

A Theory of Affective Self-Affinity: Definitions and Application to a Company and its Business

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Marketing research is increasingly interested in people's perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationships to companies and their brands. However, little attention has been paid to (1) how, specifically, such identity relationships to companies will stem from identity relationships to various other things that are relevant to people and associated with companies. Besides, (2) the influences of such relationships to companies on various business-relevant behaviors of the individuals, let alone organizations which the individuals may represent, have not been examined in a comprehensive way.

This article addresses the identified research gaps by presenting an integrative framework that introduces a special kind of identity relationship, termed affective self-affinity (ASA). The framework addresses (1) how an individual may come to have an ASA relationship to a company and (2) how such a relationship influences various behaviors of the individual him/herself (e.g., buying, investing, word-of-mouth) and of organizations which the individual may represent (e.g., organizational buying, institutional decision-making). In bringing together existing consumer research theories that are characterized by roughly similar foci on the interactions of individuals' perceptions, affective evaluations, and identification, the fundamental contribution of the article is also to theoretically define ASA, as well as explicate the principles of ASA's workings. For the marketing perspective, this theory is applied to a company and its business.

Affective self-affinities

An individual's affective self-affinity (ASA) for a certain thing is defined as the extent to which the individual perceives a positively affective congruence between the thing and his/her identity. It is claimed that an individual may have ASA for anything, including people, groups of people, ideas and ideals, activities and areas of interests, as well as product and service categories, products, services, brands – and companies. ASAs are seen to vary in strength. The definition of ASA presupposes the general notion that individuals have reflective sense of self and owes especially to theories about self-concept congruency, (social) identification, and affect.

Concerning the workings of ASAs, a principle of ASA transference is provided, concerning how an individual's ASA for one thing can contribute to his/her ASA for another. This principle provides the basis for a later discussion of the antecedents of individuals' ASAs for companies. In addition, principles of how ASAs affect individual behavior are provided. These principles provide the basis for a later discussion of the business-relevant behavioral consequences of individuals' ASAs for companies.

With regard to the principle of ASA transference, it is contended that an individual's ASA for a "thing x" positively influences the strength of his/her ASA for another "thing y", for the identity of which he/she perceives "thing x" to be essential and which he/she perceives to represent or support "thing x." With regard to ASAs' effects on behavior, three principles are provided, positing that ASAs elicit (a) choices among similar alternative behaviors, (b) committed and loyal behavior, and (c) supporting, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior.

Antecedents of an individual's ASA for a company

The propositions about the antecedents of an individual's ASA for a company apply the principle of ASA transference. In addition, supportive or consistent findings from earlier research are pointed out. In the framework presented, major sources of an individual's ASA for a company are his/her potential ASAs for *products* and *brands* which the company is perceived to produce or to have developed. Supportive or consistent research relate to communication sources, brand extensions, and corporate identity and personality. Moreover, with support from consumer research on involvement and brand extensions, the framework holds that an individual's ASA for a *product category* is a potential source of his/her ASA for a company which is perceived to market products of the category with all right credibility.

The framework also views as an important source of an individual's ASA for a company his/her perception that the company's products or product categories support or represent a certain "thing" for which the individual has an ASA. Such things may be, for instance, *activities* and *areas of interest* as well as *ideas* and *ideals*. Furthermore, supported by research on consumption and brand communities and tribes, as well as social identity theory, the framework maintains as a potential source of an individual's ASA for a company his/her perception that the company's products or product categories support or represent a certain *group of people* for which the individual has an ASA.

As other potential sources of an individual's ASA for a company, the framework maintains an ASA which the individual has (1) for an activity or area of interest, idea or ideal, or group which the company is perceived to *sponsor*; (2) for *persons* that are perceived to be *employed* by the company; (3) for *top managers* or *entrepreneurs* that are perceived to be affiliated with the company; and (4) for *items or styles of communications and advertising* the source of which the company is perceived to be. These propositions are supported by research on (1) sponsorship, (2) consumer services, and corporate images, identities, and brands; (3) corporate images and corporate celebrities; and (4) communications and advertising.

Consequences: Business-relevant behaviors influenced by individual's ASA for a company

The propositions about the business-relevant, behavioral consequences of an individual's ASA for a company apply the principles of ASA's effects on behavior. Aside from that, supportive and consistent findings are pointed out from research on corporate associations, images, brands, and reputations; organizational identification; brand loyalty; organizational buying behavior; behavioral finance; employee identification; and general management and strategy.

Reflecting the aim to present a framework which does not assume *a priori* actor or stakeholder classes, such as customers, investors, or employees, the ASA-affected behaviors are not categorized according to such stakeholder classes.

Nevertheless, certain categorizations are made due to pragmatic reasons. First of all, the behaviors influenced by an individual's ASA for a company are categorized according to whether they are his/her own individual behaviors or behaviors of an organization that he/she may represent. Second, the behaviors are categorized according to whether they are buying behaviors or non-buying behaviors.

With organizational behaviors further categorizations are made. First, organizational behaviors influenced by an individual's ASA for a company are categorized according to whether (or not) the behavior is related to a possible special role of the organization that the individual represents, stemming from its special production inputs and outputs or institutional position. Second, they are categorized according to whether (or not) the individual – with the ASA for a company – has influence on the behavior of his/her organization towards the company due to his/her possible decisive role in the organization.

Conclusion

Various consumer research theories that share the notion of individuals' having a reflective sense of self have had roughly similar foci on the interactions of individuals' perceptions, affective evaluations and identification with a variety of things. Yet, there has so far been lack of integration of the compatible aspects of these similarly-oriented theories within one coherent theoretical conceptualization. This article makes a contribution by presenting such a conceptualization. Specifically, the article defines a special kind of perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationship that an individual may have to a variety of things, termed affective self-affinity (ASA). Further, the article outlines a principle of how an individual's ASA for one thing positively influences his/her ASA for another thing – the principle of ASA transference – and principles of how an individual's ASA for a thing affects his/her behavior, eliciting choices among similar alternative behaviors, committed and loyal behavior, and supporting, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior.

The article contributes further to marketing research by applying the ASA theory to a company and its business: presenting an integrative framework of how individuals may come to have ASA relationships to companies and how these ASA relationships may further influence various behaviors of those individuals (e.g., buying, investing, word-of-mouth) and of organizations which those individuals represent (e.g., organizational buying, institutional decision-making). For managers, the framework implies that the orchestration of individuals' and organizations' behaviors relevant for the business of a company requires attention to how a company's

- product, brand and product category development and offerings, *per se* and *per* supporting and/or representing various communities, groups, activities, areas of interest, ideas, and ideals;
- the company's communications, advertising, and sponsorships; and
- the behavior of the company's employees and top managers

can contribute to the formation of ASAs for the company. Paying this attention is important, since the individuals' ASAs for the company influence various business-relevant behaviors of those individuals and organizations which those individuals represent in their different life roles.

Keywords: affect, brand and product management, communications, congruence, identification, identity, involvement, organizational buying, perception, relationship marketing, self-concept, stakeholder theory, word-of-mouth

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing researchers increasingly recognize the fact that individuals may come to have perception- and affect-laden relationships to companies that may influence their personal behaviors and the behaviors of organizations they represent – behaviors that are relevant to those companies' business (Bengtsson 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Fullerton 2005; Neville, Bell, and Mengüç 2005; Weiss, Anderson, and MacInnis 1999). It has been suggested that these relationships may even involve identification with the company (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cardador and Pratt 2006; Scott and Lane 2000), which is consistent with the increasingly popular notion that consumption, markets, and companies' products and brands are of significance in individuals' identity work, becoming entangled with their sense of self (e.g., Belk 1988; Fournier 1998; Holt 2002; McCracken 1986).

Moreover, there seems to be increasing appreciation among researchers in both marketing and management of the fact that all heterogeneous business-relevant actors, including organizations, are eventually represented by individuals (or individual agents) (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Freeman 1984; Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003). This is consistent with Jones's (1995) and Scott and Lane's (2000) view that the various stakeholders of a company basically consist of individuals and groups of individuals.

However, earlier marketing research focusing on individuals' perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationships to companies has not systematically examined how, specifically, such identity relationships to companies will stem from identity relationships to various other things that are relevant to people and associated with companies. Such relevant things include products¹ and brands, product categories, groups of people, communications and advertising, and even activities and areas of interest as well as ideas and ideals.

Besides, the earlier research has touched on the influence of such a company relationship on the individual's behaviors merely as a consumer or customer (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Fournier 1998), or an employee (see Pratt 1998), or customer and employee (Cardador and Pratt 2006). Influences on the heterogeneous business-relevant behaviors of individuals, let alone the organizations they represent, have not been comprehensively examined – in a way that would refrain from assigning the individual to a certain pre-defined, exclusive stakeholder class, such as customers, employees, or investors. In other words, no such integrative theoretical conceptualization has so far emerged that would apply to the influence of individuals' perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationships to companies on their various behaviors, their stakeholder class notwithstanding.

In this article, we address these marketing research gaps by introducing an integrative theoretical framework that examines antecedents and behavioral consequences of a special kind of identity relationship that an individual may have with a company, which we term affective self-affinity (ASA). A further and even more fundamental contribution is to *give a theoretical definition of ASA in the first place*, and to *explicate how it works in principle*. In so doing, we bring together certain existing theories in (social) psychologist consumer research that are characterized by roughly similar foci on the interactions between individuals' perceptions, affective evaluations, and identification with a variety of things but have not so far been integrated within one coherent theoretical conceptualization. The theories in question include those of self-concept congruence (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Sirgy 1982), (social) identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Hogg and Vaughan 2002; Scott and Lane 2000; Tajfel and Turner 1986), and enduring (or ego-) involvement (Celsi and Olson 1988; Higie and Feick 1989; Richins and Bloch 1986), as well as theories concerning the extended self (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988), (possession) attachment (Ball

¹ Our conception of products includes not only tangibles but also intangibles, such as services.

and Tasaki 1992; Kleine and Baker 2004), and brand relationship or attachment (Edson Escalas and Bettman 2000, 2003; Fournier 1998; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005).

In order to bring in the marketing perspective we apply the ASA theory to a company and its business. We will first examine the antecedents of an individual's ASA relationship with *a company*, i.e., how it may stem from ASAs for *other* things such as products and brands, product categories, communications and advertising, activities and areas of interest, and ideas and ideals. Secondly, we will examine the business-relevant behavioral consequences of the individual's ASA for the company.

We define an individual's ASA for a certain thing as the extent to which he/she perceives a positively affective congruence between the thing and his/her identity. This definition is mainly grounded on the widespread general notion that individuals have a reflective sense of self, and further derives especially from the above-mentioned theories about self-concept congruence and (social) identification, as well as those concerning affect and emotions (Damasio 1994, 2003; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, and MacGregor 2002a; Zajonc 1980). In building the theory further, we outline the principle of ASA transference, i.e., how an individual's ASA for one thing positively influences his/her ASA for another. We also consider principles of how ASA affects individual behavior: choice among similar alternative behaviors, committed and loyal behavior, and the adoption of supporting, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior. We apply these principles as theoretical grounds for a set of propositions concerning the antecedents of an individual's ASA for a company and its business-relevant behavioral consequences.

