

Group Identification on LinkedIn: A Professional Group Study¹

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Abstract

The research investigates how a LinkedIn group affect the factors that lead to group identification and group supportive behaviors. The results of a field study of a LinkedIn HR professional group members suggest that members of LinkedIn groups identify on the basis of self-categorization, affective commitment, and group self-esteem. In which the group operates and the attractiveness of group members. Also, whereas self-categorization is the most important factor leading to identification for members of the LinkedIn groups. In addition, the study found a strong association between the strength of group identification and the incidence of group supportive behaviors on LinkedIn. The research has important implications for organizations using LinkedIn group to build strong relationships with its members.

Key words: LinkedIn group; Group identification; Social identity

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INTRODUCTION

According to several studies from HupStop.com in 2012,

nearly half of the B2B marketers named LinkedIn as the most effective social media outlet for generating leads, whereas LinkedIn is 277 Percent More Effective for Lead Generation than Facebook and Twitter. The social network with a mission of connecting working professionals lends itself well to business-to-business marketing, of course, and plenty of B-to-B marketers are tapping into LinkedIn's network of 175 million members around the world, with more than 2 million total company pages on the network.

LinkedIn continues to be among the most popular social networking sites for business professionals, offering a variety of features for its users. One such feature, Groups, allows members the opportunity to create and manage groups focused on a wide range of business-related subjects, and some of the largest groups have hundreds of thousands of members and rival many niche social networks outside of LinkedIn in terms of size and activity, according to LinkedIn SEC Form S-1 Registration Statement. LinkedIn Groups, which could be seen as the business networking site's equivalent of a Facebook Page, is adding a number of features that give group administrators more marketing muscle. Accordantly, understanding the basis for strong relationships between professionals and their groups is of fundamental interest to the e-business practitioners and researchers on LinkedIn (Witzig, Spencer, & Galvin, 2012).

In general, the stronger the relationship between a group and its members, the greater the willingness of group members to engage in behaviors that support the group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identification reflects individual identification with a social group or community, such as senses of belongingness and attachment. For example, users may develop feelings of membership,

¹ International Human Resource Certification Institute (IHRCI) is the official approved provider and alliance partner of the US HR Certification Institute. The IHRCI LinkedIn professional group was established for Chinese Human Resource (HR) Leaders, as well as HR professors who are interested in building the bridge between HR practices and theories. The LinkedIn group established on July 31, 2011, and it has over 2,500 group member based on Oct 31, 2012 statistics.

influence and value in a group with the increased usage experience (Zhou, 2011). Experimental results show that identity-based features of online community had substantially strongest effects on increasing member attachment and participation compared to a control condition (Ren, Harper, Drenner, Terveen, Kiesler, Riedl, & Kraut, 2012). Given that social identity theory may provide important insights into individuals' willingness to support LinkedIn groups through their consumption behaviors, research is needed on the factors that lead to stronger identification (Zhang, Jiang, & Carroll, 2010).

The paper begins with a review of research on identification as a measure of the strength of the connection between individual and their groups, and the hypotheses that motivate the research. Next is a description of a field study of the members of LinkedIn groups. Finally, the results and implications of the research are presented.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people identify with groups to satisfy basic motivations for inclusion and positive distinctiveness. Similarities initially attract an individual to a group, and this initial attraction enables an individual to recognize their self-esteem and identity (Spears, 2011). Growing evidence suggests that individual group members may differ in the strength of their group identity. Individuals derive "strength and a sense of identity" from their connections to social groups, and individuals are unable to form self-images in the absence of a social identity derived from group affiliations. Indeed, individuals seek group linkages to establish their position in the social environment, and to anchor their self-definition. (Newman, Keough, & Lee, 2009).

The degree to which a membership or affiliation affects self-definition is defined by the strength of the individual's group identification (Hindriks, 2012). Stronger identification leads the individual to attribute desirable characteristics of the group to the self, and to assume a greater similarity with other group members (Abrams & Hogg, 2009). Stronger identification also increases the individual's susceptibility to influence by other group members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Identification with groups is motivated by the same desire to achieve favorable psychological needs. Individuals strive to maintain or enhance a positive social identity by affiliating themselves with attractive groups (Settlela, Jellison, & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). To the extent that one is connected to groups that are favorably evaluated, one's social identity is positive. Accordingly, individuals emphasize the distinctive and positive aspects of group membership as a way of managing their self-image (Aviram & Rosenfeld, 2002).

