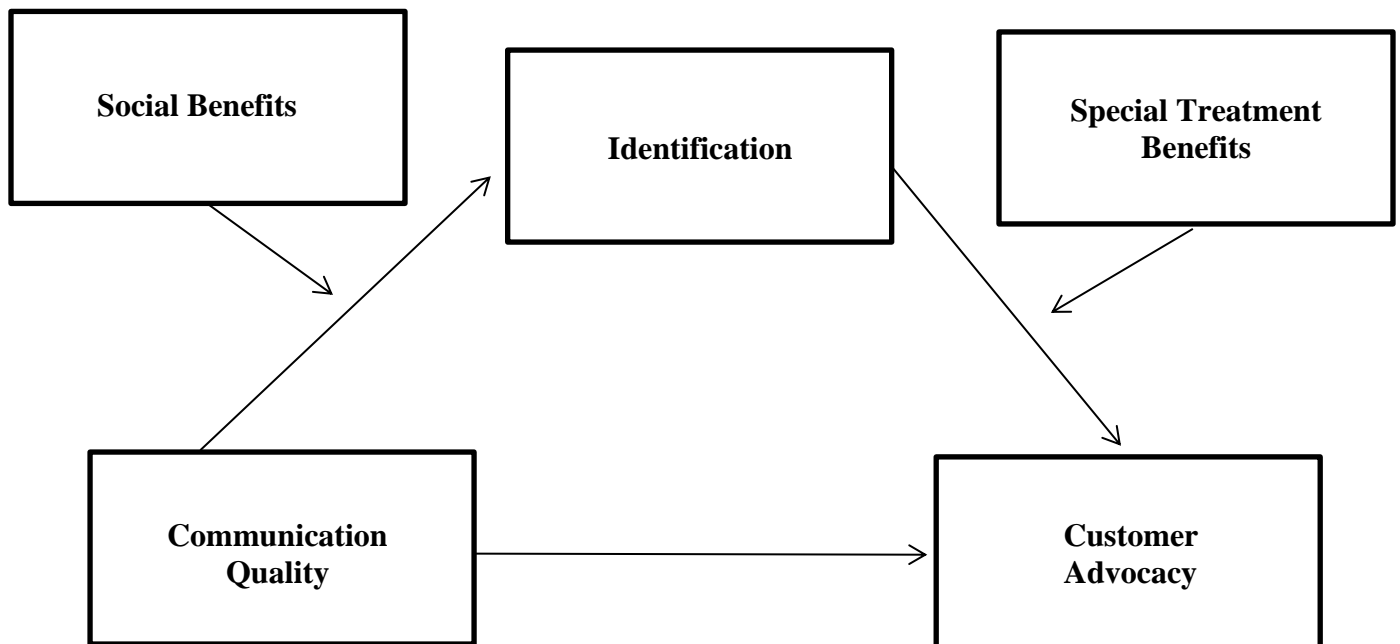
An identity lens views people as operating in distinct networks of social interactions in which they “negotiate” or engage in behavior that allows for them to play a certain role in these relational spaces (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As part of this process, our view of self is connected to others’ behaviors towards us (Stets & Burke, 2003). Two fundamental social motives are highlighted in the identity literature: self-verification and self-enhancement. Evidence points to simultaneous self-verification and self-enhancement of identities by individuals (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Self-verification requires the cognitive system to compare stored identity information to environmental stimuli (Swan, 1987; Reed, 2002). In this process, individuals endeavor for consistency between the way they see themselves and the way others see them (Reed et al., 2012). Thus, the perception of one relational partner receiving accurate and complete information from another relational partner (e.g., quality communication) is one way an individual can confirm his role in the social context (“This helps account for my relationship with this retailer”) (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In addition, self-enhancement is an emotionally oriented process in which individuals associate positive environmental stimuli (e.g., social benefits) to their self-concepts. Repeated friendly, personal interactions with employees link positive emotional content to self-relevant exemplars (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) which should enhance the effect of quality communication on identification with the retailer. This thinking is consistent with Swan (1987), who views identity “negotiation” as an interaction between these two processes –

verification and enhancement. Therefore, we believe it is the combination of customer perceived communication quality and front-line retail employee behavior signaling social benefits that impact an individual's "retail customer" identity.

