

Navigating Crisis Communication: Restorative Facework in Press Conferences

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Abstract

In the realm of crisis communication, the role of facework strategies is pivotal in managing face (or reputation) of individual or/and organization. This study examines the employment of restorative facework by the spokesperson during a series of high-stakes press conference (PC) in response to the face threats (also known as face threatening acts, FTAs) by the journalists. The methodology used in this paper solely of content analysis on verbatim transcripts collected from a series of press conferences, over a period of 82 days. A total of 28 video recordings of the press conferences held in Malaysia were transcribed and categorised to identify the common themes of FTAs and restorative strategies. The findings of the paper are interpreted from perspective of the pragmatic view within the framework of Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (1988). Preliminary findings suggest the use of restorative faceworks for reputation management aimed at repairing harm, rebuilding trust, and fostering positive relationships with the victims' families and stakeholders.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Face Negotiation Theory, Facework Strategies, Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), Restorative Facework.

Introduction

Face damage or face lose is inevitable in many cases of conflict communication. When it occurred, restorative facework (also known as corrective facework) is demanded to restore face and re-engage smooth interaction after a person's face has been lost or put in danger. Being truly an unprecedented event in the history of aviation, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight had caught media attention from all over the world. Malaysian Airlines (MAS) and Malaysian authority had been criticized for their handling of the PCs, particularly its communication to the media and families of the victims on board. A huge number of audience members who watched the PCs including the families of the victims expressed their anger and questioned the trustworthiness of the information via social media.

The faces of spokespeople were situated in vulnerable position because as stated by Kirkham and Muthaly (2015), PC demands an active exchange of information in which spokespeople (the actors of this study) are usually judged by the way they present themselves and interact with others. They highlighted that people are invariably influenced by perceptions created by media. Therefore, it is notable to investigate the use of restorative facework for reputation management during the PCs to prevail over this issue.

Literature Review

Restorative strategies play a crucial role in resolving conflicts across various contexts, from intercultural disputes to organizational conflicts and family communication dynamics. Miike (2009) investigates the domain of intercultural conflicts, emphasizing the significance of apologies and reparations as restorative facework mechanisms. He claims that in such conflicts, acknowledging wrongdoing and making reparations not only facilitate conflict resolution but also uphold individuals' dignity and cultural identities.

Following that, Fitness and Lachapelle (2010) examine restorative justice and facework in conflicts, focusing on the effects of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The study emphasizes how these elements contribute to bringing harmony in relationships. By analyzing the intricate dynamics of apology and forgiveness, they highlight the role of these elements in promoting reconciliation and rebuilding trust among conflicting parties.

Moving beyond traditional settings, Kou and Dinakar (2016) investigate the role of facework in restoring and sustaining cooperation in online communities. Their research sheds light on the unique challenges posed by digital platforms and the efficacy of facework strategies in mitigating conflicts and fostering collaboration in virtual settings.

In a similar vein, Socha and Han (2016) explore restorative strategies in the context of family dynamics and communication. Their study illuminates how restorative communication strategies, such as active listening and empathy, contribute to resolving conflicts and strengthening family bonding.

McLaren (2018) expands the discussion to organizational conflicts, exploring restorative facework strategies employed in such contexts. Through an examination of multiple conflict resolution techniques, he indicates the importance of repairing damaged relationships and maintaining organizational cohesion by adopting facework behaviors.

Lastly, Ting-Toomey and Dai (2019) offer insights into facework competence in interpersonal conflict by examining cultural and situational factors influencing facework strategies. Based on an updated face-negotiation theory, they render a sophisticated perspective on how people resolve conflicts while maintaining their face and interpersonal harmony

All in all, these studies highlight the complexity of restorative strategies and their pivotal role in resolving conflicts in various settings. From intercultural clashes to online communities and family dynamics, the use of restorative facework facilitates conflict communication, fosters reconciliation, and sustains cooperative relationships.

However, several gaps or flaws are discernible. These include limited cultural scope and

potential biases in participant selection or data analysis methods. For instance, in studies focusing on specific contexts such as intercultural conflicts, online communities, or organizational settings, there may be a lack of generalizability to broader populations or contexts. Additionally, the aforementioned studies may overlook the complexities of facework dynamics in diverse cultural contexts.

