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The Role of Familiarity IN Shaping Country Reputation

DANE KIAMBI

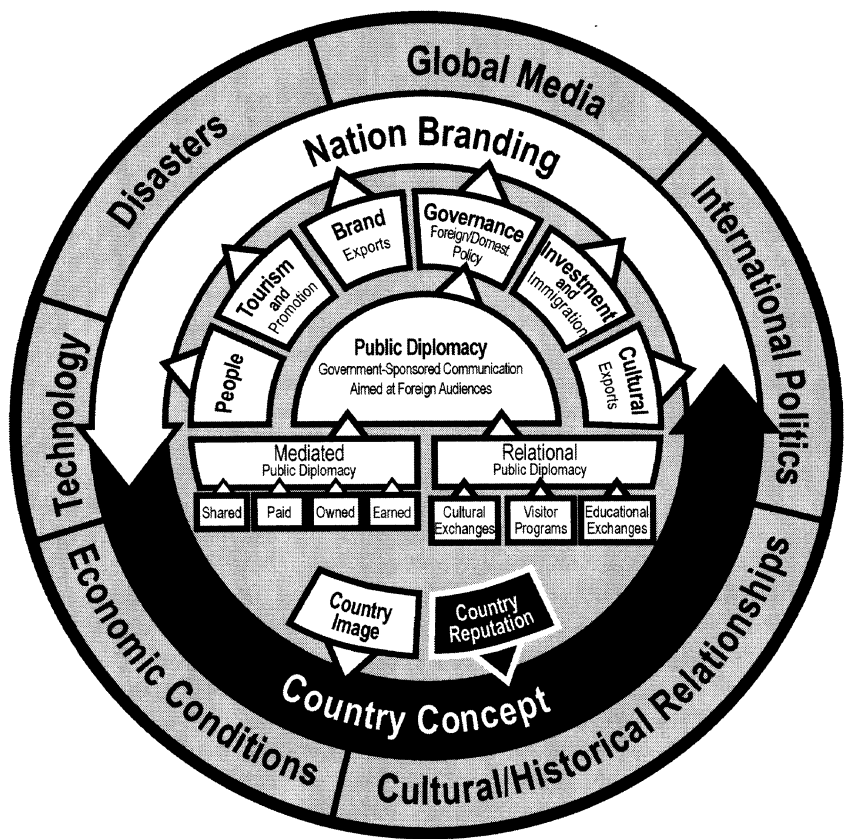
OVERVIEW

This study examines inputs that contribute to country concept, specifically the country reputation of Ghana among Americans. The results of a structural equation model indicate that familiarity is a key mediator between participants' experiences with the country and Ghana's country reputation. It is found that the participants' experiences with Ghana affected the reputation of that country positively but indirectly through the mediating role of increased familiarity. Practitioners of international public relations and public diplomacy could benefit from the use of strategies and tactics that would increase the familiarity of the U.S. public with sub-Saharan African countries.

There are a number of reasons why a country would want to manage its reputation and convey a better image of itself to the rest of the world. In some cases, image cultivation efforts are preceded by a crisis that requires image repair. In other cases, countries may aim at increasing foreign investment through trade, donor aid, and tourism.

Because of its immense economic and financial might, the United States remains a major stakeholder for most countries wishing to increase foreign investment in their countries. Consequently, countries wishing to measure their reputations among external audiences seek to understand the American people's perceptions of them.

Model of Country Concept



This study examines the impact of familiarity as a mediating variable in Ghana’s country reputation management efforts. This West African country was selected because it hired a U.S.-based public relations firm to manage its reputation at least four different times between 2001 and 2014.

We begin with an overview of Ghana and a brief review of the strategic communication efforts it has made with various publics in the United States. A review of the concept of country reputation, a discussion of the definitions and examples of direct and indirect experiences, and an analysis of familiarity as a mediating variable will follow.

Ghana: Challenges and Opportunities

Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to achieve independence from Britain, which it did in 1957. Although rich in mineral resources, Ghana “fell victim to corruption and mismanagement soon after independence” (“1956: Gold Coast to Get Independence,” n.d., para. 13). The country’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was overthrown in a coup in 1966, paving the way for years of military rule, a period marked by the reckless mismanagement of state resources. In 1979, Jerry Rawlings staged another coup, banned political parties, and later ruled the country from 1981 to 1992.

