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A Study On the Structural Dimension of Middle Class Relational Identification in Chinese Context

Yunxia Su^{1,2*} Minggui Sun³

1. Shanghai Publishing and Media Institute, Shanghai, 200093, China
2. Shanghai Publishing and Printing College, Shanghai, 200093, China
3. Donghua University, Shanghai, 200051, China

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ABSTRACT

Through in-depth interviews, this study makes an exploratory study on the dimension of the middle class relational identification in Chinese context by using the grounded theory. It is mainly composed of 4 dimensions: relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development. According to the four dimension model of middle class relational identification, the middle class relational identification in China is the cognitive and behavioral orientation that in the action of achieving a certain purpose, because of the perception of consistency with each other in role cognition and personal cognition, the middle class is willing to unite and trust, respect and understand and coordinate the conflict to adapt to this relationship, and then to form a positive evaluation of the relationship and a sense of belonging and commitment to this relationship. The construction of the structural dimension of middle class relational identification in China is conducive to explaining the endemic phenomena of Chinese middle class.

1. Introduction

The cultural and social temporal and spatial differences of the concept of the middle class make it different in different social and cultural contexts, such as “middle bourgeoisie”, “middle class”, “white-collar” and so on, which are collectively referred to as the middle class in this study. In the process of modernization around the world, the rise and growth of the middle class is a universal phenomenon, as is the case in China. Cultivating and developing the middle class is conducive to narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor, and enhancing the stability and coordination of development.

The consumption behavior of the middle class will not only promote its individuals and families, but also promote the social and economic development of China in the transitional period. Its consumption concept and lifestyle may affect the energy consumption structure and ecological environment of China and the world ^[1].

The consumption of different social classes has the characteristics of stratification. Occupation, education, personal and family income are the important factors affecting the consumption of the middle class in China ^[2]. Beyond the traditional class symbols of occupation, group and income, Hart and Negri put forward the concept of

**Corresponding Author:*

Yunxia Su,

Shanghai Publishing and Media Institute, Shanghai, 200093, China;

Shanghai Publishing and Printing College, Shanghai, 200093, China;

Email: sunnysu545@126.com

focus, and defined the social middle layer with creative labor and open network connection. Bourdieu believes that the set of class positions embodied in the consumption stratification can be explained either by introducing a set of party mechanism or by the “class spirit” produced by the words of intellectuals^[3]. The latter is exactly how Hart and Negri say that the symbolic labor of creative non-material production occupies all social life^[4].

The concept of identification originates from sociology, and social identification is based on the formation of social identity of social individuals. There are great differences in the composition of the middle class in China. The obvious heterogeneity and differentiation in social interaction rules and behavior norms, consumption behavior, lifestyle and other aspects are not conducive to the internal formation of a consistent middle class identity and class consciousness^[5]. If cultural factors such as identity and consciousness are ignored, middle class research will encounter many unanswerable questions^[6].

Relationship identification is a kind of identification related to interpersonal relationship. According to consumer sociology, Chinese identification management is a kind of external and objective identification management based on relationship self. It attaches great importance to obtaining positive evaluation from society and others, establishing identification with others by means of tangible goods and transmitting identification^[7]. At present, in China, the modern society of the middle class itself flows frequently, and it is easy to produce a sense of “anxiety” of unstable social status. Cultural anthropologists believe that goods can “create and maintain social relations”^[8], and the middle class will create a network of personal survival and development through gift consumption and confirm their own existence^[9]. Because of the great differences in the composition of the middle class in Chinese context, they can only obtain the identification within the class from a narrower perspective, such as the common consumption characteristics^[7], the dual relationship in the workplace^[10], etc. In addition, the function of the family to determine the class boundary in Chinese society is prominent, and the fuzzy boundary of the middle class has been transformed into a clear and internal family boundary^[4], the relational identification will be a feasible perspective to explain the phenomenon of middle class in China.

