

# Leveraging customers' multiple identities: identity synergy as a driver of organizational identification

Paul W. Fombelle · Cheryl Burke Jarvis · James Ward · Lonnie Ostrom

Received: 12 July 2010 / Accepted: 11 March 2011 / Published online: 4 May 2011  
© Academy of Marketing Science 2011

**Abstract** Marketers want to encourage constituents to strongly identify with their organizations, because organizational identification contributes to positive firm outcomes. However, the extant research on organizational identity largely has overlooked the fact that an individual's "self" actually is a collection of multiple social identities. This study is the first to propose and empirically demonstrate that marketers can leverage customers' multiple societal roles (e.g., parent, environmentalist, professor) to build and reinforce their relationships with the firm. Specifically, the research introduces the concept of "identity synergy." Identity synergy occurs when individuals' involvement with an organization facilitates their pursuit of other important social identities. Our study shows that customer perception of identity synergy is positively related to identification with an organization. Moreover, the study helps explain the process by which

antecedents of organizational identity (identity affirmation, identity support, and value congruence) positively affect customer-firm relationships by proposing and testing identity synergy as a mediator between these antecedents and organizational identification. The study also contributes to our understanding of organizational identity theory by introducing the new concept of peer identification, or identification with other members of the organization, such as other customers or volunteers. The empirical evidence demonstrates identity synergy's role in building peer identification, as well as peer identification's role in building organizational identification.

**Keywords** Organizational identification · Peer identification · Multiple identities · Identity synergy

P. W. Fombelle (✉)  
College of Business Administration, Marketing Group,  
Northeastern University,  
202 Hayden Hall,  
Boston, MA 02115, USA  
e-mail: p.fombelle@neu.edu

C. B. Jarvis  
College of Business, Southern Illinois University,  
Rehn Hall 223, 1025 Lincoln Drive, Mailcode 4629, Carbondale,  
IL 62901, USA  
e-mail: cbjarvis@cba.siu.edu

J. Ward · L. Ostrom  
W.P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University,  
Tempe, AZ, USA

J. Ward  
e-mail: James.Ward@asu.edu

L. Ostrom  
e-mail: lostrom@asu.edu

Organizational identification, defined as a person's perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992), has a rich research history and has long been accepted as a strong component in binding individuals to an organization. Researchers have shown that individuals' identification with an organization leads to increased support of—and participation in—the organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992), increased customer intent to purchase products or brands (Aaker 1999; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Sirgy 1982), increased customer receptivity to and effectiveness of advertising (Wheeler et al. 2005), decreased employee turnover (O'Reilly and Chatman 1986), and improved customer citizenship behaviors and increased market share (Ahearne et al. 2005).

Organizational identification research in business contexts typically has focused on a single primary identity—that of the individual's identification with the organization—such as an employee's identification with an employer (e.g., Dutton et al.

1994), a customer's identification with a company (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2005), a volunteer's or donor's identification with a nonprofit organization (e.g., Bhattacharya et al. 1995), or an alumnus' identification with a university (e.g., Mael and Ashforth 1992). However, it has been long recognized in the social psychology literature that individuals typically have *multiple* identities (James 1890). From an identity theory perspective, the self is a collection of social identities resulting from the multiple positions or roles the individual holds and enacts in society (Stryker 1980; Thoits 1983). A person can identify himself or herself simultaneously as a professor, a parent, a soccer player, an animal lover, and an Apple computer user. So, even though it is accepted that an individual's self-concept is made up of many identities, organizational identity research has yet to focus on the effects of individuals' many identities on their relationships with an organization. We know little about how an organization might—or even whether it should—harness the multiple social identities of its constituents to build stronger relationships.

For decades, social psychologists testing the interplay of multiple identities assumed that only harmful consequences (including physical and psychological disorders) could result from individuals' attempts to integrate multiple identities, because of the potential for role conflict and overload (McCall and Simmons 1978; Thoits 1986). More recently, however, researchers in sociology and psychology have begun to investigate the potential for multiple identities to be mutually reinforcing, such as integrating work and non-work/family roles (Kirchmeyer 1993; Van Steenbergen et al. 2007), bolstering self-esteem (Sieber 1974), or reducing social isolation and thus improving individuals' psychological health through the accumulation of multiple identities that give purpose and roles in society (Thoits 2003).

Nevertheless, the question of how organizational identification is influenced by the pursuit of other identities in the context of the organization remains open. On the one hand, the pursuit of other identities might compete with organizational identification. For example, the role of parent might compete with the role of motorcycle club member. On the other hand, the pursuit of other identities in the context of an organization might lead to stronger organizational identification, especially if the organizational context simultaneously facilitates the pursuit of these other identities (that is, the member experienced a synergy among the other identities and the organizational identity). For example, the role of parent might not compete with the role of motorcycle club member if the club organized fun and educational family events that allowed its members to have quality parent–child interactions while participating in the organization. Thus, in this research, we build on the perspective that it can be desirable and beneficial to an

individual to enact multiple identities simultaneously, and we demonstrate that when a company finds ways to help busy customers overcome the potential for role conflict and overload by facilitating their ability to enact multiple identities when engaging with the firm, the company also can benefit through strengthened relationships with its customers.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to propose and empirically test a theoretical model demonstrating not only that organizations stand to benefit from creating opportunities for their key constituents to enact multiple social identities in the course of their interactions with the organization, but also *how* this process occurs. The study makes four key contributions to the marketing literature. Our focus on these four key questions responds to the calls by Cardador and Pratt (2006) and others to broaden marketers' understanding of the basis for organizational identification.

First, we introduce and develop a measure for the key concept of identity synergy, defined as the extent to which an individual perceives that participating in an organization facilitates the pursuit of one or more identities other than identification with the organization *per se*. To the extent that the individual feels that participating in an organization facilitates more than one (multiple) identities, the individual's perception of identity synergy should grow. Indeed, organizational contexts that facilitate the pursuit of multiple other identities are likely to be relatively rare, and thus are likely to be seen as highly synergistic contexts for identity expression. We suggest here that individuals derive value from participating in organizations that are synergistic with important social roles, because such organizations allow individuals to efficiently use a single context to achieve multiple personal identity goals. For example, a person whose important social identities include “single person” and “art lover” might find membership in an art museum known to sponsor arts events targeted at single people to be attractive. Visits to such a museum could enhance two identities—single and art lover—at once. In contrast, an art museum that did not cater to singles would seem, *ceteris paribus*, to offer less potential value for identity realization.

Second, contrary to research suggesting that pursuit of multiple identities at once causes negative consequences for the individual, we posit that customers appreciate, and thus build stronger relationships with, firms that help them to express multiple social roles simultaneously, reducing stress in their busy lives. We therefore establish that a desired positive organizational outcome—increased organizational identification—can result when firms provide synergistic opportunities for their customers.

Third, we demonstrate that identity synergy mediates the relationship between organizational identity and several key antecedents—identity support, identity affirmation, and

value congruence. We thereby demonstrate a novel theoretical explanation for the process by which these antecedents help build and reinforce organizational identity. By understanding this process, we are able to show how managers can create conditions conducive to the perception of identity synergy and thus leverage customers' multiple social identities to build stronger organizational identification.

And finally, a critical component of this research is the introduction and testing of a second form of organizational identity and the explication of its effects, that of identification of individuals within the organization with each other, or *peer identification*. To date, organizational identity research has focused on the identification of the individual with the focal organization (Bhattacharya et al. 1995; Mael and Ashforth 1992). We seek to show that people's feelings toward other individuals within an organization (e.g., other customers or members of a customer community, or other volunteers, donors, or alumni) may be distinct from their feelings toward the organization itself, and that synergy helps drive this peer identification, which in turn helps build and support customers' identification with the organization itself.

We empirically test the proposed model using survey data from members of a large nonprofit, membership-based organization. The findings of this study have implications for marketers of products and services alike, in that customer relationships with the firm can be strengthened if the organization can identify and reinforce multiple important identities for its constituents. In addition, it provides additional evidence of the importance of customer communities by identifying the peer identification process and demonstrating its positive correlation with organizational identity.

We organize the remainder of this manuscript as follows: We begin with a brief review of the relevant social identity and organizational identity literature, including a discussion of the state of the literature on multiple identities. We then develop our identity synergy construct and hypotheses. The following sections describe the study context and data collection, and present the analysis and results. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and their implications and suggestions for future research.

