The Journey of Customer Identification: A Systematic Literature Review and Directions for Further Investigation

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Müşteri Özdeşleşmesinin Gelişimi: Sistematik Literatür İncelemesi ve Gelecek Araştırmalar için Öneriler	The Journey of Customer Identification: A Systematic Literature Review and Directions for Further Investigation
Öz	**Abstract**
Müşteri özdeşleşmesi, müşterilerin markalarla ilişkilerini anlamada önemli bir kavramdır. Bu literatür incelemesinde, müşteri özdeşleşmesi ile ilgili bugüne kadar yapılmış çalışmaları kapsamlı bir şekilde gözden geçirmek ve mevcut literatürde tespit edilen boşluklar doğrultusunda gelecek çalışmalar için faydalı öneriler sunmak amaçlanmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, müşteri özdeşleşmesi ile ilgili Scopus veri tabanından ulaşılan 73 makale sistematik olarak incelenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular kavramsallaştırma, teorik çerçeve, tanımlayıcı bilgiler, yöntemsel eğilimler ve anahtar değişkenler olmak üzere beş bölümde tartışılmıştır. Çalışma, mevcut literatürdeki boşluklardan yola çıkılarak, gelecekteki çalışmalar için faydalı olacağı düşünülen birtakım önerilerde bulunularak sonlandırılmaktadır.	Customer identification has been a key concept in understanding consumers' relationships with brands. In this review article, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of extant knowledge on customer identification and offer suggestions for future development in line with the gaps identified in the prior literature. We systematically review 73 peer-reviewed journal articles pertinent to customer identification in the Scopus database. We discuss the review findings in five sections, namely, conceptualization, theoretical framework, descriptive information, methodological trends, and key variables. Drawing from the gaps in the existing literature, we propose several suggestions for future research and end the paper with concluding remarks.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Müşteri Özdeşleşmesi, Marka Özdeşleşmesi, İşletme Özdeşleşmesi, Sistematik İnceleme, Tüketici Davranışları	**Keywords:** Customer Identification, Brand Identification, Company Identification, Systematic Review, Consumer Behavior
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1. Introduction

Customer identification has received remarkable attention in both marketing research and practice in the last two decades. Brand managers can take advantage of identification to compete in marketplaces and boost performance. Customer identification can be expressed as a psychological process that helps consumers to be psychologically connected to the brand/firm by directing the loyalty of consumers positively and can shape the strength of the long-term relationship that may occur between the brand and the consumer (Martínez and Del Bosque, 2013; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018). Customers who feel identified with a brand or, company in general, tend to develop positive attitudes toward them (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2021). Today, as a result of the high market dynamism and competitiveness, consumer-brand identification has become more important than ever in terms of brand management (Tuškej et al., 2013). Previous studies also reveal that the higher the identification with a brand or company, the more the customer tends to display favorable behaviors, such as positive word-of-mouth (Rim, Yang & Lee, 2016), willingness to pay a premium (Wolter & Cronin, 2016), and resilience to negative information (Elbedweihy et al., 2010). Therefore, customer identification is frequently used to explain the factors and motivations that connect consumers with firms (Martínez and Del Bosque, 2013). This obvious importance of customer identification led marketing academics to call for more research on further investigating this concept in terms of its scope, boundaries, antecedents, and consequences. Despite the dramatic increase in customer identification research, no study to date has been found to synthesize the extant literature on the subject. Therefore, in the current study, we aim to systematically review, assess, and synthesize the stock of articles on customer identification and try to answer these five questions: (1) What is customer identification? (2) What theories are used to explain customer identification? (3) What are the most influential papers on customer identification? (4) What methodological methods are preferred most frequently in previous customer identification research? (5) What are to be known key variables that have been investigated alongside the customer identification construct?

By providing answers to the abovementioned questions, this study aims to provide two key contributions to the literature. The first contribution comes from the identification of "what we know" about customer identification. The second contribution focuses on the "what we need to know" aspect. That is, we identify the gaps in the current customer identification knowledge and subsequently highlight several fruitful avenues for future research.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we present the review methodology followed in the current study about screening and coding protocols. Second, we discuss the review findings in terms of the conceptualization of the subject, theoretical underpinnings, descriptive characteristics, research methodologies employed, and empirical findings to address the proposed research questions. Third, we identify the gaps in the current literature and subsequently provide avenues for future research. We finalize the paper with concluding remarks.
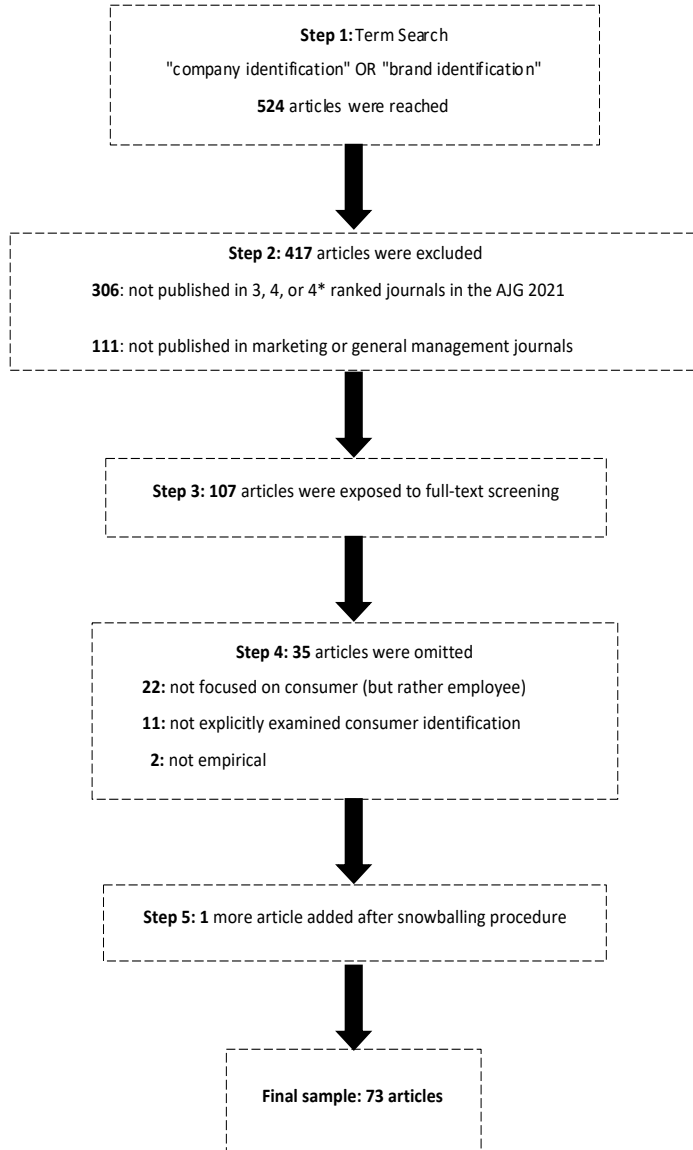
2. Review Methodology