The theoretical construction and empirical research of relational identification has become a hot topic in the fields of organizational behavior and psychology in the west^[11], while the relevant research is still quite lacking in China. It should be noted that “relationship” in Chinese context is different from that in the west, and whether the

connotation of relational identification is different from that in the West needs to be studied. In addition, some foreign studies regard the measurement of relational identification as a single dimension construct, and many measurement studies directly adapt the social identification or organizational identification scale, and the measurement objects are limited to the colleague relationship and superior subordinate relationship in the organizational context^[10,11]. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the nature of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, develop dimensions and measurement scales of relational identification covering multiple role relationships, so as to unify the structure and measurement of relational identification. This study will explore the dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, and understand its connotation, in order to provide a feasible research perspective to explain the unique phenomenon of Chinese middle class.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept and Characteristics of Relational Identification

The definition of relational identification in academic circles has two perspectives: state view and process view^[12]. From the perspective of state view, it emphasizes the cognitive relationship between the actor and the role relationship, and then determines the dynamic response of the actor to a certain relationship. Relational identification is the self-construction of an individual according to a specific role relationship^[13], and it is the cognition of the actor whether there is a specific relationship between himself and others in the purposeful action^[14]. What’s different is that Sluss and Ashforth^[13] emphasize the basic role of individual characteristics in relational identification, while Wang^[14] emphasizes that individuals regard others as a means to realize their own values or interests. Therefore, the former thinks that relational identification has three characteristics of personification, interpersonal attraction and role sublimation, while the latter thinks that relational identification has two characteristics of others’ direction and relationship operation. From the perspective of process view, it describes the process in which an individual obtains self-construction from the role relationship. Process view can explain the formation and change of relationship operation^[12]. The state view of relational identification is closely related to the process view. Various factors that affect the relationship affect the process of relational identification, which will change the state of relational identification at a certain point.

2.2 Dimension and Measurement of Relational Identification

Scholars at home and abroad have not reached a consensus on the connotation of relational identification. Is relational identification a multi-dimensional construct or a single dimensional construct? If it is a multidimensional construct, which dimensions should be included? What is the relationship between dimensions? How to operate the concept? So far, there is a lack of relevant research at home and abroad.

There are two ways to develop the scale of relational identification: one is to develop the scale of relational identification based on the scale of other constructs, the other is to directly develop the scale of measurement. The former, such as adapting social identification scale to measure subordinates' relational identification with leaders^[15], adapting organizational identification scale to measure employees' relationship identity with customers^[16], these scales do not go through strict scale development procedures, and it is difficult to use other structured scales to reflect the connotation of relational identification. The latter, for example, Walumbwa and Hartnell^[17] developed a scale with 10 items to measure subordinates' relational identification with leaders, Zhang et al.^[18] developed a scale with 7 items to measure employees' relational identification with colleagues, all of which are single-dimensional, with no significant difference in structure, content and measurement indicators^[11].

Foreign scholars mostly study three directions from the perspective of ordinary organization members: "subordinates' role identification with leaders, employees' role identification with colleagues, employees' role identification with external stakeholders of the organization". In China, there are "ten-identifications" in relational identification^[19], and kinship identification is the core of Chinese relational identification. In addition, Chinese people will adjust the scope of relational identification according to the needs of their instrumental actions. The expansion of the scope of relational identification means that Chinese people may absorb more non kinship relationships and their resources into the actions to support their instrumental goals^[14]. The life style of the middle class involves many aspects such as family, work, study and interest, and its role relationship inevitably presents diversity. Therefore, in addition to the cultural differences between the East and the West, it is necessary to deeply understand the connotation of the relational identification of the middle class in Chinese context, understand its dimension structure, and develop a scale covering multiple role relationships on this basis to unify the structure measurement of

relational identification.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method

In order to understand the connotation and dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, this study mainly uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative research emphasizes the process, situation and concreteness of research, which is more suitable for the study of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context. In the process of the research, the open questionnaire method, in-depth interview method and grounded theory method are used to obtain and analyze the data, and then refine the structural dimension and clarify its connotation.

3.2 Data Sources

There is no unified standard for the definition of Chinese middle class. Different scholars put forward different views according to the research needs. In recent years, the commonly used standard of stratum division is the comprehensive use of income, education and vocational indicators^[20]. Based on this criterion, the study defines the education standard as junior college or above, the occupational middle class as those who always or often need rapid thinking and mental work in their work, and the income standard as individuals with an annual income of more than 20000 yuan^[21]. The individuals who meet these three indicators and any two indicators are defined as middle class.