While these studies offer valuable insights into various aspects of facework and conflict resolution, they seemed to disregard one important fact which is how the facework behaviors in interaction is less complex when one communicates with only in-group or out-group members than both group members in a single event. Press Conferences on the flight incident was international broadcasting event viewed by audiences all over the world with various cultural background in which the employment of strategic facework is the utmost important. The effort of restoring face by the spokesperson in the interaction is not restricted to self-face but also collective face (e.g.: institutional face and national face) while considering the other participants of interaction at the same time, regardless in-group or out-group members of his culture.

Objective

1. How do restorative facework is employed by the spokesperson in the press conferences?
2. Why restorative facework is employed by spokesperson in in the press conferences?

Design and Methodology

A qualitative approach was engaged in this study as the approach generally paves the way for explaining and understanding meaning of social practice Merriam (1998), and the researcher is the main instrument for collecting and analyzing data. The descriptive case study design was adopted to understand the facework phenomenon in the discourse. It provides detailed understanding on the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening (Merriam, 1998, p. 203).

The strength of case study design is that it provides a chance for a clear manifestation of how individuals work contexts (Creswell, 2007 & Merriam, 1998). It leads to an in-depth investigation of events, processes, activities, or individuals Creswell (1998, 2007) but also facilitates rich conceptual/theoretical development (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). It was anticipated that adopting the above stated approach in the present study would provide an in-depth understanding of what really happens in the phenomenon under investigation in terms of context, process, and meaning.

The data of this study is based on 28 video recordings of the press conferences on flight incident held in Malaysia. Using content analysis procedure, the data gathered from a series of press conferences, over a period of 82 days were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The themes of restorative facework were categorized according to the strategies identified. Content analysis enable researcher to elicit meaning from the data collected and to draw realistic conclusions from it (Bengtsson, 2016). Video recordings were also used to observe communicative behaviors of the actor to support the conclusions drawn from the content

analysis.

Discussion on Findings

The findings reveal that restorative facework were employed by the spokesperson in certain ways and with certain goals as shown as in table 1 below:

Table 1
The forms and functions of Restorative Strategies and their goal of interaction in the PCs

Strategies of Restorative Facework	Function	Goal s of interaction
Apologize / Exhibition of apologetic behavior. Appeal. Express feeling – sympathy/ sense of solidarity.	Downplay negative perceptions and reactions. Gain understanding. Give emotional support.	Restoring image/reputation. Repairing harm. Rebuilding trust. Fostering positive relationships.

The study found that restorative facework is employed in achieving certain goals of interaction: 1. Restoring image, 2. Repairing harm 3. Rebuilding trust, and 4. Fostering positive relationship.

Restoring image/reputation

It was presumed that apologize strategy was preferred by the actor as stated by Goffman (1971) that the act of apology usually helps the offender to restore his or her self-image. However, the data seemed not to provide evidence of the actors’ use of restorative strategies in that way but through demonstration of apologetic behaviour and expression of feeling. As illustrated in excerpt (a), the behaviour was translated in certain formulaic expression and self-deprecation that served as a corrective action. This could help reducing negative perceptions on the actor’s capability and his counterpart in an effort to repair harm. Supports for this are evident in excerpt (a).

Excerpt (a)

J1: Assalamualaikum , Saya dari ‘News Channel Y’, tuan, mungkin tuan boleh memberikan pandangan daripada badan penyiasat berkenaan penumpang ‘pesawat X’ ini masih hidup . Ini kerana setakat ini hanya penumpang ‘pesawat X’ yang dinyatakan yang terperangkap tiada yang selamat. Dan bagaimanapun PM telah menyatakan tidak pun menyatakan ia berlepas, jadi apakah maknanya ini dan daripada pandangan penyiasat sendiri adakah masih berharap penumpang penumpang ‘pesawat X’ ini masih selamat.
(Assalamualaikum, I'm from ‘News channel Y’, Sir, maybe Sir could give a view from the investigating body regarding on passengers of ‘Flight X’ who survived. This is because, so far ‘Flight X’ is the only tragedy that found all the passengers were stuck on the plane and no body survived. After all, PM previously said it did not even depart, so what does this mean? And from the investigator's viewpoint, is still a hope that passengers of ‘Flight X’ are still safe.)

