When Cousins Feud: Advancing Threat Appraisal and Contingency Theory in Situations That Question the Essential Identity of Activist Organizations

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This article reports on an experiment that applied the concepts of avowed and ascribed identities to situations where similar activist organizations clash. By using the threat appraisal model and contingency theory, this study advances theories and practices of strategic conflict management by analyzing the effects of an attack on a group's essential identity due to hypocritical behavior. This work seeks to revise and extend theories concerning the distinction between internal and external threat and the linear perspective in stance predictions on the contingency continuum.

Keywords: activist organization, contingency theory, conflict management, threat appraisal, identity crisis, avowed identity, ascribed identity, crisis communication, public relations

Previous public relations research has focused on the role of activists from the perspective of organizations that activists target for change (Curtin & Gaither, 2006; Jiang & Ni, 2009). However, in reality, nonprofits often compete with one another for members, funds, and other resources (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008). In addition, activist groups that support certain causes may clash with other organizations whose core values are different (e.g., pro-life/pro-choice, pro–gun control/pro-gun). For example, the Center for Consumer Freedom, a nonprofit coalition of restaurants, food companies, and consumers working together to promote personal responsibility and protect consumer choices (Center for Consumer Freedom, n.d.), criticized the celebrity supporters of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in a full-page advertisement in *Variety*, a daily entertainment industry newspaper, for endorsing the animal rights group even as it kills thousands of animals in its care ("PETA Kills Animals," n.d.). In this circumstance, the general public may be confused by the discrepancy between the image of PETA as an animal rights group and the way it is identified by another activist group.

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Date submitted: 2014–11–02

The use of an identity-based approach, which is based on a call for identity as a central construct for studying activists (Curtin & Gaither, 2006), can contribute to the body of research on activism in public relations. In a conflict situation such as the one that Center for Consumer Freedom and PETA face, or virtually any other conflict between activist organizations, a public relations practitioner should determine the stance its organization will assume and take into account the ideas posited by contingency theory (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999).

According to Grunig's situational theory of publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), a latent public is low in problem recognition and involvement and does not think about constraints. Managers usually advise public relations practitioners to devote attention and allocate resources to active and aware publics. However, due to an increasing potential influence from the latent public through their use of online media, particularly with 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, particularly concerning the organization's response to threat and its stance movement as the issue evolves. Similarly, to perform effectively, organizations must take into account the expectations of specifically targeted publics in crisis situations.

Based on the threat appraisal model (Jin & Cameron, 2007), an extension of contingency theory that evaluates the severity of the threat and the resources needed to combat the threat, the purpose of this study is to explore how the outside latent public, sometimes called the general public, evaluates an activist organization's threat appraisal at the cognitive, affective, and conative levels, based on a perceived ascribed identity, which is either matched or unmatched with an organization's avowed identity as a new contingent factor. This study assumes that the outside latent public's assessment of an unmatched ascribed identity compared to an avowed identity could be regarded as a threat to an organization.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management

Contingency theory aims to understand the dynamics of many factors that influence an organization's stance on a continuum with advocacy (arguing for one's own case or pushing one's agenda) at one end and accommodation (giving in) at the other (Cancel et al., 1999). The stance an organization takes toward a given public at any given time is dynamic and constantly moving along a continuum (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001). Acknowledging these dynamics, contingency theory elaborates and specifies the underlying factors involved both inside and outside of the organization that strengthen an organization's stance along the continuum to "offer a structure for better understanding of the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation" (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 41). With a growing need for conceptualization and measurement of threat in crisis situations, threat assessment was introduced into the contingency theory framework (e.g., Jin & Cameron, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2005; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Internal or external threats, as identified in the original contingency factor matrix, describe the state that a nation, organization, or individual endures in a crisis (Pang et al., 2010).

Jin et al. (2005) proposed a threat appraisal model in crisis management, explaining that a threat to an organization requires an assessment of situational demands and organizational resources to handle the threat. According to Jin and Cameron (2007), a public relations practitioner perceives a threat when there are insufficient resources or a high requirement of resources to meet situational demands. Based on previous theoretical development and research findings, Jin and Cameron (2007) suggested three consequences at the cognitive, affective, and conative levels: (a) The *cognitive level* involves an individual's perception and analysis of the crisis situation in terms of required demands and resource allocation; (b) the *affective level* involves how an individual feels about the situation, including how negative he or she feels about the crisis and the arousal level or intensity of his or her being threatened; and (c) the *conative level* involves the stance taken by the organization to deal with the crisis, which is represented by movement on the contingency continuum of accommodation.