Based on this standard, 21 middle-class people who work and live in Shanghai are selected as samples, 12 men and 9 women, aged between 30 and 45 years old; among them, 1 junior college degree, 6 bachelor's degree, 10 master's degree and 4 doctor's degree; the occupation distribution is: 1 ordinary clerk, 11 enterprise and business unit directors, 9 university teachers; the income distribution is: the minimum annual income is 90000 yuan, and the maximum annual income is 24 ten thousand yuan (Considering the fact that the per capita disposable income of Shanghai residents in 2017 was 58988 yuan, the housing price was expensive and the pressure of family education expenditure was huge, this study regards the per capita annual income of Shanghai households above 90000 yuan and within 300000 yuan as the middle range of income). Therefore, all 21 samples meet the criteria of middle class.

3.3 Information Acquisition

In this study, in-depth interviews were used to collect the

required information. In the in-depth interview, a pair of half-structured interviews were used, and the interview time for each person was controlled at 45-90 minutes. With the consent of the interviewees, the whole interview was recorded. After the interview, the recordings were sorted word by word, and nearly 50000 words of interview records were obtained.

The interview content includes: the interviewees introduce their basic information, including age, education background, job title and responsibilities, general income level, political status, marital status, etc.; after briefly explaining the scope of the “ten-identifications” relationship to the interviewees, the interviewees explain their understanding of the identified relationship, and give examples of an identified relationship and a non-identified relationship respectively, so the relational attribute, the causes of the relationship, how to play their roles, how to deal with contradictions, the factors that affect the relationship, how to evaluate the relationship between themselves and the people around them, the significance of the relationship to themselves, the current and future expectations of the relationship, etc.

Twenty one interviewees provided 42 relationship cases, including 15 cases involving the relationship with

parents, parents in law and spouses, 8 cases involving the relationship with classmates, 14 cases involving the relationship with colleagues (including the relationship between superiors and subordinates), 4 cases involving the relationship with friends, and 1 case involving the relationship with lovers, which basically involved the work, study, family and hobbies of the middle class.

Then, grounded theory was used to code and model the interview content, to refine the structural dimension of relational identification of middle class.

3.4 Reliability and Validity Test

Grounded theory is a research method developed by Glaser and Strauss [22]. Based on empirical data, new concepts and ideas can be abstracted under the support of empirical data. In this study, we use grounded theory to analyze data and strictly abide by Strauss and Corbin’s procedural coding process and method [23]. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the research, avoid the subjective bias and academic conclusion of researchers, two graduate students were invited to form a coding group. In the process of research, the coding team members carry out data labeling and coding together. When there are different opinions, they discuss each other until they agree. Based

Table 1. Open Coding

Data Content	Open Coding	
	Defining Phenomenon	Preliminary Conceptualization
We used to be classmates, but now we are all college teachers. The road of development is the same.	We have a common goal.	In this relationship, our goals are the same.
I’m her daughter. She raised me when I was a child. When I grow up, I want to honor her. This is natural. I think I should do this. For her, I think she should raise me when she gave birth..... I hope that the other side will do this. In fact, it’s basically like this.	Our understanding about roles is consistent.	In this relationship, our actions reflect a consistent understanding of what each should do.
When I have a need, he will appear at once and discuss with each other when I encounter problems.	When we are in trouble, we help each other.	When we encounter problems, we will work together to solve them.
Months after her daughter was born, as a mother, she was reluctant to breastfeed in order to maintain her body shape.	The other party is unwilling to take more responsibilities.	This relationship plays a role in many complex responsibilities and multitasking.
It takes a lot of tests to get a doctor’s degree. There are certain difficulties in these levels. If the younger martial sister doesn’t pass this level, will she complain that I didn’t fully tell her my experience? Would she mind? But for a long time, she should not, how to say, everyone’s ability is limited, and I can’t help her completely, I think so.	When your ability is not enough to help the other, it will not affect the relationship between the other and yourself.	When one’s ability is not enough to help the other solve complex tasks, mutual relationship will not be affected.
I have a lot of work to do myself. I can’t help myself. The leader is not considerate at all. When I refuse, she called me a lot that day to ask me to do what she should do for her. I can’t bear it.	She doesn’t respect my opinions and choices.	She/he respects me and is willing to accept my choice or take my suggestions.
There is no contradiction between us. If there is one, it is a rare one,, he should be jealous, but then he immediately returned to normal, and the relationship with me is still the same as in the past. I think he is good, even if envy is normal,, I choose to understand him.	When there is a conflict, we give way to each other.	When there are conflicts, I will reflect on myself and be willing to compromise for mutual satisfaction.
If you meet a good leader or colleague at work, he will also help you a lot and tell you some experience.	Good relationships promote learning and improvement.	This relationship is conducive to learning and progress.
People around us all say that we are friends. People around us still agree with our relationship. Even because she started to get along with my other classmates who I didn’t get along well with ,because her, we became a small group.	People around us recognize our friendship.	People in my circle recognize our relationship; People in his / her circle recognize our relationship.
I even think that in the future, we can live in the same place and help each other. In fact, we have such expectations for such a future.	If the relationship continues, it will be a happy thing.	Hope to continue mutual support and encouragement in the future.

