When groups in glass houses throw stones: Public expectations of how activist groups respond to identity threats

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ABSTRACT

This experimental study explores how the general public views an activist organization's affective threat appraisal as a function of three factors: the organization's anger level, efficacy level, and consistency of ascribed identity with avowed identity. Results shed light on the affective threat appraisal that activist organizations might use to manage emerging conflict with the general public. A typology of activist organizations is offered to account for levels of anger and likely efficacy when organizations face perceived disconnects between avowed identity and the identity ascribed to the activist group as a result of reported behavior. Empirical evidence suggests that an identity crisis involving identity discrepancies of an activist organization can have a profoundly negative impact on the organization's image, reputation, and even survival.

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1. Introduction

Public relations researchers have recently called for greater attention to the construct of emotion or affective aspects in public relations from a strategic conflict management perspective (Jin & Cameron, 2004; Jin & Pang, 2010; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). The perception of a crisis from a given public is not strictly based on an environmental stimulus itself but involves an interpretation of the stimulus (Carver & Blaney, 1977). Emotions serve as a critical stimulus in an evolving crisis (Jin et al., 2012). As emotions have been found to affect attitude and behavior (Mitchell, 2000, 2001; Nabi, 1999, 2002; Turner, 2007), it is worthwhile for practitioners to understand emotions as an indicator of the likely behavior so that relevant strategies can be developed to respond to such reactions (Jin et al., 2012).

The recent controversy surrounding the Susan G. Komen for the Cure's (SGK) decision to bar Planned Parenthood from receiving further funding offers a fine example of emotional dynamics. An identity crisis coupled with the public's emotional outrage dramatically changed Komen's stance and strategies in managing competition and conflict. Their initial announcement provoked a blizzard of criticism on diverse social media platforms ranging from heated blog posts and emotional Facebook and Twitter messages to online petitions. After a few days of fierce backlash, the Komen Foundation reversed its decision. According to the 2012 Harris Poll EquiTrend® study (Scandal Rocks America's Support, 2012), the public outrage over SGK's decision to defund, and then reinstate, funding for abortion provider Planned Parenthood caused steep drops in the brand health of the foundation. The Harris Poll found

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that in the study's 23-year history, Komen's 21 percent drop in brand equity is one of the most dramatic plummets Harris has seen. As a result, the Komen Foundation's image suffered due to the identity crisis that emerged from the perceived discrepancy between the leading advocate of women's health and the advocate for a pro-life agenda based on political considerations and pressures.

As people experience different emotions depending on how they interpret and appraise the situation, it becomes essential for a public relations practitioner to classify and understand publics. Publics are classified into four different types: active public, aware public, latent public, and nonpublic (Grunig, 1997). In the development of classifying publics based on their activeness in problem solving, Ni and Kim (2009) stated that active and aware publics are the most crucial groups. Given an increasing potential influence from the latent public through online media, particularly the impact of social networking sites (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009) on an organization's crisis communication, the organization should be aware of the latent public's expectations. Similarly, expectations made by specifically targeted publics in crisis situations must also be taken into account by the organization to perform effectively.

Based on Grunig's situational theory of publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), a latent public is low in problem recognition and involvement and has not thought about constraints. Thus, the concept of the outside latent public refers to the latent external public, the people outside of an organization's sphere, that are affected by what that organization does. Based on this conceptual definition, this study adopts more common term "general public" in place of "outside latent public" as used in the explication of Grunig's situational theory. A new domain of the general public's thought patterns has been examined in predicting an organization's stance in a corporate setting and an international diplomacy area, respectively (Hwang & Cameron, 2008a,b). Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to the general public's assessment of an activist organization's responses in crisis situations.

According to Dozier and Lauzen (2000), public relations scholars have mainly examined activism from the perspective of organizations whose resources are plentiful enough to hire professional public relations practitioners. Unlike previous studies on activism, which relied heavily on a theoretical framework based on excellence theory, this study employs a new way of thinking about activism based on the threat appraisal model and contingency theory.

While the majority of contingency scholars have examined public relations practitioners' perspectives in varied areas of public relations, Hwang and Cameron (2008a,b) study the general public's thought patterns in assessing the organization's stance in a crisis situation. Building upon their approach, this study extends the application of the general public's assessment of affective threat appraisal to activist organizations with a typology for activists based on the levels of anger and efficacy in Turner's (2007) Anger Activism Model.

Based on an identity approach, this study proposes the general public's perception of an activist organization's ascribed identity, whether or not it is matched with the avowed identity, as a new contingent factor that may influence the assessment of an organization's emotional responses in a crisis situation. The perceived ascribed identity, which is either matched or unmatched with the avowed identity, is used based on whether there is a difference between the avowed and ascribed identities (Collier, 1994, 2003; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Rotheram & Phinney, 1987; Sha, 2006). Given the increasing power of activist organizations, this study presents a framework that identifies a typology of activists based on the levels of anger and efficacy that are central to Turner's (2007) Anger Activism Model (AAM), which classifies four distinct groups of individuals: activists, empowered, angry, and disinterested. The AAM explains that the interaction between feelings of anger toward the target issue and perceptions of efficacy predicts activism (Turner, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to explore how the general public assesses an activist organization's affective threat appraisal based on the perception of three factors: the organization's anger level, efficacy level, and consistency of ascribed identity with avowed identity. A typology of activist organizations is offered to account for levels of anger and likely efficacy when organizations face perceived disconnects between avowed identity and the identity ascribed to the activist group as a result of reported behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Threat appraisal model

With a growing need for conceptualization and measurement of threat in crisis situations, threat assessment was introduced into the contingency theory framework. Contingency theory (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999) holds that many factors influence the stance of an organization when dealing with conflict and perceived threats against it. Contingent factors can be categorized into predisposing and situational factors. Predisposing factors include the characteristics of the dominant coalition, public relations' access to top management, organizational size and culture, and so on. Situational factors include the characteristics of the external public, perceived urgency and threat, and feasibility of accommodation. Predisposing factors determine the stance of an organization before it goes into a situation dealing with a given public, while the combination and variability of situational factors may shift the stance of the organization over time, depending on whether the situational factors are powerful enough to change predisposition to a particular stance on the continuum (Cancel et al., 1999). Accordingly, the theory suggests that this stance is dynamic, varying along a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. Contingency studies have mainly examined the perspective of public relations practitioners regarding the impact of contingent factors in various public relations practices (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008; Cancel et al., 1999; Jin & Cameron, 2007; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2006; Reber & Cameron, 2003; Reber, Cropp, & Cameron, 2001; Shin & Cameron, 2004; Shin,