When the country ratified a new constitution in 1992, it restored multiparty politics (among other changes), which put the country on a path toward democracy and good governance. Jerry Rawlings won the first multiparty election in 1992 and was reelected in 1996. He was constitutionally barred from seeking a third term in 2000 and was succeeded by John Kufuor, who was reelected in 2004.

John Atta Mills was elected president in 2009 in a runoff election against Nana Dankwa. In spite of the fact that the runoff had a close outcome—the difference was less than 1%; Mills received 50.23% of the total votes while Dankwa received 49.77%—the latter conceded defeat in an unprecedented victory for the will of the people in an African region plagued by post-election disputes and violence.

Following the peaceful election, Ghana was hailed as a model of political maturity in Africa. The media were quick to point out that such a close election would have sparked accusations of rigging, with *The New York Times* noting: “That the narrowness of the victory did not set off an explosion of violence, as had occurred after elections in Ivory Coast and Kenya, was widely viewed as evidence of the maturity of democracy in Ghana” (Nossiter, 2012, para. 4).

A similar, close outcome in the 2007 elections in Kenya led to chaos after candidate Raila Odinga refused to concede defeat to incumbent Mwai Kibaki, who had been declared the winner by a margin of more than 300,000 votes. Odinga and his supporters alleged that the electoral commission had colluded with state agents to rig the election in Kibaki’s favor. Immediately after Odinga refused to concede, inter-ethnic fighting was reported in various parts of the country.

It is instructive to note that Ghana and Kenya were clamoring for multiparty politics almost at the same time in the early 1990s. While Ghana ratified a new constitution in 1992, the drafting of a new constitution in Kenya was delayed for nearly two more decades as various political groups wrangled over the contents and usefulness of new laws.

Ghana’s President Mills died in office in July 2012 and was succeeded by vice president John Mahama, as provided for in the constitution. The maturity of Ghana’s democracy has attracted positive media coverage in the United States. *The New York Times* notes that when planning President Obama’s visit to Africa in

2009, “The White House passed over Kenya, where Mr. Obama’s late father was from, in favor of [Ghana]. ... A year after Kenya exploded in political violence, it remains a tense and unsettled place. Ghana, by contrast, is seen as an outpost of democracy and civil society in a volatile region” (Baker, 2009, para. 2). Mr. Obama would later visit Kenya in July 2015.

Ghana’s successes as a well-governed country have turned it into “a favorite destination for private investors and aid donors” (Polgreen, 2009, para. 13). The country is rich in gold and is the second largest producer of cocoa in the world. Ghana also started offshore production of oil in 2010, which is expected to significantly boost the country’s economic growth.

Ghana is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional group of 15 countries whose mission is to “promote economic integration in all fields of economic activity, particularly industry, transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial questions, social and cultural matters” (Economic Community of West African States, 2015, para. 1). One of the main institutions designed to implement ECOWAS policies is the ECOWAS Bank, whose mandate is to pursue development in the road, telecommunication, agriculture, energy, and water sectors.

In spite of the successes Ghana has achieved with its political stability, it faces enormous social challenges. Of Ghana’s population of 24.6 million persons, more than 260,000 are living with HIV/AIDS. Other diseases that continue to endanger Ghanaians are hepatitis A, typhoid, meningitis, and malaria (*The World Fact Book, CIA*, 2016). Problems that are prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, such as corruption and terrorism, are also challenges that Ghana has to confront.

Having outlined the socioeconomic and political context of Ghana, this review now highlights some of the strategic communication efforts that the government of Ghana has made through a Washington, D.C.-based communications firm in a bid to influence positive relationships between Ghana and its target publics in the United States.

Opportunities for strategic communication and reputation management

Countries, like corporations, have realized that communicating with a well-defined public can be beneficial in attaining their desired objectives. Countries have also realized the importance of relying on research to prioritize objectives based on different categories of publics. Building quality relationships entails aligning the interests of the organization or country with the interests of the target public and communicating the most ideal message.

According to documents filed under the U.S. Department of Justice's Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), Ghana hired Jefferson Waterman International, a communications firm based in Washington, D.C., to advise in a number of areas. A contract signed in June 2001 noted that the consultant was to advise the government of Ghana on travel to the United States by specifically consulting "with U.S. Government officials and Members of Congress as well as the media and academic and public policy institutions in preparation of visit and during the visit" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001, p. 3).

