The elephant in the room: race and diversity in the supply chain

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ABSTRACT

While the increasing diversity of the United States population and global competition have been frequent business topics, relatively little research has examined the implications of this diversity on companies wishing to develop and maintain marketing channel relationships. The change in the demographic characteristics of the United States has increased the number of minority-owned firms and is likely to pose unique opportunities and problems for distribution channel relationships involving minority suppliers. A recent editorial in the Journal of Business Logistics has identified the challenge of race in supply chain management in our time and called for research that examines the influence of race and diversity on supply chain phenomena (Esper et al., 2020). This study proposes the use of the social identity theory as a framework for examining the relationship between minority suppliers and corporate purchasing agents. First, we present an overview of the literature on buyer–seller interaction. Thereafter, social identity and self-categorization theories are reviewed, and propositions relating these theories to the interactions between industrial buyers and minority suppliers are presented.

Keywords: Minority entrepreneurship, social identity theory, self-categorization theory, buyer–seller interaction, supply chain

INTRODUCTION

Minority entrepreneurship has significant potential social and economic consequences. The fostering of a robust and self-reliant minority business sector has been acknowledged as a significant societal goal by governmental bodies, corporate sectors, and minority communities alike. (Adobor and McMullen, 2007). To strengthen ties between large corporations and minority business enterprises, various sources have initiated efforts. Specifically, many large firms have developed programs within their purchasing departments to increase purchases from small and minority-owned businesses (Adobor and McMullen, 2007; Leenders et al., 1989; MacManus, 1993). Additionally, the development of minority-owned businesses has become an important objective of the government at both the national and state levels. Thus, the Minority Business Development Agency was established in 1969 to direct public policy toward assisting minority business development (Minority Business Development Agency, n.d.).

Legislation such as Public Law 99-661, which mandates a minimum of five percent of government contract value to be sourced from minority-owned businesses, has significantly influenced the perspectives of corporate buyers and suppliers classified as socially and economically disadvantaged. The United States Small Business Administration defines as businesses owned by blacks, persons of Spanish or Latin American ancestry, and persons of American Indian or Asian origin or descent (McManus 1993). This requirement made government contractors keenly aware of the need to cultivate minority-owned suppliers. Despite being applicable solely to government contractors, the law's introduction has, in some instances, awakened large companies to opportunities that they had previously overlooked. Nevertheless, efforts to satisfy federal mandates and voluntary initiatives aimed at fostering economic development for minorities and small businesses frequently resulted in disappointment for all involved parties. (Adobor and McMullen, 2007; Bates, 1985; Spratlen, 1978).

While a few empirical studies have examined minority supplier/industrial buyer relationships from an economic perspective (Dollinger and Daily, 1989; Guinipero, 1980), relatively few have examined the behavioral aspects of the interactions between industrial buyers and minority suppliers. Social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) may provide a framework for examining some of the unique aspects of these relationships. Thus, this study proposes the use of the social identity theory as a framework for examining the relationship between minority suppliers and corporate purchasing agents.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Marketing scholars have investigated many issues related to buyer–seller interactions (Bonoma and Johnston, 1978). Early researchers have debated the motives of industrial buyers (Banville and Dornoff, 1973). In his examination of industrial purchasing behavior, Duncan (1940) suggests that economic motives predominantly drive industrial buyers' decisions. However, Wind (1967) advocates that personal and prejudiced environmental factors influence the brand, product, and source selection decisions of industrial buyers.

Further, industrial marketers have drawn insights from various conceptual models of industrial purchasing processes (Sheth, 1973; Webster and Wind, 1972; Wind, 1967). While these studies have made substantial contributions to our overall understanding of the organizational purchase decision process, the primary objective of these early models has been to explain the purchasing process.

The similarity/attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) has provided a conceptual foundation for most research on interpersonal interactions. The hypothesis theorizes that a significant basis for interpersonal attraction is similar or shared attitudes. Status, social, and physical traits may serve as cues for assuming similarities in attitudes, beliefs, and personalities. This might lead to increased interpersonal interaction, the consequences of which could include frequent communication and increased cooperation, which may result in enhanced distribution channel relationships.