Based on the preceding discussion, we propose that:

H1: *The perceived quality of the communication associated with the coffee house will interact with (be moderated by) social benefit perceptions associated with front-line employees to impact customer identification with the coffee retailer (such that when perceived social benefits are stronger, the influence of communication quality on identification will be greater).*

Figure 1:
Hypothesized Model



The idea that identification is an important mediator in relational processes has been conceptualized and supported in prior literature (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Stokburger-Saur, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). For example, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) developed a conceptual framework of antecedents and consequences of consumer-company identification with identification as the proximal antecedent to customer loyalty, customer promotion of the company, and customer recruitment of customers. Ahearne et al. (2005) proposed and tested a model with perceptions of a company in a consultative selling context working through customer-company identification to influence customer in-role and extra-role behaviors. Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) proposed and tested a model with brand identification mediating the effects of prestige, satisfaction, and corporate communication on customer repurchase and word of mouth in the automobile industry. Another example finds Stokburger-Saur et al. (2012) conceptualizing and

testing a model with multiple antecedents (including social benefits) interacting with product involvement mediated by consumer-brand identification to influence brand loyalty and advocacy for four categories (athletic shoes, mobile phones, soft drinks, and grocery stores). Significant interaction effects were found for most of the antecedents.

Based on relevant identity theory we expect the interaction of perceived communication quality and social benefits will work through identification with the retailer to influence customer advocacy. Thus, a repeatedly reinforced identity should become more salient with salience increasing the likelihood that the identity is an active facet of a person's self-concept (Reed et al., 2012). A salient identity will be active across a range of contexts (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Thus, a "retail customer" identity will manifest itself in situations beyond the retailer. Further, identity relevance is connected to the motivational basis of identity. Action-relevance motivates behavior in a more instrumental, deliberate fashion between the identity object and identity holder (Reed et al., 2012). Therefore, a customer with a "retailer identity" may feel it is their duty to advocate for (actively promote and defend) the retailer.

This thinking is consistent with Flynn (2005) who notes that reciprocity, a foundation of social exchange, can be implicated in dyadic identity interactions. With identification, individuals are driven to create benefit for the other party as part of relational exchange (Flynn, 2005). Therefore, we propose that perceptions of the coffee retailer (communication quality and social benefits) will work through a customer's identification with the retailer to positively influence advocacy. In this way, advocacy is an aspect of identity enactment in providing favorable "promotional discourse" in the interest of the identity object – the retailer.

Recall, special treatment benefits have also been conceived as a category of relational benefits which may impact relational outcomes. However, results for special treatment benefits have been mixed with some findings pointing to effects for special treatment benefits on satisfaction (for experienced customers) and commitment with other findings not supporting effects for satisfaction, loyalty, and WOM (Dagger & O'Brien, 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Kinard & Capella, 2006). Researchers have raised questions with respect to the effectiveness of special treatment benefits as these types of extrinsic rewards may contribute to short-term effects and not the "true" firm-customer relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Kinard & Capella, 2006).

Thus, beyond the unique contribution of testing the potential moderating effect of social benefits, we also examine the unique contribution of the potential moderating effect of special treatment benefits. Our synthesis of identification and relationship benefits thinking follows. The identity literature argues that identities are schemas that contain information and meaning (internalized roles) which are enacted through behavior in context (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Meanings among identity, perceptions of situational cues (which contain contextual sign meaning), and behavior must correspond. Discrepancies between identity meanings and situational cues (signs) must be reconciled through behavior that supports an individual's self-conception (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Swan & Hill, 1982). In the context of the present study, identification with the retailer should interact with the perception of special treatment benefits. Since meaning associated with special treatment benefits can be interpreted as inconsistent with the meaning inherent in a strong retailer-customer identity ("Why are they attempting to 'buy' me with these incentives?") perceptions of special treatment benefits should have a negative effect on customer advocacy for the retailer ("Why should I promote and defend a firm not validating - or making me question - the nature of our relationship?"). Note in keeping with symbolic interactionism, it is an

individual's perception of meanings attached to the context in relation to an identity that sets the stage for identity-relevant behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Therefore, we propose a second stage moderation effect (identification x special treatment benefits) in addition to the first stage effect (communication quality x social benefits). This effect is referred to as the moderation of an indirect effect or moderated mediation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Fairchild & MacKinnon, 2009). Therefore, we propose that:

H2: *The interaction (communication quality x social benefits) will work through (be mediated by) the interaction of customer identification and perceived special treatment benefits offered by the coffee house to influence customer advocacy (such that when perceived social benefits are stronger and special treatment benefits weaker, the influence of communication quality on customer advocacy working through identification will be greater).*

To provide a more robust test of the proposed model, we include satisfaction (with beverages and employee encounters) and continuance commitment (as an indicator of advantage in this competitive market) constructs as covariates. These constructs have been conceptualized as key components in understanding the relational experience in services, with satisfaction recently being proposed as the foundational outcome of marketing (c.f., Larsen & Wright, 2020; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Palmer & Bejou, 1994; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Further, prior research has included satisfaction and commitment in explorations of constructs employed in the present research such as relational benefits, identification, and advocacy, (c.f., Hennig-Thurau, 2002; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Dagger & O'Brien, 2010; Sashi, Brynildsen, & Bilgihan, 2019).