According to Jin and Cameron (2007), the threat appraisal model consists of two levels of appraisal: (a) a primary appraisal of situational demands based on degrees of perceived *danger*, *uncertainty* of the issue (lack of prediction and control increase difficulty of threat), and *required effort* to address the threat; and (b) a secondary appraisal of resources based on *knowledge and skill*, *time*, *finance*, and *support from the dominant coalition*. Jin and Cameron (2007) conducted a Web-based experiment on the effects of threat type and threat duration on public relations practitioners' cognitive appraisal of threats, affective responses to threats, and the stances taken in threat-embedded crisis situations. The results demonstrated the main effects of threat type and threat duration on threat appraisal, emotional arousal, and degree of accommodation. Interactions between these two threat dimensions (threat type and threat duration) indicated that external and long-term threat combinations resulted in higher situational demands and more intensive emotional arousal.

Whereas Jin and Cameron's (2007) study measured the consequences of threat, this study measures the outside latent public's assessment of an activist organization's ascribed identity as a situational factor that may influence the evaluation of threat appraisal at cognitive, affective, and conative levels. An ascribed identity is assigned by another entity and may be different from the organization's avowed identity that is related to the fundamental values and beliefs about a certain cause with which the organization identifies (Sha, 2006). In other words, an organization's ascribed identity is created by others rather than by the organization itself. Thus, ascribed identities for an activist organization may not match up with the avowed identity, which is self-defined by the organization's mission statement. This work proposes that measuring the outside latent public's perceived ascribed identity of an activist organization as a threat to the organization, in a situation where both competition and conflict exist, will provide new insights into the threat appraisal model and extend contingency theory.

Avowed and Ascribed Identities of Activist Organizations

Although most contingency scholars have investigated public relations practitioners' perspectives in different areas of public relations, Hwang and Cameron (2008a, 2008b) studied the outside latent public's thought patterns concerning an organization's stance in the context of crisis situations. The present study explores an outside latent public's assessment of different activist organizations' identity crises by focusing on the discrepancy between the avowed identity and ascribed identity.

The concept of identity has been defined in diverse subfields of public relations, such as intercultural public relations (Choi & Cameron, 2005; Sha, 2006), activism (Henderson, 2005), and research on publics (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Aldoory and Sha (2006) described the identity of an activist group as a dual role: (a) publics to the target organization as the role of "public" and (b) organizations with a need to build and maintain relationships with their own publics as the role of "public communicator" (p. 352). From an intercultural perspective, Sha (2006) distinguished cultural identities as either avowed or ascribed—a distinction originally proposed by Collier (1994). The difference between avowed and ascribed identities is similar to what Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) suggested regarding the two types of organizational identity perceptions: (a) members' perceived organizational identity (i.e., what members themselves believe are the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of their organization) and (b) their construed external identity (i.e., what members think outsiders believe are the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of their organization). According to Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993), avowed identity is "internally defined," and ascribed identity is "externally imposed." One could apply the concept of avowed and ascribed identities to the investigation of activist organization identities. For example, an activist organization whose mission is to protect the environment and public health may define itself as committed to fundamental values concerning environmental quality and human welfare. However, this avowed identity of the organization may differ from the assigned identity prescribed by other entities such as its target audience, different organizations, or the media. It is possible that the assigned identity of the organization may be seen by the public at large as radical or violent, which is counter to the avowed identity of the organization.