Because of identification, the individual develops we-intentions to maintain a positive self-defining relationship with the group members (in this case, the LinkedIn groups). Further, one's self-esteem is boosted to the extent that one's ego-ideal overlaps with that of the others, and acting as the other acts or wants one to act reinforces one's self-esteem (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Identification resembles aspects of normative and informational influence (Lord, Lee, & Choong, 2001), as well as referent power (Dawson & Chatman, 2001), and is characterized by the group member's social identity.

2. RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Given that group identification is motivated by the desire to capture favorable psychological needs, individuals should emphasize the positive aspects of their group connections (Vignoles, 2011). Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) found that three components that positively contribute to individual social identity: a cognitive component (awareness of one's membership in a group, i.e., self-categorization), an evaluative component (value connotation attached to this group membership, i.e., group self-esteem) and an emotional component (a sense of emotional involvement with the group, i.e., affective commitment). Thus, this study implemented the features in LinkedIn groups, and evaluated three types of LinkedIn group connections that should differentially affect identification based on the social identity theory in virtual community (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002): self-categorization, affective commitment, and group self-esteem. In turn, identification is posited to lead to group supportive behaviors. Figure 1 illustrated the expected effects for LinkedIn groups. The hypotheses that guide the study are presented next.

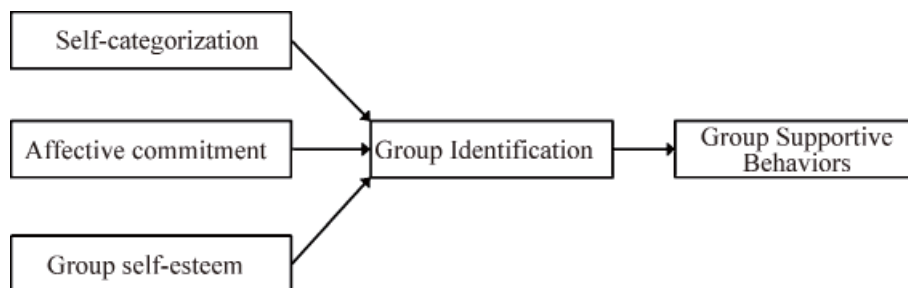


Figure 1
Research Model

2.1 Self-Categorization

Self-categorization theory articulated social cognitive process whereby a particular social identity becomes psychologically operative to govern people's social perceptions and behaviors (Zhang, 2010). According to the theory, social categorization of self and others into ingroup and outgroup accentuates the perceived similarity of the target to the relevant social category by maximizing the ratio of intracategory similarities to intercategory differences (Hogg & Terry, 2000). If members of a group that is explicit categorized, the members should feel identified with the group (Ren *et al.*, 2012). For example, members of the International Human Resource Certification Institute (IHRCI) LinkedIn group have a shared interest in the Human Resources (HR) certifications. Identification with IHRCI is likely to be higher if the members are highly certified with the HR credentials. Therefore, the self-categorization might be strengthened with explanation of the LinkedIn group identity. Formally,

H1a: Self-categorization has a significant positive effect on the group identity.

2.2 Affective Commitment

Ricketta and Van Dick (2005) view identification and commitment as two kinds of closely related "attachments" between members and their organizations or groups. Affective component of social identity influenced in-group favoritism (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Affective commitment associated with a group or feelings of liking for a group leader or member generalize to the group as a whole and vice versa (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). A feeling of being connected to an in-group occurs "to the extent that one is similar to the group prototype and all group members are perceived as similar to each other (Pickett & Brewer, 2001). Also, members (or leaders) of a LinkedIn group may be attractive because of their professional image or personal characteristics (Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). Being a part of a LinkedIn group that has members with attractive qualities or similarity should have positive self-definition effects other than affective connection. Formally,

H1b: Affective commitment has a significant positive effect on the group identity.

2.3 Group Self-Esteem

Group self-esteem refers to the positive or negative value connotation attached to group membership, and arises from evaluations of self-worth derived from membership (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). In other words, people's desire for positive in-group distinctiveness is based on a need for self-esteem (Taşdemir, 2011). Hunter, Kypri, Stokell, Boyes, O'Brien, and McMenamin (2004) demonstrated that the expression of intergroup differentiation increases participants' domain specific self-esteem. Moreover, they found that group members

with low public collective self-esteem tend to display more intergroup differentiation. Competition with out-groups can be increased by highlighting group boundaries and emphasizing the existence of out-groups (Ren *et al.*, 2012). Being affiliated with a LinkedIn group with high reputation or winning image provides individuals with an important way to establish and maintain a positive view of themselves. Formally,

H1c: Group self-esteem has a significant positive effect on the group identity.