In providing these propositions we essentially deploy piecemeal understanding of various ASA-related phenomena and concepts outlined in earlier marketing and consumer research. Thus, our contribution lies not only in theoretically defining ASA and explicating the principles of its transference and effects on behavior, but also in explicitly framing and gathering together a coherent set of testable propositions concerning company-related ASAs as presented in earlier research implicitly or in a fragmented way. Accordingly, we also provide references to various streams of research that are supportive of or consistent with our propositions.

AFFECTIVE SELF-AFFINITIES

Affective self-affinity

Definition. In this article we define affective self-affinity (ASA) for a certain thing as *the extent to which an individual perceives a positively affective congruence between the thing and his/her identity*. Perceived congruence means that the individual perceives the thing to reflect his/her identity, i.e., overlap between the identity (attributes) of the thing and his/her own, personal identity (attributes) (cf. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Marin and Ruiz 2007; Scott and Lane 2000). Note that below we use the terms “self” and “identity” interchangeably when referring to one's perceived image of oneself.

The definition presupposes the increasingly prevalent notion in consumer research that individuals have “a sense of self,” being reflexively aware of and able to perceive, assess, and define themselves or their identities in relation or contrast to surrounding objects (Rosenberg 1979; for a recent review, see Reed 2002). Moreover, as Sirgy (1982: 291) has suggested, congruency assessments are not restricted to tangibles but also apply to intangibles such as services, persons, and abstract ideas, as well as to organizations. Accordingly, our notion is that an individual may have ASA for anything, including companies. Support for this is found in studies by Shimp and Madden (1988) and Ahuvia (2005), suggesting that an individual's relationship with any (consumption) object may involve positive feelings of affect, as well as identification. In any case, it is worth noting that in our view, congruency or overlap may be perceived between any attributed portion of one's identity and any attributed portion of the identity of the other thing – including, and often so, the totality or gestalt of the identities. This is to say that we advocate the “congruence as identity overlap” view (Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; see also Bergami and Bagozzi 2000), rather than the far more constrained “congruence as similar personality adjectives” view (cf. Kressmann et al. 2006; Marin and Ruiz 2007; Sen and Bhattacharya

2001; Sirgy 1982). In the latter, congruence is seen narrowly as an individual's perception that similar human-like personality adjectives, traits, or characteristics, such as honest, enlightened, innovative, conservative, and funny apply to the other thing as well as to him/herself.

We anchor our conceptualization in the term "affinity" because possible alternatives such as "identification" and "attachment" are manifest in research traditions in which these terms and related theories apply mainly to specific types of objects (other persons, organizations, material objects) and/or are formed through certain kinds of mental processes not necessarily supported in our theoretical stance. Indeed, in terms of "identification," and according to social identity theory, individuals are seen to primarily identify with persons, groups, communities, and organizations (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Hogg and Vaughan 2002; Pratt 1998; Scott and Lane 2000; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Moreover, most views of identification (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994) posit that underlying its formation is a cognitive process of self-categorization. For instance, organizational identification would arise from an individual's cognitive, active, and volitional assessment of the organization's identity in terms of its similarity to his/her own identity, its distinctiveness and prestige (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). In contrast, the formation of ASA for a certain thing is not necessarily the result of an active and volitional act of (cognitive) assessment, but is a partly unconscious and affective process (see the principle of ASA transference below). Thus, in line with Zajonc (1980), we claim that ASA-related affective identification does not necessarily need inferences. Zajonc argues convincingly that in order to arouse affect, objects do not necessarily have to be cognized much or with much, if any, information-processing effort, let alone on a level that is accessible to the subject's awareness: self-implicating affective reactions are often instantaneous and automatic. Thus, it is possible for us to have this affective reaction to something "before we know precisely what it is and perhaps even *without* knowing what it is" (p. 154, emphasis in the original).

As far as "attachment" is concerned, individuals are considered (a) in developmental psychology primarily to have attachments to persons (e.g., Bowlby 1979, 1980; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005), and (b) in psychology and the philosophical view of possessions, to be attached to material objects and sometimes to brands (see Kleine and Baker 2004 for a review). Moreover, according to these two traditions, respectively, attachments are (a) formed in person-developmental or even biological processes, and/or (b) due to the natural possession-oriented mental nature or process of human beings. ASA does not call for either kind of process. Nor does it require strong feelings of love or passion towards the thing, which are often associated with "attachments" (Kleine and Baker 2004; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005).

Thus, even if ASA has much in common with identification and attachment, in terms of the emotional significance attached to a thing and its relation to one's identity for example, we contend that it is not directed towards specific types of objects, and that an individual may have ASA for anything, including people, groups of people, ideas and ideals, and activities and areas of interest, as well as product categories, products, brands, and companies. In terms of its formation, in turn, our stance emphasizes its partly unconscious and affective transference from one thing to another, as we discuss later.

We anchor our conceptualization to the term "affinity" because its intuitive meaning resonates well with our definition. This resonance is evident in the two meanings given to the word by The Free Dictionary: (1) natural attraction [to], liking [for], or feeling of kinship [with] [something], and (2) an inherent similarity between persons or things, or likeness deriving from kinship or from the possession of shared properties or sympathies. The positively affective perception suggested in the ASA definition resonates with (1), and the perception of congruence between a thing and one's identity with (2).

Convergence and divergence. ASA might be considered a two-dimensional construct. First, with regard to a thing for which an individual has ASA, his/her perception of the thing is tagged with a fair degree of positive affect (as opposed to negative affect). Note that research in the fields of psychology and even neurobiology increasingly demonstrates that all our perceptions of all things contain some affect, positive or negative (Damasio 1994, 2003; Slovic et al. 2002a; Zajonc 1980). Affect, in turn, manifests in positive vs. negative overall evaluations of things,

i.e., liking vs. disliking (Berscheid 1983; MacGregor et al. 2000; Slovic et al. 2002a; Zajonc 1980). This first dimension converges somewhat with the concept of attitude. This holds insofar as attitude is considered an affective overall evaluation of a thing: an indication of the strength of a person's likes or dislikes (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980), or a summary evaluation of a psychological object along dimensions such as good–bad, harmful–beneficial, pleasant–unpleasant, and likeable–dislikeable (Ajzen 2001).

Secondly, an individual perceives the thing as congruent with and thus personally relevant to his/her identity. This second dimension converges with certain dimensions of the concept of enduring (ego-)involvement. Perceived personal relevance is generally viewed as the essential characteristic of involvement (Celsi and Olson 1988; Higie and Feick 1989; Richins and Bloch 1986; Richins, Bloch, and McQuarrie 1992; Zaichkowsky 1985). In particular, the personal relevance implicated in enduring (or ego-) involvement (as opposed to situational involvement) is intrinsically (as opposed to situationally) motivated by the thing's being related to the individual's self-image (Higie and Feick 1989; Richins and Bloch 1986). Enduring involvement reflects relatively stable, enduring structures of personally relevant knowledge, derived from past experience and stored in the long-term memory (Celsi and Olson 1988).

However, ASA's second dimension is also distinct from enduring involvement in that ASA does not call for the hedonic component of fun derived from thinking about the thing in question (Higie and Feick 1989). On the one hand, an individual may have an ASA for a certain thing such as the idea of social responsibility, and a positively affective perception of it, and may consider it personally relevant or congruent, even if thinking about it would not yield any particular fun, enjoyment, or pleasure. On the other hand, even if thinking about a thing, such as an old joke, yields fun, enjoyment or pleasure, the individual does not necessarily have an ASA for it, and may not perceive it as personally relevant or congruent. Note also that an individual's ASA for a thing does not *necessarily* require the thing to be relevant to his/her identity in the strict self-defining sense that a perceived threat to the existence or welfare of the thing would lead to a sense of loss of self (cf. Ball and Tasaki 1992; Belk 1984, 1988). As far as ASA is concerned, it is sufficient that the thing is perceived to be *congruent* with one's identity, i.e. to reflect it: it does not have to be defining or relevant to the *existence* of one's self or identity.

Given the above conditions, ASA for a thing will converge, to some extent, with a confound interaction of positive affect or attitude towards it and perception of it as being personally relevant to one's identity. As a confound ASA may approximately converge with the product of positive attitude and personal relevance, yet diverge from these dimensions, respectively, if contrasted separately with only one of them. For instance, an individual may have a fairly positive attitude towards a thing – Toyota Corolla, for example – yet may not necessarily perceive it to be very relevant to his/her own identity. An individual may also perceive a thing – car-driving, for example – as being personally relevant and related to his/her identity, and yet not have a positive attitude towards it. In Sirgy's (1982) terms, the individual here could have a "self-image belief" ("I am a car-driving person"), which is nevertheless negatively valenced, i.e., the "self-image value" is negative ("I don't like being a car-driving person"). This may have something to do with the distinction between the actual vs. the ideal self (Belch and Landon 1977; Belch 1978; Dolich 1969; Sirgy 1982). For instance, car driving may be perceived as relevant to one's actual identity if one uses the car every day to go to work and/or feels a personal necessity to use it. Still, it may not be perceived as relevant to one's ideal identity, which, further, leaves it possible that one actually dislikes the very idea – and thus does not have ASA for it.

Finally, the idea of perceived congruency between a certain thing and *one's self/identity* gives ASA something in common with certain aspects of the rather vague notion of the thing being incorporated into one's extended self, as discussed by Belk (1988). However, as Cohen demonstrates (1989), Belk's notion is somewhat ill-defined and lacks internal coherence. Accordingly, we are content to state that ASA overlaps with the least controversial aspects of the extended-self notion, as pointed out by Cohen: the perception that the thing in question has affect attached to it, is assigned a special personal meaning and value, and is perceived as personally relevant. However, as discussed above, it does not by definition necessitate that the thing has to be in any way (literally) part of one's self-definition (cf. Cohen 1989).

The relative convergence vs. divergence of ASA with respect to other consumer-research constructs is summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
Relative convergence vs. divergence between ASA and other constructs

<i>Convergence (relative)</i>	<i>Divergence (relative)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive attitude X Personal (identity) relevance (involvement) • Positive self-image belief X Positive self-image value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Possession) attachment • Involvement • Positive attitude • Positive affective evaluation • Personal relevance • Positive self-image belief • Positive self-image value

ASA Strength – In addition to its positive (vs. negative) sign, a critical aspect of any affective relationship is its magnitude, intensity, or strength (Berscheid 1983; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Moreover, work on individuals' identification (e.g., Deshpandé, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986; Reed 2004), (material) attachment relationships with objects or brands (Edson Escalas and Bettman 2000, 2003; Fournier 1998; Kleine and Baker 2004), and emotional attachments to brands (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005) refer to their strength.

We have fixed the sign of the affect as positive in the definition of ASA. Our view of its strength also follows from the definition: a stronger ASA means that the individual attaches more positive affect to the perception of the thing and/or perceives the thing as being *more* congruent with his/her self identity. Note also that as we define ASA as an *extent* (continuous), we postulate that no clear threshold for its existence can be conceptualized, in terms of level of congruence or positive affect. The detectability of weak ASAs, then, depends on the sophistication of the operationalized ASA measures (see also Limitations and Further Research).

How ASA works

We now move on to considering the principles governing ASAs. First, we discuss how an individual's ASA for one thing can contribute to his/her ASA for another, and this provides the basis for the later discussion on the antecedents of individuals' ASAs for companies. Secondly, we focus on how an individual's ASA can contribute to his/her behavior, which again provides the basis for the later discussion on the business-relevant behavioral consequences of individuals' ASAs for companies.