Previous research on activism has mainly examined the encounters between corporations and public interest groups (Anderson, 1992), usually focusing on each side's incompatible strategy for dealing with conflict (Murphy & Dee, 1996; Werder, 2006). By taking a conflict management perspective based on contingency theory, this study analyzes an identity crisis between two activist organizations whose fundamental values are the same but may have conflicting paradigms for conflict resolution. Previous studies have examined activism based on a theoretical framework within the context of excellence theory, which highlights the ideas of symmetrical communication, relationship building, and ethical behavior (Grunig, 2001). Excellence theory, however, fails to address the inevitable power imbalance between organizations, which often have sufficient resources, and activist groups, which essentially rely on the media to reach their goals (Holtzhausen, 2007). Unlike excellence theory, contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999) provides an alternative perspective by demonstrating that two-way symmetrical communication may not always be possible. Contingency theory maintains instead that public relations, particularly conflict management, should be viewed along a continuum from advocacy to accommodation rather than from a strict position that upholds ideal models of excellence. Thus, this study contributes to activism studies by reflecting the reality of activist organizations engaging in healthy, honest conflict (Cameron et al., 2008) with organizations that may compete against them for the same resources.

Although Jiang and Ni (2009) explored relationships among identities, goals, and public relations practices of activist organizations, little research has been conducted on perceived ascribed identities of activists from the outside latent public's perspective. The importance of the fit between identities and an organization's values for its strategic positioning, or a perceived ascribed identity by the outside latent

public, may play a critical role in assessing an activist group's threat appraisal at cognitive, affective, and conative levels regarding the activist group (Roper, 2005). This study assumes that the outside latent public's perception of an ascribed identity of an activist organization can serve as a threat when the ascribed identity is not congruent with the avowed identity in a crisis situation. In other words, an activist organization whose ascribed identity does not match the avowed identity would be perceived as under threat, compared to an activist organization whose ascribed identity matches with its avowed identity in a crisis situation.

Jin and Cameron (2007) explained the consequences of external threat in their threat appraisal model by noting that the unmatched ascribed identity can situate the activist organization under the power of publics (i.e., the organization's high perceived demands of threats). Further, the company may face a reduced capacity to control and maneuver its resources due to the tension between the internal management and external constraints as well as the potential uncontrollable and uncertain responses from the publics. Addressing the perceived power relationship between an organization and the public, Jin and Cameron (2007) suggested that "when an organization is exposed to external threats such as damaging publicity and activists' hostile claims, it is at least partially under the power of the given external public" (p. 273). Therefore, for the outside latent public, the following hypothesis is proposed regarding perceived situational demands as a function of a perceived ascribed identity:

H1a: An unmatched ascribed identity will generate greater expectations for the organization to perceive higher situational demands than a matched ascribed identity.

When an organization has to deal with an external threat, its public relations practitioners are likely to expect more organizational resources. This may include timely responses, financial support, human resources workers with crisis-handling knowledge, and managerial support from the top decision makers of the organization to buttress public relations strategies and tactics to efficiently manage the organization–external public relationship (Cancel et al., 1997). Because an unmatched ascribed identity represents an external threat, the following hypothesis is proposed regarding the outside latent public's perception of organizational resources as a function of a perceived ascribed identity:

H1b: An unmatched ascribed identity will generate greater expectations for the organization to perceive more organizational resources than a matched ascribed identity.

According to Jin and Cameron (2007), external and long-term threats are more likely to elicit negative feelings due to the risk of losing face compared with internal and short-term threats. These long-term threats may also create intense feelings within the organization because of public relations practitioners' perceptions of the higher anxiety and agitation in a given situation. External threats such as damaging publicity and activists' harmful claims toward an organization can damage an organization's face, image, and reputation. Thus, the nature of external threats is strongly related to an organization's image and reputation. An identity ascribed by others that is not congruent with an organization's avowed identity can serve as an external threat due to the high pressure and urgency perceived by public relations practitioners. Thus, the outside latent public can expect public relations practitioners to experience more negative and intense feelings when their organization faces identity threats based on an unmatched

ascribed identity. Therefore, for the outside latent public, the following hypotheses are proposed regarding affective responses to identity threats as a function of a perceived ascribed identity:

H2a: An unmatched ascribed identity will generate greater expectations for the organization to experience more negative feelings than a matched ascribed identity.

H2b: An unmatched ascribed identity will generate greater expectations for the organization to experience more intense feelings than a matched ascribed identity.

According to Reber and Cameron (2003), external threats that take place might influence organizational leaders' willingness to participate in dialogue to resolve conflict with an external public. Opposing activist organizations also pose external threats, which cause further challenges to an unmatched ascribed identity. When threats are external, an organization tends to have weak control over the crisis because external threats place public relations practitioners under intense pressure and present an urgent need to handle external publics involved in a given threat situation.