In the field of buyer–seller interactions, Evans (1963) posits that the more similar individuals are in buyer–seller relationships, the more favorable the outcome and the higher the possibility of a sale. Sales negotiations require communication in which the salesperson and the buyer interpret each other's behavior. Studies on this interaction process have shown that the expectations and communication expertise of both parties affect the relationship (Brock, 1965; Whyte, 1948). However, actual similarity may not be as powerful a predictor of behavior as perceived similarity (Byrne and Wong, 1962; Evans, 1963; Stotland et al., 1948). Mathews et al. (1972) maintain that perceived similarity fosters cooperation between buyers and sellers. Davis and Silk (1972) and Evans (1963) contend that this occurs because attraction serves as the mechanism through which similarity influences these outcomes. In essence, similarity engenders attraction, which subsequently enhances favorable outcomes and cooperation.

However innately appealing this hypothesis may be, the results of previous inquiries are not definite. After reviewing the similarity/attraction literature, Weitz (1979) finds limited support for the hypothesis. Similarly, Brown (1984, p. 617) states that "it is clear that the almost unanimous conclusion from studies of interpersonal relations that similarity leads to attraction must be qualified once we enter into the intergroup domain."

Scholars in marketing, social psychology, and organizational behavior have engaged in theoretical inquiries regarding the distinctive attributes inherent in organizational boundary roles, exemplified by roles like buyers and salespeople. These inquiries focus on understanding how these role characteristics influence the conduct of representatives involved in negotiation processes. (Adams, 1976; Clopton, 1984; Dwyer and Walker, 1981; Rubin and Brown, 1975; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985). While this research may offer insights into organizational factors that influence negotiation behavior, however, it does not highlight the situational factors that may be present during minority supplier/industrial buyer negotiations.

Insights into the industrial buyer perspectives of minority-owned businesses are critical for the development of viable minority supplier development programs. Spratlen (1978) outlines an agenda for the effective implementation of minority business purchasing programs discusses. The author indicates that corporate purchasing from minority-owned suppliers can provide a link between effective purchasing and corporate citizenship, which can be a source of competitive advantage.

Bates (1985) analyzes the effects of preferential procurement policies on minority businesses, proposing that current initiatives aimed at supporting marginalized minority enterprises are ineffective. He argues that preferential policies can effectively eliminate longstanding barriers to minority participation in the economy. Once these barriers are removed, buyers and sellers involved in the procurement process may become more knowledgeable about each other, potentially diminishing the costs associated with fostering a more equitable economic environment.

Several studies have examined minority business enterprises through the lens of their distribution channel relationships. Guinipero (1980) examines minority business performance from the perspective of purchasing agents/managers. The findings indicate a consistent pattern where minority-owned businesses receive lower ratings from buyers compared to their non-minority counterparts, particularly in areas such as managerial and technical expertise. The author advocates for a proactive supplier development strategy, emphasizing the importance of providing managerial, marketing, financial and technical assistance to enhance the capabilities of these firms.

Additionally, Dollinger and Daily (1989) examine minority supplier/industrial buyer relationships from the perspectives of both parties. Transaction cost economics provides a theoretical foundation for their work. The authors observe that opportunism and hostile environments are the primary impediments to the establishment of strong relationships between minority suppliers and industrial buyers. Minority suppliers state that the most significant obstacle to establishing strong relationships lies in the complexity associated with conducting business transactions with large firms. Conversely, industrial buyers indicate their primary barrier as the difficulty identifying qualified minority suppliers—those capable of providing adequate capacity and competitive prices.

Cooper and Stump (2015) explore how the categorization of suppliers as minority versus non-minority influences the negotiation strategies employed by purchasing agents. They find that cooperative negotiation stances, characterized by problem-solving and compromise strategies, are predominant in interactions with both minority suppliers and non-categorized suppliers. The authors highlight that this integrative approach, which emphasizes inquiry, information gathering, and needs satisfaction, facilitates the creation and mutual sharing of value during negotiations. They suggest that suppliers engaged in minority supplier purchasing programs should leverage the widespread use of problem-solving approaches by purchasing agents.