A similar contract signed in December 2010 between the government of Ghana and the consulting firm indicated that the latter would help in "establishing positive working relationships with major electronic and print media regarding Ghana; establishing positive relationships with members of the U.S. Congress; and arranging appearances by Ghanaian officials and individuals in appropriate U.S. institutions" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010, p. 4).

The most recent contract between Jefferson Waterman International and Ghana, dated April 4, 2014, states that the consultant "shall render various professional, strategic counsel, and public relations services to assist the Government [of Ghana] in maximizing the benefits received from its many accomplishments and in improving its relationship with the Government of the United States" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, p. 5).

Beyond the general description of the assignment as provided in the contract, the documents filed with the U.S. Department of Justice do not include the strategies and tactics that the consulting firm would use to implement the various relationship-building approaches it agreed upon with the Ghanaian government.

Country Reputation

Literature on country reputation began in 2005, when Passow, Fehlmann, and Grahlow (2005) sought to measure the concept. Using the research context of the Principality of Liechtenstein, a landlocked country in Central Europe, Passow and colleagues (2005) created the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index, which was adapted from the Harris-Fombrun Reputation Quotient (Fombrun & Gardberg, 2000), which is used to measure the reputation of corporate organizations. The Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index has six dimensions: emotional appeal, physical appeal, financial appeal, leadership appeal, cultural appeal, and social appeal.

Using the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index, Yang and fellow researchers (2008) created a scale for measuring South Korea's reputation in the United States. In addition to the six dimensions in the Passow group (2005) instrument, Yang and colleagues (2008) added "political appeal," which they conceptualized as "perceptions of the country's political status such as internal relationships, democracy, and stable political environments" (p. 425).

Using Yang et al. (2008) as the basis for measuring the reputation of sub-Saharan African countries in the United States, Kiambi and Shafer (2014) developed a sub-Saharan African Countries Reputation Scale that could be used in the United States to measure the reputation of each of the more than 50 sub-Saharan African countries. In addition to the seven dimensions from the Yang et al. (2008) scale for South Korea, Kiambi and Shafer (2014) added three dimensions—people appeal, sports appeal, and security appeal—bringing the total number of dimensions to 10.

In spite of the attempts by Passow et al. (2005) and Yang et al. (2008) to quantify country reputation, the concept still suffered from a lack of clear definition. Kang and Yang (2010) made the first attempt to define the concept: “Country reputation refers to perceptions of a country, shared by domestic and international public, on the basis of personal experience and information received” (p. 53). This definition puts into perspective the earlier attempts by Passow et al. (2005) and Yang et al. (2008) to quantify the concept by measuring international publics’ perceptions of a foreign country on a wide range of issues.

Although there is still a dearth of country reputation literature, the work of Passow et al. (2005), Yang et al. (2008), and Kiambi and Shafer (2014) has laid a strong foundation for continued conceptualization. The Model of Country Concept presented in this volume identifies country reputation as one of the elements that come together with country image to form Country Concept in the minds of international publics. For the purposes of this chapter, country reputation—not country concept—is the outcome variable under examination. It is defined as *a stakeholder’s perceptions of a country over time based on direct and indirect experiences with the country as compared with its competitors.*

Because direct and indirect experiences are at the core of the definition of country reputation, this review will discuss the forms of direct and indirect experiences that stakeholders could have. In this study, direct and indirect experiences will be the major causes/predictors of country reputation, while familiarity will be the mediating variable. The extent to which stakeholders are familiar with a country is significant, and a discussion of the importance of familiarity has been incorporated.

By testing the relationships that exist between the predictors, a mediator such as familiarity and outcome variables through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), this study contributes empirical evidence to the emerging theoretical framework of country reputation and, by extension, to Country Concept.

Direct and Indirect Experiences

As with a corporation, perceptions of the reputation of a country that are held by its publics are formed through direct and indirect experiences. Direct experiences are based on the personal experience or contact that the public has with a country, while indirect experiences are based on secondhand encounters.

Examples of a stakeholder's direct experiences with a country include traveling to that country, using a product or service from the country, participating in the country's cultural events, and meeting and interacting with a citizen of the country. Examples of secondhand experiences include "word-of-mouth communications and information received from other communication channels including mass media" (Yang et al., 2008, p. 425). An example of word-of-mouth communication is overhearing someone talk about a country. Since channels of communication have continued to fragment, this study will make a distinction between news and non-news channels of communication when measuring the effect these predictors have on country reputation. The two categories of experiences—direct and indirect—could lead to different levels of perceptions and attitudes about a country.