Although Jin and Cameron (2007) found that public relations practitioners take more action-based accommodations (AA) and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations (QRA) when facing long-term threats and external threats, respectively, a more advocative stance can be expected when an activist organization deals with an identity attack posed by another activist organization as an external threat. Studies in the field of management suggest that a discrepancy between an organization's ideal identity and its current identity or image can be a motivating factor to improve or otherwise change the organization so that it aligns more closely with its ideal identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Reger, Gustafson, DeMarie, & Mullane, 1994; Senge, 1990).

Sha's (2009) study highlighted the value of organizational identity as it relates to organizational missions. Because the sense of identity that activist organizations achieve is a critical value of commitment to their missions, an identity attack can make the organization take a defensive action to retain the sense of the organization's avowed identity, reducing a discrepancy between the avowed identity and ascribed identity. Thus, an accommodative stance is more likely to be expected when an activist organization faces no identity threat than when an identity threat is present during a given crisis situation. In other words, an activist organization can counterattack when another activist organization employs an identity threat by emphasizing the hypocrisy of the opposing activist organization. Employing Jin and Cameron's (2006) scales for organizational stance based on the two factors of action-based accommodations and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: A matched ascribed identity will generate greater expectations for the organization to take a more action-based accommodative stance when faced with a crisis situation in conflict management compared to an unmatched ascribed identity.

H3b: A matched ascribed identity will generate greater expectations for the organization to take a more qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodative stance when faced with a crisis situation in conflict management compared to an unmatched ascribed identity.

Method

Design and Stimuli

This study used a one-way within-subjects analysis of variance to compare the effects of ascribed identity (matched ascribed identity vs. unmatched ascribed identity) on cognitive threat appraisal (situational demands and organizational resources), affective threat appraisal (emotional valence and emotional arousal), and an organization's stance (action-based accommodations and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations).

Much previous activism research has examined environmental issues (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Derville, 2005; Murphy & Dee, 1996; Reber & Berger, 2005); animal protection (e.g., Derville, 2005; Werder, 2006); and a wide range of social issues, including child labor and child abuse (e.g., Zoch, Collins, Sisco, & Supa, 2008). Based on popular issues in activism research, we selected existing activist organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The use of four different organizations served as the message repetition factor, which could reduce the threats to internal validity. In addition, the use of real activism cases rather than fictitious organizations can better reflect the reality of conflict among activist organizations. Individuals with high issue involvement were excluded to reduce any factors that could undermine external validity. The order of manipulated messages was counterbalanced across participants.

All stimulus messages provided a brief description of an activist organization accused of minor misuse of funds as a potential crisis to the organization. This was followed by either coverage of the organization's additional allegations involved with the organization's mission (i.e., unmatched ascribed identity with avowed identity) or coverage of support by another activist group in regard to the organization's mission (i.e., matched ascribed identity with avowed identity). The ascribed identity was operationalized as whether discrepancies were perceived between an activist organization's self-identity that reflects its mission and the way the activist organization has been portrayed by another organization. Matched ascribed identity was characterized as a positive correlation between how an activist organization defines itself and how it is defined by another activist organization. Unmatched ascribed identity, on the other hand, was conveyed in a way that describes an activist organization criticized by another activist organization due to alleged hypocritical behavior that betrays its mission.

Participants and Procedure

Fifty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in journalism classes at a large public university participated in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary. Students were informed that they would receive an incentive of extra credit for their participation. The use of college student samples can be justified because the study tests theoretically derived multivariate relationships (Basil, Brown, & Bocarnea, 2002). We assume that the cognitive and affective skills required to evaluate the stance as well as threat appraisal by activist groups based on the perception of ascribed identities may be similar among various segments of the population. All participants were invited to a computer lab where they received an e-mail inviting them to fill out an online questionnaire. After reading the stimulus message, written in the form of an online news story, participants completed the online questionnaire containing the manipulation checks and measures of the dependent variables. To avoid fatigue and boredom, each participant was randomly assigned to two of the four total messages.

Measures

Six sets of dependent variables were employed to measure situational demands, organizational resources, emotional valence, emotional arousal, action-based accommodations, and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations.