METHOD

Context

The context for this study was a regional, U.S. coffee house with a long history in its geographical market. Even though the study utilizes a cross-sectional, single retailer design, adequate variability across several locations and different service experience (in-store vs. drive-through) are likely to result in different customer experiences (c.f., Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Liu, 2007).

Sample and Procedure

The sampling frame consisted of coffee house customers. Active customers were sampled through internet surveys and intercept surveys at five store locations to capture responses from customers who may predominantly use drive-through services and ensure variability in respondents. Customers received an incentive (a gift card worth five dollars) for participation which resulted in a response rate of over 60 percent. This process resulted in 321 usable surveys over the internet and 314 surveys in-store, for a total of 634 respondents.

Respondents' age averaged 38 years and ranged from 18 to 90 years old. Most respondents were female (62%), Caucasian (90%), and had at least some level of college education (67%). Managerial/professional ranks accounted for a majority of occupations (48%), while students accounted for 20%. Thirty percent of respondents had been a customer for greater than 10 years, while 50% had been a customer for one to five years. Respondents averaged nine visits per month to the coffee house with patronage frequency ranging from at least once a month (11%) to at least

once a day (4%). Finally, 57% of respondents reported purchasing in-store and at the drive-through, 31% purchased in-store only, and 12% purchased at the drive-through only.

Measures

The questionnaire included measures of customer perceptions related to communication quality, social benefits, identification, special treatment benefits, satisfaction, commitment, and demographic descriptors. Construct measures were modified from earlier published measures.

Customer Identification. Since the objective was to capture activated and self-relevant aspects of an individual's identity structure, this research used approaches to measure "active" constructs." The use of forced choice (yes/no) formats have been used to capture "active" aspects of such constructs as involvement, trust, and identification (cf., Tonigan, Connors, & Miller, 1996; Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001; Chalutz Ben-Gal, Tzafir, & Dolan, 2015). Measurement items asked respondents whether various belief-based statements described themselves (yes/no) (items provided in Table 1). The method is consonant with the identity literature that conceptualizes salience as highly accessible knowledge, feelings, and roles congruent with a situation (the self-situation congruity) that represent the extended-self or self-definition that can affect related behavior (in this study customer-coffee house identity behavior) (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Belk, 1988; Reed, 2002). Responses to items were summed representing the number of identity-related self-beliefs that a respondent was committed to as a means of capturing active identification (Cronbach's alpha =.75).

Other measures. Other constructs were also measured with multiple item scales adapted from prior research. *Communication Quality.* This construct assessed the customer's perception of the communication received from the coffee house (Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Guenzi et al., 2009). *Social and Special Treatment Benefits.* These constructs assessed experiential aspects of the relationship with front-line employees and the coffee house (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). *Customer Advocacy Behavior.* This construct measured the extent of a customer's promotion and defense of the coffee house (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Verhoef et al., 2002; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). *Satisfaction and Commitment.* As noted earlier these variables were included to serve as covariates given that they have been identified in prior research as influencing customer WOM/advocacy (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Sashi et al., 2019; Sweeney et al., 2020). Table 1 includes detailed descriptions of construct items and scaling.

RESULTS

The objective of this research is to test for moderating and mediating relationships. Reliability, discriminant validity, and convergent validity were evaluated for the multi-item measures prior to analyses. Multi-item measures were above recommended thresholds for Cronbach's Alphas (Alphas = .69, .86, .83, .91, .83, and .80) and composite reliabilities (CRs = .75, .86, .86, .91, .81, and .81), respectively, for communication quality, social benefits, special treatment benefits, advocacy, satisfaction, and commitment. Confirmatory factor analysis (AMOS 18) was used to assess the convergent validity of measures. Observed indicators were all statistically significant ($p < .01$) for their corresponding factors. Measurement model fit statistics $\chi^2(154) = 505.89, p < .000, NFI = .936, CFI = .954, RMSEA = .060$ suggest that observed indicators are representative of constructs (Hu & Bentler 1999; Hair et al., 2006). The amount of variance extracted for each multi-item construct was above the recommended threshold of .50 (AVEs = .51, .61, .68, .71, .53, and .59, respectively, for communication quality, social benefits, special treatment benefits, advocacy, satisfaction, and commitment).