S: Ini adalah harapan dari keluarga dari perjumpaan saya dengan mereka bahawa apa jua keadaan, betapa tipis pun berkemungkinan mereka masih lagi selamat. **Doa dan usaha** kita untuk mencari mereka dan kemungkinan walaupun tipis masih selamat itu masih menjadi pegangan mereka. Sebab itu saya merayu kepada orang ramai, kenyataan YAB Perdana Menteri hanya menyatakan kapal terbang itu telah pun habis penerbangannya di Lautan Hindi tidak bermakna bahawa ianya terhempas, sebab itu kita mesti memahami mereka yang masih lagi berharap dan berdoa.

(This is the hope of the family. From my meeting with them, I got to know that even if the chance of survival is low, they don't give up hope. They still believe in our prayers and efforts to find the victims regardless how small the possibilities of survivors are. That's why I appeal to the public, the statement by YAB Prime Minister saying that the plane had ended its flight in the Indian Ocean did not mean that it crashed, so we must understand those who still hope and pray)

Even though it, it is miracle, even though it hoping against hope, that is wishes of the family. I think is **that is only proper that we respect the decision, pray that miracle happen.**

In excerpt (a), the inquiry by J1 was severely face threatening as his concern was about the survival of the victims on board where none of them were conceivable to be survive. This was followed by his expression of doubt on information disseminated by prime minister of Malaysia. The actor was also asked the rationale for hoping there were still survivors based on the investigation done. The actor's autonomy face was threatened by the inquiry since it needed enough courage to talk about heart-rending news and to deal with family members of the victims who were in high emotional state. The challenge was not only to restore his face and reputation of his country, the actor was also obliged to repair harm as he needed to respond to the information disseminated by the prime minister. Attending to that, restorative facework was initiated by showing his concern and thought towards the hopeful feeling of the families towards the chance of survivors and attempting to revive hope by rectifying the statement made by the prime minister. The call for solidarity in his utterance "**that is only proper that we respect the decision, pray that miracle happen**" seemed persuasive enough to gain understanding of others as well as to appease family members who were in grief.

It can be said that the actor effectively accomplished face restoration through appeal strategy and emotional support given that enabled him to uphold his self-face and collective face (MAS and Malaysia reputation). The measures taken allow him to ratify his dedication and his team's obligation to the mission. Apart from that, same strategies are also found to be used in repairing. Evidence is shown in the following excerpt (b).

Repairing harm

Excerpt (b)

J10: There have been a heart breaking scene ...Your team are not capable of setting out and finding answers?

S: I fully understand what they are going through. **Emotions are high.** This is something that I have discussed with the France delegation this morning in dealing with the families. Earlier in this statement I indicated one of our main priority is also how to manage emotion and how to appease the

families. I have indicated in my statement earlier that we are sending another high level team to travel to Beijing. To explain what we are doing. And I hope and appeal to everybody that though we understand their concern we are trying our very best. And it is heart wrenching. Even for me.

As revealed in excerpt (b), instead of confronting J10 for her negative criticism on his team's performance and capability that damaged to his and his nation's face, the actor preferred to render an affecting response by showing his attention to the remarks by J10 prior to the criticism made. Considering the climate of the discourse that was overwhelmed by intense feelings, appeal strategy was employed in gaining understanding from others that they do their best when things are at their worst. It was expressed in the form of emotional support dedicated to the family members of the victims on the board. The actor might have anticipated that there would be an experience of harm based on the present temperature of interaction that motivated him to initiate his response in such a psychological strategy. It was followed by his measures to repair harm by highlighting what he had done on his part (discusses with the France delegation) regarding the issue of family members of the victims.

Despite of humiliation received from the criticism made, he seemed to pacify J10 and the audiences by indicating his priority and responsibility to attend the ones who were affected by the heart-breaking scene or news. He appeared not to be swayed by the criticism but rather attempts to repair harm caused by J10 in his highlight that there was disparity between what is claimed by J10 and what he and his team had been done. The effort was further attempted by expressing his sympathy to the families of the victims.

Expressing sympathy in excerpt (d) on the other hand is used to achieve other goal of interaction.

