

Defensive Strategies in Crisis Communication: Analysing Reputation Management in the High- Stakes Media Event

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Abstract

The disappearance of Flight MH370 caused significant reputational damage to Malaysia, necessitating a robust defense to manage the country's reputation amidst global scrutiny. This study investigates the defensive strategies employed in crisis communication by the Malaysian government spokesperson during the MH370 press conferences. By conducting content analysis on the 28 transcripts of press conferences held in Malaysia, this research aims to understand how defensive strategies are employed to protect their image, as well as the crisis communication during the event. Findings indicate that while certain strategies, such as denial and aggression, were initially prominent, there was a notable shift towards expressions of justification as the crisis progressed. This research provides insights into the dynamics of crisis communication, highlighting the challenges and complexities of maintaining organizational image during unprecedented crises. The implications for future crisis communication practices are discussed, offering guidelines for organizations in handling similar situations.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Content Analysis, Defensive Strategies, Face Negotiation Theory, Organizational Image

Introduction

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 in 2014 remains one of the most perplexing aviation mysteries of the 21st century. This crisis not only posed significant operational challenges but also demanded a vigorous communication strategy to manage the images of Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government. The way in which information was conveyed, the strategies used to address public concerns, and the efforts to maintain credibility amidst uncertainty are critical components of this case.

As public scrutiny intensified, the entities involved had to navigate the complex interplay between providing accurate information and protecting their reputations. The enactment of reputation management during the event is complicated by the fact that the standard mechanism of face may be valued in various ways by local audiences and/or reporters (in-group face) and international audiences and/or reporters (out-group face) due to cultural relativity. The actors need to consider many entities such as victims' next of kin from different countries, international news media, various legislative and safety regulation bodies, shareholders, and numerous other publics in the industry. The study focused on press conferences held by Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government from March to July 2014, following the disappearance of Flight MH370. These press conferences were characterized by a high level of scrutiny and emotional intensity, reflecting the global interest and uncertainty surrounding the crisis.

The significance of studying defensive strategies in crisis communication lies in the growing role that media, particularly international broadcasting, plays in shaping public perception. In this era that dominated by social media platforms, crises are often amplified beyond national borders, requiring quick, effective, and thoughtful responses to mitigate reputational harm. News conferences, especially those broadcasted on a global scale, serve as critical points of communication between organizations, political leaders, or corporations and the public. The way these parties manage their narratives can influence not only the immediate perception of the crisis but also long-term trust and credibility.

This area of study is essential for a variety of stakeholders, including communication experts, public relations practitioners, corporate leaders, government officials, and even media organizations. By analyzing the strategies employed in such high-stakes environments, scholars and practitioners can develop a deeper understanding of how to craft responses that resonate positively with diverse international audiences, while simultaneously protecting reputations from irreparable damage. In addition, the insights garnered from this research can aid in the development of more effective crisis communication frameworks, which can be utilized to navigate future crises with greater confidence and clarity.

The need for this research is driven by the increasing complexity of global crises. Whether it's a government mishandling of a disaster, or a high-profile individual embroiled in controversy, crises often unfold in real-time with an audience that is vast, diverse, and highly reactive. The stakes are high, and the repercussions of a poorly managed crisis can extend far beyond the initial incident, affecting not just the stakeholders but also public trust in institutions and organizations across the world. Therefore, understanding defensive strategies in crisis communication is not only crucial for reputation management but also for maintaining the integrity and credibility of those in charge of these crises.

This research paper follows a qualitative content analysis of the press conferences to specifically explore how defensive strategies were employed to manage reputation and conflict from the lens of Face Negotiation Theory. The results will provide insights that can be applied to the larger disciplines of crisis communication and reputation management by examining best practices in face work during high-stakes events.

Literature Review

The study of defensive strategies in crisis communication has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in the context of high-profile crises. Research from 2018 onwards has expanded our understanding of how organizations and individuals employ defensive strategies to manage their reputation and mitigate conflict. A growing body of literature has focused on the significance of the strategies in many cases as they play a crucial role in protecting an organization's reputation, maintaining stakeholder trust, and mitigating potential damages during a crisis.