The principle of ASA transference – We contend that an individual's ASA for “thing x” positively influences the strength of his/her ASA for another “thing y”, *for the identity of which he/she perceives “thing x” to be essential and which he/she perceives to represent or support “thing x.”*

To the extent that an individual perceives a certain thing x (X) to be essential for the identity of thing y (Y), he/she will, by definition, perceive that Y somehow reflects the identity of X. Now, if this individual has ASA for X and thus perceives X to be congruent with his/her own identity, these are clearly the conditions under which he/she will perceive that Y, reflecting X's identity, is also congruent with his/her own identity. Nevertheless, a necessary additional condition is that Y is perceived to represent (as opposed to misrepresent) or support (as opposed to suppress) X: the mere perception that X is essential to Y's identity is not sufficient. In other words, if one perceives X to be congruent with one's identity on the one hand, and essential for the identity of Y on the other, but perceives Y to misrepresent or suppress X, it is likely that one will not perceive Y to be congruent with one's identity. Otherwise, one would perceive something (Y) that misrepresents or suppresses a reflection of one's own identity (X) as congruent with it, which is a contradictory (inconsistent) mental state that individuals will avoid (see Rosenberg 1979).

For example, whereas an individual's ASA for the idea of the 'fight against cancer' will positively influence his/her ASA for products or companies perceived to *support* it, such as biotechnology companies with a perceived identity related to the development of cancer drugs, it will not positively influence ASA for products (or companies) perceived to *suppress* the fight, such as tobacco (companies).

Furthermore, the positive affect attached to the perception of X will transfer to the perception of Y, because individuals are motivated and tend to exhibit consistency in their attitudinal evaluations (Abelson, Aronson, McGuire, Newcomb, Rosenberg, and Tannenbaum 1968; Festinger 1957; McGuire 1969) – and particularly consistency among their self-related attitudes (Epstein 1980; Rosenberg 1979; Sirgy 1982). Given people's positively affective evaluation of X, and since the support for or representation of X by Y is a positively associative link (see Heider 1946; Jacoby and Mazursky 1984), individuals tend towards consistency by assimilating their (neutral) evaluation of Y towards the positive evaluation of X. Note that the claim here is that perceived *support*, being a positively associative link, can indeed transfer the affect *alternatively* to perceived *representation* (representation that may also stem from perceiving Y to belong to a category defined by X, cf. Boush and Loken 1991; Wänke, Bless, and Schwartz 1998). Moreover, if an individual's perception and evaluation of X is positively affective and he/she perceives that not only X but also Y reflects his/her identity, it is mentally consistent for him/her to have a positively affective perception and evaluation of Y, whereas having a negatively affective evaluation would not be.

We maintain that this perceptual-evaluative process of ASAs for one thing "transferring" to another, including the case when a new thing is identified with associations to others, may be based not only or not necessarily on conscious cognitive processing but also on fast unconscious emotional reactions (see Damasio 1994, 2003; Slovic et al. 2002a; Zajonc 1980). Moreover, we also maintain that (repeated) perceptions of (previously) identified things result in rather stable, enduring structures of self-implicated knowledge about and ASAs for the different things stored in the long-term memory – as is the case with affect (Zajonc 1980), feelings or emotions (Damasio 1994; Damasio 2003), and involvement (Celsi and Olson 1988). This is also consistent with the theory and evidence related to the acquisition of a liking for vs. a disliking of objects through associative learning: specifically, the associative transfer of valence, which is often referred to as evaluative conditioning (EC) (Levey and Martin 1975; for a review, see De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001). EC produces changes in the liking of a stimulus by pairing that stimulus with other positive or negative stimuli, and has been shown to lead to object affects that are fairly resistant to "extinction," or diminution and elimination, after initial acquisition. In any case, we also maintain that the individual does not have to actively cognize, all the time, his/her ASA for a thing for which he/she has ASA: this may occur only during temporary states of activation or salience (see Forehand, Deshpandé, and Reed 2002; Reed 2004). Yet, when trying to recall, recognize, or retrieve the object, one's ASA for it, as an affective quality of the original input, is likely to be the first element to emerge (see Zajonc 1980).

Finally, and to be more precise, we specify that the extent to which an individual's ASA for X positively influences the strength of his/her ASA for Y is *moderated by the extent to which he/she* perceives (i) X to be essential for Y's identity and (ii) Y to represent or support X. This is important in our logic, since otherwise a strong ASA for one thing could embrace all things in the world for whose identity one perceives the thing to be marginally essential and to marginally represent or support the thing. Nevertheless, we still maintain that an individual may have ASAs – stronger or weaker – for a great variety and number of things, perceiving them, with positive affect, as congruent with his/her identity. As posited in symbolic interactionist identity theory (see Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Reed 2004; Solomon 1983), ASAs for various things and the perceived associations between them and from them to other things, then, form a (consistent) self-structure in which the ASAs fit into an overall constellation and enact some parts of one's identity therein.

The effects of ASA on behavior – Whereas an individual's ASA for a certain thing comes to be formed – in a causally ambiguous way – by his/her ASAs for certain other things and the perceived relationships between them, in terms of behavior our claim is more straightforward. We suggest that an individual's ASA for a thing (causally) influences his/her behavior with respect to it. In other words, as a consequence of having ASA for a thing, the individual will alter his/her behavior concerning it. Thus, ASAs lead to, and do not merely reflect, behavior.

At the minimum, regardless of its strength, an individual's ASA for a thing X influences his/her choice between similar alternative behaviors. Specifically, we refer to the choice between (a) a behavior whereby X is perceived to yield certain benefits and (b) other behaviors whereby other things than X – for which the individual has weaker or no (or negative) ASA – are perceived to yield approximately similar benefits (when the costs and risks of the behaviors are also perceived as approximately similar, yet less than the benefits). Faced with this kind of choice, the individual will choose and engage in behavior whereby X is perceived to yield the benefits. We refer to this notion as the *principle of ASA eliciting choice over similar alternative behaviors*. For instance, when choosing between products that are perceived to yield approximately similar benefits and also have approximately similar costs and risks, an individual will choose to purchase the product for which he/she has the strongest ASA. This kind of choice may even occur more or less unconsciously (see Fitzsimons et al. 2002). Indeed, referring to the positive affective evaluations and feelings of affection and liking towards things, as in ASAs, Zajonc (1980: 155) notes:

“We sometimes delude ourselves that we proceed in a rational manner and weigh all the pros and cons of the various alternatives. But this is probably seldom the actual case. Quite often ‘I decided in favor of X’ is no more than ‘I liked X’ . . . We buy the cars we ‘like,’ choose the jobs and houses we find ‘attractive,’ and then justify these choices by various reasons . . . “

Since ASA by definition involves positive affect, even a slightly stronger ASA for X may result in an individual choosing behavior whereby X – e.g., a product – is perceived to yield benefits over alternatives with approximately similar perceived benefits and costs/risks. In fact, this is highly consistent with the notion that an individual tends to exhibit consistency not only in attitudes but also in attitudes and behavior (Abelson et al. 1968; Festinger 1957; McGuire 1969) – and particularly (self-)consistency in self-related attitudes and behavior (Epstein 1980; Rosenberg 1979; Sirgy 1982).

Moreover, an ASA for a thing, such as a product, will prevent the individual from fully considering all the possible alternatives, and make him/her exhibit increased loyalty and commitment (see e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer 1995) in choosing the behavior whereby X is perceived to yield benefits over alternatives with approximately similar benefits and costs. We refer to this notion as the *principle of ASA eliciting committed and loyal behavior*.

Finally, an individual's ASA for a thing will influence his/her behavior beyond choices between similar alternative behaviors. As one identifies, to some extent, with a thing – perceiving congruence between it and one's identity – one will give preferential and supportive treatment to it, actively seek to increase its welfare, actively seek more interaction with it and/or actively give more of one's scarce resources to it. This has been suggested about identification in research on organizations and companies as things (identification with organizations) (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Scott and Lane 2000). We refer to this notion as the *principle of ASA eliciting supportive, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior*.

ASA for a company

As this article purports not only to define ASA theoretically but also to provide an application for a company and its business, we will next examine the antecedents and business-relevant behavioral consequences of an individual's ASA *for a company*. Before discussing these antecedents and consequences, however, we will briefly refer to research supporting the notion that individuals may indeed have ASAs for companies. Given that companies could be considered to be represented as (corporate) brands in individuals' minds (Balmer 1995, 2001; Bernstein 1989; Harris and De Chernatony 2001; Hatch and Schultz 2001; Ind 1997; Keller 2003b; King 1991), we start by considering work implying that individuals may have affective perceptions of certain brands, and may perceive them as congruent with their selves or identities.

First of all, in her influential work, Fournier (1998) provides extensive evidence of the general point that individuals may have various kinds of relationships with brands, and that these relationships involve similar aspects as interpersonal relationships, including affect. Thomson et al. (2005) further suggest that individuals may have emotional attachments and feelings of affection towards brands. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) also refer

to the brand affect, as well as to its strength. Sirgy (1982) supports the general notion concerning the perceived congruence of brands with an individual's identity, albeit focusing more on product images and self-images. Moreover, researchers have started to emphasize the self-concept-related aspect of individuals' relationships or attachments to brands (Edson Escalas and Bettman 2000, 2003; Fournier 1998).

The notion that not only product trademarks but also companies are represented as (corporate) brands in individuals' minds provides support for the suggestion that individuals may have somewhat similar ASAs for companies as for brands. For instance, nine of the top ten names on the well-known list of "Best Global Brands" (Business Week 2006) were actually company names: Coca-Cola, Microsoft, IBM, GE, Intel, Nokia, Toyota, Disney, and McDonald's. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) explicitly propose that consumers can identify with companies. Scott and Lane (2000) make similar claims about how various company stakeholders may identify with it. Indeed, people have been shown to view companies as having corporate (brand) identities, personalities, or characters (Davies, Chun, da Silva, and Roper 2004; Furnham and Gunter 1993; Goffee and Jones 1998; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, and Mohr 2004) with which they might identify. Identification claims, in turn, are based on the notion that individuals can identify with companies as consumers even if they are not formal organizational members, such as employees (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Scott and Lane 2000).

Thus, the literature on (corporate) brands and (company) identification provides support for the notion that an individual may have an ASA for a company. Nevertheless, one major precondition should be considered in the light of earlier research: the individual's awareness of the company. For instance, brand research emphasizes the role of brand awareness: an individual has some knowledge, memories, or associations (e.g., Keller 1993, 2003a, 2003b). Since she or he is likely to recognize only a limited number of companies, awareness could be considered an important precondition for individual ASA for any particular one. Thus, concerning the application of ASA to a company and its business, our first proposition is:

P1: An individual may have an ASA for a company of which he/she is aware.

ANTECEDENTS OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S ASA FOR A COMPANY

In this section we discuss the antecedents of an individual's ASA for a company. Specifically, we present propositions concerning how people's ASAs for various things, including products and brands, product categories, activities and areas of interest, ideas and ideals, communities and groups, communications and advertising, and employees and managers may positively influence the strength of their ASA for a company.

In describing these antecedents we rely on the principle of ASA transference outlined above. In addition, we refer to some research that supports it, or is at least highly consistent with our specific propositions.

Product- and brand-related ASAs

Proprietary product or brand – As already mentioned, research on product image–self image congruence (Aaker 1997; Ekinci and Riley 2003; Harris and Fleming 2005; Sirgy 1982), (affect) relationships to (consumption) objects (Ahuvia 2005; Shimp and Madden 1988), brand relationships (Edson Escalas and Bettman 2000, 2003; Fournier 1998; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005), and brand affect (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001) imply that individuals may have ASAs for products and (product) brands.

