Public Relations by Nations and the Constitution and Effects of Nation Images

The Research Problem
In the globalized world organizations are put under high competition pressure and under the conditions of our modern media societies they find themselves increasingly observed by the public. Intangible assets like image and reputation are thus becoming more important; at the same time they also pose much greater risks. Organizations are trying to meet this challenge by enacting professional public relations: They observe and reflect on the actions of their stakeholders and try – by means of strategic communication – to build a favorable organizational image in order to gain and stabilize trust. Trust is an important PR goal variable because it helps to decrease uncertainty and it has a positive effect on the processes of legitmatizing and furthering of freedom of action (Bentele, Seidenglanz 2008).

Just like other kinds of organizations (e.g. corporations, parties or none-government organizations), nation-states also feel the effects of the growing importance of image and reputation: „The way a country is perceived can make a critical difference to the success of its business, trade and tourism efforts, as well as its diplomatic and cultural relations with other nations“ (Anholt 2007: 11). On the operational level these developments are visible in an establishment of central departments for national public relations, mostly in connection to the respective institutions for foreign policies (vgl. Karten 2008: 163).

With the establishment of these central bodies of national PR, strategic image and reputation management is becoming an integral part of the foreign communication by nations. But such communication involves complex processes: Effective nation image management not only presupposes an extensive understanding of the frame conditions of such communications, it also calls for a valid and reliable instrument for the measurement of the nation image itself. And herein lies the central challenge of current research: valid and reliable instruments for the measurement of nation images that can serve as a basis for strategic communications are rare.

The goal of this study is thus to develop a generic and multidimensional model of the nation image that can equally be applied to different nations and hence be utilized to comparative analyses of nation images in different stakeholder groups. The model will also allow to analyze the effect the nation image has in different stakeholder groups, i.e. the importance of particular image dimensions and the effects of these dimensions on the PR goal variable trust. Correspondingly our research question is:

How are nation images constituted and which effect do they have on the establishment and safeguarding of trust?
Model and Method

In connection to attitude theory (Fishbein, Ajzen 1975; Ajzen 1980) the image is conceived of as an attitudinal construct that comprises of a cognitive an affective component. Building on a recent model of corporate reputation (Ingenhoff, Sommer 2008; Eisenegger, Imhof 2009), the nation image is further specified as a multifactorial construct consisting of four different, but closely interrelated, dimensions: The cognitive image component contains the evaluative dimensions of competence (functional dimension) and integrity (normative dimension). The affective component contains the evaluative dimensions of beauty (aesthetic dimension) and fascination (sympathetic dimension). The indicators for these latent dimensions are developed in connection to existing models (Allred et al. 1999; Bannister, Saunders 1978; Martin, Eroglu 1993; Mittelstaedt et al. 2004; Parameswaran, Yaprak 1987; Pappu et al. 2007; Passow et al. 2005; Yang et al. 2008) and are then tested for validity by means of expert interviews.

In the established model, three exogenous and formatively specified variables (competence, integrity and beauty) explain two endogenous and reflexively specified components (fascination and trust).

In accordance with the underlying models as well as the existing empirical studies in the field we put forth and will test the following hypotheses:

\[ H_1: \] The more positive the evaluation of a nation’s competence (cognitive-functional dimension), the greater is the fascination for the nation (affective-sympathy dimension).

\[ H_2: \] The more positive the evaluation of a nation’s integrity (cognitive-normative dimension), the greater is the fascination for the nation (affective-sympathy dimension).

\[ H_3: \] The more positive the evaluation of a nation’s beauty (affective-aesthetic dimension), the greater is the fascination for the nation (affective-sympathy dimension).

\[ H_4: \] The dimensions of competence, integrity and sympathy directly affect the goal variable trust:

\[ H_{4.1}: \] The more positive the evaluation of a nation’s competence (cognitive-functional dimension), the greater is the trust in the nation.

\[ H_{4.2}: \] The more positive the evaluation of a nation’s integrity (cognitive-normative dimension), the greater is the trust in the nation.
**H4.3:** The greater the fascination for the nation (affective-sympathy dimension), the greater is the trust in the nation.

**H5:** The aesthetic dimension only affects the sympathy dimension and has no direct effect on trust.

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**Figure 1:** Constitution and effects of nation images

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The hypothesized effects can be analyzed by means of a structural equation model. Due to the formative constructs in the model as well as the relatively high number of items we are drawing on the PLS-method for our analyses.

**Literature**


Fishbein, Martin; Ajzen, Icek (1975): BELIEF, ATTITUDE, INTENTION AND BEHAVIOR: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORY AND RESEARCH. READING, MASS u.a.: ADDISON-WESLEY.