Table 1
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Constructs and Items	Standardized Coefficient
Communication Quality (scaled: strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree (5))	
My perception of _____ is that it...	
Provides accurate information about its products and services.	.75
Gives complete information about its products and services.	.80
How well does this statement describe you?	
Are well informed about _____ products and services.	.57
Social Benefits (scaled: strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree (5))	
Regarding your relationship with the coffee house, you...	
Enjoy talking to store employees.	.73
Feel the employees are like friends to you.	.84
Have meaningful conversations with employees since they know you as a person, not just another customer.	.89
Special Treatment Benefits (scaled: strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree (5))	
Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about your relationship with _____.	
Receive “special service” that other customers don’t get.	.96
Get reward points for your purchases.	.60
Are given priority over other customers.	.86
Advocacy (scaled: not at all (1)/extremely well (5))	
How well do these statements describe you or what you actually do?	
Say positive things about _____ to people you know.	.86
Defend _____ when someone says something negative.	.78
Encourage friends and relatives to go to _____.	.89
Recommend _____ to people if they want advice on a good coffee house.	.85
Satisfaction (scaled:(1)/(5))	
Overall, how do you feel about these aspects of your experience with _____?	
Regarding the beverages you purchase? Dissatisfied/Satisfied	.89
Regarding the beverages you purchase? Displeased/Pleased	.89
Regarding the employee encounters? Dissatisfied/Satisfied	.51
Regarding the employee encounters? Displeased/Pleased	.51

Table 1 continued

Commitment (scaled: strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree (5))

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about your relationship with _____.

Would keep visiting _____ even if it became harder to reach.	.77
Would keep buying at _____ even if prices increase.	.67
Would “go the extra mile” to remain a _____ customer.	.85

Identification (scaled: yes (1)/no (0))

Indicate if these items describe you:

- Thinking of the retailer as “your coffee house.”
- Seeing the coffee house’s successes as your successes.
- Being very interested in what others think about the coffee house.
- Feeling it is a personal compliment when someone praises the coffee house.
- Being offended/hurt when someone says something negative about the coffee house.
- Feeling that being a committed customer is part of who you are.

Note: All standardized coefficients are significant at $p < .01$.

With respect to discriminant validity, the amount of variance extracted for each construct is greater than the squared correlation between constructs. Results provide support for the convergent and discriminant validity of the multi-item interval scale construct measures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2006). Summated scores of the multi-item scales were used to address the research hypotheses.

As discussed above, we followed a methodology to capture self-relevant aspects of a customer’s active identify. Out of 634 customers of the retailer, nearly 48% indicated some active identification with the coffee house. Of these, 47% and 25% of respondents, respectively, identified “yes” to one or two items; 12% indicated “yes” to three items; 16% indicated “yes” to four or more items. Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all measures used in this study.

Hypotheses suggest that the moderating effect of communication quality and social benefits works indirectly through the identification x special treatment benefits interaction to influence customer advocacy. Preacher and Hayes (2004) developed a rigorous “bootstrap” test to examine indirect effects in models.

Following Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), two regression equations were estimated for the model examining customer advocacy. For the first equation, communication quality, social benefits, the interaction term (communication quality x social benefits), and covariates (satisfaction and commitment) were entered as predictors of identification. For the second equation, communication quality, social benefits, special treatment benefits, identification, the interaction term, and covariates were entered as predictors of advocacy.

PROCESS Macro Model 21 (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS 24 was used to analyze the data. Given the potential effects of collinearity between regressor variables, mean centering was used (Shieh, 2011). Table 3 presents results for the analysis which tests the conditional effects model (Figure 1).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Study Constructs

	Standard		X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7
	Mean	Deviation							
X1 Communication Quality	3.74	0.65	--						
X2 Social Benefits	3.03	0.90	.41**	--					
X3 Identification*	2.08	1.38	.35**	.54**	--				
X4 Special Treatment Benefits	2.35	0.97	.24**	.45**	.29**	--			
X5 Advocacy	3.20	0.91	.64**	.56**	.53**	.35**	--		
X6 Satisfaction	4.33	0.66	.42**	.40**	.25**	.15**	.47**	--	
X7 Commitment	2.98	0.92	.52**	.61**	.54**	.32**	.64**	.48**	--

* Mean and standard deviation for individuals actively identifying with coffee house.
** Correlation is significant at $p < .01$

Table 3 shows that H1 is supported as the proposed interaction effect (communication quality x social benefits) is significant ($p < .00$) in the regression equation predicting identification. Satisfaction is not significant while commitment is significant in the equation predicting identification with $R^2 = .38$ ($R^2 = .33$ with satisfaction and commitment excluded from this equation). Further, H2 is supported with the effect of the interaction (communication quality x social benefits) working through the identification x special treatment benefits interaction. The identification x special treatment benefits interaction is significant in the regression equation predicting advocacy ($p < .01$). Satisfaction and commitment are both significant in the equation predicting advocacy with $R^2 = .60$ ($R^2 = .57$ with satisfaction and commitment excluded from this equation).