We used Jin and Cameron's (2007) cognitive threat appraisal items to measure situational demands based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*: (a) "This crisis situation would be difficult for [name of an activist organization] to deal with," (b) "This crisis situation would last a long time," (c) "This crisis situation is very severe to [name of an activist organization]," (d) "[name of an activist organization] would not be certain about how to deal with this crisis situation," and (e) "[name of an activist organization] has not encountered a similar crisis situation such as that described." Organizational resources were measured with four items based on Jin and Cameron's (2007) cognitive threat appraisal items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*: (a) "Considerable knowledge would be needed for [name of an activist organization] to deal with this crisis situation," (b) "It would be very time-consuming for [name of an activist organization] to respond to this crisis situation," (c) "A lot of financial support will be necessary for [name of an activist organization] to deal with this crisis situation," and (d) "It will be critical for top management of [name of an activist organization] to be supportive of public relations practitioners on how to deal with this crisis situation."

Emotional valence was measured with three items based on Jin and Cameron's (2007) affective threat appraisal items using the likelihood of feeling "unhappy," "annoyed," and "unsatisfied." Responses to "How likely do you think [name of an activist organization] would feel in the situation described above?" were measured on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *very unlikely* and 7 = *very likely*. Emotional arousal was measured as the likelihood of feeling "alarmed," "agitated," and "aroused." Responses to "How likely do you think [name of an activist organization] would feel in the situation described above?" was measured on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *very unlikely* and 7 = *very likely*.

Action-based accommodative stance was measured with five items based on Jin and Cameron's (2006) stance measurement inventory: (a) "To yield to the public's demands," (b) "To agree to follow what the public proposed," (c) "To accept the public's propositions," (d) "To agree with the public on future action or procedure," and (e) "To agree to try the solutions suggested by the public." Responses to willingness to carry out the stated activities concerning the situation were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Five items measured qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodative stance: (a) "To express regret or apologize to the public," (b) "To collaborate with the public in order to solve the problem at hand," (c) "To change my own position toward that of the public," (d) "To make concessions with the public," and (e) "To admit wrongdoing." Responses to willingness to carry out the stated activities concerning the situation were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Results

A manipulation check of ascribed identity was successful. Participants who were exposed to unmatched ascribed identity rated the organization's behavior as being unmatched with its avowed mission significantly higher (*M* = 5.86, *SE* = .14) than those who were exposed to matched ascribed identity (*M* = 2.72, *SE* = .21), *F*(1, 57) = 161.05, *p* < .001.

A series of analysis of variance tests were conducted to test the hypotheses. Hypothesis 1a predicted that an unmatched ascribed identity would generate greater expectations for the organization to perceive higher situational demands than a matched ascribed identity. There was a significant effect of ascribed identity on situational demands. Participants in the unmatched ascribed identity condition expected the organization to perceive higher situational demands (*M* = 4.70, *SE* = .14) than those in the matched ascribed identity (*M* = 3.77, *SE* = .16), *F*(1, 57) = 30.99, *p* < .001, partial η^2 = .35. Therefore, hypothesis 1a was supported. Hypothesis 1b predicted that an unmatched ascribed identity would generate greater expectations for the organization to perceive more organizational resources than a matched ascribed identity. There was a significant effect of ascribed identity on organizational resources. Participants in the unmatched ascribed identity condition expected the organization to perceive more organizational resources (*M* = 4.82, *SE* = .14) than those in the matched ascribed identity condition (*M* = 4.14, *SE* = .17), *F*(1, 57) = 15.20, *p* < .001, partial η^2 = .21. Therefore, hypothesis 1b was supported.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that an unmatched ascribed identity would generate greater expectations for the organization to experience more negative feelings than a matched ascribed identity. There was a significant effect of ascribed identity on emotional valence. Participants in the unmatched ascribed identity condition expected the organization to experience more negative feelings (*M* = 5.82, *SE* = .15) than those in the matched ascribed identity condition (*M* = 5.17, *SE* = .18), *F*(1, 57) = 12.32, *p* < .01, partial η^2 = .18. Therefore, hypothesis 2a was supported. Hypothesis 2b predicted that an unmatched ascribed identity would generate greater expectations for the organization to experience more intense feelings than a matched ascribed identity. There was a significant effect of ascribed identity on emotional arousal. Participants in the unmatched ascribed identity condition expected the organization to experience more intense feelings (*M* = 5.04, *SE* = .16) than those in the matched ascribed identity condition (*M* = 4.41, *SE* = .19), *F*(1, 57) = 11.54, *p* < .01, partial η^2 = .17. Therefore, hypothesis 2b was supported.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that a matched ascribed identity would generate greater expectations for the organization to take a more action-based accommodative stance when faced with a crisis situation in conflict management compared to an unmatched ascribed identity. There was a significant effect of ascribed identity on action-based accommodations. Participants in the matched ascribed identity condition expected the organization to take a more AA-directed stance ($M = 4.96$, $SE = .16$) compared to those in the unmatched ascribed identity condition ($M = 3.51$, $SE = .18$), $F(1, 57) = 33.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .37$. Therefore, hypothesis 3a was supported. Hypothesis 3b predicted that a matched ascribed identity would generate greater expectations for the organization to take a more qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodative stance when faced with a crisis situation in conflict management compared to an unmatched ascribed identity. There was a significant effect of ascribed identity on qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations. Participants in the matched ascribed identity condition expected the organization to take a more QRA-directed stance ($M = 3.88$, $SE = .13$) than those in the unmatched ascribed identity condition ($M = 3.43$, $SE = .18$), $F(1, 57) = 4.30$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. Therefore, hypothesis 3b was supported.