2.1. Screening Protocol

We have employed a systematic literature review approach to synthesize the relevant literature in customer identification. This method of review has been extensively used in the marketing discipline (e.g., Liu et al., 2021; Krey et al., 2022) to extract and analyze data from extant publications in the review sample. Also, systematic reviews facilitate better interpretation of the findings by visualizing the data extracted. They can be used by academics to identify the consistencies in the pertinent literature and present possible explanations for them as well (Hulland and Houston, 2020). We performed the search process in the Scopus database in December 2021. This database has been commonly used by several researchers (e.g., Sepulcri et al., 2020; Paul and Dhiman, 2021; Riboldazzi et al., 2021) as it covers a vast majority of peer-reviewed scientific journals in marketing. We followed a well-defined search process in line with strict inclusion and exclusion criteria (Tranfield et al., 2003; Snyder, 2019; Paul and Criado, 2020). Specifically, the article screening process is composed of five phases (see Figure 1). In the first phase, we searched for keywords "company identification" OR "brand identification" in titles, abstracts, or keywords to reach relevant journal articles on customer identification published in English until the end of 2021. This step generated 524 articles. In the second phase, we excluded 306 articles that were not published in 3, 4, or 4* ranked journals in the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) 2021. We also left out 111 articles as they did not meet the inclusion criterion of being published in marketing or general management journals. These two criteria narrowed the number of articles to 107. In the third phase, we conducted a full-text screening of the remaining 107 articles, which revealed that 22 articles did not focus on customer identification (but rather on employee identification); 11 articles did not explicitly examine customer identification, and 2 articles were not empirical (conceptual or metanalytical papers). This step reduced the number of articles to 72. In the final phase, the reference lists of these papers were carefully read and one more article was found related to customer identification. The inclusion of this article led the final number of 73 eligible articles that were published between 1998 and 2021 to be systematically reviewed in this study.

2.2. Coding Protocol

Following previous systematic studies in the marketing literature (e.g., Eteokleous et al., 2016), we performed content analysis to extract information based on five main aspects. First, we analyzed the alternative conceptualizations of customer identification. Second, we identified the theories employed in the relevant literature. Third, we extracted descriptive information from each article with regard to the author(s), year of publication, journals, citations, and keywords. Fourth, methodological issues were analyzed in terms of the number of studies, research method, time emphasis, countries involved, data type, data collection method, access to data, unit of analysis, sampling method, sample size, response rate, nonresponse bias, common method bias, and statistical analysis. Fifth, we took information on empirical findings, i.e., the direct and indirect relationships of customer identification with various constructs. This coding process was undertaken by two authors who worked independently from each other to ensure intercoder reliability. The two coding forms created by the authors were then compared to identify any discrepancies. The intercoder reliability was revealed to be .90%, which is well accepted (Kassarjian, 1977). Concerning the observed coding differences, they were discussed one by one by two authors and resolved.

Figure 1: Systematic Literature Review Process

Step 1: Term Search

"company identification" OR "brand identification"

524 articles were reached

Step 2: 417 articles were excluded

306: not published in 3, 4, or 4* ranked journals in the AJG 2021

111: not published in marketing or general management journals

Step 3: 107 articles were exposed to full-text screening

Step 4: 35 articles were omitted

22: not focused on consumer (but rather employee)

11: not explicitly examined consumer identification

2: not empirical

Step 5: 1 more article added after snowballing procedure

Final sample: 73 articles

3. Findings

3.1. The Concept of Customer Identification

Customers may feel identified with brands (Tuškej et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2021) or companies (Einwiller et al., 2006; Haumann et al., 2014; Wolter and Cronin, 2016), in general. Table 1 lists some definitions of the customer identification concept found in the literature. Of these, the most influential papers in the prior literature are Lam et al. (2010) and Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), which will be discussed in detail below.

Table 1: Summary of Definitions of Customer Identification

Scholars	Dimensionality	Definition	Selected articles using the definition
Escalas and Bettman (2003: 340)	Unidimensional	"the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept"	Albert et al. (2017); Albert et al. (2013); Gaustad et al. (2020); Khalifa and Shukla (2017)
Bhattacharya and Sen (2003: 77)	Unidimensional	"…an active, selective, and volitional act motivated by the satisfaction of one or more self-definitional (i.e., ''Who am I?'') needs"	Currás-Pérez et al. (2009); Elbedweihy et al. (2016); He & Li (2011); He et al. (2012); He et al. (2017); Homburg et al. (2013); Itani (2021); Lii and Lee (2012); Marin and Maya (2013); Teichmann et al. (2016; Wolter and Cronin (2016); Wolter et al. (2017; Wolter et al. (2016); Wolter et al. (2021)
Einwiller et al. (2006: 186)	Unidimensional	"as the degree to which consumers feel a sense of connection to a company and the degree to which aspects of the perceived organizational identity are self-referential and self-defining for them"	Liu et al. (2010)
Lam et. al. (2010: 129)	Multidimensional	"psychological oneness with a social entity (e.g., a firm, a brand) stemming from an actual membership (e.g., an employee) or a symbolic membership (e.g., a current or potential customer of a brand)"	Lam et al. (2012); Lam et al. (2013); Wolter et al. (2019); Swani et al. (2021)
Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012: 407)	Unidimensional	"consumers' perceived state of oneness with a brand"	Bartsch et al. (2016); Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2017); de Kerviler and Rodriguez (2019); Kim (2019); Delgado-Ballester and Fernandez Sabiote (2015); He et al. (2018); Kolbl et al. (2019); Sichtmann et al. (2019); Tran et al. (2020)
Tuškej et al. (2013: 54)	Unidimensional	"a consumer's sense of sameness with a specific brand's symbolic meanings"	Albert et al. (2017); Matute et al. (2021)