Minority supplier purchasing initiatives are not just a United States phenomenon. Research highlighting the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom regarding minority suppliers is increasing. Shah and Ram (2006) employ case studies to investigate the implementation of supplier diversity programs at three prominent U.S. companies that serve as exemplars of supplier diversity: JPMorgan Chase, Ford Motor Company, and Unisys. They conducted semi-structured interviews with supplier diversity teams from these organizations to explore the motivations, drivers, and challenges associated with these initiatives. The authors highlight that effective monitoring of supply chains and proactive outreach efforts by minority business enterprises are crucial factors contributing to the success of these programs. Additionally, they underscore the influential role of government as a catalyst in shaping approaches to supplier diversity. In their conclusion, the authors analyze the essential components of successful supplier diversity initiatives and draw implications that could inform practices in the United Kingdom.

Similarly, Blount and Li (2020) investigate the factors influencing the purchasing preferences of large organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom towards goods and services provided by ethnic minority businesses. Drawing from social capital theory, the study develops hypotheses centered on cognitive, relational and structural dimensions that potentially impact these decisions. The findings demonstrate a significant direct relationship between buyers' positive perceptions of social capital and their expenditures on ethnic minority enterprises in both countries. Additionally, the study reveals that buyers' attitudes towards supplier diversity play a mediating role in this relationship across both national contexts. The authors note that, although the concept of supplier diversity originated in the United States, United Kingdom buyers have relatively high expenditures with their minority suppliers.

While marketing scholars have provided the foundation for the studies of buyer/seller interactions, these studies do not provide sufficient explanations for the interactions between minority suppliers and industrial buyers. However, the field of social psychology has produced significant research that may be directly applicable to this area.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SELF-CATEGORIZATION THEORY

Tajfel (1986) argued that intergroup situations differ from interpersonal situations. In interactions among groups, group differences become noticeable and as a result, individuals begin to adjust their perceptions and behaviors. The concept of the social identity of interest here was developed by Tajfel (1978, 1982) and Turner (1982, 1985; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). It describes the components of an individual's self-concept that are derived from group memberships and incorporate various evaluative, emotional, and psychological characteristics. Tajfel and Turner introduced an analytical framework for understanding intergroup relations and social conflicts, termed "social identity theory" (Turner and Giles, 1981). The central premise of the theory is that individuals are motivated to realize a positive social identity by favorably comparing their ingroups to relevant outgroups.

The social identity theory posits that different processes operate when individuals from different groups interact. These processes are distinct from interpersonal interactions (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This intergroup approach views the outcomes of such interactions as attributable, in part, to the fact that individuals are viewed as the representatives of a group and not simply as individuals. From this perspective, perceptions are constructed not by viewing the individual as an isolated entity, but rather through their behavior as a member representing a different group.

Later, Turner (1982) explored the role of social identity as a psychological mechanism that facilitates the "depersonalization" of self-perception, thereby enabling group behavior. This exploration paved the way for the development of the "self-categorization" theory, which seeks to identify the processes through which individuals are integrated into a cohesive psychological group (Turner, 1985). The self-categorization theory, which focuses on individual–group relationships, seeks to explain intergroup discrimination in terms of the need for a positive social identity or distinctness (Turner 1985).

The basic ideas of the self-categorization theory are as follows. Cognitive representations of the self manifest as "self-categorizations," which involve the cognitive classification of oneself as part of a particular category of stimuli, as opposed to being aligned with other categories (Rosch 1978; Turner, 1985). There are three significant levels of abstraction present within the social self-concept: self-categorization as a human being (e.g., female), self-categorization as part of an ingroup–outgroup classification based on differentiations between groups of people (e.g., industrial buyer versus supplier), and personal self-categorizations based on differentiations between oneself as an individual and other ingroup members (e.g., African American supplier/Hispanic supplier) (Turner, 1985).

In any given situation, there is a purposeful opposition among the various levels of self-categorization regarding their significance or prominence. Self-categories are formed based on perceived intra-category similarities as well as inter-category differences. As these categorizations become salient, they give prominence to the similarities or differences. (Tajfel, 1969).