## Conceptual background

### Identity theory and organizational identification

Social identity theory is a social psychological theory of intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self (Hogg et al. 1995). The formation of a social identity allows an individual to perceive himself or herself as psychologically linked with the group, sharing the group's

experiences, and feeling a part of its successes and failures. Social identification helps answer the question, "Who am I?" (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

Identity theory views the self as an assortment of underlying identities (Stryker and Burke 2000). Similarly, Markus and Nurius (1986) stated that the self is made up of a system of self-conceptions within the person. Thus, individuals are assumed to have a number of identities (e.g., grandparent, tennis player, university alumnus, employee, environmental activist) that combine to form a sense of self. Identity theorists emphasize that individuals are motivated to evaluate their performances in individual roles, and that these evaluations have implications for feelings of global self-esteem, trust, and commitment through self-verification (Burke and Stets 1999; Higgins 1987; Swann et al. 2004). Moreover, these theorists agree that individuals are motivated to seek positive social feedback about their identities, and often pursue socially influenced goals that guide the pursuit of "ideal" identities. For example, an individual may seek to be a terrific grandparent, a competitive tennis player, a generous college booster, a top-performing employee, and an effective conservationist.

Organizational identification is a specific form of social identity in which a person's identity is defined in terms of membership in a particular organization. Previous research has argued that individuals will alter their behaviors within an organization simply by feeling a strong connection with the organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Identification depends on satisfaction and identity goal realization resulting from behaviors that are membership-bound, ego-involving, and intrinsically motivating (Brown 1969). In particular, individuals are drawn toward organizations that are congruent with important aspects of their social identities (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Further, the marketing literature has highlighted factors that can increase an individual's organizational identification, including organizational distinctiveness, organizational prestige, tenure with the organization, satisfaction, and the visibility of the membership (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Bhattacharya et al. 1995).

However, despite research that shows the positive effects of increasing members' identification with an organization, Pratt (1998) argues that few have sought to answer the question, "How does organizational identification occur?" If organizational identification is a desirable goal, it is critical to provide managers with the tools to understand, create, and grow a sense of organizational identity within a firm's various constituencies. This research hopes to contribute to this theoretical understanding and provide insights to marketers about one possible approach to increasing organizational identification.

Organizational identity sometimes has been confused with other constructs such as commitment and brand

loyalty, but Bhattacharya et al. (1995) are among those who point out that identification differs conceptually and empirically from these related constructs. It is the implication of self-concept and perception of oneness that distinguishes organizational identity from other constructs (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Brand loyalty indicates that the individual has a predisposition to purchase a brand based on past experiences with the brand. Thus, brand loyalty often is an outcome of the functional utility that consumers receive from the brand. In contrast, identification occurs when the individual psychologically connects to the causes or goals an organization embodies. “In other words, *ceteris paribus*, all persons who identify with what an organization represents are likely to be loyal to its products or services, but not all brand-loyal customers need identify with the organization” (Bhattacharya et al. 1995, p. 47).

Despite the fact that some organizational behavior literature has melded the constructs of organizational identification and organizational commitment (Podsakoff et al. 1986; Porter et al. 1974), more recent work statistically shows that identification is a unique construct. This research stream argues that identification is necessarily organization-specific, whereas commitment is not (Adler and Adler 1987; Ashforth and Mael 1989; O'Reilly and Chatman 1986). The argument is supported by Mael's (1988) study in which he illustrates that the constructs of identification and commitment are indeed distinct and differentiable. An individual can appear to be committed to the organization not because of a strong psychological connection with the organization, but because the organization is a convenient outlet to achieve personal goals (Ashforth and Mael 1989). If another organization provided better options or opportunity, the individual could switch organizations without sacrificing his or her identity goals. For the individual who has formed a strong organizational identity, leaving the organization would, by definition, involve some emotional loss (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

### Peer identification

This research hopes to demonstrate that, in addition to these established distinctions between organizational identity and other important relationship marketing concepts, people's identification with an organization also may be distinct from their identification with other individuals involved with that organization, such as other employees, customers, volunteers, donors, or alumni. Prentice et al. (1994) distinguish between *common-bond groups*, which are based primarily on identification among group members, and *common-identity groups*, which are based primarily on direct identification to the organization. In common-bond groups, the formation of a group identification is influenced by the degree to which the individual knows, likes, and

feels similar to other individuals of the group. Common-identity groups, in contrast, form independently from identification with individual group members. In common-identity groups, the strength of group attachment depends on one's commitment to the identity of the group as a whole, and not as much to the individuals within the group. Likewise, McAlexander et al. (2002) argue that crucial relationships can form both between the customer and the organization and between the customer and other customers.

Thus, one should be able to develop identification with other members of an organization that is distinct from one's identification with the organization itself. This distinction has been recognized in the literature on brand communities, in which structured peer-to-peer relationships among the admirers of a brand have been shown to lead to positive consequences for the community and the firm, such as greater community engagement, brand commitment, and even hyper-loyalty (Fournier et al. 2001; Jacoby and Chestnut 1978; Keller 1993; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Algesheimer et al. (2005) label this construct “brand community identification,” defined as a shared or collective identity in which the person construes himself or herself to be a member of, or to belong to, the community. However, we argue here that there need not be a formal brand community for peer-to-peer identification to occur, and we also want to broaden the discussion of “peer” beyond brand loyalists to any type of stakeholder group involved with a firm. For example, in the context studied here, the individuals involved are all members of a membership-based nonprofit organization—such individuals could not be categorized as a brand community, but might demonstrate many of the same type of common-bonds effects as demonstrated by the brand community literature. Thus we define *peer identification* as the extent of an individual's identification with other of the same type of individuals associated with the organization. For a customer, peers would be other customers; for an employee, peers would be other employees. But the peer identification processes should be similar for these groups, and we propose that such peer identification will be distinct from the members' identification with the organization itself. An understanding of the connection between peer identification and organizational identification could offer insights to managers about how to increase organizational identification.

### Multiple identities and the role of identity synergy

Given that it is widely acknowledged that people hold a variety of social identities simultaneously, we argue that an individual who perceives participation in an organization as a way to facilitate the pursuit of multiple salient social identities will identify with the focal organization more



strongly. Organizational identification is thus built “bottom-up” from the organizational context’s support of the individual’s multiple other identities, a perspective congenial to identity theory rooted in the role-focus of symbolic interaction (e.g., Stryker and Burke 2000) but not at odds with social identity theory (e.g., Hogg et al. 1995).

From a marketing and management perspective, we are interested in when individuals’ involvement with an organization helps them to pursue other important social identities, which we call “identity synergy.” For members of an organization (e.g., an art museum, a motorcycle riders club) or customers (e.g., of a retail store or golf course) or fans (e.g., of a baseball or soccer team), identity synergy occurs when the act of participating in the organization as member/customer/fan provides the opportunity to enact and enrich one or more other important social identities (e.g., spouse, philanthropist, teacher). When members feel that their engagement with an organization provides synergy with another identity, they are likely to feel the organization positively affects their enactment of that identity, gives them opportunity to grow in that identity, and facilitates their pursuit of the identity. In addition, as a firm facilitates the pursuit of more social identities simultaneously, customers will perceive greater value in organizational membership, strengthening their relationships with the firm.

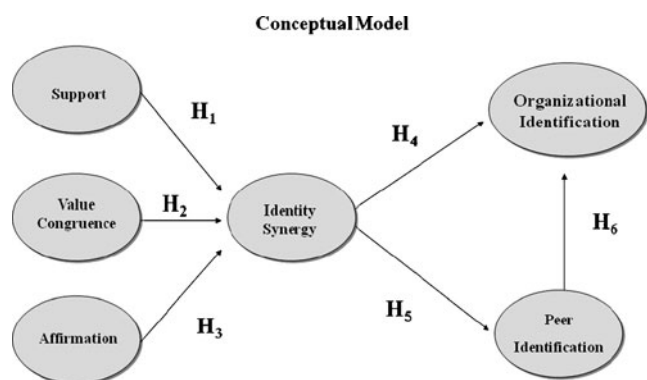
Achieving identity synergy is particularly relevant for today’s busy consumers, who may feel pulled in many directions by conflicting and competing demands. Individuals may feel, at times, stressed and harried in the pursuit of multiple identity goals. For example, Goode (1960, p. 485) states, “The individual is likely to face a wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations. If he conforms fully or adequately in one direction, fulfillment will be difficult in another.” For a working parent, for example, time spent at home with the children may be limited by the amount of time spent at work, with the family getting only what is left over (Thompson and Bunderson 2001). To reduce this sort of role strain and its resulting negative psychological and physical effects, people may seek to integrate their identities (Hall 1972). Often, the identities meld into a unity such that the enactment of multiple identities occurs simultaneously and are overlapping (Thompson and Bunderson 2001). For example, imagine a woman who becomes a participating member of a local zoo—visiting the zoo, attending special events, donating financially, or volunteering time. If the zoo creates the perception that this member also can enhance her social identity of being a better parent by offering entertainment and educational opportunities for her children, she will perceive synergy between her membership in the zoo and her “parent” identity. In addition, if the zoo also creates the perception of synergy with other identities—for

example “animal lover” and “friend” as well as “parent,” thus allowing her to use the single context of zoo participation to efficiently enact and reinforce *multiple* identities simultaneously—she will perceive even greater identity synergy, and thus more highly value the organization. Marketers have glimpsed and acted upon the value of synergy in some contexts. For example, shopping centers include stores that service a variety of identity roles to facilitate “one stop” shopping. However, a systematic theory of identity synergy, its antecedents and consequences—particularly its application to organizational identification—has not yet been developed. In the following section, we outline the hypotheses of our model (see Fig. 1), including antecedents and consequences of identity synergy.