Firstly, Lam et al. (2010) define customer identification as a psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing belongingness with a brand. Building on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), these scholars conceptualize brand identification as a formative construct with three dimensions cognitive, affective, and evaluative. The cognitive dimension of brand identification represents the sense of awareness with membership. The emotional dimension is about the affective investment in awareness and evaluations. An evaluative is the final dimension and is defined as the degree to which a customer believes the psychological

oneness with the brand brings value to him/her. These three components are proposed to be valuable in understanding the bonds between the individual and the brand. When an individual categorizes himself/herself as a member of a brand, s/he realizes cognitive awareness. Self-esteem increases as the individual evaluate the positive connotations of the brand to which he/she thinks he/she belongs. With these positive evaluations, a feeling of emotional attachment to the brand is formed, and therefore, identification with the brand occurs (Işıkay and Başcı, 2020). Thus, it is claimed that in studies that deal with customer identification multidimensionally, the formation process of identification can be handled more comprehensively.

On the other hand, Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen (2012: 407) view brand identification as a unidimensional construct and they define it as "a consumer's perceived state of oneness with a brand". They propose that customer identification is a cognitive construct in nature (Park et al., 2010). While the value received from a brand is the antecedent to brand identification, the emotions of a brand are the consequences of this construct. Thus, value and emotions should not be viewed as parts of customer identification.

Besides, some scholars have interchangeably used self-brand connection with brand identification in the previous literature (e.g., Gaustad et al., 2019; Obilo et al., 2021). Escalas and Bettman (2003) define self-brand connection as the extent to which an individual has incorporated a brand into his or her self-concept. However, according to Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), customer identification (with brands or companies) possesses a narrower meaning such that it excludes the potential motivations guiding such self-brand connections, for instance, communicating one's identity to others and achieving one's desired self.

3.2. Theoretical Perspectives

The theories used as an overarching framework in customer identification research are listed in Table 2. Interestingly, approximately one-third of the reviewed articles (37.0%) did not refer to any specific theory in positioning their research, while the remaining ones (63.0%) were based on single or multiple theories. Of these, the social identity theory (45.7%) appears to be the most prevalent theory in the relevant literature.

Social identity theory basically postulates that an individual's self-esteem and self-identity depend on his/her identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), the answer which an individual gives to the questions "who am I" or "who are we" (Ashforth et al., 2008). According to this theory, individuals form a unique personal identity and develop a social identity based on the groups to which they belong (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In other words, this theory suggests that individuals form their social identities to express their own identities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Therefore, while individuals in the same group exhibit similar behaviors, those in different groups act differently. In this context, consumer identification is drawn from social identity theory. Accordingly, consumers are prone to enhance their self-identity and self-esteem by identifying with a group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Brands or companies as groups help consumers to define their social identities based on their symbolic values (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). That is, consumers benefit from brands or companies to satisfy their self-definitional needs (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Therefore, as this theory is engaged in conceptualizing the concept of customer identification, this is not surprising that it is the most used one in the previous literature. This theory is followed by consumer culture theory (2.9%) and motivated reasoning theory (2.9%). Other theories that were hardly used in the relevant

literature comprise a very long list, which provides strong evidence that customer identification can be utilized to explain a diverse list of research questions.

Table 2: Theories Used in Customer Identification Research

| Theoretical paradigm	%	Theoretical paradigm	%
Specified	*63.0*	Psychological empowerment theory	1.5
Social identity theory	48.5	Regret theory	1.5
Consumer culture theory	3.0	Relationship quality theory	1.5
Motivated reasoning theory	3.0	Self-congruity theory	1.5
Attraction theory	1.5	Self-construal theory	1.5
Conceptual metaphor theory	1.5	Self-determination theory	1.5
Basic psychological needs theory	1.5	Self-expansion theory	1.5
Brand relationship theory	1.5	Self-verification theory	1.5
Brand values theory	1.5	Sensemaking theory	1.5
Complexity theory	1.5	Social comparison theory	1.5
Conceptual metaphor theory	1.5	Social exchange theory	1.5
Congruence theory	1.5	Social intuitionist model	1.5
Embodied cognition theory	1.5	Stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) paradigm	1.5
Expectation– confirmation theory	1.5	The in-and extra-role theory	1.5
Expectation–evidence theory	1.5	The moral foundation's theory	1.5
Flow theory	1.5	Theory of optimal distinctiveness	1.5
Instrumental stakeholder theory	1.5	Virtue character theory	1.5
Need gratification theory	1.5	*Not specified*	*37.0*

Note: Some of the reviewed articles have used more than one of the theories listed above.

3.3. Descriptive Overview of Publications

3.3.1. Number of Publications Over Time

The distribution of articles over years is presented in Figure 2. The first study in our review sample was published in 1998. We observe a rapid increase in the number of customer identification publications between 2006 and 2013. In 2014, however, we can see a sharp decline in the interest in customer identification research. Between 2016 and 2021, researchers showed the greatest interest in the investigation of customer identification, Specifically, the average number of publications per year is 7.3. This provides strong evidence that marketing scholars increasingly focus on customer identification studies.

Figure 2: Number of Publications per Year
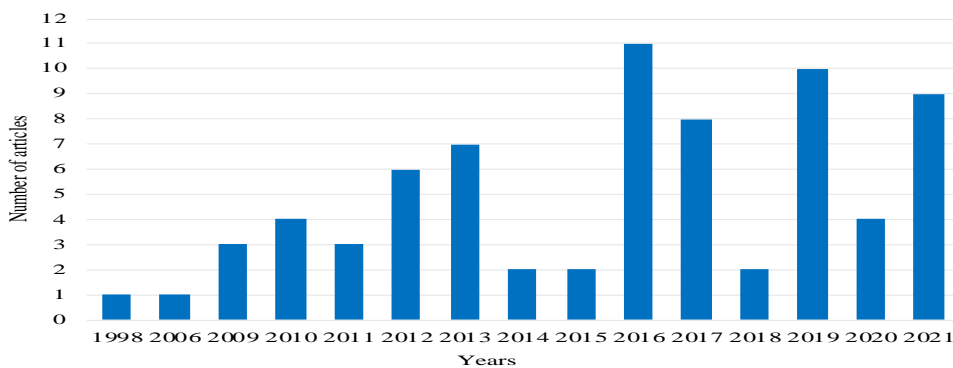
3.3.2. Journal Outlets