Familiarity

Familiarity with a place is a significant concept because it "represents a key marketing variable in segmenting and targeting groups and developing a marketing action plan including product, distribution, pricing, and promotion decisions" (Baloglu, 2001, p. 127). In country reputation management, familiarity emerges as a significant concept that could help decision makers determine the kinds of messages and products that would be suitable for a group of people familiar with a country and not for a group that is unfamiliar. In addition, familiar destinations are more attractive than unfamiliar ones (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Familiarity could thus play a pivotal role in a public awareness campaign, as it could help a communication specialist distinguish between audiences that are familiar with an issue and those who are unfamiliar for communication planning purposes.

Familiarity with a country could be achieved or mediated through direct or indirect experiences (Bromley, 2000). Baloglu (2001), however, notes that familiarity goes beyond direct experiences operationalization only, and that it ought to incorporate "multiple visits" (p. 128). Being familiar with a foreign country, therefore, requires more than one visit to the country, multiple searches of information about that country, or more than one encounter with citizens from that country.

Multiple visits, which increase a person's familiarity with a place or product, distinguish direct and indirect experiences from the concept of familiarity. An indirect experience with Angola, for example, could be the result of a news item a person has read or watched about the country. To claim to be familiar with Angola, however, a person must go beyond such one-off encounters with news stories and make an effort to search for news stories and features about Angola.

Ha and Perks (2005) note that brand experiences play an important role in improving brand familiarity. Consumers are more likely to be familiar with brands that have been around for a long time and have had their reputations bolstered through brand experiences (Pae, Samiee, & Tai, 2002). Brand experience is thus

a necessary condition for building brand familiarity. Examining familiarity in a country reputation study could help establish whether familiar destinations are more attractive than unfamiliar ones, while also shedding light on the possibility of segmenting publics based on their levels of familiarity with a country or destination.

THE STUDY

Hypotheses

A country's reputation as held by foreign publics is formed through direct and indirect experiences. Therefore, direct and indirect experiences could be considered antecedent variables and thus lead to different levels of familiarity with a country. They could also lead to different levels of rating for a country in terms of favorability and supportive intentions, such as tourist visits or buying products from that country.

According to Martin and Eroglu (1993), direct experiences are based on the personal experiences or contact that the public has with a country or its people, while indirect experiences are based on secondhand encounters. In this study, the indirect experiences antecedent variable has been further broken down into two categories: non-news-related indirect experiences and news-related indirect experiences.

Previous research has shown that experiences that come about as the result of direct or indirect interactions with others or sources of information have positive effects on familiarity in the assessment of the reputation of an entity (Bromley, 1993; Caruana, 1997; Yang, 2007). Bromley (2000) also noted that familiarity with an organization could be achieved through direct and indirect experiences. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Direct experience will be positively associated with familiarity with Ghana.

H2: Non-news-related indirect experience will be positively associated with familiarity with Ghana.

H3: News-related indirect experience will be positively associated with familiarity with Ghana.

Fombrun and van Riel (2003) showed that familiarity could affect reputational favorability when analyzed as a mediator variable. Bromley (2000) noted that familiarity with an organization could be mediated through direct and indirect experiences. Yang (2007) showed that familiarity was positively associated with the organizational reputation of four South Korean organizations. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H4: Familiarity will be positively associated with Ghana's reputation.

According to MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997), familiar destinations are more attractive than unfamiliar ones. Familiarity with a destination is thus likely to influence intentions to visit a particular destination. The following hypothesis is proposed.

H5: Familiarity will be positively associated with supportive intentions toward Ghana.

Fombrun and van Riel (2003) noted that reputation is built over time through repeated behaviors and interactions such as direct and indirect experiences. In addition, reputation is built over time through information received (Caruana, 1997). The following hypotheses are thus proposed.

H6: Direct experience will be positively associated with Ghana's reputation.

H7: Non-news-related indirect experience will be positively associated with Ghana's reputation.