on the working time of the research, a memorandum is established for each comprehensive coding and theoretical refining work, recording the process of theoretical construction and modification [24].

4. Category Extraction and Model Construction

4.1 Coding Analysis of Grounded Theory

According to the grounded theory coding process of Strauss and Corbin [23], this study analyzes the interview data in three steps: open coding, relational coding and core coding.

4.1.1 Open Coding

Open coding is the process of decomposing and labeling the original interview materials sentence by sentence or paragraph. The purpose of tagging sentences or paragraphs is to conceptualize them and to group related concepts into a category to achieve categorization. In this study, we first extract the specific phenomenon about dimensions of relationship identification of middle class from the interview data, then summarize the phenomenon to form the concept, and extract the similar concept to form the category. In this process, 127 original statements are extracted and 39 free nodes are formed after conceptualization. In categorization, the initial concept with less frequency is eliminated and 21 free nodes are finally established. See Table 1 for the initial concepts and some category examples obtained by open coding.

4.1.2 Relational Coding

The concepts and categories established by open coding are independent of each other, and relational coding is the process of discovering and establishing the relationship between categories. According to the framework of paradigm structure process, the researchers logically sorted out the concepts and categories established by open coding as a whole, further produced the core categories, and explained the phenomena theoretically [23]. According to the free nodes obtained from the initial conceptualization, this study concludes eight categories: individual cognition, role cognition, solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, coordinating conflicts, relationship self-evaluation, relationship social evaluation and relationship outlook. The corresponding relationship between each category and the initial concept is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Relational Code

Initial Concept (Free Node)	Relationship with Tree Nodes	Tree Node (Categorization)
In this relationship, our goals are the same.	Influence	Individual Cognition
In this relationship, our values are the same.	Influence	
In this relationship, I know what I should do.	performance	Role Cognition
In this relationship, I know what he / she should do.	performance	
In this relationship, our actions reflect a consistent understanding of what each should do.	Influence	
We trust each other.	Influence	Solidarity and Trust
When we encounter problems, we will work together to solve them.	Influence	
Celebrate each other's achievements and be happy for each other.	Influence	
This relationship plays a role in many complex responsibilities and multitasking.	Influence	
When one's ability is not enough to help the other solve complex tasks, mutual relationship will not be affected.	Influence	
I respect him/her and am willing to accept his/ her choice or take his/ her advice.	Influence	Respect and Understanding
She/he respects me and is willing to accept my choice or take my suggestions.	Influence	
When there are conflicts, I will reflect on myself and be willing to compromise for mutual satisfaction.	Influence	Coordinating conflicts
In case of conflict, he/ she will reflect on himself/herself and be willing to compromise for mutual satisfaction.	Influence	
We have a good relationship, get along with each other happily and harmoniously.	Influence	Relationship Self-evaluation
This relationship is conducive to learning and progress.	Influence	
People in my circle recognize our relationship.	Influence	Relationship Social Evaluation
People in his/her circle recognize our relationship	Influence	
I hope this relationship will last.	Influence	Relationship Outlook
Hope to continue mutual support and encouragement in the future.	Influence	
Hope for common development and progress in the future.	Influence	

4.1.3 Core Coding

In the core coding stage, after systematically analyzing

the conceptual genera found in relational coding, the core genera are searched, and the core genera are connected with other categories to verify their relationship. According to the eight categories in Table 2, four core categories are further summarized: relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development. See Table 3 for the specific corresponding relationship.