A certain product or brand, or certain products or brands, are often perceived as defining the identity of the company that produces it and/or has developed it. As noted by Balmer (1998) and Dowling (2004), products and brands are important elements of a company's identity, or perceptions and beliefs of what it is. Moreover, producing and developing a product or brand are likely to be perceived as representing and/or supporting it. According to the principle of ASA transference, then, an individual's ASA for a product or brand will positively influence his/her ASA for a company perceived to produce or to have developed it.

In terms of the positive affect implicated in ASA, certain findings in the fields of communications and advertising, as well as brand extension, are consistent with the notion that an ASA for a product or brand transfers to the company perceived to produce or to have developed it. On the one hand, research findings on communications and advertising suggesting that likable and attractive sources are related to consumers' more positive evaluations of the message (Kahle and Homer 1985; Petty, Unnava, and Strathman 1991; Simon, Berkowitz, and Moyer 1970) imply that feelings about the source and the message tend to get mixed. On the other hand, it has been suggested that products and brands could be seen as messages that a company sends (Duncan and Moriarty 1998; Keller and Aaker 1992). According to research on brand extension, in turn, it seems that positive evaluations of a brand-extension product may have "spillover" effects on the parent or umbrella brand, which could be the company brand (Aaker 1996; Balachander and Ghose 2003; Morein 1975; Wernerfelt 1988).

Thus, we propose:

P2: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a product or brand, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to produce and/or to have developed it.

Product category – In the above proposition, the product or brand refers to a unique (proprietary) company product or brand. Nevertheless, research on product-image–self-image congruence suggests that individuals may also perceive (generic) products or product categories to be congruent with their selves or identities (Dolich 1969; French and Glaschner 1971; Landon 1974; Sirgy 1982). Moreover, research on involvement has often focused on individuals' enduring or ego involvement with product categories (Costley 1988; Richins and Bloch 1986; Richins, Bloch, and McQuarrie 1992).

A certain product category is usually perceived as definitive for the identity of the company. As Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) note, the product category – or industry – is an important constituent of a company's identity, with which an individual might also identify. Moreover, producing or developing products in a certain category is likely to be perceived as representing and/or supporting it. Based on the principle of ASA transference, then, an individual's ASA for a product category will positively influence his/her ASA for a company perceived to produce or develop products in the same category.

However, it is likely that an individual does not come to have ASAs for all companies that may potentially start producing products in a category for which he/she has ASA. According to research on brand extensions, the perceived credibility of a certain company in terms of producing a new product in a certain category affects the attitudes of individuals towards both the product and the company (Desai and Keller 2002; Keller and Aaker 1992; Milberg, Park, and McCarthy 1997). Low perceived credibility results in more negative attitudes. Thus, the positive influence of an individual's ASA for a product category on the strength of his/her ASA for the company is moderated by the extent to which the company is perceived to have credibility in producing and developing products in that category. We thus propose:

P3: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a product category, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to produce and develop products, with credibility, in that category.

For instance, if an individual has a strong ASA for environmentally friendly hybrid cars, he/she will probably come to have a stronger ASA for (all) companies perceived to (credibly) produce hybrids.

ASAs related to the activity or area of interest

As mentioned above, it is likely that beyond products, brands, and product categories, an individual may come to have ASAs basically for any object or anything. These may include activities or areas of interest, and even more generally or abstractly, ideas or ideals.

Considering the former, research on involvement has demonstrated that individuals often have enduring or ego involvement with certain (leisure) activities or areas of interest (Havitz and Dimanche 1997; Havitz and Mannell 2005; Richins and Bloch 1986). This implies that they may have ASAs for activities or areas of interest. A certain

activity or area of interest, in turn, can be perceived as essential for the identity of a product category, as well as supported or represented by it. For instance, the activity of alpine skiing will be perceived as essential for the product categories of alpine skis and equipment as well as supported by them. According to the principle of ASA transference, then, an individual's ASA for an activity or area of interest will positively influence his/her ASA for a product category perceived to support it. Consumption and brand-community research (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Cova and Cova 2001, 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) has provided consistent findings. Specific cases have been made for activities or areas of interest such as snowboarding, roller-skating, white-water river rafting, motorcycling, and cooking – the corresponding products, brands, or product categories being snowboards and snowboard apparel (Cova and Cova 2002), roller-skates (Cova and Cova 2001), rafting guide services (Arnould and Price 1993), motorcycles and motorcycle apparel (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and exotic cooking equipment (Ahuvia 2005).

Moreover, a certain activity or area of interest may be perceived as essential for the identity of *a company committed to* developing products that support it. This kind of commitment is likely to be perceived as supporting the area of interest in question. Hence, according to the principle of ASA transference, an individual's ASA for an area of interest will positively influence his/her ASA for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support it. For instance, research on brand tribes provides consistent findings concerning snowboarding and companies committed to developing snowboards (see Cova and Cova 2002).

Thus, we propose:

P4: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product or brand perceived to support it.

P5: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product category perceived to support it.

P6: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support it.

Idea or ideal-related ASAs

Research on the self concept and identity has demonstrated that individuals often identify with or define themselves also through rather abstract ideas or ideals, such as high status (Sirgy 1982), nationality or national heritage (Nuttavuthisit 2005), the beauty of objects (Hassenzahl 2004a), natural health (Thompson and Troester 2002), and environmental-friendliness (cf. Dobscha and Ozanne 2001).

A certain idea or ideal may be perceived to be essential to the identity of a product, a brand, or a product category perceived to support or represent it. By definition then, an individual's ASA for the idea or ideal will positively influence his/her ASA for the product, brand, or product category. This is, in a way, the very general idea underlying much of the consumer research concerning the self-concept and product-image–self-image congruence (Sirgy 1982). For instance, an individual's ASA for the idea of “high status” is likely to contribute to his/her ASA for the supportive category of jewelry; an ASA for “Frenchness” to his/her ASA for the representative category of products made in France and representative brand of Chanel; an ASA for “natural health” to his/her ASA for the representative products of acupuncture, aromatherapy, and massage therapy (see Thompson and Troester 2002); and an ASA for “environmental-friendliness” to his/her ASA for supportive products such as hybrid cars.

Similarly as for activities or areas of interest, we propose that:

P7: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product or brand perceived to support or represent it.

P8: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product category perceived to support or represent it.

P9: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support or represent it.

Sponsorship-related ASAs

As mentioned earlier, individuals may have ASAs for activities or areas of interest, ideas or ideals. A certain activity, area of interest, or idea may come to be perceived as essential for the identity of a company *sponsoring* it. In fact, a major reason why companies engage in sponsoring is that it tends to associate the sponsored object with the image or identity of the company in people's minds. Insofar as sponsoring something is likely to be perceived as representing or supporting that something, an individual's ASA for an activity, area of interest, or idea will, according to the principle of transference, positively influence his/her ASA for a company perceived to sponsor it. The fact that sponsoring-related corporate undertakings are sometimes called "*affinity marketing*" fits into this picture.

Particularly with regard to the implied positive affect in ASA, certain suggestions put forward in the research on sponsorship and cause-related and affinity marketing are consistent with the notion of the transference of ASA for an activity, area of interest, or ideal to the company perceived to sponsor it. Indeed, in very general terms, it is suggested that individuals' positive evaluations of areas of interest or ideas may contribute to their forming positive evaluations of companies that are perceived to support them, as well as related persons, organizations, places, and events (e.g., Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Gwinner and Swanson 2003; Mohr, Webb, and Harris 2001).

Examples of activities or areas of interest sponsored in this way are certain forms of sports (Gwinner and Swanson 2003) and arts (Olkkonen and Tuominen 2006; Quester and Thompson 2001). In these cases, the related persons, organizations, places, and events include athletes and artists (persons) (Bennett, Henson, and Zhang 2002); sports clubs and art galleries (organizations); stadiums and museums (places) (Clark, Cornwell, and Pruitt 2002; Levy 2004); and sports events and art exhibitions (events) (Gwinner 1997). Examples of ideas or ideals, in turn, include care for the disabled (Becker-Olsen and Simmons 2002; Ross, Patterson, and Stutts 1992), children's medical research (Irwin, Lachowitz, Cornwell, and Clark 2003), the fight against diseases (e.g., cancer, AIDS, multiple sclerosis), and nature conservation (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005). In these cases, the related persons, organizations, places, and events may be research institutes or nature-conservation groups (persons, organizations), hospitals or natural parks (places), and Paralympics or car-free days (events).

Thus, we propose:

P10: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to sponsor it – or a person, organization, place, or event representing it.

P11: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to sponsor it – or a person, organization, place, or event representing it.

Group-related ASAs

According to social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg and Vaughan 2002; Tajfel and Turner 1986), individuals identify to a great extent with groups, and group memberships have great affective significance to them. This implies that individuals may have ASAs for groups. Further, a certain group may be perceived as essential for the identity of a product, brand, or product category. Often it is the (stereo)typical (imaginary) user groups that are perceived of as defining certain products, brands, or product categories (French and Glaschner 1971; Keller 2003b; Landon 1974; Sirgy 1982; Sommers 1964). For instance, young urban businessmen were first perceived of as defining the identity of the product category of cellular phones, and of brands such as the Nokia-Mobira Cityman. Sometimes the whole product category, product, or brand perception comes to be defined by its user groups, such as motorcyclists by motorcycles, the Harley Davidson community by Harley Davidsons, and Club Med people by Club Med services. Furthermore, a certain group may be perceived as essential for the identity of a company (brand): Swedish people, to some extent for IKEA and the Japanese for Sony; animal-rights people for The Body Shop; the laid-back and youthful for Virgin; the urban creative class for Apple; and engineers for Siemens.

According to the principle of ASA transference, an individual's ASA for a group will, by definition, positively influence his/her ASA for a product, brand, or product category perceived to support or represent it. Consistently, research on the role of social identification in consumer behavior (e.g., Kleine et al. 1993; Reed 2002, 2004; Sirgy 1982) broadly suggests that people's evaluations of and/or identifications with products and brands partly stem from their evaluations of and identification with social types or groups of people that those products and brands represent, often in the form of typical user group imagery. Research on consumption tribes and communities (Cova and Cova 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), further implies that the product and brand evaluations and identifications may stem from the fact that the products or brands actually support a certain group in terms of existence and viability: snowboarders, roller-skaters, motorcyclists, Harley Davidsonists, natural health enthusiasts, etc. Moreover, the same research implies that the evaluation and identification may transfer to companies perceived to be committed to developing products supporting the group.

Thus, we propose:

P12: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a group of people, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product or brand perceived to support or represent it.

P13: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a group of people, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product category perceived to support or represent it.

P14: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a group of people, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support or represent it.

Company-people-related ASAs

Personnel – Also a company's personnel is comprised of people, and according to social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg and Vaughan 2002; Tajfel and Turner 1986), individuals may, hence, identify with them as well. This implies that individuals may have ASAs for a company's personnel.

