Who shall speak in a crisis? – The role of spokesperson nationality
By Christopher Ruppel (University of Vienna), Sabine Einwiler (University of Vienna), Daniel Laufer (Victoria University of Wellington) & Tony Garrett (Korea University)

Identification with corporate spokesperson as facilitator of crisis communication

- This project focuses on the role of the spokesperson (SP) as a possible figure of identification for audiences addressed during a crisis.
- Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) the focus is on the concept of in-group bias which refers to favoring members of one’s in-group over members of an out-group.
- One factor strongly determining this bias is nationality and thus the respective nation brand, i.e. „the mental image of the country held by foreign people“ (Fan, 2010: 98).
- The influence of the SP’s nationality is particularly relevant for multinational enterprises that operate worldwide and employ managers, the potential spokespersons, of different nationalities.

Spokesperson’s nationality: In-group, out-groups and dissociative groups

- In general, people are favorably biased to their in-group and its members (own nationality).
- This in-group bias does not automatically entail a negative bias towards out-groups (foreign nationalities), unless the out-group represents a so called dissociative group (White & Dahl, 2007).
- Countries having a negative nation brand represent such dissociative groups.

Stakeholder’s self-construal as moderator

- Individuals’ self-construal which can be interdependent, i.e. defined more by relationships and group membership, or independent, i.e. defined more by the attributes of the individual self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), influences the strength of the in-group bias.
- Self-construal can vary in persons depending on the situation and personal condition.

Hypotheses

H1 When the SP belongs to their in-group or a neutral out-group, stakeholders perceive the SP as more trustworthy and the corporate reputation as more positive compared to a SP belonging to a dissociative group (negative nation brand).

H2 This effect is mediated by the person’s identification with the SP.

H3 This chain of effects is more prevalent in individuals with a high level of interdependent self-construal compared to those with a high level of independent self-construal.

Experimental study

- To explore these hypotheses, we conducted a first laboratory experiment in Austria (n=165).
- A news article on an accident and resulting crisis situation that had happened in a biogas plant located in Austria and run by a US company served as the research stimulus.
- The quoted SP’s nationality was manipulated on three levels: SP from Austria (in-group) vs. USA (neutral out-group) vs. Russia (dissociative group).
- A pre-test of six different nation brands had shown that Austrians evaluated Russia low and USA average.
- Individual’s self-construal was measured.

Moderation and mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013)

- Participants scoring low on independent self-construal yielded first support for our hypotheses.
- These participants evaluated the Austrian SP more trustworthy and identified stronger with him compared to the Russian SP. Effects for corporate reputation showed likewise.
- In the case of an American SP no significant effects manifested in the data.

Detailed results: please turn page
Figure 2: In-group (Austrian SP) vs. dissociative group (Russian SP) left-hand: moderated mediation analysis (***p < .01; *p < .05) right-hand: conditional effects of SP’s nationality on identification with SP

![Diagram showing relationships between variables and statistical results for Austria and Russia.]

Figure 3: In-group (Austrian SP) vs. neutral out-group (US SP) left-hand: moderated mediation analysis (***p < .01; *p < .05) right-hand: conditional effects of SP’s nationality on identification with SP

![Diagram showing relationships between variables and statistical results for Austria and US.]

More evidence is needed:
- A currently conducted follow-up study in South Korea will further explore the hypothesized effects of spokesperson’s nationality.
- Research showed that people from Asian cultures have stronger interdependent self-construal while in Western cultures independent self-construal is more pronounced (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).
- We expect the effects to be more prevalent in South Korea than in Austria.

Literature

Christopher Ruppel
University of Vienna (Corporate Communication Research Group)
Vienna, Austria
cchristopher.ruppel@univie.ac.at

Sabine Einwimmer
University of Vienna (Corporate Communication Research Group)
Vienna, Austria
sabine.einwimmer@univie.ac.at

Daniel Laufer
Victoria University of Wellington (School of Marketing and International Business)
Wellington, New Zealand
daniel.laufer@vuw.ac.nz

Tony Garrett
Korea University (School of Business Administration)
Seoul, South Korea
Email: tgarrett@korea.ac.kr