The literature shows that African countries have, over time, consistently received negative coverage from the U.S. media. Beaudoin and Thorson's (2001) analysis of foreign news in American newspapers showed that Africa is depicted as a place consumed by power struggles. Golan (2008) examined the coverage of Africa by the ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN evening news programs and found that a majority of stories about African nations focused on negative issues such as conflict and disasters, both natural and man-made. Because reputation is built over time from information received (Caruana, 1997), negative information could negatively influence the reputation of an organization. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H8: News-related indirect experience will be negatively associated with Ghana's reputation.

A country wishing to manage its reputation must use channels of communication to reach its target publics. These channels range from mass media tactics to interpersonal and relational tactics. The following research question is thus posed.

RQ1: Which channels of communication would be most effective for Ghana to reach various key publics in the United States?

The suggested hypotheses are shown in the structural model in Figure 5.1 below.

Sample

An online survey was used to collect data from citizens of the United States ($N = 465$) who were 18 years of age and older. The sample comprised heterogeneous demographic backgrounds in terms of age (Median = 34, $SD = 12.86$); gender

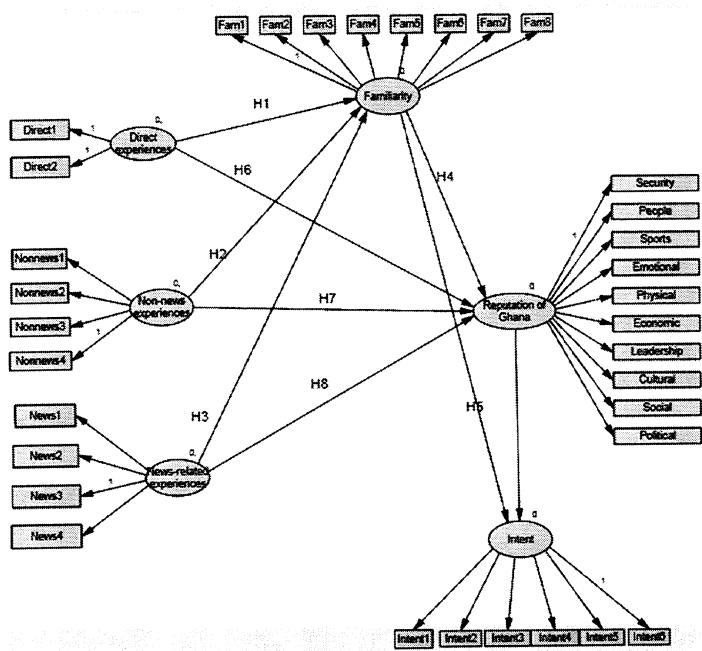


Figure 5.1: The Structural Model Used in Hypotheses Testing.

(female = 53.3%, male = 46.7%); ethnicity (Asian/Pacific Islander = 5.8%, Black/African American = 9.2%, Hispanic/Latino = 4.7%, Native American/American Indian = 1.1%, White/Caucasian = 76.8%, and Other = 2.4%); educational level (bachelor's degree = 35.1%, college credit = 25.4%, associate's degree = 12%, and master's degree = 11%); employment status (employed for wages = 49.5% and self-employed 20.6%); and income levels (median between \$30,000 and \$60,000). Participants were drawn from 40 states. To reach a diverse group of Americans, the data were collected via Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a data collection website hosted by Amazon. Each participant was paid \$.80 for the study, which took approximately 30 minutes.

Measures

Dimensions of sub-Saharan African countries' reputation scale

This study used the scale developed by Kiambi and Shafer (2014) to measure the reputation of Ghana in the United States. The following 10 dimensions were used. Items were measured on a six-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6).

Security appeal

This dimension refers to perceptions of a country as being capable of providing security to its people and visitors. An example of an item that measured this dimension was “Ghana is a secure place.”

People appeal

This dimension refers to the perception of a country’s people as peaceful and capable of living in peace, not only among themselves but also with foreigners. An example of an item used to measure this dimension is “The people of Ghana are capable of living peacefully among themselves.”

Sports appeal

This dimension refers to the competitiveness of a country in sports in the international arena. An example of an item used to measure this dimension is “The sportsmen and women of Ghana are competitive.”

Emotional appeal

This dimension refers to the extent to which a country is liked, respected, and admired by others. An example of an item used to measure this dimension is “I respect Ghana.”

Physical appeal

This dimension refers to perceptions of the country’s infrastructure, which includes health care, housing, roads, communications, and services. An example of an item used to measure this dimension is “Ghana is a beautiful place.”