Indeed, its personnel are often perceived as essential to the identity of a company (brand). According to the literature on corporate communications and marketing, particularly that related to the corporate image, identity, and branding, employees are important determinants of individual perceptions of companies' identities (Balmer 1995; Harris and De Chernatony 2001; Hatch and Schultz 1997; Kennedy 1977; Olins 1991; Van Riel, 1997). Under the principle of ASA transference, insofar as a company's employing of people is seen to be supportive or representative of them, and not suppressive or misrepresentative, an individual's ASA for its personnel will positively influence his/her ASA for the company perceived to employ them. Particularly with regard to the implied positive affect inherent in ASA, findings from earlier marketing research are consistent with this notion. Individuals' perceptions of companies' employees and their behavior have been suggested to be major determinants of their perceptions of the companies, particularly service and retail companies (Berry 2000; Berry and Lampo 2004; Grönroos 1994; Hardaker and Fill 2005; Hart 1998; Papasolomou and Vrontis 2006; Rust and Zahorik 1993; Schneider and Bowen 1985; Schneider and Bowen 1993). Also according to research on (personal) selling, individuals' feelings of affect towards (sales)persons with whom they are in personal contact contribute significantly to the attitudes they develop towards the company (Armstrong and Min Yee 2001; Chang 2006; Doney and Cannon 1997; Jap 2000; Reynolds and Arnold 2000; Reynolds and Beatty 1999).

Moreover, there is support for the notion of perceived congruence between the personnel and an individual's identity. Sales research has demonstrated that an individual's perception of a salesperson as similar to him/herself contributes to his/her positive evaluations of the employer company, and even to identification with it (Armstrong and Min Yee 2001; Lichtental 2001; Smith 1998). It has also been proposed that the affective content of a service contributes to the development of relationships between service-provider employees and individuals that resemble friendship (Price, Arnould, and Tierney 1995). These kinds of relationships have also been identified as potential sources of identification with the employer company (Jap 2000).

Thus, we propose:

P15: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a person, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to employ that person.

Top managers and/or entrepreneurs – Furthermore, individuals may come to have ASAs for companies' top managers – which is a different case from having ASAs for other personnel (employees). There is rarely any direct personal contact with top managers, whereas it may be very frequent with service or sales personnel, for example. Nevertheless, an individual may have an ASA for a top manager, particularly one appearing in the media. Top managers sometimes even become “celebrities” of a kind, for whom individuals may come to have similar feelings as towards athletes and actors (Hayward, Rindova, and Pollock 2004; Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward 2006).

Top managers, as well as entrepreneurs, may also be essential to the identity of a company (brand), as is the case with, Bill Gates and Microsoft, and Steve Jobs and Apple, for instance. According to the principle of ASA transference, then, an individual's ASA for a top manager or entrepreneur will positively influence his/her ASA for a company perceived to employ him/her. Similarly, it has been suggested that individuals' perceptions of top managers are major constituents of their perceptions of the identities and personalities of companies, and of their feelings about them (Hatch and Schultz 1997; Webster 1965). For instance, Richard Branson is perceived as an adventurous and charismatic person: he is an entrepreneur-manager with whom many people want to identify, and this may have contributed to people's identification with his company, Virgin.

Thus, we propose:

P16: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a top manager or entrepreneur, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to employ that person.

Communications- and advertising-related ASAs

Finally, recent research on communications and advertising suggests that individuals may have ASAs for specific items and styles of corporate communication. First of all, it has been found that individuals are increasingly literate and sophisticated in dealing with corporate advertising and other marketing communications (O'Donohoe 2001; Ritson and Elliott 1997). Consumers are not only passive receivers of messages who are persuaded in varying degrees, to do various things. For instance, as competent consumers individuals are likely to welcome advertisements that respect and challenge them (O'Donohoe 2001) – that invite them to join the “hunt for meaning” (Goldman 1992). Intriguing issues to do with targeting and the purpose of the communications may also strongly attract and involve consumers (O'Donohoe 2001).

The finding that individuals may, indeed, use company media and communications to satisfy their needs for diversion and entertainment, besides to obtain information about products, is consistent with the theory of “uses and gratifications” (Katz 1959; O'Donohoe 1994). Further, people use communications and advertising as personal and social resources for constructing and maintaining identities (Elliott 1997; Ritson and Elliott 1997; Willis 1990). Specifically, they have been shown to perceive company communication and advertising as congruent with their self-images, to varying degrees (e.g., Chang 2005; Hong and Zinkhan 1995). All this implies that they may have ASAs for pieces and styles of communication and advertising *per se*, besides for the products to which they refer.

Furthermore, an advertisement can be considered a *product* of the source company – a cultural product in its own right, which is consumed by individuals somewhat independently of the products that are the subjects of the communication and promotion (O'Donohoe 2001; Shankar 1999). Thus, according to the principle of ASA transference, and on the same basis as argued for other company products, an individual's ASA for communication will positively influence his/her ASA for a company perceived to have produced and/or developed it. Obviously, the findings of the research on attitude towards ad (see Brown and Stayman 1992; Muehling and McCann 1993; Nan 2006) are also consistent, suggesting that a positive evaluation of an ad contributes to positive evaluation of the advertising brand.

Thus, we propose:

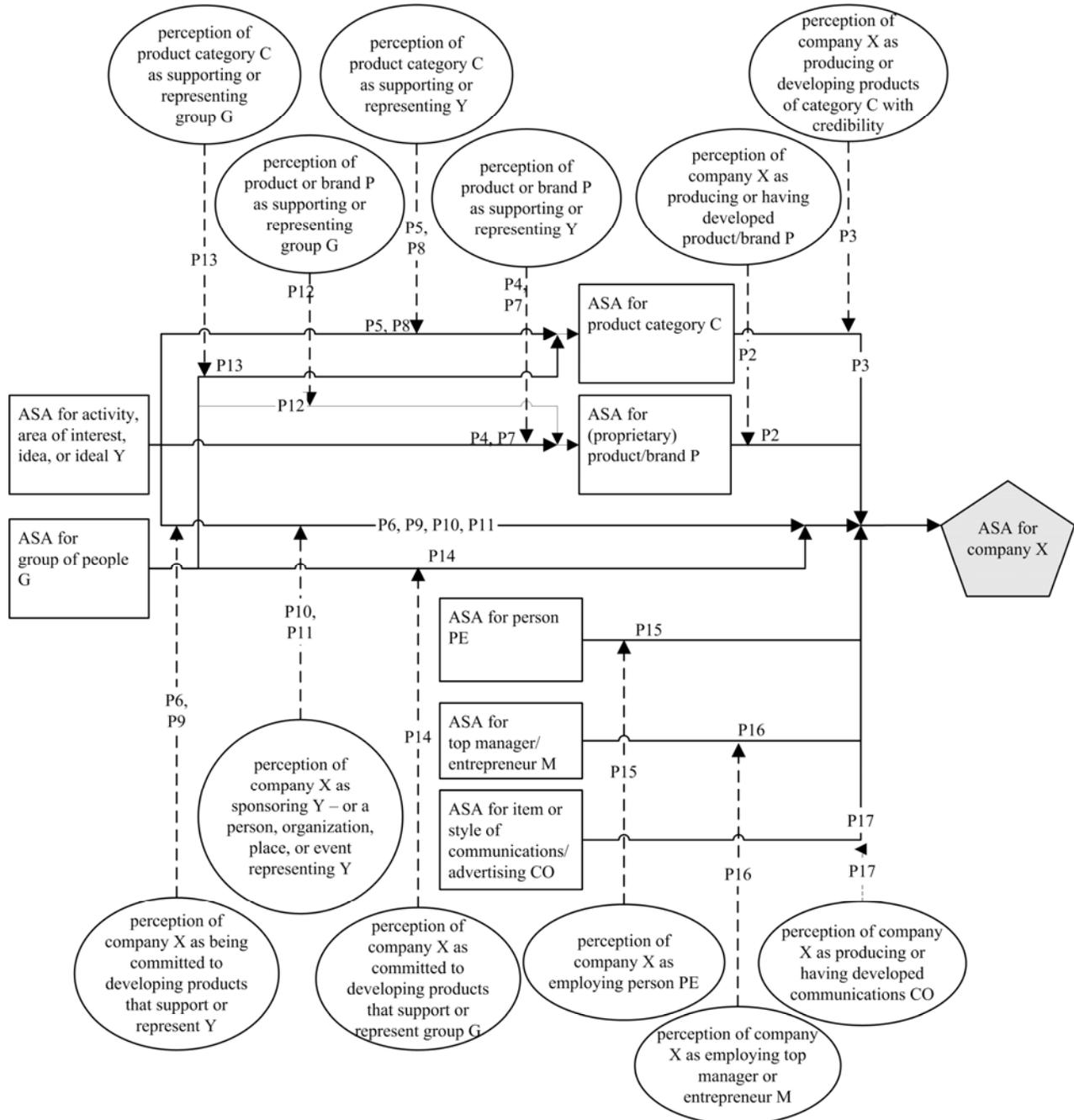
P17: The stronger the ASA an individual has for an item or style of communication or advertising, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to produce and/or have developed it.

Above, we have provided an extensive analysis of how individuals may come to have ASAs for companies. With respect to the antecedents, the propositions presented are summarized in Table 2, and the suggested framework is illustrated in Figure 1. Note the introduction of the “perceived to/as...” element at the end of each proposition in the Figure with the addition of “perception of...” as if this was a moderator variable, according to standard notation. This reflects the authors’ understanding that the extent to which an individual’s ASA for X positively influences the strength of his/her ASA for Y is actually *moderated by the extent to which he/she perceives X to be essential for Y’s identity and Y to represent or support X*. For the sake of simplicity we have not explicated these moderator variables in separate propositions.

TABLE 2
Antecedents of an Individual’s Affective Self-Affinity (ASA) for a Company: Propositions

<i>Proposition #</i>	<i>Proposition</i>
Proposition P1	An individual may have an ASA for a company of which he/she is aware.
Proposition P2	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a product or brand, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to produce and/or to have developed it.
Proposition P3	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a product category, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to produce and develop products, with credibility, in that category.
Proposition P4	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product or brand perceived to support it.
Proposition P5	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product category perceived to support it.
Proposition P6	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support it.
Proposition P7	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product or brand perceived to support or represent it.
Proposition P8	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product category perceived to support or represent it.
Proposition P9	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support or represent it.
Proposition P10	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an activity or area of interest, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to sponsor it – or a person, organization, place, or event representing it.
Proposition P11	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an idea or ideal, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to sponsor it – or a person, organization, place, or event representing it.
Proposition P12	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a group of people, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product or brand perceived to support or represent it.
Proposition P13	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a group of people, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a product category perceived to support or represent it.
Proposition P14	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a group of people, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to be committed to developing products that support or represent it.
Proposition P15	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a person, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to employ that person.
Proposition P16	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a top manager or entrepreneur, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to employ that person.
Proposition P17	The stronger the ASA an individual has for an item or style of communication or advertising, the stronger the ASA he/she has for a company perceived to produce and/or have developed it.

FIGURE 1
Antecedents of an Individual's Affective Self-Affinity (ASA) for a Company



CONSEQUENCES: BUSINESS-RELEVANT BEHAVIORS AFFECTED BY INDIVIDUALS' AFFECTIVE SELF-AFFINITIES FOR A COMPANY

We now move on to examining how an individual's ASA for a company may influence various business-relevant behaviors of the individual as well as of the organizations he/she may represent. Given our aim to present a framework that does not assume that individuals belong to a certain pre-defined stakeholder class, such as customers, employees, or investors, we do not categorize the behaviors according to such classes. Nevertheless, for pragmatic reasons we do offer certain behavior categorizations.