Table 4 displays the bootstrapping results for the conditional indirect effects of communication quality on identification at values of the moderator (social benefits) at various levels (i.e., high = one standard deviation above the mean; medium = at the mean; low = one standard deviation below the mean). The “Effect” column shows the effects of communication quality and social benefits on identification. Confidence intervals (lower level - upper level) that exclude zero are evidence of an effect statistically different from zero. Note that a significant effect is observed for communication quality at the highest level of social benefits.

Table 3
Linear Regression Results for Advocacy

	Identification			Consequent Advocacy		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Antecedents						
Comm. Quality	.13	.08	.11	.51	.04	.00
Social Benefits	.48	.06	.00	---	---	---
Comm. Quality X Social Benefits	.31	.07	.00	---	---	---
Identification						
Spec. Treat. Benefits	---	---	---	.16	.02	.00
Identification X Spec. Treat. Benefits	---	---	---	.11	.03	.00
	---	---	---	-.04	.02	.01
Covariates						
Satisfaction	-.10	.08	.20	.17	.04	.00
Commitment	.52	.07	.00	.18	.04	.00
Constant	-1.18	.07	.00	1.77	.18	.00
	$R^2 = .38$			$R^2 = .60$		
	$F(5, 628) = 77.89, p < .00$			$F(6, 627) = 157.64, p < .00$		

Note: R^2 change for the communication quality x social benefits interaction effect on identification = .02.

Table 4
Conditional Effect of Communication Quality on Identification at Values of the Moderator (Social Benefits)

Social Benefits*	Effect	SE	p	Lower Level CI	Upper Level CI
-1.03	-.19	.11	.10	-.41	.04
-0.03	.13	.08	.13	-.04	.29
0.97	.44	.10	.00	.24	.64

*Values for the moderator are for the mean and +/- one SD from the mean.
Note: The conditional effect of communication quality on identification is significant at one standard deviation above the mean for social benefits as the confidence interval excludes zero indicative of statistically significant effect.

To depict the interaction effect associated with the regression model predicting identification, slopes are plotted for respondents one standard deviation below the mean (Mean = 2.12) and for respondents one standard deviation above the mean (Mean = 3.93) for social benefits. Figure 2 presents the effect of the interaction on identification. Increasing perceptions of the quality of communication associated with the coffee house has a stronger effect on identification for customers experiencing higher social benefits from interacting with front-line personnel ($F(1, 108) = 4.52, R^2 = .04, p < .03$) in comparison to customers experiencing lower social benefits ($F(1, 103) = 3.93, R^2 = .03, p < .05$).

Figure 2

Interactive effects of communication quality and social benefits on customer identification