As depicted in Table 3, the articles included in this review study were published across 13 different academic journals. *Journal of Business Research* (46.6%) is by far the most popular outlet for customer identification research. *European Journal of Marketing* (12.3%), *Journal of Business Ethics* (11.0%), and *Psychology and Marketing* (6.8%) are the other three most key journal outlets in customer identification literature. The remaining 9 journals are *Journal of Marketing* (5.3%), *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (4.0%), *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (5.5%), *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (2.7%), *Journal of Retailing* (2.7%), *Business and Society* (1.4%), *Industrial Marketing Management* (1.4%), *Journal of Advertising* (1.4%), *Journal of International Business Studies* (1.4%), including four or fewer articles on the topic. This wide range of journal outlets indicates that customer identification received the attention of researchers and publishers in diverse areas.

Table 3: Journals Disseminating Customer Identification Research

Journal	%	Articles
Journal of Business Research	46.6	Albert et al. (2017); Albert et al. (2013); Bartsch et al. (2016); Baskentli et al. (2019); Berendt et al. (2018); Brashear-Alejandro et al. (2016); Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2017); de Kerviler and Rodriguez (2019); Einwiller et al. (2019); Ekinci et al. (2013); Elbedweihy et al. (2016); Gaustad et al. (2020); He et al. (2012); Kang et al. (2015); Khalifa and Shukla (2017); Kolbl et al. (2019); Krishna and Kim (2021); Lee et al. (2012); Lee et al. (2021); Lin et al. (2019); Palmer et al. (2016); Rim et al. (2016); Sichtmann et al. (2019); Su et al. (2016); Swani et al. (2021); Torres et al. (2017); Tran et al. (2020); Tuškej et al. (2013); Wolter et al. (2019); Wolter et al. (2016); Wolter et al. (2021); Wolter and Joseph Cronin (2017); Yu et al. (2021); Zhou et al. (2012)
European Journal of Marketing	12.3	Aspara and Tikkanen (2011); Delgado-Ballester and Fernandez Sabiote (2015); Han et al. (2016); Itani (2021); Karaosmanoğlu et al. (2011); Marín and de Maya (2013); Paulssen et al. (2019); Pérez et al. (2013); Xiao and Lee (2014)
Journal of Business Ethics	11.0	Currás-Pérez et al. (2009); Dalman et al. (2019); Deng and Xu (2017); He and Li (2011); Kim (2019); Lii and Lee (2012); Marin et al. (2009); Matute et al. (2021)
Psychology and Marketing	6.8	Curlo and Chamblee (1998); Gilal et al. (2021); Liu et al. (2010); Orth et al. (2020); Stokburger-Sauer (2010)
Journal of Marketing	5.5	Haumann et al. (2014); Homburg et al. (2013); Homburg et al. (2009); Lam et al. (2010)
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	4.1	Wolter and Cronin (2016); Einwiller et al. (2006); Lam et al. (2013)
International Journal of Research in Marketing	2.7	Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020); Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
Journal of Interactive Marketing	2.7	He et al. (2017); Teichmann et al. (2016)
Journal of Retailing	2.7	Lichtenstein et al. (2010); Wolter et al. (2017)
Business and Society	1.4	Chun (2016)
Industrial Marketing Management	1.4	He et al. (2018)
Journal of Advertising	1.4	Hayes et al. (2021)
Journal of International Business Studies	1.4	Lam et al. (2012)

3.3.3. Citation Analysis

We determined the most relevant and influential articles in the customer identification literature by examining the number of citations. Table 4 shows the ten articles with the highest number of citations along with the journals they were published. We also calculated the average citations per year to control for the age of an article. Accordingly, among 73 review articles, the study by Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer (2009) seems to be the most cited one. This paper is closely followed by Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) and Marin et al. (2009). When we consider the citations per year in ordering the articles, there are slight changes in the ordering. Specifically, we observe that the article by Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) is the most cited publication. The second most cited article is Tuškej et al. (2013), while Lii and Lee (2012) are in third place.

Table 4: Most Cited Articles on Customer Identification

Author	Journal	No. of citations	Citations per year
Homburg et al. (2009)	Journal of Marketing	378	29
Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)	International Journal of Research in Marketing	368	37
Marin et al. (2009)	Journal of Business Ethics	341	26
Lii and Lee (2012)	Journal of Business Ethics	312	31
Tuškej et al. (2013)	Journal of Business Research	298	33
He and Li (2011)	Journal of Business Ethics	261	24
Lam et al. (2010)	Journal of Marketing	252	21
He et al. (2012)	Journal of Business Research	241	24
Zhou et al. (2012)	Journal of Business Research	211	21
Homburg et al. (2013)	Journal of Marketing	169	19

Note: The citation results were as of January 17th, 2022.

3.3.4. Keywords

Keyword concurrence analysis was performed using VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) to identify the relationships among the concepts based on their paired presence in the relevant literature (Mustak et al., 2021). From a temporal perspective, this visualization method also enables us to observe the changes in the predominant keywords over time. Figure 3 presents the keyword co-occurrence analysis results for customer identification literature with a minimum threshold of two co-occurrences in the relevant literature. The main keywords that were focused on between 1998 and 2012 are purplish and include customer-brand identification, brand attitude, branding, and corporate associations. Consumer-company identification, corporate branding, identification, and loyalty, colored light blue, are among the most common keywords that appear between 2013 and 2014. The next keywords, customer-company identification, CSR, consumer behavior, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth are greenish, demonstrating that the average year of publications including these keywords is 2015. Between 2016 and 2017, different dimensions of identification, consumer-brand identification, and fit, in yellowish, are the most commonly focused concepts in the relevant literature. Finally, after 2017, we can observe that the keywords, colored reddish, are value co-creation and customer-company identification.