First of all, we categorize the ASA influence on behaviors according to whether the behaviors are individual or organizational. This distinction is pragmatic in terms of recognizing the fact that while individuals may indeed influence or decide not only their own behaviors but also the behaviors of organizations to which they are affiliated, they are able to control their own behaviors much more effectively. Secondly, we categorize the ASA influence on behaviors according to whether it is a question of buying behaviors or non-buying behaviors. This distinction is pragmatic in that business-relevant behaviors in which individuals and organizations engage may or may not be directly buying-related.

As far as organizational behaviors are concerned we suggest further categorizations. First, we categorize the ASA influence according to whether the behavior is essentially related to a possible special organizational role. The pragmatic connection here is that some business-relevant behaviors of an organization are very much dependent on its special role (e.g., a metal-industry company's metal purchasing or a media organization's content production), whereas some behaviors are not (e.g., buying office paper or cell phones for employees, or partnering with other organizations). This distinction is also consistent with the notion in general organization theory suggesting that organizations specialize in certain input-output production activities or may have special institutionalized roles on the one hand, but on the other they are or become similar in many ways due to isomorphism (Scott 1998).

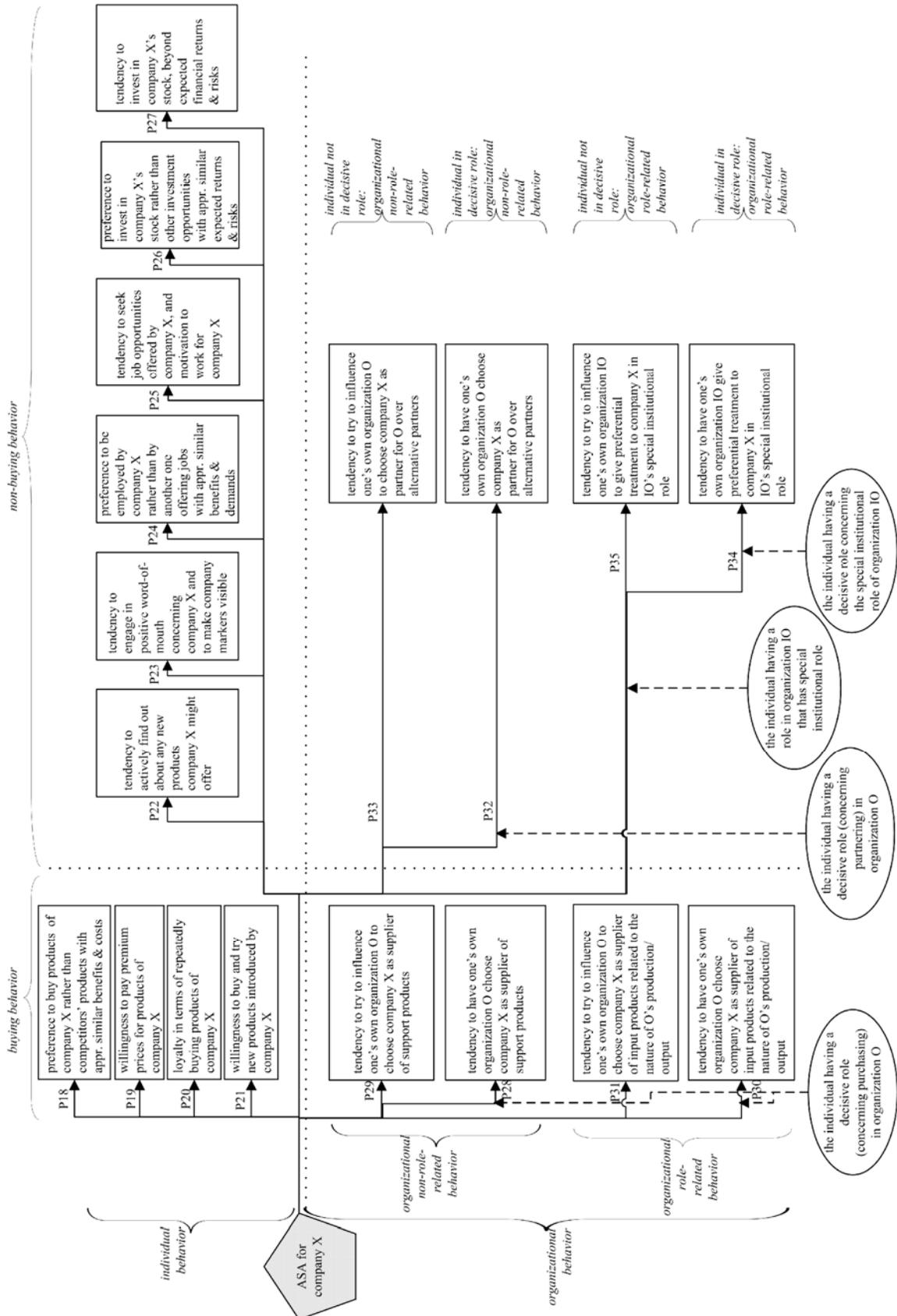
Secondly, we categorize the ASA influences on organizational behaviors according to whether the individual concerned has an influence on the organization due to having a special and decisive role in it. The pragmatism here lies in the fact that an individual may sometimes have a very decisive role in some organization with regard to a certain business-relevant organizational behavior (e.g., an industrial purchaser), and sometimes have only a marginal influence on its behaviors (e.g., an office assistant).

Our propositions concerning the consequences of ASA for a company are summarized in Table 3, and our framework is depicted in Figure 2.

TABLE 3
The Behavioral Consequences of an Individual's Affective Self-Affinity (ASA) for a Company: Propositions

<i>Proposition #</i>	<i>Proposition</i>
Proposition P18	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her preference to buy its products rather than competitors' products with approximately similar perceived benefits and costs.
Proposition P19	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the greater is his/her willingness to pay premium prices for its products.
Proposition P20	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the greater is his/her loyalty in terms of repeatedly buying its products.
Proposition P21	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the greater is his/her willingness to buy and try new products it introduces.
Proposition P22	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to actively find out about any new products it might offer.
Proposition P23	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to engage in positive word-of-mouth behavior concerning the company and its products, and to make company markers visible to other people.
Proposition P24	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her preference to be employed by it rather than by another one offering jobs with approximately similar perceived benefits and demands.
Proposition P25	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to seek job opportunities offered by it and the greater the motivation to work for it.
Proposition P26	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her preference to invest in its stock rather than in other investment opportunities with approximately similar perceived returns and risks.
Proposition P27	The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to invest in its stock, beyond expected financial returns and risks.
Proposition P28	The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization choose it as a supplier of support products.
Proposition P29	The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization's choice of that company as a supplier of support products.
Proposition P30	The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization choose the company as a supplier of input products related to the nature of its production/output.
Proposition P31	The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization's choice of that company as a supplier of input products related to the nature of its production/output.
Proposition P32	The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role (concerning partnering) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization choose the company as a partner over alternative partners.
Proposition P33	The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role (concerning partnering) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization's choice of that company as a partner over alternative partners.
Proposition P34	The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role in an organization with a special institutional role has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization give preferential treatment to it in that special institutional role.
Proposition P35	The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role in an organization with a special institutional role has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization to give preferential treatment to it in that special institutional role.

FIGURE 2
The Behavioral Consequences of an Individual's Affective Self-Affinity (ASA) for a Company



Individual buying behavior

Under the assumption that ASA elicits choice over similar alternative behaviors, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to his/her choosing to buy the company's products over alternatives with approximately similar perceived benefits and costs, offered by competitors for which the individual has weaker ASA. In terms of marketing research, this will mean that an individual's ASA for a company has a positive influence on his/her preference to buy its products over those of its competitors and/or on his/her willingness to pay premium prices for them.

In support of this, it has been widely demonstrated that individuals' positive evaluations of companies positively influence their product evaluations, as well as their responses, including purchase quantities and the willingness to pay premium prices (Aaker and Keller 1993; Belch and Belch 1987; Brown and Dacin 1997; Wansink, Kent, and Hoch 1998). Moreover, it has been specifically suggested that an individual's identification with a company leads to a preference for its products over those of its competitors (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003).

Thus, we propose:

P18: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her preference to buy its products rather than competitors' products with approximately similar perceived benefits and costs.

P19: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the greater is his/her willingness to pay premium prices for its products.

According to the principle that ASA elicits committed and loyal behavior, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to increased commitment and loyalty in terms of repeatedly buying its products and brands – at least over alternatives with approximately similar benefits and costs. This is implied by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), with regard to consumer-company identification. Thus, we propose:

P20: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the greater is his/her loyalty in terms of repeatedly buying its products.

Moreover, assuming that ASA elicits supportive, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to an increased tendency to try out new products introduced by it as line or brand extensions (see e.g., Aaker 1990; Keller and Aaker 1992). A similar suggestion is made by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) with regard to consumer-company identification. Thus, we propose:

P21: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the greater is his/her willingness to buy and try new products it introduces.

Individual non-buying behavior

With regard to individuals' non-buying behaviors, given the principle that ASA elicits supportive, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to an increased tendency to actively find out about its new products and services. This is supported by the research on involvement: involvement has been viewed as the motivation to process information related to its object (Mitchell 1979; Richins, Bloch, and McQuarrie 1992). If the object is a company, the motivation to process the information will probably lead to an increased tendency to find out about the new products it might offer. Moreover, individuals who have an ASA for a company (brand) may even form a more or less tight brand community, which then serves as an important information resource not only for the company but also for the individuals (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Thus, we propose:

P22: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to actively find out about any new products it might offer.

Moreover, under the same ASA principle, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to his/her increasingly managing others' impressions of it – assuming that impression management is supportive behavior. This has been implied in research on organizational identification (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail

1994; Scott and Lane 2000). More specifically, impression management may take the form of engaging in positive word-of-mouth about the company and its products (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), and even of visibly showing off company markers such as logos when using them (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Thus, we propose:

P23: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to engage in positive word-of-mouth behavior concerning the company and its products, and to make company markers visible to other people.

Furthermore, given the principle that ASA elicits choice over similar alternative behaviors, an individual's ASA for a company will also lead to his/her choosing to apply for employment in the company rather than for alternative jobs with approximately similar benefits and demands offered by companies for which he/she has weaker ASA. It is consistently suggested that individuals in job markets prefer to work for companies of which they have positive images and that have good reputations. This is implied in research on corporate brand(ing) (Balmer and Gray 2003; Einwiller and Will 2002; Hatch and Schultz 2003), and elaborated on in studies on employer/employment recruitment (Collins and Han 2004; Collins and Stevens 2002; Ewing, Pitt, de Bussy, and Berthon 2002; Lievens, Van Hove, and Schreurs 2005) and marketing (Ambler and Barrow 1996; Berthon, Ewing, and Hah 2005; Wheeler, Richey, Tokkman, and Sablynski 2006). Furthermore, assuming that ASA elicits supportive, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to an increased tendency to seek job opportunities with it and the motivation to work for it – considering one's job-seeking as interaction-seeking and one's work effort as one's scarce resource. A consistent finding is that individuals extend their self-definitions to the organizations and companies they work for (Burke 1937; Cardador and Pratt 2006; Elsbach and Glynn 1996; Glynn 1998), and exhibit greater work-motivation with increasing identification (see Pratt 1998). Thus, we propose:

P24: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her preference to be employed by it rather than by another one offering jobs with approximately similar perceived benefits and demands.