Financial/economic appeal

This dimension refers to “perceptions of the country’s competitiveness, profitability, growth prospects, and risk of investment” (Yang et al., 2008, p. 424). An example of an item used to measure this dimension is “Ghana is an inviting place to do business.”

Leadership appeal

This dimension refers to the strength of a country’s leadership and the ability to communicate a vision for the country. An example of an item used to measure this dimension is “Ghana has charismatic leaders.”

Cultural appeal

According to Yang et al. (2008), cultural appeal refers to the country's distinct values and historical past. An example of an item used to measure this dimension is "Ghana is socially and culturally diverse."

Social/global appeal

This dimension refers to perceptions of a country's high standards in "its dealings with global community, good causes, and environmental policies" (Yang et al., p. 425). An example of an item used to measure this dimension is "Ghana supports good causes."

Political appeal

Yang et al. (2008) defined political appeal as a country's "political status such as internal relationships, democracy, and stable political environments" (p. 425). An example of an item used to measure this dimension is "Ghana maintains good international relationships with the US."

Instrument for measuring direct experiences

Five items were used in the main study, but because of low reliability and poor factor loadings, only two items were retained in the final analysis: "Have you met a person from Ghana?" and "Have you interacted with a person from Ghana?"

Instrument for measuring indirect experiences

The following items were retained for final analysis for non-news experiences: "Have you heard someone talk about Ghana?"; "Have you discussed something about Ghana with friends/classmates?"; "Have you watched something about Ghana in a film/movie?" and "Have you watched or read something about Ghana in entertainment media (e.g., TV show, non-news magazine)?"

The following items were used to measure indirect experiences derived from news sources: "Have you watched something about Ghana on television news?"; "Have you read something about Ghana in a newspaper?"; "Have you read something about Ghana on a news website (e.g., newspaper, television websites)?" and "Have you watched something about Ghana in a news magazine (e.g., *60 Minutes*)?"

Instrument for measuring familiarity

Familiarity was measured in terms of the extent to which respondents sought additional information about Ghana. Baloglu (2001) noted that familiarity may be treated as a multidimensional concept and can be measured using three dimensions:

informational, experiential, and self-rated. Baloglu (2001) defined the informational dimension as the extent to which respondents sought and used sources of information, the experiential as the extent of past experiences, and the self-rated as how familiar respondents considered themselves with a place or product.

This study adapted the informational and self-rated dimensions from Baloglu's (2001) conceptualization of familiarity and created items that reflected these two dimensions. Samples of items in the informational dimension are "I have, in the past, sought information about Ghana from online sources"; "I have, in the past, sought more information about Ghana from textbooks" and "I have a high level of awareness of developments in Ghana." Eight items were used to measure participants' familiarity with Ghana using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Instrument for measuring supportive intentions

Besides reputation, supportive intentions were another major dependent variable used in this study. Supportive intentions were measured using the following six-point Likert-type items ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*: "I think I would love to visit Ghana"; "I think other people would want to visit Ghana"; "I would be satisfied with visiting Ghana"; "I would recommend visiting Ghana to others"; "I would recommend products from Ghana to others" and "I would love to purchase products from Ghana."

RESULTS

Table 5.1 below shows results of the structural paths:

Table 5.1: Standardized effects in the structural model.

<i>Independent factor</i>	→	<i>Dependent factors</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>Ghana</i>
Direct experience	→	Familiarity	H1	.19***
Indirect experience (non-news)	→	Familiarity	H2	.31***
Indirect experience (news)	→	Familiarity	H3	.18***
Familiarity	→	Country reputation	H4	.35***
Familiarity	→	Intent	H5	.16***
Direct experience	→	Country reputation	H6	.01
Indirect experience (non-news)	→	Country reputation	H7	.12*
Indirect experience (news)	→	Country reputation	H8	-.23***

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. H = hypothesis.

H1: Effects of direct experiences (personal experiences) on familiarity with Ghana. It was hypothesized that direct experiences would be positively associated with familiarity with Ghana. This hypothesis was supported, suggesting that personal experiences such as encounters with people from Ghana or traveling to Ghana increased study participants' familiarity with Ghana.

