

ANGER, EFFICACY, AND IDENTITY IN ACTIVISM:
PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THREAT APPRAISAL, ATTITUDES, AND
BEHAVIORAL INTENTION

Jeesun Kim

Dr. Glen T. Cameron, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This study was an exploratory attempt to apply an identity-based approach using concepts of avowed and ascribed identities to different types of activist organizations when managing a potential crisis based on the threat appraisal model (Jin & Cameron, 2007) and contingency theory (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). A 2 (anger: high vs. low) x 2 (efficacy: high vs. low) x 2 (ascribed identity: matched vs. unmatched) mixed factorial design with anger and efficacy as between-subjects variables and ascribed identity as a within-subjects variable was employed to examine cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to news stories about activist organizations.

One of the most intriguing findings of this study is the main effect of ascribed identity across all dependent variables. An identity crisis leading to attributions of being a hypocrite caused by a perceived discrepancy between an avowed identity and an ascribed identity was found to raise expectations for the organization to perceive higher situational demands and more organizational resources, to have more negative and more intense feelings, to have more advocative stances, and to have a negative impact on attitudes and intention.

Significant main effects of anger on both cognitive and affective threat appraisal, a main effect of efficacy on cognitive threat appraisal, and interactions between anger and efficacy on affective threat appraisal indicate that the nature and interplay of anger and efficacy should be taken into consideration when assessing an activist organization's threat appraisal. Results also

demonstrated that participants exposed to a combination of high anger and low efficacy messages expected the organization to perceive higher situational demands than any other combination of anger and efficacy.

This research extends the contingency theory framework to examine the dynamics of activist organizations, moving beyond the assumptions of two-way symmetrical communication in Grunig's excellence theory. From the standpoint of public relations practice, the main contribution of the present study is to provide empirical evidence that in an identity crisis, being hypocritical in an activist organization's strategic conflict management can have a profoundly negative impact on the organization's image, reputation, and even survival.