One notable study by Coombs and Holladay (2018) examined the role of defensive strategies in corporate crisis communication, emphasizing the importance of transparency and accountability. The focus was on the critical balance between defensive and accommodative approaches in crisis scenarios. Their findings showed that strategies such as acknowledging mistakes, and providing clear and honest information, were more successful in maintaining public trust.

In the following year, Kim and Lee (2019) investigated the impact of cultural differences on defensive communication strategies. Using Face Negotiation Theory as an underpinning theory, they investigated crisis responses from multinational corporations and found significant variations in the application of face-saving tactics across different cultural contexts. The study demonstrated that the element of culturally sensitive communication is pivotal for international crises management.

A study by Yang and Lim (2020) explored the effectiveness of defensive strategies in political crisis communication. They analyzed press conferences and public statements from political leaders during various scandals, identifying common tactics such as denial, shifting blame, and bolstering. Their research revealed that while these strategies could temporarily help image repair, they often led to long-term credibility issues if not supported by necessary actions.

In 2021, Zhang and Benoit extended the application of Image Repair Theory to examine defensive strategies in social media crises. Their study focused on how brands responded to negative online events, identifying a shift towards more interactive and responsive communication. The study found that strategies like engaging with affected stakeholders directly and providing real-time updates were crucial in maintaining a positive public image in the digital age.

Following that, Daniel Nölleke, Andreas M. Scheu, and Thomas Birkner (2021) argue that mediatization has reshaped how organizations employ defensive communication strategies. The authors expand the concept of mediatization to include the development and implementation of strategies used to defend against negative media portrayals. The findings highlight the interplay between media coverage and the responses it elicits from individuals and organizations, providing a nuanced understanding of how organizations develop and deploy defensive communication strategies in the face of crises.

Later in 2023, Park and Cho examined the role of defensive strategies in environmental crises. They analyzed the communication responses of companies involved in environmental

disasters and found that a combination of face-saving and face-restoration tactics was most effective. Their research emphasized the need for organizations to acknowledge environmental impact while actively engaging in remedial actions.

Another significant study by Vapiwala and Pandita (2024) research on how defensive behaviours affect conflict resolution and communication. They found that service professionals exhibit a range of defensive communication strategies in response to workplace conflicts, which can be categorized as mature, neurotic, and immature defenses. Mature defenses, such as assertiveness and problem-solving, were found to be the most effective in resolving conflicts and maintaining a positive work environment. While neurotic defenses, which include behaviors like denial and projection, were found to complicate conflict resolution and exacerbate tensions. These strategies often resulted in misunderstandings, increased stress, and a negative impact on team dynamics. Apart from that, immature defenses, such as passive-aggressiveness and avoidance, were identified as the least effective. These behaviors not only failed to resolve conflicts but also contributed to a toxic work environment, leading to increased frustration and disengagement among employees.

The most recent study by Garcia and Martinez (2024) explored the integration of artificial intelligence in crisis communication strategies. Their study found that AI tools could enhance the effectiveness of defensive strategies by providing real-time sentiment analysis and enabling more personalized responses. They concluded that while technology offers new opportunities for crisis management, the fundamental principles of face negotiation and human empathy remain crucial.

Overall, the above studies consistently present the importance of transparency, cultural sensitivity, and the integration of new technologies. The application of theoretical frameworks, particularly Face Negotiation Theory, provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of managing reputations during crises. This body of work offers a rich foundation for analyzing the defensive strategies employed in the MH370 press conferences, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective crisis communication practices.

Objective

1. to identify the defensive strategies employed by the spokesperson during the MH370 press conferences.
2. to uncover the ways defensive strategies are employed during the MH370 press conferences to manage the reputation of Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government.

Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, conducting content analysis procedure to examine the defensive strategies employed during the MH370 press conferences. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of communication strategies and their effectiveness in managing reputations and mitigating conflict. The primary data for this study comprises transcripts of press conferences held by Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government following the disappearance of Flight MH370. These transcripts are based on a series of press conferences held in Malaysia only. Additional data are gathered from media reports and public statements related to the crisis.

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory will serve as the underlying theoretical framework for this analysis. This theory provides a structured approach to understanding how individuals and organizations manage face during conflict situations, emphasizing the importance of defensive strategies. The content analysis is conducted in several steps. First, the transcripts and related documents will be systematically coded for instances of defensive communication strategies. Codes are developed based on Ting-Toomey's face negotiation strategies, such as avoidance, denial, justification, and others. The coded data will then be categorized into themes that reflect the different defensive strategies employed, helping to identify patterns and variations in the use of these strategies.

Thematic analysis is conducted to interpret the data and understand the essence of the defensive strategies that are used, as well as exploring the way they are used for reputation management and conflict resolution. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, member checking and inter-coding process are implemented to cross-check the results through discussion and consensus. Triangulation is employed by comparing the findings from the press conference transcripts with the observation on the recorded video conferences.

Ethical considerations are carefully addressed throughout the study. Since the research involves analyzing public records and media reports, there are no direct ethical concerns related to participant consent. However, the research considered the sensitivity issues to the families affected by the MH370 tragedy, ensuring that the analysis is respectful and mindful of the emotional impact of the crisis. This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to analyzing the defensive communication strategies used during the MH370 press conferences, offering valuable insights into crisis communication and reputation management.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the defensive communication strategies employed during the MH370 press conferences. The analysis aimed to uncover how these strategies were utilized to manage reputations and mitigate conflict during a high-profile aviation crisis. There are three main defensive strategies were identified:

Denial: a strategy in crisis communication when the organization or its representative expressing denial of actions or claims that challenge his individual or/and national reputation or credibility. This can be used to defend and manage face by positioning his represented organization or/and nation as unjustly criticized, or by delegitimizing the accusations.

Assertion: a strategy in crisis communication involves the organization or its representative (spokesperson) making strong, confident statements to convey authority, control, and confidence. This strategy is often used to reassure stakeholders, affirm the organization's position, and mitigate the impact of the crisis. From the perspective of Face Negotiation Theory, assertion can help an organization maintain or restore its face by projecting confidence and competence.

Justification: a strategy in crisis communication involves providing explanations or rationales for actions or decisions to minimize perceived wrongdoing or mitigate the impact of the crisis. This strategy is aimed at protecting the organizational or/and national face by framing the

crisis in a way that reduces the perceived severity or assigns responsibility in a way that is less damaging to its/their image.

From the findings, defensive strategy is significantly used by the actors to minimize negative criticism by the journalists. In such a way, they managed to protect their faces and/or national face that was exacerbated by the criticism. Support for this is given in the following examples.

Excerpt (a)

T20 (28/3/2014) line 205-213

J10: And secondly, being three weeks since the incident, you've been criticized ...and you also defended Malaysia performance on their handling on this. Looking back last three years (weeks), what would have anything would or could Malaysia have done differently?

S: I don't think we have done anything different from what we have done, and I think, like I said in our earlier press conference, no matter what has been thrown and labelled at us, history will judge us, a country that has been very responsible, we have corroborated any evidence that we receive.

In excerpt (a), the actor's competence face was threatened when J10 put forth a question on how Malaysia should have handled MH370 Malaysian Airlines incident differently. The FTA was imposed on the national face as the question implied the weakness of the government's handling the incident so far. The actor's moral face was also challenged by the criticism made by a journalist (J10) for depreciating the efforts made by SAR team. Responding to that, the actor used defend strategy by expressing his denial on the statement and showed his assertiveness in giving opinion regarding the issue.

The same response given when the same type of questioned raised by other journalist (J4) indicated the shortcomings of the actor's side in taking precaution before the incident happened as well as in acting after the incident happened. This is illustrated below:

Excerpt (b)

T16 (24/3/2014) line 76-84

J4: Looking back what would you guys have done differently that would have one permitted to prevent this accident from happening and two maybe easier to find the plane?