P25: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to seek job opportunities offered by it and the greater the motivation to work for it.

Finally, given that ASA elicits choice over similar alternative behaviors, an individual's ASA for a company will also lead to his/her choosing to invest in its stock over alternative investment opportunities with approximately similar expected returns and risks. A consistent suggestion relates to individuals' use of the mental shortcut referred to as "affect heuristic" (Aspara and Tikkanen 2008; Finucane et al. 2000; Slovic et al. 2002b): individuals often use an overall, readily available affective impression as a mental shortcut in making investment decisions rather than thoroughly calculating expected returns and risks. Furthermore, assuming that ASA elicits supportive, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior, an individual's ASA for a company will lead to an increased tendency to invest in its stock, even beyond expected financial returns and risks – considering stock investment as supportive behavior and resource-awarding towards the company. Thus, we propose:

P26: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her preference to invest in its stock rather than in other investment opportunities with approximately similar perceived returns and risks.

P27: The stronger the ASA an individual has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to invest in its stock, beyond expected financial returns and risks.

Organizational buying behavior

We now turn to discuss organizational behaviors, in the sense that an individual (with an ASA for a company) may influence or decide about not only his/her own behaviors but also the behaviors of organizations to which he/she is affiliated. Note that for reasons of limited space, we only refer mainly to influences on organizational behaviors according to the principle that ASA elicits supportive, interaction-seeking and resource-awarding behavior.

With respect to business-relevant organizational *buying* behavior (OBB), we distinguish between whether or not it could be considered to be very dependent on the particular organization's special role. Albeit not synonymous, this is consistent with the notion put forward in the OBB literature, that the two major purposes of organizational

buying are (1) to obtain products that enable the production of the special output of the organization, and (2) to keep the organization going by consuming and using certain products not directly related to the output (e.g., office equipment) (Gronhaug 1979; Kotler 1997; Mattson 1988). The former kind of role-related buying behavior is best exemplified, in general, with reference to component and material parts, as well as capital items, which a producer organization (in a certain industry) needs due to the nature of its output products. Products in the non-role-related category include office equipment and supplies, general IT systems and software, and business gifts.

Note that notwithstanding the exact type of buying behavior, even non-expert individuals are likely to know of many companies that are potential suppliers to their organizations, and may indeed have ASAs for them. This happens because many companies feature occasionally in the general and/or business media, and because quite a few even operate in both consumer and business markets. For instance, the majority of companies (company brands) in the top ten on the much-cited list of Best Global Brands (Business Week 2006) operate extensively in both markets: Microsoft, IBM, GE, Nokia, Toyota, and Mercedes.

In terms of OBB in general, and given the principles of ASA influence on behavior, an individual's ASA for a company may lead to an increased tendency to have his/her organization choose it as supplier of products to be consumed, over alternative potential suppliers for which he/she has weaker ASA. A consistent finding is that the decisions of individual organizational purchasers are affected by emotions, particularly the reputations or corporate brands of supplier companies and the purchasers' feelings about them (Gilliland and Johnston 1997; Lynch and De Chernatony 2004).

However, it is worth remembering that there may be many members of an organization influencing its buying decisions – one or a few in decisive or eventual decider roles and many others in influencer roles (Anderson and Narus 2004; Jackson, Keith, and Burdick 1984; Webster and Wind 1972). Thus, the distinction has to be made between an individual in a decisive role concerning purchasing and one who is “only” a potential influencer of the buying decisions (see below).

Organizational non-role-related buying behavior – With regard to buying behavior that is not strongly dependent on the organization's special role, and maintaining the above-mentioned distinction between whether an individual is in a decisive vs. a non-decisive role, we propose:

P28: The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization choose that company as a supplier of support products.

P29: The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization's choice of that company as a supplier of support products.

Organizational role-related buying behavior – With regard to buying behavior that is quite dependent on the organization's special (output-related) role, and maintaining the above-mentioned distinction, we propose:

P30: The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization choose that company as a supplier of input products related to the nature of its production/output.

P31: The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role (concerning purchasing) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization's choice of that company as a supplier of input products related to the nature of its production/output.

Figure 2 illustrates the distinction between the decisive vs. the non-decisive role by introducing “the individual having a decisive role concerning purchasing in the organization” as if it was a moderator variable, according to the standard notation. Note that individuals in their professional and private lives may have roles in multiple organizations, influencing the organizations' behaviors to varying degrees.

Organizational non-buying behavior

With respect to business-relevant organizational *non-buying* behavior, we again distinguish between whether the behavior in question could be considered highly dependent on the organization's special role. As far as *non-role-related* non-buying behaviors are concerned, although we acknowledge that not all such behaviors are about "partnering" (e.g., dominating or being dominated), we particularly focus on the willingness of an organization to engage in partnership with the focal company. Indeed, business-relevant inter-organizational behaviors that do not merely reflect buyer(-seller) behavior or control and dominance exerted through some kind of power hierarchy could be considered cooperative partnering in networks (e.g., Anderson and Narus 1990; Campbell 1985; Eccles 1981; Jarillo 1988; Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti 1997; Mariotti and Cainarca 1986; Powell 1990). Note that researchers have recently increasingly emphasized the benefits of networks of partnership relationships in business (Kanter 1994). For any company, partnerships may be useful in entering new businesses and taking up joint sales, marketing and co-branding efforts (Bucklin and Sengupta 1993), entering foreign countries (e.g., Hitt, Dacin, Levitas, Arregle, and Borza 2000; Luo 1997), and acquiring new knowledge and resources (e.g., Das and Teng 2000; Doz 1996; Doz and Hamel 1998; Dyer and Singh 1998; Hamel 1991; Inkpen 1996, 2000). They may also be paramount in developing new products and technologies, as research and development are increasingly carried out in complex networks of various companies, research institutes, and governmental agencies (Achrol and Kotler 1999; Castells 1996; Chesbrough 2003; Emden, Calantone, and Droge 2006; Hagedoom 2002; Kreiner and Schultz 1993).

As far as organizational, *role-related* non-buying behaviors are concerned, we focus particularly on those that are very dependent on the special institutionalized roles organizations may assume. Good examples of such roles pertain to institutional investor, financial analyst, media, and government organizations.

As with buying behavior (OBB), there are multiple individual organizational members, besides the eventual decider(s), contributing to the partnering decisions, as well as to the decisions of organizations with special institutional roles. All these decisions are likely to be influenced by the various individual members. Thus, we offer separate propositions with respect to whether the individual is in a decisive role in an organization with regard to partnering or its special institutional role, or whether he/she is only a potential influencer of the decisions.

Organizational non-role-related non-buying behavior – As mentioned, with regard to an organization's business-relevant non-buying behaviors that are not specific to its special role, we focus on its partnering with the focal company. Under the principles that ASA affects behavior, an individual's ASA for a company can lead to an increased tendency to have his/her organization choose it as a partner over alternative potential partners for which he/she has a weaker ASA. However, it is again worth noting that there may be multiple organizational members influencing its partnering decisions – one or a few in decisive or eventual decider roles and many others in influencer roles. Thus, we propose:

P32: The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role (concerning partnering) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization choose that company as a partner over alternative partners.

P33: The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role (concerning partnering) in an organization has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization's choice of that company as a partner over alternative partners.

Figure 2 illustrates the distinction between the decisive vs. the non-decisive role by introducing "the individual having a decisive role concerning partnering in the organization" as if it was a moderator variable, according to the standard notation.

Organizational role-related non-buying behavior – With respect to organizational non-buying behaviors, in turn, we focus particularly on those that are very dependent on the special institutionalized roles organizations may assume. Given the principle of ASA eliciting supportive, interaction-seeking, and resource-awarding behavior,

and maintaining the distinction between whether the individual is in a decisive vs. a non-decisive role, we propose:

P34: The stronger the ASA an individual with a decisive role in an organization with a special institutional role has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to have the organization give preferential treatment to that company in the organization's special institutional role.

P35: The stronger the ASA an individual with a non-decisive role in an organization with a special institutional role has for a company, the stronger is his/her tendency to try to influence the organization to give preferential treatment to that company in the organization's special institutional role.

Good examples of such organizational roles are those pertaining to institutional investor, financial analyst, media, and government organizations. Indeed, suggestions not inconsistent with the above propositions have been made in research concerning the judgments of individual financial analysts (Ganzach 2001; Westphal and Clement 2007), personal issue-importance and involvement among workers and editors in media organizations (Aspara 2004; Peiser 2000), and personal relationships among officials of government organizations with individual companies and their employees (e.g., Luo 2001; Yongqiang and Zhilong 2006).

Figure 2 illustrates the distinction between whether or not an individual has a role in an organization with a special institutional role by introducing "the individual having a role in an organization with a special institutional role" as if it were a moderator variable. As earlier, we also illustrate the distinction between a decisive vs. a non-decisive role by introducing "the individual having a decisive role concerning the special institutional role of the organization" as if it were a moderator variable.

CONCLUSION

Affective self-affinities

Various consumer research theories sharing the notion that individuals possess a reflective sense of self have been characterized by a roughly similar orientation concerning the interactions between people's perceptions, affective evaluations, and identification with various things. These include theories about self-concept congruence (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Sirgy 1982), (social) identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Hogg and Vaughan 2002; Scott and Lane 2000; Tajfel and Turner 1986), and enduring (or ego-) involvement (Celsi and Olson 1988; Higie and Feick 1989; Richins and Bloch 1986), as well as even those concerning the extended self (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988), (possession) attachment (Ball and Tasaki 1992; Kleine and Baker 2004), and brand relationship and attachment (Edson Escalas and Bettman 2000, 2003; Fournier 1998; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Yet, so far there has been little integration of the compatible aspects of these theories into one coherent theoretical conceptualization. This article makes a contribution by presenting such a conceptualization. Specifically, we define a special kind of perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationship that an individual may have with a variety of things, termed affective self-affinity (ASA). We outline in principle how an individual's ASA for one thing positively influences his/her ASA for another – the principle of ASA transference. We also outline how an individual's ASA for one thing affects his/her behavior related to it – the principles of ASA eliciting (a) choice over similar alternative behaviors, (b) committed and loyal behavior; and (c) supportive, interaction-seeking and resource-awarding behavior.

Affective identity relationships to companies

When it comes to firms and their business, marketing research has been increasingly interested in individuals' perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationships *to companies* (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cardador and Pratt 2006). However, little attention has been paid to (1) how, specifically, such identity relationships to companies will stem from identity relationships to various other things that are relevant to people and associated with companies. Besides, (2) the influences of such relationships to companies on various business-relevant behaviors of individuals, let alone the organizations they represent, have not been comprehensively analyzed in a way that would *not* assume the individuals to belong to certain pre-defined stakeholder classes, such as customers or employees.

This article contributes to filling the marketing-research gaps by applying the ASA theory to a company and its business. Specifically, we first examined the antecedents of an individual's ASA relationship to *a company*, i.e. how it may transfer from his/her ASAs for *other* company-associated things such as products and brands, product categories, groups of people, and items and styles of communications, as well as activities, areas of interest, ideas, and ideals. In implying that individuals' identification with such things potentially drives their identification with companies, the framework also contributes to recent research on company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cardador and Pratt 2006; Fullerton 2005; Scott and Lane 2000). While focusing on the general notion, processes, and consequences of identification, this earlier research has fallen short in explicating which aspects of the companies' identities individuals are likely to actually identify with.