H2: Effects of non-news-related indirect experiences (non-news secondhand experiences) on familiarity with Ghana. It was hypothesized that indirect experiences that do not result from news-related items would increase familiarity with Ghana. This hypothesis was supported. It can be concluded that non-news-related experiences such as hearing someone talk about Ghana, reading about Ghana in a textbook, or discussing Ghana with friends/classmates substantially increased study participants' familiarity with the West African country.

H3: Effects of news-related indirect experiences (news-related secondhand experiences) on familiarity with Ghana. It was hypothesized that indirect experiences that result from news-related items would increase U.S. familiarity with Ghana. This hypothesis was supported. It can be concluded that experiences that are garnered from news channels such as television news, newspapers, and news websites of news organizations increased study participants' familiarity with Ghana.

H4: Effects of familiarity on Ghana's country reputation. It was hypothesized that more familiarity with Ghana would lead to a more favorable country reputation. This hypothesis was supported, suggesting that participants' familiarity with Ghana led to a favorable reputation for the country.

H5: Effects of familiarity on supportive intentions for Ghana. It was hypothesized that more familiarity with Ghana would lead to more supportive intentions toward the country. This hypothesis was supported. It can be concluded that participants' familiarity with Ghana led to increased intention of support for the country.

H6: Effects of direct experiences (personal experiences) on Ghana's reputation. It was hypothesized that direct experiences with Ghana would positively influence the reputation of the country. This hypothesis was not supported, suggesting that personal experiences did not enhance Ghana's reputation in the United States.

H7: Effects of non-news indirect experiences (non-news secondhand experiences) on Ghana's reputation. It was hypothesized that indirect experiences that do not result from news media would be positively associated with favorable reputation. This hypothesis was supported, although the strength of the structural path was modest.

H8: Effects of news-related indirect experiences (news-related secondhand experiences) on Ghana's reputation. It was hypothesized that indirect experiences that result from news media would be negatively associated with Ghana's reputation. This hypothesis was supported. It can therefore be concluded that experiences that are garnered from news media such as television, newspapers, and news websites decreased participants' favorability toward Ghana.

RQ1 sought to determine the channels of communication that would be most preferred for disseminating information about Ghana to its various key target publics in the United States. The results show that the most preferred channel of communication to learn about Ghana for the American public is online news media ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.40$), followed by broadcast television news ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.70$) and libraries ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.72$). The other preferred channels of communication included cable television ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.80$), national newspapers ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.70$) and Ghanaian cultural events ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.40$). The ubiquitous social media channels (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) rated a distant eighth ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.91$).

DISCUSSION

Familiarity as a Mediating Variable

One of the major findings of this study is the influence of the mediating variable of familiarity on country reputation and supportive intentions. As seen in the results of the structural model, familiarity emerged as a key mediator between participants' experiences and country reputation. The direct path effect (without familiarity) from personal (direct) experiences to country reputation was not significant.

The model's direct path effect from non-news-related secondhand experiences to country reputation was medium in terms of strength. Direct path effects from news-related secondhand experiences to Ghana's reputation were significantly and strongly negative, suggesting that news stories had a major negative impact on Ghana's reputation in the United States.

When mediated by familiarity, however, the effect on Ghana's reputation was significant and much stronger. It can thus be concluded that the extent of participants' experiences with Ghana affected the reputation of the country positively but indirectly through the mediating role of increased familiarity with Ghana.

According to the results of the structural model, there were strong effects of familiarity on support intentions toward Ghana. This suggests that familiarity with the country increased support intentions toward Ghana.

This study contributes empirical evidence to the Model of Country Concept proposed by Fullerton and Kendrick (Chapter 2 in this volume). Besides showing the strengths of the relationships between antecedent variables such as mediated and relational tactics, this study sheds light on the possible role of mediating variables such as familiarity.

Familiarity, which was measured using items such as "I consider myself well-exposed to media coverage of this country"; "I have a high level of awareness of this country"; and "I have sought more information about this country online," represents an experience that goes beyond personal and secondhand experiences.

The literature suggests that familiarity may be self-reported (such as someone reporting that they have a high level of awareness of a country) or by actions such as voluntarily searching for information about a particular country.

Based on the outcome of this study, familiarity can be used as a public awareness strategy to enhance country reputation. Public relations and public diplomacy practitioners could design communication campaigns that would enable foreign publics to develop some level of awareness of developments in a particular country besides the 30-second news clips they see on television.