The perceived identity between the self and ingroup members is enhanced by factors that increase the significance of the ingroup-outgroup categorization. This leads to the depersonalization of individual self-perceptions. It is believed that this depersonalization serves as the fundamental mechanism driving group phenomena, such as social stereotyping, cohesion within one's own group, ethnocentrism, and cooperation within the group. (Turner, 1985).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) introduced the social identity theory to the business literature in a conceptual article that proposed the theory as a possible explanation for conflicts arising from intergroup interactions in organizations. No empirical evidence was offered to support whether or not the identifications within a business organization were salient enough to trigger the effects predicted by the theory; however, the authors presented a compelling conceptual argument.

With regard to buyer/seller interactions, Francis (1991) tested the effects of various degrees of adaptive behavior on intercultural buyer/seller negotiations. Hypotheses were formulated in the context of similarity/attraction, social identity, and communication theories. Utilizing each theory, the author found moderate adaptation, as opposed to substantial or no adaptation, to be the most successful strategy in intercultural negotiations.

PROPOSITIONS

Ingroup Favoritism

Within organizational contexts, the construction of self and others is often primarily "relational and comparative" (Tajfel and Turner 1979)." This means that an individual's perception of themselves is heavily influenced by their belongingness to a particular group and the distinctions drawn between their group and others. This process of self-categorization plays a crucial role in ingroup formation and contributes to the well-established tendency of individuals to prefer groups comprised of members who share similarities with themselves (Messick and Mackie, 1989).

The social identity and self-categorization theories are particularly applicable to minority supplier/industrial buyer relationships. The *a priori* categorization of suppliers as “minority” may serve as a cue to buyers. To maintain and enhance their distinctiveness and achieve a positive self-identity, industrial buyers may also consider race as a salient self-categorization. The extent to which differences or similarities in race exist between members of the ingroup (buyers) and outgroup (minority suppliers) is likely to negatively or positively impact the interactions between the buyers and minority suppliers.

Proposition 1 follows from this line of reasoning. Favorability, which is defined as the likability of group members, the preferability of being a member of the group, and the tendency to perceive group actions and performance in a favorable light, is likely to cause non-minority industrial buyers to have more favorable interactions with and perceptions of the performance of non-minority suppliers than minority suppliers. Similarly, minority industrial buyers are likely to have more favorable interactions with, and perceptions of, minority suppliers than non-minority suppliers.

Proposition 1**:** Industrial buyers perceive suppliers who are members of ingroups (minority/non-minority) more favorably than members of outgroups.

The Use of Heuristics

In order to navigate social interactions successfully, individuals need to categorize social entities and recognize the characteristics that define these categories. Membership in some categories might be gleaned from observable traits such as gender, race, and age. Others may be inferred or provided by acquaintances, such as occupation or educational background. The minority supplier classification employed by corporations and the government provides such a categorization. To use this information about the members of a category, individuals must possess memory representations of these categories, from which they can derive likely attributes of category instances. The recalled category information significantly influences the behavior of the individual perceiving it.

Rothbart et al. (1978) found that we organize our impressions around individual members when we have little information about the group and/or know only a few members; in other words, when there is little demand for memory. Conversely, when there is a heavy demand for memory, we are likely to organize our impressions of the entire group. Hence, if we know many members of a group but see only a few of them very frequently, the characteristics of the latter are likely to have an undue influence on our impressions of the entire group simply because they will be more available to memory. In general, problem suppliers are likely to be seen more frequently by industrial buyers, and hence, they remain available in memory.

The salience or distinctiveness of a particular class of events may make examples of that class more available to memory; resultantly, the frequency of that class may be overestimated (Hamilton and Rose, 1980; Jones et al., 1977). Thus, it appears that one of the ways in which memory can deceive us is by serving up a biased sample of what we know. What we are likely to recall about a group is the novel, unusual, or most available information. This information may not be representative of the group or even what we know about the group. This may present problems in distribution channel relationships if the information that is most available in the memory regarding minority suppliers is the representative of the suppliers experiencing problems. Therefore, we posit that minority supplier categorization is likely to allow these characteristics to be inferred by minority suppliers more frequently than by non-minority suppliers.

Proposition 2: Industrial buyers infer impressions of an individual supplier to the group of minority suppliers if the supplier is categorized as a minority supplier, whereas impressions are inferred to the individual supplier if the supplier is categorized as a non-minority supplier.