Discussion

This study suggests that discrepancies between avowed and ascribed organizational identities may be a significant situational factor for mission-based activist groups' crisis management strategies. One of the most intriguing findings of this study was the significant effect of ascribed identity across all dependent variables. Unmatched ascribed identity served as a greater threat than matched ascribed identity, with unmatched identity leading participants to perceive the organization as vulnerable. When an organization's behavior did not match its avowed mission, participants expected the organization to perceive higher situational demands and more organizational resources than when an organization had no identity threat. Perceived unmatched ascribed identity, or what might be conveyed as hypocrisy by the organization, appeared to motivate participants to expect the organization to prioritize its core identity and worldview as a matter of the utmost urgency in a given crisis situation. In other words, hypocrisy associated with an organization's identity played a critical role in placing the organization under greater danger and uncertainty regarding its crisis management, leading to an organization's need for more financial and public relations support.

Given the negative nature of unmatched ascribed identity and its perceptions as being hypocritical, participants expected the organization to experience negative and intense emotions from the identity crisis. Participants expected the organization to deal with more intense negative feelings triggered by an identity crisis involving hypocrisy that may also influence the organization's image and reputation. Because identity represents the essence of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), participants expected the organization to respond to the threat posed by an ascribed identity that differed from its avowed mission. Therefore, the high pressure the organization may face regarding the identity crisis was likely to make participants expect the organization to feel more alarmed, agitated, and aroused in its emotional responses to the identity threat. These findings align with Jin and Cameron's (2007) findings regarding the effects of external threat on situational demands, organizational resources, and emotional arousal.

In terms of the stance, participants expected an activist organization to be willing to accommodate another activist organization that shares common goals (e.g., shared categories such as animal protection or child welfare). This finding suggests that the sense of identity an activist organization has constructed represents the fundamental reason for the organization's existence; as a result, an identity attack could lead the organization to adopt a defensive stance to preserve the organization's avowed identity. Although Jin and Cameron (2007) found that more qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations were expected when dealing with external threat rather than internal threat, the findings from the current study suggest that more sophisticated approaches should be employed to measure the development of the relationship between external threat and an organization's stance. For example, although identity threats for activist organizations are regarded as external threats, the critical role of identity for organizational image and reputation can make an activist organization take a more advocative stance in a given crisis situation. Research about organizational identity has suggested that organizations could grow and change in ways that are consistent with their identities, but most organizations find it almost impossible to change in ways that are inconsistent with their identities (Stimpert, Gustafson, & Sarason, 1998). An activist organization will usually attempt to restore its identity in a way that is consistent with its avowed mission, because identity threats can become one of the most dangerous factors for the survival of activist groups as mission-based organizations that rely heavily on highly committed donors, members, and employees.