## Hypothesis development

### Antecedents to identity synergy

If a perception of identity synergy can increase an individual’s identification with an organization, the question arises as to how an organization can generate and nurture this perception. Previous research has shown that organizational identification is positively affected by increases in perceived support (McAlexander et al. 2002), value congruence (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), and identity affirmation (Drigotas et al. 1999). Although prior work has demonstrated the impact of support, value congruence, and affirmation on identification with the organization *per se*, an open question is whether these factors might affect member perception of the degree to which *other* identities are facilitated while participating in the organization (that is, identity synergy). If support, value congruence, and affirmation positively influence identity synergy, light would be shed on *how* these variables drive organizational identification. As past researchers have pointed out, further research on the processes that can intensify an individual’s organizational identification is



**Fig. 1** Conceptual model

needed (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cardador and Pratt 2006). This study posits that identity synergy is at least one important mediating process explaining the effect of these three drivers on organizational identification.

*Perceived support* is the degree to which members perceive that an organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Kraimer and Wayne (2004) contend that perceived organizational support represents the individual's psychological contract with the organization. When organizations fulfill their end of the psychological contract (e.g., by acknowledging that a donor's giving contributes to the success of the charity), members form a general perception that the organization values their contributions (Eisenberger et al. 1990). In marketing, research has identified support behaviors from an organization that include fairness of interpersonal treatment, keeping promises, and providing service (Parasuraman et al. 1991), effective recovery (Bitner et al. 1990), and response to special requests (Bitner et al. 1990).

We add to this research by demonstrating that increased perceptions of support for multiple identities are related to increased perceptions of identity synergy. When an individual feels that the organization demonstrates concern for his or her opinions and well-being as a parent, a spouse, or a community activist, for example, that individual is more likely to perceive synergy from enacting the supported identity within the organizational context. For instance, a "pet friendly" chain of home improvement stores might allow customers to bring their dogs to the store for socialization while they shop, offer dog treats and employee attention to pets at the check-out register, and provide space for animal rescue organizations to conduct pet adoption and educational/promotional events. As a result, an individual who considers himself or herself to be a "dog person" is likely to feel that the retailer supports that important "animal lover" identity, and thus would be more likely to enact that identity during the consumption experience by taking his or her dog on shopping trips to the store and socializing within the store with other customers and their pets. We believe the greater the perceived support for an important identity (e.g., animal lover) from the organization, the greater the perceived identity synergy. Therefore, we posit:

H1: Perceived support for an individual's important social identities from the organization is positively related to an increase in the perception of identity synergy.

A perception of identity synergy also may be positively influenced by a perception of value congruence. Values are an individual's basic convictions that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable (Rokeach 1973). Values motivate action and are

the basis from which individuals define their identities. *Value congruence* is the perception that two entities share similar values and tend to perceive external stimuli in similar ways (Meglino and Ravlin 1998). Perceived value congruence with the organization, or the perception that the individual's values match the values of the organization, has been shown to increase job satisfaction, identification with the organization, and length of the relationship (Kristof 1996; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005; Meglino and Ravlin 1998).

We posit that increased perceptions of value congruence allow individuals to enact multiple identities within the context of the organization because it is easier to integrate important aspects of their lives with the organization. Conversely, if an individual felt that the values associated with an important identity were not consistent with the values of the organization (or those of other members of the organization) the individual would stop or limit the frequency with which the conflicting identity was enacted within that organization. Previous research has shown that the simultaneous pursuit of different values may lead to role overload, but that perceived value congruency reduces role overload (Carlson and Kacmar 2000). Therefore, we extend extant research by arguing that value congruence positively affects the perception of identity synergy.

H2: Perceived value congruence between an individual's social identities and the organization is positively related to an increase in the perception of identity synergy.

It has been shown that individuals are motivated to seek verification of their performance and progress in various identities, and they look for social situations that provide opportunities to receive this self-verification (McCall and Simmons 1966; Swann et al. 2004). In Swann and colleagues' view, psychologically healthy individuals are drawn to situations that provide feedback about identity performance, because such feedback is crucial not only to self-definition but also to the measure of progress toward identity goals. Since individuals typically seek positive self-views, a powerful and attractive form of identity verification is *affirmation* (Drigotas et al. 1999), defined as positive feedback that an individual has reached or is reaching an identity goal. For example, an individual may seek to be a good parent, a terrific spouse, a top-performing employee, an effective conservationist, and a great tennis player.

The perception that an organization provides affirmation of one or more of an individual's salient social identities is likely to be strongly related to the sense that the organization provides opportunities to facilitate or enrich those identities, that is, that participation in the organization is synergistic with the other relevant identities. Research demonstrates that when people spend time in identity-

affirming activities, they tend to perceive less conflict between life domains (Thompson and Bunderson 2001). Elsbach (2009) found that corporate creatives, who often find their idealistic and independent “artist” identities in conflict with their “corporate worker” identities, perceived less conflict when they received affirmation for those identities from their employers. The affirmation of important personal identities by the organization allows people to incorporate more of their lives into the organization. Moreover, theorists argue that the successful enactment of identity-related behaviors validates and confirms a person’s status as a member of an identity group (e.g., valuable employee) and reflects positively on self-evaluation (Callero 1985). Individuals who have a strong connection to a particular identity will try to perform the behaviors that are associated with that identity (Arnett et al. 2003). Thus, we assert they will seek out organizations that provide them with such affirmation. Organizations that are able to affirm members’ important identities, and thus help them feel that they are enacting those identities successfully, will be rewarded with higher perceptions of identity synergy.

H3: Increased identity affirmation of an individual’s important social identities by the organization is positively related to an increase in the perception of identity synergy.

#### Consequences of identity synergy

Just as an individual’s self is the sum of many salient identities, identification with a single organization can be viewed, at least in part, as the sum of other identities that are consistently enacted in the organizational context. People seek out membership in organizations that allow them opportunities to enhance and thus add value to important identities in their lives (Serpe and Stryker 1987). We propose that increased customer perceptions of synergy between the organization and other important social identities causes the individual to value the organization more highly, and to identify with it more strongly. And the greater the number of identities with which the organization has synergy, the greater the overall perception of synergy, and thus the value of the organization to the customer increases and the customer’s relationship with the firm strengthens. The association and enhancement of multiple salient social identities within the organization gives the individual reason to care about the organization’s fate, to feel a sense of shared destiny, and to feel a closeness or oneness with the organization, because the organization itself is the vessel through which other identities are expressed. Thus, the stronger the individual’s perception of identity synergy with the organization, the more likely he or she is to form a stronger organizational identity.

H4: An increase in perceived identity synergy is positively related to an increase in organizational identification.

As we previously argued, individuals can form unique and separate connections to the organization versus the other individuals who are part of the organization. Just as a perception of identity synergy can lead members to identify with an organization, it also can influence their relationships with peers within the organization. If customers of a firm perceive other customers enacting the same important social identities in the context of the firm (consider the example of the “dog person” observing and interacting with other “dog people” in the context of shopping at a home improvement store), they may develop the belief that other customers of that business are like them and develop a sense of oneness with other customers, distinct from their perception of oneness with the firm itself. Cialdini et al. (1997) point out that an individual’s perception of his or her degree of connection with another individual is cued by feelings of kinship, friendship, similarity, and familiarity. Enacting important social identities while interacting with other members of the organization increases the individual’s feelings of familiarity with—and thus connections to—fellow members of the organization.

Those interactions could be formal and organized by the firm (such as a group class in jewelry-making at a craft store) or informal and spontaneous (such as observing other customers buying and wearing a t-shirt supporting a charity campaign sponsored and sold by a coffee shop). Where an organization provides the opportunity for members to enact similar important identities (synergy) as part of a group of other organizational members, members may begin to identify with one another. The organization that can provide opportunities for members to enact their social identities while connecting with other members who hold the same identities at multiple touch points will help form peer-to-peer relational bonds. The more individuals are able to connect with each other while reinforcing their shared social identities, the more they will start to identify as being part of the peer group.