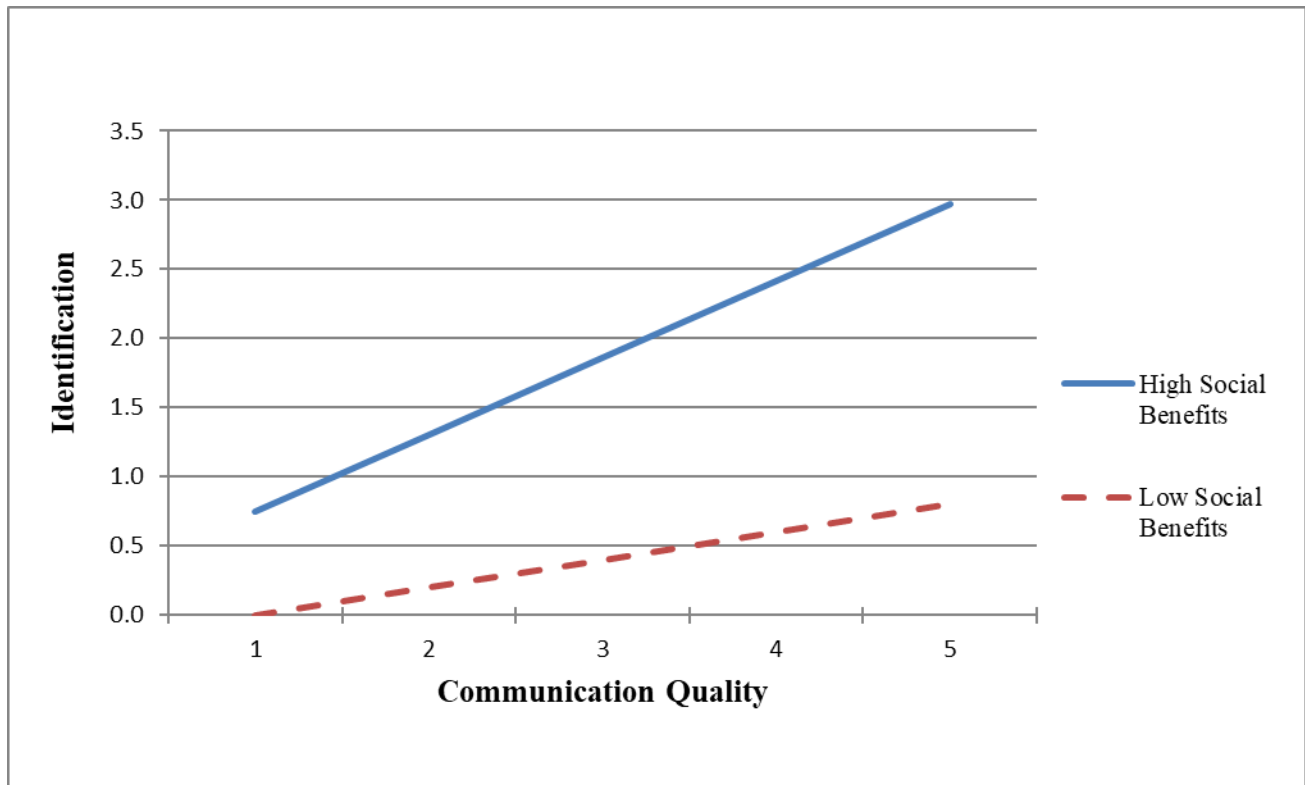


Table 5 displays the bootstrapping results for the conditional effect of identification on advocacy at various levels of the moderator (special treatment benefits) (i.e., high = one standard deviation above the mean; medium = at the mean; low = one standard deviation below the mean). The “Effect” column shows the combined effects for identification and special treatment benefits on customer advocacy. As noted earlier, evidence of an effect statistically different from zero are indicated by confidence intervals that exclude zero. Significant effects for identification on advocacy are observed for all levels of special treatment benefits with the effect strongest when special treatment is perceived to be low.

Table 6 displays the results for the conditional indirect effect of communication quality on customer advocacy working through identification at various levels of the moderators (social and special treatment benefits). The “Effect” column in Table 6 shows the combined effects on advocacy. Note that significant effects for communication quality on advocacy working through

identification are observed for lower and higher levels of social benefits for all levels of special treatment benefits with the effect strongest when social benefits are high and special treatment benefits are low. Also note the negative effects on advocacy for levels of special treatment benefits when perceived social benefits are low.

Table 5

Conditional Effect of Identification on Advocacy at values of the Moderator (Special Treatment Benefits)

Special Treatment Benefits*	Effect	SE	p	Lower Level CI	Upper Level CI
-1.35	.21	.04	.00	.14	.28
-0.01	.16	.02	.00	.12	.20
0.99	.12	.02	.00	.08	.16

*Values for the moderator are for the mean and -/+ one SD from the mean.
 Note: The conditional effect of identification on advocacy is significant at all levels of the special treatment benefits as the confidence intervals exclude zero indicative of statistically significant effects.

Table 6

Conditional Indirect Effect of Communication Quality on Advocacy Working Through Identification at Values of the Moderators

Social Benefits*	Spec. Treat. Benefits*	Effect	Boot SE	Lower Level CI	Upper Level CI
-1.027	-1.347	-.040	.020	-.081	-.003
-1.027	-0.013	-.030	.015	-.059	-.002
-1.027	0.987	-.022	.011	-.044	-.002
-0.027	-1.347	.027	.018	-.009	.062
-0.027	-0.013	.020	.014	-.006	.047
-0.027	0.987	.015	.011	-.004	.038
0.973	-1.347	.093	.031	.038	.155
0.973	-0.013	.069	.023	.028	.112
0.973	0.987	.052	.019	.019	.094

As noted earlier, customers were sampled through internet surveys and intercept surveys. To ensure equivalency of respondent samples, we replicated analysis for each type of sample. The results mirror each other for the internet and intercept samples and are consistent with the combined sample.

Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were used to evaluate the effects of collinearity among the variables. For the first equation, VIFs ranged from 1.03 – 1.99. For the second equation, VIFs ranged from 1.28 – 2.21. Thus, collinearity is not indicated as a problem (Hair et al., 2006).

In summary, consistent with predictions, the perceived quality of the communication associated with the coffee house was found to interact with social benefit perceptions associated with front-line employees to influence customer identification with the coffee retailer. The influence of communication quality on identification was stronger when perceived social benefits are higher. Further, as expected, the communication quality x social benefits interaction was found to work through the interaction of customer identification and perceived special treatment benefits offered by the coffee house to influence customer advocacy. The impact of communication quality on customer advocacy working through identification was stronger when perceived social benefits were higher and special treatment benefits were lower.

DISCUSSION

Advocacy is recognized as an important form of customer extra-role behavior that provides significant communication value to firms through intense customer-to-customer promotion and defense of the product and/or service. Sweeney et al., (2020) suggest that advocates are substantially more profitable than those customers who provide positively valenced WOM. This research addresses questions raised in the marketing literature as to what value-in-social-context “looks like” and deepens theory in the area as to how relational benefit and identity processes are implicated in value co-creation for a B2C retail context. Specifically, we examine moderated and mediated relationships among perceived retailer communication, relational benefits, and identification with the retailer in explaining customer advocacy. The model that was tested and supported was parsimonious and had relatively strong explanatory power with significant effects for this coffee house service context while also accounting for the effects of satisfaction and commitment constructs. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine such relationships theoretically and empirically in explaining advocacy.

Theoretical Implications

The present research contributes to our understanding of servicescape through a SDL lens in elaborating firm-customer (micro-level) value co-creation dynamics. In doing so, we integrate identity literature to highlight the social and signaling dimensions which impact meaning in context. Consistent with symbolic interactionism, market actors are conceived as active agents in interactions with their environment who strive to harmonize self-conceptions and context. We support prior research in finding formal and informal communication and social bonding to be implicated in identity processes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Amiot et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2012).

We extend thinking in the area in that customer perceptions of communication quality and social benefits were found to interact and are conceived as resources that can contribute to the self-verification and self-enhancement of customer’s identity. Self-verification and enhancement processes in turn, create customer value through a reinforcement of identity which in turn drives the customer to generate reciprocal value – engage in advocacy behavior for the retailer. This study highlights the important role of communication, social benefits, and identity processes in customer advocacy. Consistent with prior research, we find identification mediates the effects of less proximal antecedents of advocacy (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Stokburger-Saur, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). Thus, routinized, interaction

among customers and front-line employees becomes “institutionalized” behavior that is part of the narrative of service-dominant logic (Varo & Lusch, 2016). In this broader sense, servicescapes can be viewed as opportunity structures for identification enactment.

We also extend thinking in the area by examining the moderating effects of two relational benefit categories that are particularly relevant to the retail context studied. In doing so we detail the roles played by social and special treatment benefits in the identity “negotiation” process. Overall, results are supportive of prior thinking that front-line employees can represent a communal aspect of the relationship (Goodwin & Gremler, 1996) with social/emotional aspects positively linked to self-relevant exemplars (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Further, questions have been raised with respect to the effectiveness of special treatment benefits as these types of extrinsic rewards may not be consistent with a “true” firm-customer relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Kinard & Capella, 2006).

We add more nuanced thinking in the area by finding social benefits to enhance the effect of communication on identity and special treatment benefits to mitigate the effect of identity on advocacy. Dagger and O’Brien ((2009) found positive effects for special treatment benefits on satisfaction and trust for experienced service customers however experienced customers may not be highly identified with the company and they did not assess the effects of special treatment benefits on advocacy. Clearly, while more research is needed in this area, an examination of relational benefits as moderators in relational processes warrants further attention as they hold the potential of improving understanding as moderators change the association between constructs and therefore offer theoretical and managerial insights.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future identity-related research could profit from integrating affect theory into models examining customer identification, as strong emotion (negative and positive) has been tied to identity verification, enhancement, and salience (Stryker, 1987; Swan, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2003). How might identify-related emotions connect to identification and customer advocacy as well as other customer extra-role behavior?