2.4 Group Support Behaviors

A key aspect of identification is that individuals are motivated to establish and maintain their ties to the group through their behaviors. Thus identity not only enables users to actively participate in group (Shen, Cheung, Lee, & Chen, 2011), but significantly affects online community users' participation intention and behaviors (Zhou, 2011). Consequently, a LinkedIn group identification is expected to lead to group-supportive behaviors for members. Formally,

H2: Group identification has a significant positive effect on the group support behaviors.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Data Collection

The study recruited all HR professionals who have joined LinkedIn group during the research period. Based on reviewed with those members' profiles on LinkedIn, the IHRCI LinkedIn group was selected because it represented the typical HR professional group (90%+ are HR professionals) and had willing to sponsor this research project in which we could join and connect their membership.

A sample of 1,500 group members was randomly selected from the LinkedIn group member directory. The average age of the participants was 38.7 years and they had been employed by their organization for an average period of 3.6 years. Most of whom work in the greater China region across China (31%), Taiwan (10%), and Hong Kong (8%), and 69 percent of them were female. Respondents worked for a wide variety of organizations, both in industries (78%) and consulting service sector-free lance included (22%), and held an array of jobs and occupational levels.

Prospective participants received an online questionnaire URL through the Inmail (a private messages service that let us send to any LinkedIn user). 465 provided feedback (31%) before due date, of whom 428 (92%) were valid, generating an overall response rate of 29 percent. We conducted two tests to examine the common method variance (CMV). First, we conducted a Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The results indicated that the largest variance explained by individual factor was 13.39 percent. Thus none of the factors can explain the majority of the

variance. Second, we modeled all items as the indicators of a factor representing the common method effect (Malhotra, Kim, & Patil, 2006). The results indicated a poor fitness. With both tests, we feel that CMV is not a significant problem in our research.

3.2 Measures

All variables included 3 items were rated on a five-point scale anchored with “not at all” and “very much/many” and with “moderately” in the middle. The modified items of self-categorization, affective commitment, and group self-esteem were measured adapted from Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) and Shen *et al.* (2007) as follows:

Self-categorization: “My personal identity has an overlapping with group identity”; “My personal image has an overlapping with group identity”; “My personal value has an overlapping with group identity”. (Mean=3.43; SD=1.18; $\alpha=.88$)

Affective commitment: “I like the group members”; “I have positive feeling toward the group”; “I feel a strong feeling of membership in the group”. (Mean=3.32; SD=1.29; $\alpha=.80$)

Group self-esteem: “This group have characteristics that others admire”; “The group is ranked highly compared to other groups”; “This is one of the best HR groups in LinkedIn”. (Mean=4.01; SD=1.25; $\alpha=.87$)

Group identification. This modified version of the group identification scale (Newman, 2009): “Would you think it is accurate if you were described as a typical member of this group?”; “Are there many members in this group who influenced your thoughts and behaviors?”; “It is important to me to maintain strong ties to the group”. (Mean=3.22; SD=1.38; $\alpha=.81$)

Group support behaviors. The items of group support behavior were modified and adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo. (2004): “I participated in the group’s discussions and events”; “I spent time on maintaining the connection within the group”; “I invited others to join this group”. (Mean=3.47; SD=1.26; $\alpha=.78$)

4. RESULTS

All scales exhibited good internal consistency with alphas in excess of 0.70 and variance extracted measures for each construct exceeding 0.50. The hypotheses were tested with a LISREL model with variance input. The constructs in the model were represented with single indicators using the summated scales. Each λ was set to $\alpha^{1/2}$ and each $\theta(1-\alpha)\delta^2$. The LISREL models were estimated in order to test the significance of the LinkedIn group on the effects of self-categorization, affective commitment, and group self-esteem on the group identification.

Analysis of the path coefficients are support of H1a, H1b, and H1c. The path coefficient from self-categorization to group identification is significant in the LinkedIn group ($\gamma = .58, t = 3.89, p < .01$). As expected, the path from group performance to group identification is significantly positive in the group sample ($\gamma = 0.21, t = 2.17, p < .05$). Finally, the path from group self-esteem to group identification is significant for the LinkedIn group ($\gamma = 0.25, t = 2.48, p < .05$). As posited in H2, group identification was significantly related to the group support behaviors ($\beta = 0.42, t = 6.31, p < .01$). A summary of model fit and the standardized path coefficients is provided in Table 1. Figure 2 presents the results graphically.