H5: An increase in the perception of synergy is positively related to an increase in peer identification.

We propose that the more participants become tied to other peers in the organization, the more they come to value and identify with the organization itself. When individuals perceive that they can be authentic in the group context and establish meaningful relationships with group members, their perception of identification with the organization that brings those members together should become stronger (Amiot et al. 2007). Marketing research in brand communities has examined the idea that other members play a crucial role in the formation of relationships with the

organization (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). This peer identification, which brand community research has characterized as a “kinship” between members (McAlexander et al. 2002), has been found to make an individual more devoted to the organization (Fournier et al. 2001).

As individuals start to receive support and affirmation and connect with other members, they start to value that organization as an entity that meets many of their needs. Consider a group of Harley-Davidson motorcycle riders that has formed a local HOG chapter. These HOG groups have a strong organizational identity with the Harley brand name, but the group members also strongly identify with the friends and colleagues they have met as a part of the group (Fournier et al. 2001). Buying a Honda Cruiser would have drastic effects on the individual’s relationship with both the Harley brand and the HOG group. Not only would that person lose the benefits of being a part of the organization, but that individual also would sever the social ties with the peer identity group. Therefore, we hypothesize that the more one’s peer identification grows, the stronger one’s organizational identification becomes.

H6: An increase in peer identification is positively related to an increase in organizational identification.

## Methodology

A major metropolitan zoo with a large, diverse, active membership of 44,000 patrons provides the research setting for this study. This provides an organization in which a variety of potential identities could drive valuable behaviors. Further, nonprofit organizations represent a significant part of the U.S. economy and thus provide an important context for study—they received more than \$306.39 billion in donations in the United States alone in 2007 and employed more than 10% of the American workforce (GivingUSA 2008). Membership-based nonprofits have been recognized as desirable environments for testing identification issues because of their diverse membership bases and varieties of social causes (Bhattacharya et al. 1995). The contributions from members of nonprofits are critical to organizational success, and their motivating identities for becoming members often are diverse. However, we suggest that for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike could benefit from identifying and reinforcing the multiple social identities of their customers. Consumers may patronize retailers, join customer communities, and select goods or services based in part on how the brand provides synergistic benefits across multiple important consumer identities. In fact, recent organizational identification research (Pratt 1998; Scott and Lane 2000) suggests

people support organizations for identification purposes even when formal membership is not a possibility or part of the organization’s offerings.

## Measure development and pretesting

Because the questionnaire required answers from early questions to be inserted later in the survey, an online survey instrument was used. The first question asked respondents to check off from a large list all the identities that they felt were relevant to their membership in the organization, giving us a count of the total number of roles each respondent felt were relevant. (The list of identities used was generated from a pre-test, which is discussed in more detail later in this section.) From the initial set of identities that the respondents checked as relevant, they then were asked to choose their top three most important identities in the organizational context. This two-step procedure was followed in both the two pre-tests and the final study. These “top three” identities were inserted into later questions in the survey. To limit the length of the questionnaire, we asked questions regarding only each respondent’s top three identities. The respondent completed the identity affirmation, support, and value congruence items three times—once for each of the three identities the respondent chose as most relevant.

Based on the conceptual development and existing literature, we generated and pre-tested an initial set of measures for the constructs. Measures of identity affirmation, value congruence, and perceived organizational support were adapted from well-established scales to fit the context of our study. These constructs were all measured using seven-point Likert scales. (See Appendix A for a complete list of scale items.) The scales for identity affirmation (Drigotas et al. 1999) and perceived support (Eisenberger et al. 1990) have demonstrated good psychometric properties in previous studies. For identity affirmation, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as: “The organization sees me as a good \_\_\_\_.” A typical organizational support scale item was: “The organization cares about my well-being as a/an \_\_\_\_.” The measure of value congruence also was taken from a well-tested scale (Maxham and Netemeyer 2003). It used the single item, “The organization has the same values as I do with regard to being a/an \_\_\_\_.” (Each blank was filled in with the identity the respondent selected from the list, and each question was answered three times, once for each of the three top identities the respondent selected.) A single item was used in an effort to limit the length of an already long survey. We felt that because value congruence already was a well-established construct, multiple-item measures were not essential. In addition, prior research has employed single-item measures and found them to have equal predictive



validity to multiple-item measures (e.g., Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007; Drolet and Morrison 2001).

We developed new scales grounded in prior research for identity synergy. The four synergy measures (which used seven-point Likert scales) were adapted from the work and family literature (Carlson et al. 2006) and included the following items: “Being a member of [the organization] has positively affected my role as \_\_\_\_\_;” “Being a member of the [the organization] gives me the opportunity to be a better \_\_\_\_\_;” “Being a member of [the organization] makes it easier for me to fulfill my duties/responsibilities as a/an \_\_\_\_\_;” and “Being a member of [the organization] makes it easier for me to be a good \_\_\_\_\_.” (Each blank was filled in with the identity the respondent selected from the list, and each question was answered three times, once for each of the three top identities the respondent selected.)

The final value for each individual item for the constructs of synergy, perceived support, affirmation, and value congruence was generated by multiplying the scores given for each of the top three identities. This multiplicative approach allows the analysis to demonstrate the synergistic effects when a firm provides higher levels of synergy with a greater number of identities.

Finally, we used Ashforth and Mael’s (1989) well-established scale to measure organizational identification and also adapted it to measure peer identification. Additionally, we collected several control variables with the potential to influence the dependent variables, including income, age, membership level, and length of membership, to eliminate these as possible alternative explanations for the findings.

Our next task was to generate a list of critical identities relevant for the particular context of our study. Because organizations have a wide array of members with an equally broad spectrum of identities, discovering all the identities that potentially drive behavior can be difficult. Previous research has either (1) pre-selected identities assumed by the researcher, *a priori*, to be at the center of respondents’ self-systems or (2) simply focused on one main identity. These approaches, however, risk ignoring critical identities that may drive the entire system of identification and its consequences. By imposing one or a few identities on all respondents, researchers may miss the chance to capture variation in the outcomes they are exploring (Marks and MacDermid 1996). For example, a father of two children may perceive the identity of being a parent as important to his overall self-definition but nevertheless may hold some other identity—for example, “boss”—as even more central.

We e-mailed online pre-test questionnaires to 1,000 randomly selected members of the zoo and asked respondents to identify any zoo-relevant identities in a free-

response format. E-mail invitations to participate were followed by two reminder e-mails spaced 4 days apart. Anyone who completed the survey was entered into a prize drawing. This survey had a response rate of about 34%. This questionnaire was followed by a second pre-test survey to a different sample of 1,000 randomly selected zoo members. The second pre-test included a large list of 30 identities generated from the free-response survey, zoo member interviews, and employee insights, with the objective of identifying the most common identities for inclusion in the final study. The response rate of the second pre-test was about 40%. Both response rates were in line with prior research in this type of organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992). Any identity chosen by at least 10% of the respondents in the second pre-test was retained for inclusion in the final study. The final list of zoo-relevant identities for the study contained 16 choices, which included such wide-ranging options as animal lover, shopper, teacher, religious person, grandparent, employee, and spouse. Appendix B lists the final set of 16 identities specific to this study context, as well as several illustrative quotes for each identity that were collected from 12 qualitative depth interviews with zoo members, which were used as a final check of the face validity of the final set of identities used to test the study hypotheses.

In the second pre-test, we also included the organizational and peer identification scales to test for discriminant validity between the two factors. Exploratory factor analysis clearly revealed two distinct factors, corresponding to identification with the organization itself versus identification with other members of the zoo. The eight items were submitted to a principle components analysis using varimax rotation, which showed that 79% of the total variance was accounted for by the two factors. Using eigen values greater than 1 as a cutoff criteria also supported a two-factor scale. All items loaded on the appropriate factors, the lowest being .62 and the highest being .90.

### Sampling

For the test of hypotheses, e-mail invitations were sent to an additional 12,000 individuals randomly selected from the zoo’s 44,000 members, defined as individuals who had paid for a zoo membership during the period of the study. The invitation to participate in the survey was followed by two reminder e-mails spaced 4 days apart. We received 3,958 completed surveys for a response rate of 33%. However, to avoid Type I error associated with such a large sample, we conducted the analyses with a randomly selected subsample of 750 out of the 3,958 completions. This sample size was based on Bentler’s (1995) recommendation of a ratio of respondents to number of free parameters of 10:1. We pulled and analyzed several random samples of equivalent

size, and the results were consistent across all samples. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling as implemented in AMOS 18.0.