Figure 3: Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis
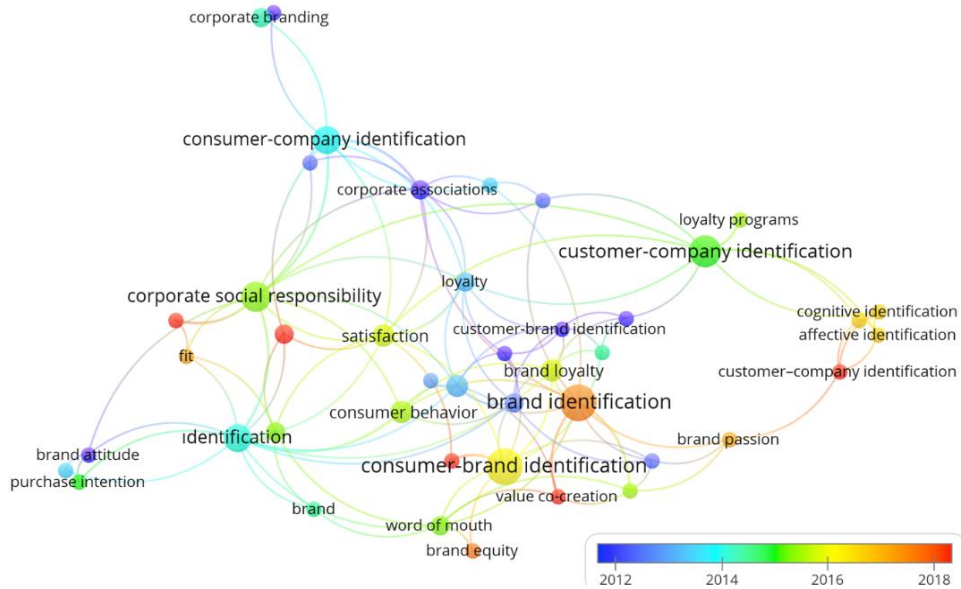
3.4. Methodological Trends

The systematic review of customer identification literature revealed that the big majority of 73 articles included a single study (72.6%), while the remaining ones (27.4%) had multiple studies. Specifically, two-study (19.2%), three-study (4.1%), four-study (1.4%) and five-study (2.7%) articles constitute the multi-study articles. Therefore, the reviewed articles comprised 104 studies in total. The methodological aspects below were analyzed using the information from these 104 studies published in 73 articles and displayed in Table 5.

Almost all of the studies in the customer identification stream of research were quantitative in nature (97.1%). Among these quantitative studies, the experiment was found to be the most preferred data collection method (50.0%), closely followed by the survey (46.3%). Content analysis (0.9%) was very rarely employed in the previous customer identification literature (Hayes et al., 2021; Swani et al., 2021). Surprisingly, the review sample includes very few studies that adopted a qualitative research design (1.0%) (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) with the interview (1.9%) and focus group (0.9%). Similarly, a mixed-method research design (1.9%) (e.g., Berendt et al., 2018; de Kerviler and Rodriguez, 2019) was adopted in very limited studies. Concerning time emphasis, the big majority of studies (92.4%) employed a cross-sectional design, while the remainder (7.6%) adopted a longitudinal design.

Table 5: Methodological Aspects Based on 104 Studies in 73 Articles

Research design		%	Research design			%
Number of studies			**Unit of analysis**			
	One	72.6			B2C customers	96.3
	Two	19.2			Customer complaints	1.9
	Three	4.1			Social media posts	0.9
	Four	1.4			B2B customers	0.9
	Five	2.7	**Sampling method**			
Research method			*Non-probabilistic*		Convenience	8.8
	Quantitative	97.1			Snowball	8.8
	Qualitative	1.0			Quota	3.5
	Mixed	1.9	*Probabilistic*		Random	3.5
Time emphasis					Stratified	1.0
	Cross-sectional	92.4			Not specified	74.4
	Longitudinal	7.6	**Sample size**			
Countries involved					99 or less	8.4
	One	67.3			100-249	31.8
	Two	1.9			250-499	32.7
	Three or more	0.9			500 or more	27.1
	Not specified	29.9	**Response rate**			
Data type					Yes	14.4
	Primary	96.3			Not specified	85.6
	Secondary	3.7	**Nonresponse bias**			
Data collection method					Yes	5.0
Quantitative	Experiment	50.0			Not specified	95.0
	Survey	46.3	**Common method bias**			
	Content analysis	0.9			Marker variable	12.9
Qualitative	Interview	1.9			Procedural remedies	11.2
	Focus group	0.9			Harman's single factor	6.9
Means to access data					Common latent factor	6.0
	Panel	34.3			Others	5.2
	Online	23.4			Not specified	57.8
	Personal interview	7.2	**Statistical analysis**			
	Intercept	5.4			SEM	37.5
	Mail/postal	2.7			Regression	19.1
	Paper & pencil	2.7			Process macro	16.2
	Telephone	1.8			Difference tests	9.6
	Not specified	22.5			Content analysis	2.2
					Others	15.4

Regarding the country context, the review findings demonstrate that, unfortunately, a substantial number of studies (29.9%) lack information on how many countries or geographical regions they conducted their research. Of the remaining studies, a single country context (67.3%) appeared to be predominant, while a handful of studies focused on two (1.9%) or three or more countries (0.9%). Table 6 provides the list of countries under which customer identification studies were performed. Interestingly, almost half of the studies (44.7%) did not

disclose which country or geographical region they focused on. Of the studies that reported the country context, the USA ranks the first (27.0%). The following popular countries in customer identification research were mostly in the Europe region, such as Germany (14.6%), the UK (7.9%) Spain (7.9%), France (5.6%), Austria (4.5%), Slovakia (2.2%), and Turkey (3.4%). In the Asia region, Taiwan (6.7%) (e.g., He and Li, 2011) and China (4.5%) (e.g., He et al., 2017) were the focus of a few studies. The remaining countries were used only once in the prior customer identification research. From the systematic review of relevant articles, it is evident that no study has been conducted in South America, Africa, or Oceania regions. Additionally, as Table 6 shows, the development levels of the countries that were examined in customer identification papers were taken into account. Accordingly, the big majority of the studies were conducted in countries with developed economies. It is noteworthy that the number of studies focused on emerging and developing countries as a research setting were quite limited. Notably, underdeveloped economy countries were totally neglected in the past literature.