Table 1
Estimated Parameters for Structural Model

Parameters	Standardized LISREL Estimate	T Values	Hypothesis
γ_{41}	0.58	3.89**	H1a
γ_{42}	0.21	2.17*	H1b
γ_{43}	0.25	2.48**	H1c
β	0.42	6.31**	H2

Overall fit of unconstrained model

χ^2 is 32.59, $p = .05$

Goodness-of-fit index = 0.96

Normed fit index 0.96

Comparative fit index 0.95

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

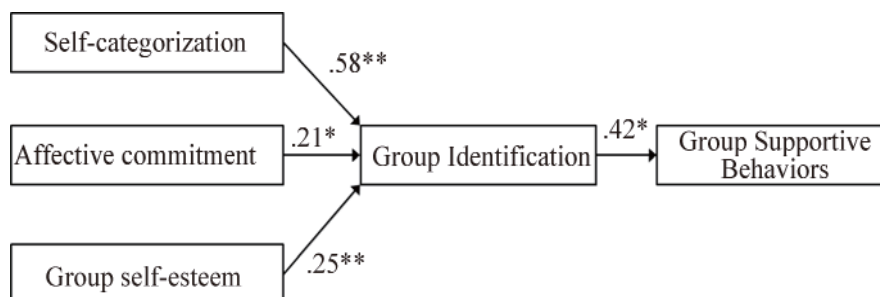


Figure 2
Results

DISCUSSION

The results support the view that individuals identify on the basis of group characteristics that promote a self-image. As predicted, the LinkedIn group members appear to identify because of favorable associations related to their self-categorization with the group domain, their affective commitment toward the group members, and perceived the group's reputation for self-esteem. For the LinkedIn group, perhaps because of the distinctiveness and salience of the certifications to HR professionals, self-categorization became the dominant factor.

The results also suggest that identification leads to behaviors that are congruent with a group-based identity for the LinkedIn group. unsuccessful groups. Highly identified group members participated more frequently in behaviors that established or maintained their connection with the group. These group members were also more likely to attend the group's discussion and invite others to join the group. poor performance. Another interesting findings of the filed study is that the members with higher score of group identification highly engaged in visible marketing events that were demonstrated on the discussion board of the LinkedIn group.

Consistent with the social identity theory, individual identification with a certain group has been shown to be a valuable indicator of the perceived relationship with that group. It covers the extent to which an individual identifies himself with a group in the sense that the individual comes to see himself as a member of the group (Taşdemir, 2011). A member's group identification is, therefore, the extent to which a member identifies himself with the network as a whole and feels that he or she actually belongs to a group (Newman *et al.*, 2009). An individual that highly identifies himself with a LinkedIn group is likely to be an attached member and promote the group to others. As the group identification also relates to the level of the group support behaviors it is, therefore, very important for a LinkedIn group if it wants to stay vital.

The implication is that, The identity power of LinkedIn Groups should not be underestimated. The power of the LinkedIn group identification is to allow those pursue positive self-images to come together as ingroup that mutually identify them. In other word, a LinkedIn group with identifiable images and a tangible identity therefore creates a feeling of self-esteem and group based supportive behaviors for enhancing personal identity. The LinkedIn group owners or managers should not only emphasis on members' participation but selling points related to the group identity by creating (or acquiring) few unique characteristics, professional contents, and success stories or associations. Moreover, inviting key industry experts or figureheads to join and engage may be a critical success factor. If there are some heavy-hitters in the group's sector, invite them to engage with the group, and encourage them to invite their colleagues,

and by highlighting the group to other, non-competing groups (LinkedIn members can belong to up to 50 groups simultaneously). Also, displaying the group in the Group Directory and on the key members' profiles to get more visibility and identity.

Notwithstanding the results are consistent with theory in social psychology that specifies the essential role of identification in self-definition and self-esteem, the study has some limitations. First, although the research uses a LinkedIn group field study to enhance realism, the assessment of causality is limited by the group's nature. Future research might help us generalize our conceptual research model and the findings of our analyses. Second, this study represents only a snapshot in time, compared to longitudinal studies, and overall analysis could be improved by continuing the study year-over-year. Last, the study examines the empirical evidence, but without further interviewing the group members, there might be some other factors worth considering, such as group information, familiarity with group, and intragroup communication (e.g. Ren *et al.*, 2012). Those mediating effects of these factors between group identification and group supportive behaviors should be investigated in the future.

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