To ensure that our survey sample didn't suffer from non-response bias, we conducted comparisons of known demographic variables between the obtained sample and the member population (Armstrong and Overton 1977). The zoo's administration supplied data on demographic variables collected from nearly all members as part of the membership enrollment process. There were no significant differences between the obtained sample of members and the population of members in average age, income, or membership level.

The measurement model then was analyzed with confirmatory factor analysis, and the hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling.

## Analysis and results

### Measurement model

The fit statistics of the CFA demonstrate that the hypothesized model fits the data well, with  $\chi^2_{(179)}=2564.39$  ( $p<.01$ ), Bentler and Bonnett's (1980) comparative fit index (CFI)=.97, the non-normed fit index (NNFI)=.97, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=.07. The measurement factor loadings were all statistically significant ( $p<.001$ ) and positive, providing evidence for the convergent validity of the constructs. In addition, all scales resulted in Cronbach's alpha levels of .86 or above, and the average variance extracted exceeded .50 on all constructs, demonstrating good reliability. Finally, the average variance extracted exceeded the squared inter-construct correlations, indicating strong discriminant validity between all constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Table 1 reports the correlation matrix for the constructs, as well as their means, standard deviations, alphas, and average variances extracted.

### Structural model

The structural model fit statistics indicated good fit:  $\chi^2_{(203)}=4940.74$  ( $p<.01$ ), RMSEA=.067, NFI=.94, and CFI=.94. The  $\chi^2$  statistic is significant; however, this is usually the case for large samples (Kline 2005). All of the structural paths were statistically significant at  $p<.01$ , and all were in the direction hypothesized, providing support for the conceptual model. Table 2 reports the completely standardized parameter estimates for the hypothesized model.

Specifically, in H1 we posit that perceived support from the organization is positively related to perceived identity synergy; this path is significant and positive ( $\beta_1=.41$ ;

$p<.01$ ). Thus we have support for H1. We also find support for H2, because higher levels of perceived value congruence ( $\beta_2=.24$ ;  $p<.01$ ) were related to higher levels of identity synergy. Identity affirmation ( $\beta_3=.19$ ;  $p<.01$ ) also was significantly and positively related to perceptions of synergy, thus providing support for H3. An increase in identity synergy, in turn, was related to increased perceptions of both organizational identification ( $\beta_4=.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and peer identification ( $\beta_5=.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ), showing support for H4 and H5.<sup>1</sup> And finally, H6 receives support, because peer identification was significantly and positively related to organizational identification ( $\beta_6=.69$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Because we argue that firms that enable customers to enact more identities see more positive outcomes than firms that enable fewer identities, it is necessary to determine whether the total number of identities that respondents stated were relevant to their organizational membership had an impact on organizational identity. Although our operationalization of the measures of identity support, affirmation, and value congruence reflects the multiplicative effect that results when a firm scores highly on multiple identities, we were limited by survey length to measuring the three top identities for the multiple-item scales. However, we also have a measure of the raw total number of identities that respondents first checked as personally important and relevant to their organizational membership, out of the set of 16 identities listed on the final survey. Therefore, we can conduct an additional post-hoc analysis of the influence of this total number of identities in driving organizational identity. The number of identities checked off by respondents ranged from two to 16, with a mean of 5.29 identities. When we included this measure in our model, it had a significant and positive effect on the formation of *both* peer identity ( $\beta=.12$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and organizational identity ( $\beta=.04$ ;  $p<.01$ ). The remainder of the relationships in the model did not change when the identity count measure was included. These finding appears to support our assertion that having more than one (multiple) social identities reinforced within an organization enhances customers' perceptions of identity synergy, and thus functions to enhance customers' connections to the organization.

<sup>1</sup> To ensure that no bias was created in the structural paths emanating from the synergy construct due to the fact that the constitutive "identity" terms making up the multiplicative measure of synergy were not hypothesized or estimated in the model, we ran regression analyses, including the constitutive terms and the synergy term as predictors of organizational identification and peer identification. For both dependent variables, when the "identity" direct effects were included without the interaction term, all three constitutive terms had significant effects. However, when the multiplicative synergy term was included, the constitutive terms all became insignificant, providing confirmation that the results of the hypotheses tested in the structural model were not biased by not including the constitutive terms.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics and correlations

Constructs	Mean	Std Dev	Ave	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Organizational support	157.55	92.19	.90	.97					
2. Organizational value congruence	162.11	99.47	n/a	n/a	n/a				
3. Organizational affirmation	128.05	91.73	.94	.75**	n/a	.98			
4. Identity synergy	167.38	87.79	.85	.65**	n/a	.59**	.95		
5. Peer identification	3.38	1.61	.80	.44**	n/a	.49**	.39**	0.96	
6. Organizational identification	4.21	1.44	.67	.52**	n/a	.52**	.51**	.78**	0.91

Cronbach alphas reported on the diagonal

Ave average variance extracted

\*\* $p < .01$ 

In addition, because part of our theory argues that identity synergy mediates the relationship between the exogenous variables and organizational identification, we conducted a post-hoc analysis to examine the mediating relationship. Direct paths were added from each of the exogenous variables to organizational identification. The paths from both support ( $\beta = .045$ ,  $p = .34$ ) and affirmation ( $\beta = .039$ ,  $p = .269$ ) to organizational identification were non-significant, indicating that synergy was fully mediating those relationships. However, the path from value congruence ( $\beta = .249$ ,  $p < .05$ ) to organizational identification is significant, indicating that while synergy is partially mediating the relationship, a direct effect also exists. Indeed, the inclusion of a path from value congruence to organizational identification improves the fit of the original model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 58.18$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ). Thus, we found that convergence between individual values and those of an organization creates organizational identification not only through synergy, but also directly; we'll discuss the potential reasons for this finding in the [discussion](#) section to follow.

As with all self-report data, there is the potential for the occurrence of common method variance. However, we can

address this limitation in part by determining post hoc whether common method variance due to the use of a single source had a significant impact on our results. We controlled for the portion of the variance in the indicators that is attributable to obtaining the measures from the same source by re-estimating the structural equation model with the addition of an unmeasured “single-source” first-order factor added to the indicators of all the latent variables in the model, as advocated by Podsakoff et al. (2003). The overall pattern of significant relationships and the magnitude of the standardized estimates in the structural model were not affected by common method variance (that is, all the paths that were significant when common method variance was not controlled remained significant even when common method variance was controlled for), demonstrating strong evidence that same source bias did not have a significant effect on the hypothesized model.

In addition, as control variables, we included in our post-hoc analysis several additional variables, including age, income, membership level (based on the organization's structure for different donation levels), and how

**Table 2** Results: structural model estimates

	Hypothesis	Std path coeff	t-value
Hypothesized paths			
Support → Identity synergy	H1	.41	16.42 *
Value congruency → Identity synergy	H2	.24	15.24 *
Affirmation → Identity synergy	H3	.19	7.64 *
Identity synergy → Organizational identification	H4	.24	15.37 *
Identity synergy → Peer identification	H5	.38	19.92 *
Peer identification → Organizational identification	H6	.69	35.93 *
Control variables			
Membership length → Organizational identification		.07	4.72 *
Age → Organizational identification		.06	4.45 *
Current membership level → Organizational identity		.04	2.81 *
Income → Organizational identification		-.02	-1.10

\* $p < .01$

many years the individual had been a member of the organization. In line with the findings of other identity researchers (Bhattacharya et al. 1995; Mael and Ashforth 1992), the number of years the individual had been a member of the organization had a positive relationship with organizational identity ( $\beta=.07$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Similarly, the individual's age ( $\beta=.06$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and current membership level ( $\beta=.04$ ;  $p<.01$ ) had small but significant relationships with organizational identity. The individual's income level, however, had no significant relationship with organizational identity ( $\beta=-.02$ ;  $p=.27$ ). The addition of these control variables to the model had no influence on the size, significance, or direction of any of the hypothesized relationships.

## Discussion and implications

This research examines how identity synergy in an organizational context—that is, the perception that participation in an organization allows organizational members (customers, employees, donors, alumni, etc.) to build and reinforce important social identities—can build customer identification with that organization. In a marketing context, not only is the construct of identity synergy new, but the idea that such synergy can build identification with a specific organization or brand is novel. Moreover, we find that when consumers perceive that an organization offers support, affirmation, and value congruence in respect to their salient identities (apart from their roles as organizational members), their perceptions of synergy grow, and these perceptions, in turn, generate identification with the organization itself. The greater the number of social identities with which the firm is perceived to have synergy, the greater the impact on organizational identity. The findings of our study are relevant for academics and practitioners. Marketing scholars have shown increasing interest in the impact of identity-related processes on consumer behavior (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Bhattacharya et al. 1995; Mael and Ashforth 1992; McAlexander et al. 2002). However, work focused on how the pursuit of multiple identities affects identification with a brand—a product, retailer, or nonprofit—is lacking.