Table 3. Core Code

Tree Node (Categorization)	Core Code
Individual Cognition	Relational Orientation
Role Cognition	
Solidarity and Trust	Relational Adaptation
Respect and Understanding	
Coordinating conflicts	
Relationship Self-evaluation	Relational Evaluation
Relationship Social Evaluation	
Relationship Outlook	Relational Development

4.1.4 Theoretical Saturation Test

In this study, new concepts and categories can no longer be generated when supplementary investigation data are used. Therefore, theoretical saturation test is adopted.

4.2 Dimension Model and Connotation Definition of Relational Identification

In the structural dimension model of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context relationship, the four dimensions of relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development are the core categories, which affect the relational identification of middle class. Among them, relational orientation is the foundation, which is composed of individual cognition and role cognition. It reflects the cognition of both sides about each other’s role and the other side in a relationship, and provide the carrier of the role and individual characteristics of the bearing relationship for the relationship identification. Relational adaptation is the “umbrella”, which consists of solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts. It provides relational norms and process strategies for relational identification. Relational evaluation provides relational reflection, which is composed of relationship self-evaluation and relationship social evaluation. It is reflected in the emotional and cognitive evaluation of an individual for a certain relationship as well as a broader cognitive evaluation. The more a relationship is recognized by everyone, the more recognition of their roles will be strengthened.

Relational development guides the development of a relationship, and then realizes the continuity and unity of its past, present and future.

According to the model, this study holds that relational identification of Chinese middle class is the middle class’s cognitive and behavioral orientation in realizing a purposeful action, because the actor perceives the consistency of role cognition and personal cognition with the relationship partner, and is willing to adapt to the relationship through solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts, and then form a positive evaluation of the relationship, as well as a sense of belonging and commitment to the relationship.

5. Document Dialogue

Based on in-depth interview and grounded theory, this study abstracts four structural dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, and finds that these four structural dimensions have solid theoretical basis through dialogues with existing domestic and foreign studies.

The dimension of relational orientation includes two sub dimensions: individual cognition and role cognition. According to Sluss and Ashforth^[13], relational identification is based on relationship identity, which includes role-based identity and personal identity, reflecting how the two parties play their respective roles. At the sub dimension level of individual cognition, narrative psychology based on the concept of “narrative” focuses on how people organize behaviors and give meaning through narrating life stories, and how to construct themselves in this process. Relational identification has personality characteristics. When one identifies a relationship, the characteristics and personality of the other will be fully considered^[13]. At the sub dimension level of role cognition, according to the symbolic interaction theory, the individual’s self-role is formed in the social interaction with others and changes with time^[25]. In the context of Chinese culture, Chinese people will use different exchange rules because of different relationship attributes, that is, the exchange principle between family members is responsibility and obligation, the exchange principle between relatives and friends is reciprocity, and the exchange principle between strangers adopts the instrumental principle^[26]. The essence of the pattern of differential order relationship in Chinese society is the response of Chinese people to the cognition of role relationship.

The dimension of relational adaptation includes three sub dimensions: solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts. The relational identification takes the relational attribute as the standard of

identification, emphasizes to abide by the behavior norm under a certain relationship attribute, and both parties of the relationship must bear the responsibilities and obligations in the relationship^[26]. For example, Chinese society requires children to be “filial” to their parents, which actually requires their children to respect and obey their parents. The sub dimension of solidarity and trust and the sub dimension of conflict and coordination belong to the category of relationship norms, which reflect the common understanding and expectation of both parties and can build and create a harmonious relationship atmosphere^[27]. Social exchange theory describes the individual’s perception of the exchange relationship with each other, and emphasizes the comparison between their own exchange relationship and other members’ exchange relationship. In general, the parties to the relationship need to prove their mutual loyalty (i.e., unity), a common interest relationship (i.e., reciprocity), willingness to assume multiple responsibilities (i.e., integrity of roles), belief adjustment (i.e., flexibility), and a tendency to resolve conflicts harmoniously (i.e., coordinate conflicts)^[28]. At the sub dimension level of respect and understanding, social support theory can explain that one’s relational identification with the other is an indicator of obtaining social support from the other. To respect and understand each other means to give each other face, to recognize the social status or reputation of the other^[29], and to obtain social support from the other.