Another area for future research relates to direct exploration of identity verification and enhancement in context. Relational identity processes are conceived as one actor’s perception of appropriate behavior in context as well as relevant other actor perceptions of appropriate focal actor behavior in the context (Stets & Burke, 2003). As such, attribution and categorization processes both come into play in an individual’s interpretation and classification of interactions which can impact subsequent behavior (Gooding & Kinicki, 1995). Attributional processes have been implicated in self-esteem protection and mastery motivations (Ross & Fletcher, 1985). Therefore, future research in the area might want to explore attribution and identity processes particularly for non-verification/non-enhancement episodes in firm-customer and customer-customer interactions.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

How can firms more effectively manage customer advocacy? A deeper explanation of how retail employee behavior impacts customer identity could help retail management implement more intentional procedures to impact customer advocacy. According to Bowen (1986), customer/front-line retail employee encounters offer the chance to contribute to psychological connectedness. This research points to the importance of *how* information is communicated to the customer beyond *what* is communicated. Creating an organization culture that attracts, socializes, and

motivates front-line employees in terms of knowledge development and customer rapport-building is an important managerial takeaway.

Recruiting the “right type” of people that are more authentic in positive interactional behavior with customers along with training in positive displays would be steps in the right direction. Retail employee behavior stemming from certain traits (e.g., emotional maturity, agreeableness, and extroversion) would help customers feel that employee behavior is more “genuine.” (Mechinda & Patterson, 2011). Further, training in skills tied to interpersonal bonding (e.g., self-disclosure, and non-defensive and active listening) is also consistent with communication likely to enable identity processes. Linking customer ratings of their service experience to employee rewards is also a demonstrable way of signaling its importance to employees (Jones et al., 2014). At their core, employee behaviors can help drive psychological connection which is the foundation of identity (Deaux, 1996). This thinking is consistent with the recent work of Sweeney et al., (2020) who note the importance of social bonding and identification to advocacy.

In contrast to social benefits, given findings of the present research, we echo cautions with respect to the use of special treatment benefits for more strongly identified customers. Therefore, the assessment and monitoring of customer identification in concert with the deployment of these benefits appears warranted as their use negatively impacted advocacy from customers who identified with the retailer. This recommendation is consistent with thinking that “real” psychological connectedness and its outcomes cannot be bought (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; McConnell & Huba, 2003) and that special treatment benefits are a weaker source of sustainable competitive advantage (Berry, 1995). Of course, the efficacy of practices tied to the differential treatment of customers that identify and advocate for the retailer begs exploration.

It will be important to consider advocacy in a technology-enabled servicescape. It is clear that advocacy will only increase in significance given the growing prominence of digital interactivity. Therefore, managers will have to translate knowledge of value-in-social-context dynamics from offline to online environments (Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014). Early evidence appears to point to the importance of customer engagement and relationship building to online customer advocacy (Sashi et al., 2019) which is consistent with the need for further research examining how offline identification related processes translate to and work in concert with online exchange behavior.

Given some measure of consistency between offline and online environments, managers can then design, implement, and monitor digital platforms and engagement programs that leverage communication and social bonding effects to reinforce and magnify firm-customer identification. Such efforts could pay dividends in more formally integrating another customer extra-role behavior, customer-to-firm feedback, in value co-creation in the interest of more expansive psychological embeddedness and customer-to-customer advocacy.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study allowed for a deeper examination of context-specific effects (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002), we recognize it is limited to a single retailer and single industry. To help mitigate this limitation, we collected responses from the internet as well as several different locations to account for unique customer experiences. Another limitation relates to the study’s single-source, cross-sectional design. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to examine identity process effects over time and for customers and front-line employees. It is noteworthy that common methods variance is not likely to account for interaction effects observed, a focus of

this study, and in fact if common methods variance is present, the effects of moderation are likely to be even *more substantial* than observed (Siemens, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). We acknowledge that we have explored only one realm of how company communication can impact customer identity. Clearly, company values communication, advertising, and social responsibility messaging are also implicated in firm-customer identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Future research could also employ a more extensive measure of advocacy (c.f., Sweeney et al., 2020). Would an examination of the influence of identification on types of customer advocacy (promotion, defense, virtual recommendations) find differential results for these advocacy domains?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is much to be learned about how cooperation and coordination inherent in servicescapes contribute to customer advocacy as value-in-social-context. The narrative, while complex, seems to be developing around a richer understanding of identity processes which can support or constrain the integration of resources in the co-creation of value. Specifically, firm communication and aspects of relational benefits can positively influence customer self-conceptions and negatively influence customer advocacy. In this way, service context can support or detract from identify negotiation for mutual actor benefit.

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