In the organizational behavior and family studies literatures, research into multiple identities traditionally has focused on the negative impact of identity conflict, such as the work-family conflict. More recent work has explored the potential for synergies created by the pursuit of dual or multiple identities, also often focusing on the work-family context. Our examination of how synergy can spring from the enactment of multiple personal identities in the context of a nonprofit membership organization (neither a work nor family context) is distinctive with respect to past work on identity synergy outside marketing. Furthermore, our finding that the perception of synergy affects organizational

identification and mediates the effects of support, affirmation, and value congruence also is a contribution to literatures beyond marketing. The finding that synergy only partially mediates the relationship between value congruence and organizational identity suggests that there may, indeed, be a simple direct effect, such as has been proposed in some previous research (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Kristof 1996; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005; Meglino and Ravlin 1998). Or, alternately, there may be other as-yet-unidentified factors mediating the relationship. Future research may seek to detect and test other possible mediating processes in this relationship.

In addition, this study contributes to the organizational identity literature by introducing the concept of peer identification and illustrating its positive effect on overall organizational identification. We believe it is important for nonprofit and for-profit organizations to recognize that individuals can identify distinctly and differently *both* with the organization *and* with other members of the organization, to most effectively capitalize on these relationships to build organizational identification.

## Managerial implications

In today's competitive landscape, it has become ever more critical for organizations to forge strong bonds with key constituents. Marketing executives have shown interest in increasing consumer loyalty by enabling consumer pursuit of multiple identity goals in stores (for example, a retailer such as IKEA offering child care in-store) or while using products (for example, a Harley-Davidson motorcycle dealership sponsoring a "toys for tots" motorcycle rally). Nonprofit marketers also have shown interest in the idea of adding value to, and broadening the appeal of, attendance at museums, botanical gardens, zoos and other nonprofit attractions by conducting events such as singles nights, beer tastings, rock concerts, and gourmet food tastings. Such activities allow attendees to pursue more than one aspect of the self (e.g., fine arts lover and single person) at once. Thus, marketing practitioners seem to grasp the potential importance of identity synergy to customers, but they lack an empirically tested theoretical framework to help them formulate and evaluate strategies to help customers achieve identity synergy.

We demonstrate here that if a manager can identify customers' important social identities and then offer opportunities for them to enact and enhance those multiple identities in the context of a service or retail environment, stronger bonds can be built with the firm. In contrast, when an organization is perceived as offering little synergy with other important social identities, conflicting and competing demands can create role strain and have negative effects on an individual's life (Hillman et al. 2008). Role strain has been shown to be related to outcomes such as job



dissatisfaction, job burnout, and turnover (Burke 1988; Frone et al. 1992; Greenhaus 1988), as well as to outcomes related to psychological distress (e.g., depression), and life and marital dissatisfaction (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Netemeyer et al. 1996). This suggests that firms that fail to offer synergy with other important social roles may suffer, because customers must sometimes choose between participating with the firm and finding other outlets in which to enact those social roles.

Managers should develop and target initiatives for key groups based on the identities the groups have in common. The initiatives should be designed to provide support and affirmation to members for those identities, and should communicate congruence between the organization's values and the values driving the members' social identities. Our multiple-stage pretesting technique for identifying the most commonly relevant identities—that is, combining free-response questionnaires, member interviews, and employee insights to develop a large list of potential identities, followed by a quantitative survey to prioritize the most critical identities—easily could be adapted as a research tool for managers. Our experience in this study reinforced our suspicion that relying solely on managerial assumptions or focusing on very few key identities could be very limiting and could risk ignoring critical identities relevant for customers. The identities that management may assume to be important may not always form a complete list. This study uncovered several identities that, at first glance, did not appear to be relevant to the context—and, in fact, were surprising to the organization's own management—but nonetheless were relevant and important to a significant portion of respondents. Without appropriate open-ended development processes such as those conducted here, those critical identities might have been overlooked, and other less-relevant ones inappropriately included.

When individuals first become involved with an organization, they may believe in its mission but have yet to imagine themselves as possessing characteristics of the new group, and thus their organizational identity is low or unknown. An organization needs to encourage the incorporation of the member's important identities into that of the organization to facilitate synergy. Small communities built around relevant identities within the organization can function to support and enhance important identities. These groups create opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions, encourage relationships, and create a sense of community within the organization that is built directly on the identities that are important in members' lives. For example, this study showed the zoo's management that many people were coming to the zoo for exercise, much like walkers at the mall. As a result, the zoo installed a walking trail and organized small groups around the identity of fitness. The walking trail allowed the zoo to capitalize on a naturally

existing phenomenon already happening within their organization, and in doing so more strongly bonded those individuals to the organization.

This research provides managers with a set of actionable antecedents to both identity synergy and organizational identity. Because perceived support is an important driver of identity synergy, it is critical for organizations to devise ways to facilitate support of important identities. Activities or promotions such as singles events or providing child care during a concert lets customers know that the company understands what is important in their lives and is willing to support those important identities. Special member perks, such as private changing rooms after a workout or special parking for members with children, also may allow individuals to feel valued and supported. When it comes to perceived value congruence, the organization must strive to communicate and emphasize to members how the organization's values match their own. Communication efforts should make it clear that each member is part of a larger group of members who share similar values and goals. An organization must find ways to affirm members in their important social identities. Likewise, facilitating ways in which members can identify, connect, and interact with other members is critical. It is clear that managers can't center efforts on one focal identity, but rather must understand the full portfolio of identities their key constituents seek to enact within the organization.

Our research also points to the need to foster both organizational and peer identification. According to GivingUSA (2008), the two largest recipients of donations in 2008 were churches and universities/colleges. These two particular types of organizations are very successful at creating bonds with the organization and also between members within the organization. Lifelong friends often are formed while at college or within the church community. These relationships form a very strong peer identity and cause individuals to highly value the organization. The reputation and long-term survival of the organization becomes very important to individuals who identify strongly with the organization. Financial contributions ensure that the institution maintains viability, and thus allow the individual to maintain the highly-valued organizational identification. By building and strengthening relationships, the organization can retain members longer, and those members will provide greater financial and participatory support over time.

#### Limitations and future research

This study was conducted in the nonprofit context, using members of just one organization. Although we believe the effects illustrated in this study would logically generalize to a broader set of nonprofit and for-profit organizations,

further research should seek to replicate our results in other contexts. The correlational nature of the data also is a limitation. Although a post-hoc analysis indicated that same-source bias had no significant effect on the hypothesis tests, a future study could build on these findings to track organizational members' relationships with a firm over time to tease out further the processes involved and their consequences. A longitudinal study also could be used to examine how relevant identities with an organization evolve or change over time, to provide managers with guidance on how to manage an evolving portfolio of identities. As time progresses and life stages change, so do the motivating identities in an individual's life, and thus the identities that an individual is seeking to enact and reinforce within an organization may change, too. For instance, individuals may join the zoo because they have young children, and the zoo has a fun and educational atmosphere. But as their children grow up and move away, the individuals may remain members to support identities such as conservationist or community philanthropist.

Another interesting question arises when the organization tries to connect to unique groups that have distinct, and perhaps conflicting, identities. For example, it might be challenging for an organization to promote events that appeal to members with a salient single-person identity and also members with a salient parent identity. Future research could examine ways in which companies can reach out to multiple identities without creating unwanted conflicts.

Other research extensions could investigate boundary conditions, such as whether there are types of consumption contexts in which enacting multiple identities would be more relevant than in others. If so, organizational efforts to create identity synergy might be more effective in some contexts than in others. Contexts also may vary in terms of the number of social identities relevant to a stakeholder group. In this study, 16 identities met the criteria of being

relevant to an arbitrary cutoff of at least 10% of customers, but every organization and setting is likely to have its own very different and unique subset of identities that are most salient to its key constituents. A firm would be unlikely to be able to provide support for every identity, so how should managers prioritize efforts? Some firms might find that a larger or smaller list of identities is relevant to its members, or firms may vary in heterogeneity of constituents' identities, providing additional challenges for not only identifying but also prioritizing which identities to address across a diverse set of possibilities. Individual customer differences may also exist and be relevant for future research—for example, are there gender or age differences in either the types or numbers of relevant social identities? Additionally, are there differences in importance of identities and how they are enacted that have relevance for identity synergy based on whether the identity involved is obligatory (e.g., parent) or voluntary (e.g., animal lover)?