This study suggests a sophisticated approach to the concept of organizational identity. It is designed for activist organizations and addresses three issues: (a) an activist organization's identity as a continuous process and as something that occurs in organizations (e.g., Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and is continuously renegotiated by its strategic publics, including the general public (Moffitt, 1994), rather than as something organizations *have*: a feature, potentially an asset or a resource (Fiol, 1991; Gioia, 1998); (b) a discrepancy between what an activist organization claims to be (i.e., avowed identity) and how others perceive the activist organization (i.e., ascribed identity) as a strong threat to the activist organization's image and reputation; and (c) consequences of an unmatched ascribed identity (i.e., hypocritical identity) as opposed to a matched ascribed identity with the avowed identity at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels.

This study applies an identity-based approach by incorporating concepts of avowed and ascribed identities to different types of activist organizations in relation to the management of a potential crisis and based on the threat appraisal model and contingency theory. The findings demonstrate that simple linear relations are not appropriate to predict the outcome of complex and dynamic public relations situations, especially strategic conflict management (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2007). The results of this study provide a deeper understanding of an identity crisis driven by conflict between two activist organizations in the same category whose fundamental values and worldviews are shared but may have different perspectives for managing conflict. The effects of matched ascribed identity (i.e., no identity crisis) can provide insights into an identity-based view of sustainable competitive advantage. Organizational identity and any associated processes can shape an organizational "gestalt" (Mintzberg, 1978) that can put an organization in a unique position vis-à-vis its rivals in the competitive environment as well as provide the organization with a set of organizational competencies that reinforce its identity (Stimpert et al., 1998).

Although this activism study uses contingency theory, suggesting new viewpoints beyond many of the assumptions in Grunig's excellence theory (Grunig, 2001), it provides insights into excellence theory's core value of public relations as a management function. Consistency with an organization's core value and mission can be possible only through a public relations practitioner's role, which should sustain the substantive behavior that constitutes the organizational identity rather than being merely a good persuader who uses techniques to superficially address image—popularly called the "spin." Therefore, the findings support a major principle of excellence theory that public relations practitioners must participate in the management decision-making process, which ensures successful communication for the organization to shape its identity.

This study also offers practical implications for public relations practitioners and management. The main contribution of this study is to provide empirical evidence of how an identity crisis involving hypocrisy can have a profoundly negative impact on the organization's image, reputation, and even survival. It is critical for both public relations professionals and management to avoid any perceived discrepancies between the avowed identity and the ascribed identity in their businesses. People give credit to organizations that are committed to an identity or a core ideology, and by developing marketing and communication messages, branding efforts, and community outreach strategies that uphold their missions, organizations will gain the support of the public. For crisis management, expressing concerns and confidence may not matter; what matters is being consistent with and true to one's identity. Without adhering to a core identity in practice, message strategies designed to frame an organization in a certain way may be a waste of time.

This study provides valuable insights into how the outside latent public's assessment can help public relations practitioners create, develop, and change strategies for threat appraisal in response to a potential crisis triggered by perceived identity threats. If public relations practitioners consider the discrepancy between an expected stance by the outside latent public and planned stance by the organization, they can ultimately be proactive in taking a certain stance as well as in threat appraisal by reducing this discrepancy. In particular, focusing on the public's assessment of practitioners' regular crisis monitoring and threat assessment to weigh situational demands against required organizational resources may help practitioners make more effective and accurate decisions and facilitate communication between practitioners and top decision makers in crisis situations. It is critical to develop a consistent image of the organization for the outside latent public in the implementation of any public relations efforts such as news releases, social media messages, and decision-making processes. Put simply, knowing and then meeting the expectations of the outside public regarding threat assessment and organizational response can be invaluable.

Because our study embarks on an identity-based approach to examining activist organizations' crisis management based on the outside latent public's perspective, more work is needed to replicate this experiment with publics from diverse demographics. Although we employed a multiple message design and excluded subjects with high issue involvement, using real activist groups may raise questions about external validity. It would be useful to consider measuring perceptions from different publics such as internal audiences and to include members, staff, board members, and volunteers to better understand

the impact of identity threat. Future research would benefit from including other variables for classifying activist organizations such as prior reputation and organizational culture.

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