The dimension of relational evaluation includes two sub dimensions: relationship self-evaluation and relationship social evaluation. At the sub dimension level of relationship self-evaluation, when one provides enough social support and meets the emotional and instrumental needs of the other, the other can positively evaluate the role relationship and form relational identification^[30]. Relational identification has the characteristics of interpersonal attraction and role sublimation^[13]. When both sides of the relationship agree with the relationship, friendship may be formed beyond the boundaries of formal roles. In China, the intensity of emotional relationship among family members, relatives and friends, and between strangers decreases in turn. According to the resource allocation model of Hwang^[31], the possibility of resource allocators accepting resource allocation requests is a function of the closeness of the relationship between allocators and applicants, and the latter is a function of emotional level, reciprocity (human feelings), and “face” to applicants in turn. In addition, social learning theory holds that a good relationship can make one party of the relationship become a model and encourage the other party to actively imitate it, so that both parties can internalize the nature and char-

acteristics of the relationship and improve the relational identification^[11]. On the sub dimension level of relationship social evaluation, generally speaking, the more a group of related role relationships are recognized by the collective, the stronger the recognition of both parties to their roles will be. Collective recognition can come from other individuals or from a broader social background^[25].

The dimension of relational development includes a sub dimension of relationship outlook. According to the theory of self-narration, in the process of constructing the relational identification, the relational identification can be seen as one of the parties who narrates by connecting the past and the present experiences. Relational identification is not only a state, but also a process of change. Relational identification from the perspective of process view can explain the formation and change of relational identification^[12]. Therefore, relational identification is developed after a certain point of time. Whether and how to extend and change in the future also needs attention.

6. Conclusion and Agenda

6.1 Main Contributions

First of all, this study clarifies the connotation of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context. Relational identification of middle class in Chinese context is the middle class’s cognitive and behavioral orientation in realizing a purposeful action, because the actor perceives the consistency of role cognition and personal cognition with the relationship partner, and is willing to adapt to the relationship through solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts, and then form a positive evaluation of the relationship, as well as a sense of belonging and commitment to the relationship.

Secondly, it constructs the structural dimension model of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context. In this model, relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development are the 4 core dimensions. These 4 core dimensions affect the relational identification of middle class. Among them, relational orientation includes two sub dimensions: individual cognition and role cognition, relational adaptation includes three sub dimensions: unity and trust, respect and understanding, coordinating conflicts, relational evaluation includes two sub dimensions: relationship self-evaluation and relationship social evaluation, and relational development includes one sub dimension: relationship outlook.

6.2 Shortcomings of This Study

First of all, although the sample selection of this study

conforms to the sample selection criteria, all the interviewees come from the same city. These interviewees work, study and live in the same city in China. Therefore, whether the research on the structural dimension of relational identification of middle class has universal significance is still uncertain. In the future, we need to expand the regional coverage of the samples to improve the generality of the research conclusions.

Secondly, this study lacks of quantitative research. This study mainly uses qualitative research methods. Therefore, the research conclusion lacks the support of quantitative data and quantitative research.

6.3 Future Research Prospects

This study draws four structural dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context. At present, there is a lack of research in this area in China. Therefore, this study not only opens up the existing research on relational identification, but also provides a new perspective for the study of the unique phenomenon of middle class in Chinese context. The future research can be improved in two aspects: first, to develop the measurement scale of structural dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context to provide operable technical basis for the follow-up empirical research; second, to expand to the fields of consumer behavior, consumer sociology, consumer economics, organizational behavior, psychology and other disciplines, further excavate its antecedent and outcome variables, explore the relationship between relational identification and other variables, and pay special attention to its possible negative impact.

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