Table 6: Countries Involved in Customer Identification Studies

Level of economy	Country	%
Specified		*55.3*
Developed	USA	27.0
	Germany	14.6
	UK	7.9
	Spain	7.9
	Taiwan	6.7
	France	5.6
	Austria	4.5
	Slovakia	2.2
	Belgium	1.1
	Denmark	1.1
	Finland	1.1
	Italy	1.1
	Poland	1.1
	Portugal	1.1
	Sweden	1.1
	Switzerland	1.1
	The Netherlands	1.1
Emerging	China	4.5
	Turkey	3.4
	Pakistan	1.1
	South Korea	1.1
Developing	Bosnia & Herzegovina	1.1
	Bulgaria	1.1
	Romania	1.1
Not specified		*44.7*

In addition to the country, we also examined the industry chosen as an empirical context in the extant customer identification literature (see Figure 4). Several researchers emphasize food and beverage (24.3%) in their customer identification studies. The other most widely studied industries are hospitality and tourism (11.9%), electronics (9.0%), clothing (7.3%), automotive (5.1%), and retailing (4.5%). This proves that customer identification scholars conducted research in both product and service contexts. Notably, despite the well-known importance of

industry in consumer behavior research, a considerable number of studies (15%) provided no information on which product or service category they focused on. Besides, the authors scrutinized the reviewed articles that focus on the product or service industry In order to evaluate their approach to customer identification. Yet they didn't observe any particular difference in terms of the evaluation or conceptualization of customer identification.

Figure 4: Distribution of Industries Examined in Customer Identification Studies
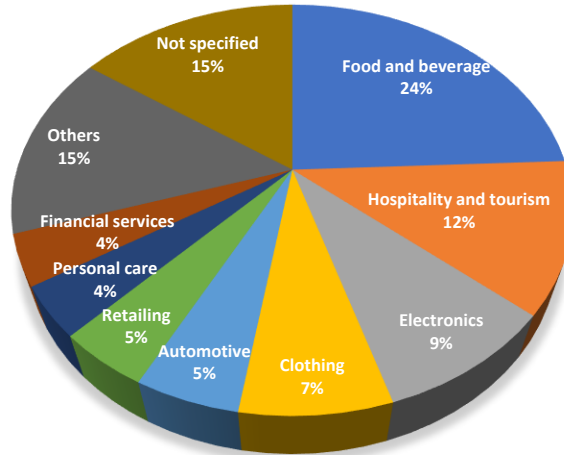
The reviewed studies on the subject involve both primary data and secondary data collection methods. Specifically, primary data (96.3%) dominated research on the subject, while only a handful of studies (3.7%) preferred secondary data. Customer identification scholars applied a variety of methods to collect data for the study. These methods, in descending frequency, included panel (34.3%), online (23.4%), personal interview (7.2%), intercept (5.4%), mail/postal (2.7%), paper & pencil (2.7%), and telephone (1.8%). The remaining studies (22.5%), on the other hand, did not specify how they reached their data.

In the large majority of studies, the unit of analysis was the B2C customers (96.3%). Although very rare, customer complaints (1.9%) (Wolter et al., 2019) and social media posts (0.9%) (Swani et al., 2021) were the focus of customer identification studies. Surprisingly, the customer identification construct has been investigated in the B2B context only twice (0.9%) in previous literature (i.e., He et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2013).

The reviewed studies were also analyzed in terms of the preferred sampling methods. Surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the studies (74.4%) provided no information about the sampling method. Most of the remaining studies (21.1%) were conducted using non-probabilistic sampling methods, namely convenience (8.8%), snowball (8.8%), and quota sampling (3.5%). Unfortunately, probabilistic methods were rarely adapted (4.5%). Notably, only a handful of the reviewed studies employed random (3.5%) or stratified sampling (1.0%). Concerning the sample size, in the majority of studies (32.7%), the sample size ranged from 250 to 499 participants. In 31.8% of studies, the sample size was between 100 and 249 participants, while 27.1% of the studies collected data from at least 500 respondents. On the other hand, the sample size was less than 100 in only a small portion of previous studies (8.4%).

Surprisingly, a very limited portion of studies (14.4%) reported their response rate. Similarly, non-response bias was tested in a couple of studies (5.0%). In relation to the common method bias, this review revealed that almost two-thirds of studies did not consider the possibility of common method bias in their data. Of the remaining studies, the marker variable (12.9%) was the most popular method to control for CMB followed by procedural remedies (11.2%), Harman's single factor (6.9%), and common latent factor (5.2%). Finally, the review results revealed that the most frequently employed analytical method was PLS-SEM (37.5%). The remainder included regression analysis (19.1%), process macro (16.2%), difference tests (9.6%), content analysis (2.2%), and others (15.4%), such as correlation and hierarchical linear modeling.

3.5. Related Variables with Customer Identification

Examining the determinants and outcomes of customer identification is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing customer identification as well as its benefits and risks for customers and companies. The summary of the literature on the relationships between customer identification and other constructs is illustrated in Figure 5.

3.5.1. Antecedents

Our findings suggest that there are several antecedents of customer identification. To begin with, when customers trust companies (Homburg et al., 2013), feel emotionally attached to them (Karaosmanoglu et al., 2011), or have personal connections with employees (Marin et al., 2013), they feel more identified. Sichtmann et al. (2019) studied customer identification in the international branding context and showed that perceived brand globalness/localness positively influenced customers' identification with the brand. Congruency has also been one of the antecedents frequently investigated in the literature. For instance, the congruency between a customer's self and brand (Albert et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2013), celebrity (Albert et al., 2017), or other customers (Elbedweihy et al., 2016) has been identified as a key facilitator of customer identification. The congruency between customer values and brand values was also found to foster customer identification (Elbedweihy et al., 2016; Tuškej et al., 2013). Moreover, feelings of belongingness and status (Brashear-Alejandro et al., 2016), as well as self-expansion (de Kerviler and Rodriguez, 2011), are positively related to customers' desire to identify with companies or their brands.

Previous research revealed that several brand-related factors, such as brand attractiveness (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009), brand community identification (Zhou et al., 2012), brand distinctiveness (Wolter et al., 2016), brand experiential and functional values (Delgado-Ballester and Fernandez Sabiote, 2015), brand quality (Lam et al., 2013), brand reputation (Han et al., 2016), brand identity (He et al., 2012), brand rivalry (Berendt et al., 2018), brand social benefits (Torres et al., 2017), and brand warmth (Kolbl et al., 2019) enhance customers' identification. Besides, customer-company identification is also positively influenced by companies' prestige (Wolter and Cronin, 2017), identity attractiveness (Marin et al., 2013), and use of corporate brand name (Swani et al., 2021).