Nation-branding agents could also ensure that foreign publics are primed with the right information about the country they are promoting so that they (the foreign publics) can look for more information about that country in the future.

At the tactical level, agents could rely on a number of channels of communication to increase awareness of Ghana among the U.S. public. This study showed that the most preferred channels of communication by Americans in learning about Ghana are online media, broadcast TV news, libraries, cable TV news, newspapers, cultural events, and social media, in that order.

Nation-branding agents could thus lobby American journalists to write positive news and features of events unfolding in Ghana and have them posted on media websites. Although social media was the eighth preferred channel of communication, links to online news stories about a country can be shared on social media sites to increase the visibility of the news items themselves.

Because libraries were the third preferred channel for learning about Ghana, practitioners could identify strategic libraries across the United States and distribute material that will serve to cultivate awareness of Ghana among the target audience. In addition, the Ghanaian government could produce documentaries to create awareness of the country and air them on select broadcast and cable TV channels in the United States.

Ghana could also lobby to have important personalities appear on highly regarded radio and television programs devoted to international issues such as CNN's *Inside Africa* and radio programs aired by popular radio channels such as NPR and Voice of America.

Public relations organizations that consult for African governments can also endeavor to create visibility for their clients through social media outlets. An official Facebook page or Twitter account for an African country could be used to disseminate information to create awareness of the country among the American public.

Because familiarity plays a key mediating role in country reputation and support intentions for Ghana, nation-branding agents can test campaign messages to find ones that would create top-of-mind awareness of Ghana among the American public.

Another interesting observation is that when mediated by familiarity, news-related secondhand (indirect) experiences had a positive effect on country

reputation, as opposed to when news-related secondhand experiences acted as a direct-effect path to country reputation, which resulted in a significant negative influence on country reputation. The negative influence of news-related secondhand experiences on reputation is consistent with the literature showing that U.S. media focus mostly on negative news in relation to African countries (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2001; Golan, 2008).

Public relations and public diplomacy specialists could, however, counter the influence of negative news media through the strategy of increasing awareness of their countries among the public. As a public awareness strategy, increasing familiarity with Ghana among the U.S. public could counter the negative influence of news stories about Ghana, as shown by the results of this structural model.

Tactics such as lobbying news and feature writers to produce articles that highlight the achievements of a particular country on a certain issue should be considered. As an example, PR practitioners acting on behalf of Ghana could develop ideas for news analyses of Ghana's socioeconomic and political progress following the media spotlight resulting from President Barack Obama's visit to the country in 2009.

Implications for Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy Practice and Theory

Given that the results show the strong influence of familiarity on country reputation and support intentions, practitioners might benefit from paying attention to campaign messages that seek to promote public awareness of their nation-clients in the United States. As the study shows, country reputation has a significant positive influence on support intentions for a country—hence the need for practitioners to focus first on improving reputation.

While direct (personal) experiences, non-news indirect experiences, and news-related indirect experiences are important antecedents of country reputation management, they cannot fully account for positive country reputation without the key role played by the mediating variable of familiarity.

Continued negative coverage of a country in the U.S. media may continue to affect its reputation negatively. Nation-branding agents may therefore consider lobbying media houses and journalists to highlight positive developments of their country clients through news stories, features, and anecdotes that could create familiarity and positive awareness among the U.S. public.

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Shaping International Public Opinion

A Model for Nation Branding
and Public Diplomacy

Jami A. Fullerton and Alice Kendrick, Editors



PETER LANG

New York • Bern • Frankfurt • Berlin
Brussels • Vienna • Oxford • Warsaw

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fullerton, Jami A., editor. | Kendrick, Alice, editor.

Title: Shaping international public opinion: a model for nation branding and public diplomacy / edited by Jami A. Fullerton, Alice Kendrick.

Description: New York: Peter Lang, 2017.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016023376 | ISBN 978-1-4331-3029-8 (hardcover: alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4331-3028-1 (paperback: alk. paper) | ISBN 978-1-4539-1864-7 (ebook pdf)

ISBN 978-1-4331-3573-6 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-4331-3574-3 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: International relations—Public opinion. | Public opinion—Political aspects.

Place marketing—Political aspects. | Cultural diplomacy.

Classification: LCC JZ1305 .S4838 2016 | DDC 327.2—dc23

DOI 10.3726/b10433

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016023376>

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council of Library Resources.



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Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York

29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006

www.peterlang.com

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