Rebuilding trust

Excerpt (c)

J7: Dalam tempoh 15 hari ini ada tak Sir give up, frust dan sebagainya.
(It has been 15 days so far, have you ever felt give up, frustrated and so on)

S: ... I have never give up and the thoughts of the family members always been close to me. And this is something I can give an assurance to all family members out there. As long as there's hope **we will continue with search.**

As seen in excerpt (c), the personal question asked by J7 threatened the actor's autonomy face as it challenged the actor's emotional investment in what could be a deeply held expression. The FTA can cause emotional leakage and losing trust if the actor was unable to respond inappropriately. Hence, the actor's status face as vigorous leader was at risk. With regards to this, the actor denied the negative feeling questioned by J7 and rendered his sympathy to the family of the victims of flight incident. The actor showed his steadiness in his reaction, someone who was dependable and sensible. That was also followed by his promise to continue the search to regain trust from the audience of his commitment and effort.

Apart from offering sympathy, the act of self-deprecation can be found from the data as one of the apologetic behaviors shown by the actor to rebuild trust from the media and other audience. The following example attests to this idea.

Excerpt (d)

J14: The question is about the Malaysian Defence said that they have been deployed to the search including the scorpion submarine and my other question is, is there any lead so far on the police investigations that has been going on?

S: **Our submarines do not have the ability especially sonar passive of active**, and the ships is something that I discussed with my countries part...So the sonar capability and the deep-sea surveillance, search and rescue is also something that we asking France to assist...

In excerpt (d), apologetic behavior was displayed when the actor *self-deprecating* the ability of ships owned by his country as incompatible for the search and rescue mission. This is followed by an offer to rectify the situation by seeking assistance from another party to solve the problem in his effort to rebuild trust on the performance of his search and rescue team. In other occasion, expression of feeling sympathy and are used to foster positive relationship by seeking understanding of others. Such use is evident in the excerpt below.

To foster positive relationship

Excerpt (e)

J13: You had mentioned emotions are running high. Sir, do you think that the police could reveal some information as to what possibly (not clear) ground with the plane that hidden so far that would address problem with China?

S: It if could, I think the police would. But I think it just not to ease the emotions because at the end of the day they have to make sure that whatever information release not only does not affect the ongoing investigation but as it's now taking an international perspective. Secondly the emotions dealing with the families are very complex. So you just cannot look at it as one particular aspect, and expect everybody to just calm down. These are their loved ones and like I said **I can fully understand because I have children, I have brother, I have family members and I can imagine what they are going through. But I just want to say to the Chinese families that is not just them have lost or looking for lost members, Malaysian also have lost family members and 14 other nations have lost family members and it is important for them not to (not clear) speculative that would make the emotions run higher.** But at the same time on the Malaysian government side, I and the side of MAS, we were together with the Chinese authorities. We are continued to engage them.

As revealed in excerpt (e), expression of his empathy to the families of the victims in his response was attempted to invoke congeniality feeling among Chinese family in his effort to foster positive relation with China. When he stated that “but I just want to say to the Chinese families that is not just them have lost or looking for lost members, Malaysian also have lost family members and 14 other nations have lost family” to make them realised that they are not alone and understand the difficult situation faced by his counterpart. That was followed

by his emphasis on commitment to deal with the families who were affected by the loss of their loved ones to rebuild trust into bargain.

Conclusion

The handling of press conferences following the flight incident underscores the complexities and challenges inherent in crisis communication and reputation management. Through the lens of restorative facework, it is evident that Malaysia Airlines and the relevant authorities navigated a delicate balance between providing factual updates, expressing empathy, and managing the intense scrutiny from the media and the public. While some strategies were successful in mitigating reputational damage and rebuilding trust, others fell short, highlighting the critical need for well-crafted communication plans and training in crisis scenarios. The analysis of these efforts provides valuable lessons for organizations on the importance of transparency, consistency, and emotional intelligence in communication. Effective restorative facework can not only help in managing immediate reputational threats but also lay the groundwork for long-term recovery and relationship-building with stakeholders. As the aviation industry and other sectors continue to face potential crises, the insights gleaned from the flight incident can guide the development of robust crisis communication strategies that prioritize restoring and maintaining public trust.

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