Finally, customer identification is a valuable topic in corporate social responsibility (CSR) research. It was found in several articles that companies' CSR activities were fundamental to achieve strong customer identification (Deng and Xu, 2017; He and Li, 2011; Homburg et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2012; Lii and Lee, 2012; Marin et al., 2009; Pérez, García de los Salmones, and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013).

3.5.2. Consequences

A set of articles highlighted that customer identification had a significant impact on attitude (Lii and Lee, 2012; Einwiller et al., 2019), purchase intention (Paulssen et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2021), willingness to pay (Wolter and Cronin, 2016; Haumann et al., 2014), switching behavior (Lam et al., 2010), word-of-mouth (Su et al., 2016; He et al., 2018), advocacy (Baskentli et al., 2019; Stokburger-Sauer et al, 2010;2012), and loyalty (Ekinci et al., 2013; Kang et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2016). Also, the stronger the consumer feels identified with a brand, the higher the perceived quality (Tran et al., 2020), satisfaction (Stokburger-Sauer et al, 2010; Pérez et al., 2013), commitment (Su et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2012), and distinctiveness (Berendt et al., 2018). Moreover, the review results revealed that customer identification played a protective role towards companies and their brands. Specifically, previous research provided evidence that highly identified customers trusted brands (He et al., 2018) and showed resistance to negative information about them (Elbedweihy et al., 2010).

This systematic review indicated that customer identification fostered consumers' dispositions towards brands in a variety of ways. Specifically, identification with brands promoted brand effect (Han et al., 2012), brand association/awareness (Tran et al., 2021), brand attachment (Zhou et al., 2012), brand love (Dalman et al., 2019), brand passion (Albert et al., 2013), and brand power (Orth et al., 2020). Identified customers could even develop hate feelings toward competing brands (Itani, 2021). Previous research has also suggested that customers who felt identified with companies engaged in various extra-role behaviors, for instance, civic virtue, helping behavior, and co-creation (Paulssen et al., 2019).

3.5.3. Mediators

The reviewed articles included a variety of mediators (e.g., attitude towards advertisement, brand affect, brand attachment, credibility, customer entitlement, moral reasoning strategy, purchase intention, satisfaction, trust, value, willingness to support) on the link between customer identification and its consequences. For instance, brand affect was found to mediate the relationship between brand identification and brand loyalty (Han et al., 2016). In addition, moral reasoning strategies, i.e., moral decoupling and moral rationalization, were proved to mediate the impact of brand identification on purchase intention (Yu et al., 2021).

3.5.4. Moderators

Extant research has identified a variety of factors that strengthen or weaken the direct relationships between customer identification and its antecedents. For example, the impact of CSR on customer identification was positively moderated by the CSR reputation of the company (Lii and Lee, 2012). Also, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) revealed that consumers' degree of involvement with the brand's product category elevated the positive influence of brand–self congruency, brand distinctiveness, brand social benefits, brand warmth, and brand experience.

Figure 5: Summary of Research on Customer Identification

Antecedents
Altruism
Brand attractiveness
Brand community identification
Brand distinctiveness
Brand experiential value
Brand functional value
Brand identity
Brand rivalry
Brand social benefits
Brand warmth
Cultural value (collectivism/individualism)
Commercial expertise
Community cohesiveness
Company identity attractiveness
Congruency
Consumer dispositions towards globality
Consumer-brand disagreement
Corporate branding
CSR
CSR domain (group/individual)
Customer extrinsic investment
Degree of codesign
Emotional attachment
Employee-company identification
Employee-customer orientation
Experience
Extra-role behaviors
Familiarity
Feeling of belongingness
Feeling of status
Flow
Head canting (up/down)
In-group bond
In-group ties
In-role behaviors
Information quality
Innate innovativeness
Interactivity
Loyalty
Need for affiliation
Perceived brand globalness/localness
Personal connection with the employee
Personalization
Prestige
Quality
Relationships
Reputation
Satisfaction
Self-expansion
Trust

Mediators
Attitude towards advertisement
Brand affect
Brand attachment
Credibility
Customer entitlement
Moral reasoning strategy
Purchase intention
Satisfaction
Trust
Value
Willingness to support

Customer Identification

Consequences
Attitude
Brand advocacy
Brand affect
Brand association/awareness
Brand attachment
Brand hate
Brand identity
Brand identity fusion
Brand love
Brand passion
Brand power
Brand support
Citizenship image
Codesign expenditures
Commitment
Complaint intentions
Consumer distinctiveness
Corporate motive
Customer spending
Ethical judgment
Extra-role behavior
Gift purchase intention
Global brand ownership
Identity-promoting behavior
Identity-sustaining behavior
Loyalty
Message likes
Moral reasoning strategy
Preparedness to purchase
Purchase behavior
Purchase intention
Quality
Recovery expectations
Resilience to negative information
Resistance to company's repositioning
Satisfaction
Switching behavior
Trust
Value
Value co-creation
Willingness to pay
Willingness to wear company's logo
Word-of-mouth

Moderators
Brand engagement
Brand origin (foreign/domestic)
Brand sensitivity
Community–brand similarity
Company offering (product/service)
Competitive intensity
Consumer age
Consumer creativity
Consumer height
CSR orientation
CSR reputation
CSR support
Employee-company identification
Experience
Familiarity
Fit
Identity salience
In-group bond
In-group ties
Marketing activity (offline/online)
Moral foundations (individualizing/binding)
Novelty seeking
Product involvement
Quality
Symbolic purchase motivation
Time

Moderators
Familiarity
Competitive advertising
Identity salience
Individualism (self-construal)
Length of relationship
Quality
Cultural value (Individualism/collectivism)
Symbolic purchase motivation
Time
Toolkit support
Type of information (CA/CSR)
Cultural value (Uncertainty avoidance)

Systematic review findings also showed that several factors foster or weaken the relationship between customer identification and its outcomes. For example, cultural values, namely individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance were found to moderate the relationships between customer identification and identity-sustaining and identity-promoting behaviors (Lam et al., 2012). Identity salience was also an important factor on the consequence side of consumer identification. Accordingly, consumers' identification with a company was a stronger predictor of loyalty in case of high identity salience (Marin et al., 2009). Time was another moderating factor that has been commonly examined in the relevant body of literature (Haumann et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2016). For instance, Homburg et al. (2009) proved that the contribution of customer-company identification on loyalty and willingness to pay was stronger for customers who had a long relationship with the company. On the other hand, these effects were weaker in shorter relationships.