Another fruitful avenue for future research in this arena is to identify and investigate additional antecedents and mediators that may drive the desired outcomes. We have introduced the concept of identity synergy and investigated the effects of several constructs that have been hypothesized to affect organizational identification—support, value congruence, and identity affirmation—but other explanatory variables could further explicate the process by which multiple customer identities can be leveraged to support organizational identification.

**Acknowledgments** The authors would like to thank Jennifer Hall, Harry Jones, and Jim Brewer from the Phoenix Zoo for their hard work in making this project possible; Bruce Clark from Northeastern University for his insightful comments and timely advice throughout the review process; and the editor and anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Center for Services Leadership at Arizona State University.

## Appendix A

Constructs (Scale Sources)	Items	Item Loadings
<b>Support</b> (Adapted from Eisenberger et al. 1990) <sup>a</sup>		
	The [organization] cares about my well-being as a/an _____.	.96
	The [organization] cares about my opinions as a/an _____.	.96
	The [organization] is willing to help me in my role as a/an _____.	.97
	The [organization] considers my goals and values as a/an _____.	.97
<b>Value Congruence</b> (Adapted from Maxham and Netemyer 2003) <sup>a</sup>		
	The [organization] has the same values as I do with regard to _____.	n/a
<b>Affirmation</b> (Adapted from Drigotas et al. 1999) <sup>a</sup>		
	The [organization] sees me as a good _____.	.99

(continued)

Constructs (Scale Sources)	Items	Item Loadings
	The [organization] thinks I have the traits and dispositions of a good _____.	.99
	The [organization] treats me like I am a good _____.	.97
<b>Synergy</b> (Adapted from Carlson et al. 2006) <sup>a</sup>		
	Being a member of the [organization] makes it easier for me to be a good _____.	.96
	Being a member of the [organization] makes it easier to fulfill my duties/responsibilities as a/an _____.	.96
	Being a member of the [organization] gives me the opportunity to be a better _____.	.95
	Being a member of the [organization] has positively affected my role as a/an _____.	.95
<b>Organizational Identity</b> (Ashforth and Mael 1989)		
	When someone criticizes the [organization], it feels like a personal insult.	.86
	I am very interested in what others think about the [organization].	.81
	When I talk about the [organization], I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’	.84
	The [organization]’s successes are my successes.	.90
	When someone praises the [organization] it feels like a personal compliment.	.92
<b>Member Identity</b> (Ashforth and Mael 1989)		
	When someone criticizes other members of the [organization], it feels like a personal insult.	.92
	I am very interested in what others think about other members of the [organization].	.89
	When I talk about other members of the [organization], I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’	.90
	The members’ successes are my successes.	.94
	When someone praises other members of the [organization] it feels like a personal compliment.	.95

<sup>a</sup> measures that were repeated for each of three salient identities

All items were measured using seven-point scales anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree” unless otherwise stated

## Appendix B: Customer Social Identities

Zoo Member Identities	Representative Quotes from Exploratory Interviews	Zoo Member Identities	Representative Quotes from Exploratory Interviews
1. Animal Lover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I love the animals. They’re life. They’re like a therapy to me.”</li> <li>• “We are definitely animal lovers. We have a soft spot for them. It’s fun to watch them play and be babies.”</li> </ul>	4. Employee/Boss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I joined the zoo partly to support their conservation efforts.”</li> <li>• “The zoo has many great events that are great for me to bring my important clients to.”</li> </ul>
2. Community Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like supporting the zoo because it is privately owned. It deserves community support. I buy more of a membership than I need. I don’t go that often, but if I can help keep admission costs down so others can go, I feel like I am helping the community.”</li> <li>• “The community needs things like the zoo and like libraries, and we need to instill that in our youth.”</li> </ul>	5. Exerciser/Walker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My husband finds his consulting job melds with our zoo membership very well. [Company X] is his client—and [Company X] supports the zoo as well. So they both attend many of the social events, which turns into great face time with a valuable client.”</li> <li>• “Well, it’s a nice place to go for a walk for exercise. Even if you’re not an animal lover, it’s still nice place to come for a walk.”</li> </ul>
3. Conservationist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The zoo has some major conservation projects that we like to support with our membership.”</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It’s a place for me to get some exercise.”</li> </ul>

Zoo Member Identities	Representative Quotes from Exploratory Interviews	Zoo Member Identities	Representative Quotes from Exploratory Interviews
6. Family Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I have seven kids. Our oldest is 25 and our youngest is 3. With our family, especially with our spread in age, it is difficult to find something everyone can enjoy.”</li> <li>• “My kids love the zoo and it keeps them happy. It is a family event.”</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My friend, who home schools her children, takes her kids all the time (to the zoo). For her, learning is a top priority.”</li> </ul>
7. Friend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I upgraded my membership level at the zoo so I could take friends.”</li> <li>• “My membership comes with free guest passes, which I use to bring friends with me so I don’t go to the zoo alone.”</li> </ul>	16. Volunteer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The zoo has volunteer opportunities. Volunteer opportunities help me feel involved and that I can make a difference.”</li> <li>• “As a docent, I can interact with many of the visitors and talk about the animals which I love so dearly.”</li> </ul>
8. Grandparent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We enjoy bringing the grandkids here and everything.”</li> <li>• “I don’t really ever go, unless I bring my grandkids.”</li> </ul>		
9. Outdoor Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We appreciate the outdoors, and we try to take care of it.”</li> <li>• “I am part of a realm of people that enjoy nature, wildlife, and just being outdoors.”</li> </ul>		
10. Parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It absolutely makes me feel like a good father to bring her to the zoo.”</li> <li>• “Being a zoo member affirms that I can do my job as a parent. I can keep my kids happy. I can entertain them and I can educate them all at once, which is pretty gosh darn hard.”</li> </ul>		
11. Religious Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like to come to the zoo to listen to God—by observing his creation at the zoo, I try to find out who God is.”</li> <li>• “I have some deep meditations here that I can’t get anywhere else. This is where you get in touch with all of the world, in a sense. It has a lot deeper value and meaning to me.”</li> </ul>		
12. Shopper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I love to shop, and the zoo often has some great gift ideas for both friends and family.”</li> <li>• “I buy my children’s families memberships to the zoo every year for Christmas. It is really a great gift idea.”</li> </ul>		
13. Social Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We know other families that have memberships. We have combined our time so we can all go together.”</li> <li>• “Yeah, we have quite a big group of people in that area that actually have zoo passes, and we go quite often in groups.”</li> </ul>		
14. Spouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My husband and I often go to the zoo together just because we’re home and need something to do together.”</li> <li>• “It was a cool date thing. We were married 9 years before we had kids. You can only sit and watch the sun set so many times.”</li> </ul>		
15. Teacher/Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “As a teacher, the zoo has many great programs for me to bring my students to.”</li> </ul>		

## References

- Aaker, J. (1999). The malleable self: the role of self expression in persuasion. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 36(1), 45–57.
- Adler, P., & Adler, P. A. (1987). Role conflict and identity salience: college athletics and the academic role. *The Social Science Journal*, 24(4), 443–455.
- Ahearne, M., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Gruen, T. (2005). Antecedents and consequences of customer-company identification: expanding the role of relationship marketing. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(3), 574–585.
- Algesheimer, R., Dhalakia, U. M., & Herrmann, A. (2005). The social influence of brand community: evidence from European car clubs. *Journal of Marketing*, 69(3), 19–34.
- Amiot, C. E., Sablonniere, R. D. L., Terry, D. J., & Smith, J. R. (2007). Integration of social identities in the self: toward a cognitive-development model. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(4), 364–388.
- Armstrong, S. J., & Overton, T. S. (1977). Estimating nonresponse bias in mail surveys. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14(3), 396–402.
- Arnett, D. B., German, S. D., & Hunt, S. D. (2003). The identity salience model of relationship marketing success: the case of nonprofit marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(2), 89–105.
- Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20–39.
- Bentler, P. M. (1995). *EQS structural equations program manual*. Encino: Multivariate Software, Inc.
- Bentler, P. M., & Bonnett, D. G. (1980). Significance tests and goodness of fit in the analysis of covariance structures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 88(3), 588–606.
- Bergkvist, L., & Rossiter, J. R. (2007). The predictive validity of multiple-item versus single-item measures of the same constructs. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 44(2), 175–184.
- Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2003). Consumer-company identification: a framework for understanding consumers’ relationships with companies. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(2), 76–88.
- Bhattacharya, C. B., Rao, H., & Glynn, M. A. (1995). Understanding the bond of identification: an investigation of its correlates among art museum members. *Journal of Marketing*, 59(4), 46–57.
- Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Tetreault, M. S. (1990). The service encounter: diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(1), 71–84.