Guinipero's (1980) findings support this notion. Perceived challenges encountered by minority purchasing coordinators when procuring from minority suppliers were reported to be more pronounced, ranging from "moderate" to "significant," than those experienced when purchasing from non-minority suppliers, which ranged from "no problem" to "moderate." Additionally, t-tests confirmed that the perceptions of the problems were significantly different in all cases.

Stereotyping Behavior

A stereotype is simply a set of interrelated characteristics imputed to a group and its members. Thus, it is a mental prototype of the representatives of a category of people (Jones, 1982). With respect to stereotypes and memory, Cohen (1977) examined the extent to which individuals were selective about what they remembered about group members.

Research indicates that once we have labeled someone (e.g., as an "extrovert" or "introvert," "minority," or "non-minority"), we are likely to infer additional stereotype-consistent attributes for which we have no evidence (Cohen, 1977; Stephan and Rosenfield, 1982). Furthermore, once we have classified someone in a particular way, our memory of the behavior or features that led us to invoke that particular classification may be lost, and we may be able to recall only the label we used (Cantor and Mischel, 1977; Doob and Kirshenbaum, 1973; Taylor et al., 1978). This could be particularly troublesome for minority suppliers, as they may encounter more difficulty establishing relationships with suppliers, which would allow them to dispel such stereotypes.

Dollinger and Daily (1989) found support for this situation. They noted that industrial buyers found the establishment of these relationships to be the least desirable aspect of interacting with minority suppliers. Additionally, non-minority industrial buyers perceived the atmosphere surrounding these relationships as uncomfortable. Other researchers (Stephan and Stephan, 1985, p. 163) provide additional insight into this phenomenon, noting that "people who regard themselves as superior experience anxiety concerning interaction with others who are regarded as inferior." The "minority" designation given to suppliers may inadvertently provide the foundation for a relationship in which industrial buyers regard themselves as superiors to the minority supplier. This anxiety may prompt individuals to avoid interactions with outgroup members, thereby heightening stereotyping and perceptions of dissimilarity between them. Such tendencies appear contradictory to the growing diversity within the workforce and could potentially undermine relationships within distribution channel relationships involving minority suppliers. Propositions 3a, b, and c stated below follow this line of reasoning.

Proposition 3: Suppliers categorized as minorities will receive a) less contact with industrial buyers, b) fewer long-term relationships with industrial buyers, and c) more perceived dissimilarities (stereotypes) than suppliers not classified as minorities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Extensive evidence indicates that individuals regularly categorize themselves and others according to social attributes such as age, gender, race, and status, demonstrating pronounced preferences for groups defined by these categories (Tajfel, 1986). As a result of this categorization process, differences within groups tend to be minimized, whereas differences between groups remain clear. Depending on the level of awareness that differences between groups (i.e., minority suppliers and industrial buyers) may influence our expectations and behaviors, we may develop strategies to remedy any problems that may result from this perception of differences.

Further, research has consistently demonstrated that individuals exhibit a preference for interacting more frequently with members of their own social groups over those from different groups (e.g., Cooper and Fazio 1979; Stephan, 1978). Considering the juxtaposition of individuals' inclination toward homogeneity and the evolving demographic landscape of business and society, an appreciation of the impact of demographic diversity on business outcomes at both the individual and group levels holds significant theoretical and practical implications (Pfeffer, 1983; Thomas, 1990). Social identity and self-categorization theories provide avenues for exploring the changing nature of these relationships. Thomas (1990, p. 117) states that

> "in a country seeking competitive advantage in a global economy, the goal of managing diversity is to develop our capacity to accept, incorporate, and empower the diverse human talents of the most diverse nation on earth. It's our reality. We need to make it our strength."

Corporations and government entities must coordinate relationships with minority suppliers to allow these suppliers to become value-adding partners, which will assist in managing the flow of goods and services along the supply chain. This enables these firms to compete more favorably with relatively large integrated firms.

Future research should attempt to empirically validate social identity and self-categorization theory within the context of minority supplier distribution-channel relationships. Scenarios can be used to counter the respondents' desire to answer in a socially responsible manner. Respondents might be instructed to assume the role of purchasing agents making decisions during a particular situation instead of acting based on their own negotiation experiences. This approach, successfully employed in previous research (Francis, 1991), aims to mitigate potential pressures associated with providing responses that could be construed as discriminatory.

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