4. Gaps and Directions for Future Research

The first important aspect outlined by this systematic literature review is the lack of consensus on the exact conceptualization of customer identification. While some authors view customer identification as a unidimensional cognitive construct (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), some others claim that this construct has a multidimensional nature, comprising affective, cognitive, and evaluative dimensions (Lam et al., 2010). Therefore, future researchers should address this issue in their studies. They should provide a clear conceptualization of customer identification with a solid theoretical underpinning.

This review study identified a variety of gaps in the methodological approaches followed in the previous customer identification literature. Firstly, most of the research on customer identification has been quantitative in nature (97.1%). This is most likely because several well-established measurement scales for the customer identification construct are available in the literature (i.e., Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Future research should investigate the construct by employing qualitative or mixed-method approaches as such methods would provide a deeper understanding of the roots and evolution of customer identification. Moreover, although customer identification is not a new concept in marketing literature, there is still a lack of knowledge on the role of customer identification in several research contexts. For instance, there is little knowledge on how the Covid-19 pandemic would influence consumers' identification with brands. Therefore, qualitative research would be very helpful and necessary in gaining initial insight into the topic. The big majority of studies (92.4%) performed a cross-sectional study design. This is probably because longitudinal studies require more time and budget. Also, their administration is rather more difficult than cross-sectional studies. Concerning the unit of analysis, our review of the relevant literature demonstrates that scant attention has been directed to the evolution of B2B customers' identification with suppliers (He et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2013). Therefore, more emphasis on the application of customer identification in B2B settings (such as wholesaling, construction, and engineering) should be given in future research. Heretofore, no study has been conducted on the role of customer identification in the public sector. In many countries, governments hold the responsibility for several sectors, such as transportation, telecommunication, and postal services. It is, therefore, worth investigating the determinants of public sector customers' identification as well as its contribution to the governments' performance. The geographic focus should also be extended to take into account other areas in the world. Notably, the present systematic review revealed that most of the research on customer identification has

been conducted in a limited number of countries. More research on Africa, Latin America, and Oceania regions is urgently needed. Also, the emerging economies where dynamic customer responses towards domestic and foreign products are observed should be given enough attention. A cross-cultural examination of customer identification could be a good contribution as well. Finally, our synthesis of findings also generated that response rate, nonresponse bias, and common method bias have been neglected in a significant number of articles. However, the assessment of these statistical issues using appropriate methods is necessary to evaluate the study in terms of the representativeness of the sample and measurement reliability. Therefore, future scholars are strongly advised to give enough importance to these methodological issues in their quantitative studies.

Concerning the established relationships of customer identification with other constructs, our synthesis of findings generated that only age has been studied as a moderating factor in the relationship between customer identification and its antecedents (Delgado-Ballester and Fernandez Sabiote, 2015). Brand managers would utilize demographic differences as the determinants of customer identification when forming their branding strategies. Therefore, we encourage future research to investigate the moderating roles of other possible demographic characteristics of customers (e.g., gender, education, income) in generating strong customer identification. Similarly, our review of the marketing literature reveals that only a handful of papers have investigated the personality factors in the customer identification context. Thus, examining the roles of a variety of personality aspects, such as Big Five personality traits, religiosity, and materialism, would offer interesting findings on customer identification.

Research on the role of customer identification in international branding is quite sparse (Sichtmann et al., 2019). International or global brand owners would benefit from research findings that reveal culture-related antecedents or consequences of brand identification to better decide on foreign market entry, advertising, and promotion strategies. For example, the three centrism aspects, i.e., ethnocentrism, cosmopolitanism, and Xenocentrism (Prince et al., 2016), could determine the degree of consumers' identification with domestic and/or foreign brands. Therefore, more studies on the role of customer identification in this field are urgently needed.

This systematic review highlights that the extant literature has primarily focused on the positive outcomes of customer identification. However, especially the extremely higher level of customer identification is likely to result in negative consequences for customers or companies. It would thus be valuable for both theory and practice to explore the possible negative outcomes of brand identification in future research.

As a final remark, several other moderating factors could be a topic of future research on brand identification. For instance, future studies can explore the moderating role of the place of shopping, i.e., online, or offline, on the link between customer identification and customer attitudes and behaviors towards retail brands. This way of investigation would not only contribute to the retailing literature but also provide valuable information to omnichannel retailers.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we presented a comprehensive review of customer identification and in turn identified the gaps for future research. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic literature review focusing on customer identification. Specifically, we have contributed to the literature by providing an answer to five research questions. First, the present study provided an overview of the definitions of customer identification. Second, this study assessed the alternative conceptualizations and theories used in customer identification research. That is, by identifying key theories and paradigms that have been utilized to explain customer identification, this review paper made an important contribution to the relevant literature. Third, the analysis of the citation counts revealed the most influential articles in the previous customer identification literature. Fourth, we provided an integrative understanding of the methodological aspects followed in the previous research. Finally, the key antecedents and consequences, as well as mediators and moderators that have been connected to the customer identification construct were scrutinized. Furthermore, based on the study findings, we identified several gaps along with suggestions for future researchers when structuring their conceptual frameworks. In particular, we emphasized promising areas of brand identification research with reference to theory, methodological design, and relationships with various variables.

From a practical standpoint, the study findings could be used by brand managers to gain and sustain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Marketers who pursue creating strong identification between customers can have a better understanding of the possible ways of reaching this goal. They are advised to consider various benefits of identification when planning their brand strategies.

It should be noted that the findings of this study should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, this systematic review of customer identification was based on the inclusion of papers published in journals ranked 3, 4, and 4* in the AJG 2021 list. Subsequent studies could also include other journals in their review samples. Second, we only used journal articles and excluded other forms of papers (such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, etc.) from our review sample. Therefore, we might have missed some valuable information that could be captured from the excluded papers, which in turn may decrease the generalizability of the findings. Future work may include these types of publications to have a broader understanding of customer identification. Lastly, future research could involve meta-analysis that would enable the assessment of the statistical findings extracted from the relevant customer identification articles.

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