- Brown, M. E. (1969). Identification and some conditions of organizational involvement. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 14(3), 346–355.
- Burke, P. J. (1988). Some antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 3(4), 287–302.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (1999). Trust and commitment through self-verification. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 62(4), 347–366.
- Callero, P. L. (1985). Role-identity salience. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 48(3), 203–215.
- Cardador, T. M., & Pratt, M. G. (2006). Identification management and its bases: bridging management and marketing perspectives through focus on affiliation dimensions. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34(2), 174–184.
- Carlson, D. S., & Kacmar, M. K. (2000). Work-family conflict in the organizations: do life role values make a difference? *Journal of Management*, 26(5), 1031–1054.
- Carlson, D. S., Kacmar, M. K., Wayne, J. H., & Gryzwacz, J. G. (2006). Measuring the positive side of the work-family interface: development and validation of a work-family enrichment scale. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 68(1), 131–164.
- Cialdini, R. B., Brown, S. L., Lewis, B. P., Luce, C., & Neuberg, S. L. (1997). Reinterpreting the empathy-altruism relationship: when one into one equals oneness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(3), 481–494.
- Drigotas, S. M., Rusbul, C. E., Wieselquist, J., & Whitton, S. W. (1999). Close partner as sculptor of ideal self: behavioral affirmation and the Michelangelo phenomenon. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(2), 293–323.
- Drolet, A. L., & Morrison, D. G. (2001). Do we really need multiple-item measures in service research? *Journal of Service Research*, 3(3), 196–204.
- Dutton, J. E., Dukerich, J. M., & Harquail, C. V. (1994). Organizational images and member identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(2), 239–263.
- Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 500–507.
- Eisenberger, R., Fasolo, P., & Davis-LaMastro, V. (1990). Perceived organizational support and employee diligence, commitment, and innovation. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75(1), 51–59.
- Elsbach, K. D. (2009). Identity affirmation through ‘signature style’: a study of toy car designers. *Human Relations*, 62(7), 1041–1072.
- Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2003). You are what they eat: the influence of reference groups on consumers’ connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 13(3), 339–348.
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18(1), 39–50.
- Fournier, S., Sensiper, S., McAlexander, J. H., & Schouten, J. W. (2001). *Building brand community on the Haley-Davidson posse ride* (Vol. Reprint No. 5011009). Boston: Harvard Business Review.
- Frone, M. R., Russell, M., & Cooper, L. M. (1992). Antecedents and outcomes of work-family conflict: testing a model of the work-family interface. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77(1), 65–78.
- GivingUSA. (2008). Giving USA 2008. In T. C. o. P. a. I. University (Ed.), (Vol. 53rd Annual Issue): GivingUSA Foundation.
- Goode, W. J. (1960). A theory of role strain. *American Sociological Review*, 25(4), 483–496.
- Greenhaus, J. H. (1988). The intersection of work-family roles: individual, interpersonal, and organizational issues. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 3(4), 23–44.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 10(1), 76–88.
- Hall, D. T. (1972). A model of coping with role conflict: the role behavior of college educated woman. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(4), 471–486.
- Higgins, T. E. (1987). Self-discrepancy: a theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319–340.
- Hillman, A. J., Nicholson, G., & Shropshire, C. (2008). Director’s multiple identities, identification, and board monitoring and resource provision. *Organization Science*, 19(3), 441–456.
- Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. W. (1995). A tale of two theories: a critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58(4), 255–269.
- Jacoby, J., & Chestnut, R. W. (1978). *Brand loyalty: Measurement and management*. New York: Wiley.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1–22.
- Kirchmeyer, C. (1993). Nonwork-to-work spillover: a more balanced view of the experiences and coping of professional woman and men. *Sex Roles*, 28(9/10), 531–552.
- Kline, R. B. (2005). *Principles of structural equation modeling* (2nd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Kraimer, M. L., & Wayne, S. J. (2004). An examination of perceived organizational support as a multidimensional construct in the context of expatriate assignment. *Journal of Management*, 30(2), 209–237.
- Kristof, A. L. (1996). Person-organization fit: an integrative review of its conceptualizations, measurement, and implications. *Personnel Psychology*, 49(1), 1–49.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R. D., & Johnson, E. C. (2005). Consequences of individuals’ fit at work: a meta-analysis of person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology*, 58(2), 281–342.
- Mael, F. (1988). *Organizational identification: Construct redefinition and a field application with organizational alumni*. Doctoral Dissertation, Wayne State University, Detroit.
- Mael, F., & Ashforth, B. E. (1992). Alumni and their alma mater: a partial test of the reformulated model of organizational identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13(2), 103–123.
- Marks, S. R., & MacDermid, S. M. (1996). Multiple roles and the self: a theory of role balance. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58(2), 417–432.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *The American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954–969.
- Maxham, J. G. I., & Netemeyer, R. G. (2003). Firms reap what they sow: the effects of shared values and perceived organizational justice on customer’s evaluations of complaint handling. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(1), 46–62.
- McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., & Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building brand community. *Journal of Marketing*, 66(1), 38–54.
- McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1966). *Identities and interactions*. New York: Free Press.
- McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interactions: An examination of human associations in every day life*. New York: Free Press.
- Meglino, B. M., & Ravlin, E. C. (1998). Individual values in organizations: concepts, controversies, and research. *Journal of Management*, 24(3), 351–389.
- Muniz, A. M., & O’Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412–432.
- Netemeyer, R. G., Boles, J. S., & McMurrian, R. (1996). Development and validation of work-family conflict and family-work conflict scales. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81(4), 400–410.
- O’Reilly, C., & Chatman, J. (1986). Organizational commitment and psychological attachment: the effects of compliance, identifica-

- tion, and internalization on prosocial behavior. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 492–499.
- Parasuraman, A., Berry, L. L., & Zeithaml, V. A. (1991). Refinement and reassessment of the SERVQUAL scale. *Journal of Retailing*, 67(4), 420–450.
- Podsakoff, P. M., Williams, L. J., & Todor, W. D. (1986). Effects of organizational formalizations on alienation among professionals and nonprofessionals. *Academy of Management Journal*, 29(4), 820–831.
- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J.-Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: a critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(5), 879–903.
- Porter, L. W., Steers, R. M., Mowday, R. T., & Boulian, P. V. (1974). Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover among psychiatric technicians. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 59(5), 603–609.
- Pratt, M. G. (1998). To be or not to be: Central questions in organizational identification. In D. A. Whetten & P. C. Godfrey (Eds.), *Identity in organizations: Developing theory through conversations* (pp. 171–207). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Prentice, D. A., Miller, D. T., & Lightdale, J. R. (1994). Asymmetries in attachments to groups and to their members: distinguishing between common-identity and common-bond groups. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(5), 484–493.
- Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values*. New York: Free Press.
- Scott, S. G., & Lane, V. R. (2000). A stakeholder approach to organizational identity. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 43–62.
- Serpe, R. T., & Stryker, S. (1987). The construction of self and reconstruction of social relationships. In E. J. Lawler & B. Markovsky (Eds.), *Advances in group processes*, vol. 4 (pp. 41–66). Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Siebert, S. D. (1974). Toward a theory of role accumulation. *American Sociological Review*, 39(4), 567–578.
- Sirgy, J. M. (1982). Self-concept in consumer behavior: a critical review. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(3), 287–300.
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Menlo Park: Benjamin-Cummings.
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284–297.
- Swann, W. B., Polzer, J. T., Seyle, D. C., & Ko, S. J. (2004). Finding value in diversity: verification of personal and social self-views in diverse groups. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(1), 9–27.
- Thoits, P. A. (1983). Multiple identities and psychological well-being: a reformation and test of the social isolation hypothesis. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 174–187.
- Thoits, P. A. (1986). Multiple identities: examining gender and marital status differences in distress. *American Sociological Review*, 51(2), 259–272.
- Thoits, P. A. (2003). Personal agency in the accumulation of multiple role-identities. In P. J. Burke, T. J. Owens, R. Serpe, & P. A. Thoits (Eds.), *Advances in identity theory and research* (pp. 179–194). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Thompson, J. A., & Bunderson, S. J. (2001). Work-nonwork conflict and the phenomenology of time: beyond the balance metaphor. *Work and Occupations*, 28(1), 17–39.
- Van Steenbergen, E. F., Ellemers, N., & Mooijaart, A. (2007). How work and family can facilitate each other: distinct types of work-family facilitation and outcomes for women and men. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(3), 279–300.
- Wheeler, S. C., Petty, R. E., & Bizer, G. Y. (2005). Self-schema matching and attitude change: situational and dispositional determinants of message elaboration. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 787–797.