Secondly, we examined the business-relevant behavioral consequences of the individual's ASA relationship to a company. With the implication that there are individuals with ASAs for a company who influence the behaviors of the various stakeholder actors that potentially relate to it, the framework responds to the recent call for marketers to focus not on certain fixed stakeholder perspectives but on what happens in the interactive space between individuals and companies (Dacin and Brown 2006). It illustrates how an individual's ASA for a company may influence the business-relevant behaviors of the individual him/herself as well as behaviors of the organizations he/she may represent. We considered both buying and non-buying behaviors. In terms of organizational behaviors, we drew attention to the fact that the influence of the individual on the business-relevant behavior of an organization he/she represents is likely to depend on how decisive his/her role in it is. We also noted that some business-relevant behaviors of an organization are very much dependent on a special role it has, stemming from its special production inputs and outputs or institutional position.

Thus, the framework clarifies how an individual's ASA for a company may influence *not only* his/her buying and non-buying behaviors as a consumer/customer (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cardador and Pratt 2006; Scott and Lane 2000; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005) or his/her motivation as an employee (Cardador and Pratt 2006; Pratt 1998; Scott and Lane 2000). ASA for the company may also affect, for instance, the individual's personal word-of-mouth and investing behavior. Even further, it may affect the behavior of organizations in which the individual acts in the role of influencer or decider of, for example, organizational purchasing or institutional decisions.

On the general level, a major marketing contribution of this article is the setting of a coherent set of testable propositions in an explicit framework. The propositions suggest how individuals' perception- and affect-laden, identity-involving relationships to companies may stem from their identity relationships with other things and how such relationships influence various business-relevant behaviors of individuals and the organizations they represent. Although implied in earlier research, most of the propositions have not previously been explicitly framed.

Stakeholder management and relationship marketing

Our framework further adds to stakeholder research (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Scott and Lane 2000) through the implication that individuals' ASAs for companies form a kind of individual-level psychological substrate mediating between the companies on the one hand and the business-relevant behavioral responses of the individuals and the organizations they represent on the other. Specifically, by incorporating the notion that individuals' influence on a company may arise from their affect-laden, identity-involving relationships with it, the framework extends the basis of the behavioral motives behind stakeholder acts beyond rational interests to include images and feelings, and beyond group identities (Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003) to individual identities (cf. Scott and Lane 2000). In effect, it implies that much of the influence exerted by stakeholder actors on the company occurs without any intent to exert influence, due to individuals' (ASA-influenced) behaviors involving the company – rather than due to actors' explicit, intentional attempts to influence the company, as is usually assumed in stakeholder research (see Donaldson and Preston 1995; Jones 1995; Jones and Wicks 1999; Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003 for reviews). A further contribution is the combining of this perspective with the notion (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Freeman 1984; Lamberg, Pajunen, Parvinen, and Savage 2006; Rowley

and Moldoveanu 2003) that all business-relevant actors, even if organization- or group-like, are after all represented by individuals, and the resulting focus on how all stakeholders' behaviors are eventually shaped by how individuals representing them relate to the company.

With these perspectives, the framework contributes also to the research on (customer) relationship management and marketing (e.g., Ballantyne, Christopher, and Payne 2003; Gummesson 1999; Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Payne, Ballantyne, and Christopher 2005), which has so far often paid rather little attention to individuals that represent organizational actors or customers. Also, it adds to the emerging literature on individuals' relationships with the company or the company brand (Bengtsson 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cardador and Pratt 2006; Fournier 1998; Fullerton 2005; Scott and Lane 2000), yet making an extension by examining the effects of individuals' identity relationships to a company on not only their personal behaviors but also on the behaviors of organizations that they may represent.

Managerial implications

Our framework essentially implies that traditional stakeholder and relationship marketing thinking has to be enriched to include individuals' affect-laden, identity-involving ASAs for the company. Specifically, it may indeed be beneficial for managers to create strategies aiming to render company-relevant individuals to have stronger ASAs for their company, i.e., to have such individuals develop increased affect towards it and to identify more strongly with it. In general, our research essentially calls for boundary-spanning strategies addressing a variety of company-relevant individuals in a coordinated way – strategies that do *not* pertain exclusively to a certain function, such as sales and marketing vs. investor relations vs. human-resource management vs. public relations, and do *not* address exclusively only one stakeholder class at a time. Google Corp., for instance, seems recently to have succeeded in implementing such boundary-spanning strategies, deliberately or not. After all, Google has achieved a preferred position in people's everyday web use, in Internet advertisement markets, on lists of the world's favorite investment targets, in the rankings of the most attractive employers, in managers minds' as a highly regarded business partner, and even in the minds of government officials (e.g., in China) as a reliable company (see Lashinsky 2007; Watts 2006).

Nevertheless, as different stakeholder classes, both individual and organizational, may have varying influence on a particular company's performance, and as one individual may represent certain actor classes more effectively than others, it is important to orchestrate the targeting of different individuals in different ways in order to achieve optimal overall influence on the company performance. In this orchestration, it may prove useful to address the business-relevant behaviors of both individuals and organizations, and both buying and non-buying behaviors, respectively. In terms of organizational behaviors, the potential channels of influence should be assessed by taking into account the fact that individuals may be in decisive (or non-decisive) roles, and that some business-relevant behaviors of organizations are very much dependent on any special output-related or institutional role they may have.

In terms of what makes individuals form stronger ASAs for a company, our framework emphasizes the contributing role of their affinities for the company's products, brands, and styles of communication, as well as the company's support for and sponsorship of things for which the individuals have affinities. As far as practitioners of consumer marketing are concerned, the implied need to strengthen ASAs for products, brands, communications, and sponsorships is likely to be somewhat intuitive. It may be less intuitive for practitioners who are responsible for marketing to businesses and organizations, for recruiting new employees and motivating current ones, for finance and investor relations, and for public relations with government officials and the media. There is also increasing emphasis on the need to shape the behavior of employees and top managers and to have them represent themselves to external audiences in a likable and involving way, as well as to foster corporate support for communities of individuals that form around something, e.g., a leisure activity, that is meaningful to them.

Limitations and further research

With regard to the definition of ASA, it must be noted that this article has not provided a fully-fledged practical operationalization of the construct. This should thus be among the first steps in further research. Since ASA may converge with a positive attitude and personal (identity) relevance, learning from earlier operationalizations of these constructs is likely to be useful. The visual-scale approach to measuring identity overlap (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002) might prove a useful starting point, as might simply asking respondents to indicate the extent to which a certain thing is “like me” or “not like me” (French and Glaschner 1971; Landon 1974; Sirgy 1982; Sommers 1964). In addition, the way in which subjects link ASA to other verbal expressions (“X somehow reflects me as a person,” “X is just for me,” “Me, I simply love X”, “X suits me”) should be explored (cf. Ahuvia 2005). Further research on the actual principles of ASA transference and its effects on behavior, in turn, could utilize and adapt study designs deployed, for instance, in research on attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}) (see Brown and Stayman 1992; Muehling and McCann 1993; Nan 2006) with regard to the transference of affect and behavioral effects. (This being said, the principles of ASA transference and its effects on behavior might also be used as an alternative theory explaining the mechanism through which A_{ad} influences product evaluations and behaviors – complementary to the affect-referral and the salient-attribute theories (cf. Nan 2006)).

With respect to the practical application of ASA theory, a basic limitation of our research is that it does not explicitly address different kinds of companies according to industry or product type. We do not pay explicit attention to differences in how individuals come to have ASAs for companies operating in different industries, producing different types of products for different types of customers. Although we do distinguish between individual and organizational business-relevant behaviors, buying and non-buying behaviors, and organizational role-specific vs. non-role-specific behaviors, we do not pay explicit attention to how the ASAs may differently influence the behaviors of individuals and organizations that are different in terms of their importance to companies. For instance, the differences between a company selling products exclusively to consumers (B2C) and one selling exclusively to serve the output of other companies or organizations (B2B) are likely to be considerable. There are also likely to be differences between a company exclusively selling products the consumption of which is highly visible or involves high social risk and one selling products the consumption of which is private, not visible, and without social risks. These are issues to be dealt with in further research, with respect to specific industries and companies and specific types of companies and products.

Specifically with regard to the consequences of ASAs, further research should investigate business-relevant behaviors in more depth, and identify further organizational behaviors that are heavily dependent on special organizational, (e.g., production) or institutional roles. On the other hand, individuals’ roles beyond those they assume in formal organizations should also be studied further. For instance, how ASAs for companies influence opinion leaders and innovative consumers is an interesting issue, as is how they may come to have such ASAs. Furthermore, at the intersection of individual and organizational behavior there may be boundary behaviors worth studying. These include the requesting and giving of references from, to, and by organizations and/or individuals representing them – which are often highly important when organizations make buying decisions.

Moreover, as far as the single individual is concerned, our framework does not address the *relative* significance of products and brands, product categories, communications, employees and managers, and the supported communities, groups, and other things in the formation of ASAs for companies. This warrants further and extensive empirical research. Neither does the framework address how an individual’s various encounters with the company or its products or brands, product categories, communications, etc. in his/her various private and professional roles may differently contribute to the formation of his/her overall ASA for the company. In particular, further research should study the *interplay* between companies’ actions, the creation of the rational expectations individuals have in their different roles, the development of their ASAs, their business-relevant behaviors as driven jointly by their expectations and ASAs, and the satisfaction vs. dissatisfaction resulting from the disconfirmation of their rational expectations. This would allow examination of important feedback effects that remain unidentified in our framework.

Further research should also investigate the significance of ASA as a causative and behavioral drive at its different levels of strength. This is a challenge that is similar to those arising with many psychological concepts, particularly in consumer research, such as ‘brand loyalty’ (see Jacoby 1975). We have attempted in our propositions to be specific about how an individual’s ASA for a company may influence his/her behavior or the behavior of an organization he/she represents. Most propositions assume a decision-making situation involving choice between the company and similar alternatives, of which an individual chooses the company due a stronger ASA for it. However, the question remains whether an ASA for a company can be a substantially more powerful behavioral drive for an individual – and, if so, how powerful a drive, particularly relative to more rational goals, expectations, and satisfactions.

In any case, the outcome of this theoretical and conceptual study, i.e., the comprehensive framework regarding the antecedents and consequences of an individual’s ASA for a company, needs to be elaborated in empirical studies. An initial step would be to conduct extensive qualitative research involving both unstructured and structured individual and group interviews covering the antecedents and consequences of individuals’ ASAs to enable the constructs included in our framework to be carefully operationalized. The narratives and the responses to the structured questions would provide a basis for examining the strength of ASAs of a set of individuals for certain companies, and the sources and importance of these ASAs as motivations for their and their organizations’ behaviors and behavioral intentions. This kind of in-depth qualitative research would clarify both the contents of various ASA elements and the process of ASA transference, which would be useful in developing multi-item scales for use in subsequent deductive research. The testing of the propositions should then be based on different types of companies, and the methods used should range from laboratory experiments to field surveys. It would be better not to try to test all the propositions in a single study, but to take one subset at a time and to possibly examine the antecedents vs. consequences of ASA for a company in different studies. It may also be useful to identify coherent sub-parts of the framework to be investigated separately. For instance, given that individuals may have strong ASAs for people or groups of people (e.g., users of a product, personnel), one could focus on the extent to which group-related ASAs transfer (or do not transfer) to company ASAs, and further influence the individuals’ behaviors.

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