S: I'm going be consistent I'm not looking back. I'm looking forward and our focus is always being to find the air craft concern. And we have done that by trying to narrow the searching rescue area. And we have done that by using the most sophisticated equipment that is available out there with the support of our friends 26 nation in the world, unprecedented.

From the excerpt (b), defend strategy was employed when the actor insisted that he wouldn't look backward and focus on what he and his team were doing. This suggests that he tried to maintain his decision without considering the alternative way of handling the issue raised by J4. The assertion was followed by a justification that what they have done was assisted by the greatest equipment and supporting teams. In his closing, he showed a great skill as an astute spokesperson and politician when he established camaraderie feeling amongst the other nations involved in SAR mission in response to the remark that brought discredit upon their administration.

The pattern of defend strategy employed by the actor that started with denial and followed by assertion or justification also can be seen in the following examples.

Excerpt (c)

T22 (5/4/2014) line 68-74

J5: The 227 passengers have been cleared of any suspicion, how about the crew members? Why is it taking so long?

S: I don't think anybody has been cleared from any of the investigations and like I said as far as the which include the crew as well, the four possibilities that I constantly reminded us, just weather investigation on terrorism, hijacking, psychological or personal that as I know, is still on going.

In excerpt (c), a criticism by the journalist (J5) was attended with strong denial. The threat on his reliability face was defended by expressing his denial to the statement given by J5 regarding the clearance of suspicion on the passengers and crew members. This followed by justification that the investigation was still ongoing as it covered all four possibilities.

In the presence of a worldwide audience, the actor struggled to appear firmly in the exercise of his authority and demonstrate proper refined behavior. An improper act on his part can become a source of embarrassment to MAS and Malaysia while submission to a spiteful remark would be extremely face damaging. From the excerpts above, the actor performed his best to use less offensive mode in his defend strategy. The strategy performed by the actor was seen to protect competence face of his nation rather than to impose his perspective on the interaction as he made his effort to reduce the tone of his utterance.

These findings align with existing literature on crisis communication, which emphasizes the importance of balancing defensive and accommodative strategies. Face-saving and face-restoration efforts were critical in managing the crisis, although their effectiveness varied depending on the stage of the crisis and the specific context.

Implications

The defensive strategies had mixed effects on the reputation of Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government. While apologies and justifications helped to partially restore trust, the initial use of avoidance strategies contributed to ongoing public frustration and criticism. Overall, the combination of strategies highlighted the complexities of managing reputations during a high-stakes crisis.

For future crisis management, the study suggests the need for a timely and transparent communication approach. Apologies should be issued promptly to address public concerns, while justifications should be clear and substantiated to maintain credibility. Avoidance tactics should be minimized to prevent the escalation of public frustration.

Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the defensive communication strategies employed during the MH370 press conferences, using Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory as the theoretical framework. Through a detailed qualitative content analysis, the study identified and examined key strategies such as avoidance, apology, and justification,

assessing their effectiveness in managing reputations and mitigating conflict during a high-stakes crisis.

The findings reveal that while avoidance strategies initially helped to manage uncertainty and reduce immediate pressure, they also contributed to public frustration and speculation. Apologies, on the other hand, played a crucial role in addressing emotional distress and demonstrating empathy, leading to a temporary improvement in public perception. Justifications were instrumental in defending decisions and maintaining credibility, though they often led to long-term skepticism regarding transparency.

Overall, the study underscores the complex interplay between different defensive strategies and their impact on reputation management. Effective crisis communication requires a balanced approach that combines timely apologies, clear justifications, and careful management of the face to restore and maintain trust. The insights gained from this analysis contribute to the broader field of crisis communication, providing valuable lessons for managing reputational challenges in future crises.

Future research should further explore the long-term effects of these strategies on stakeholder trust and organizational reputation, as well as the role of emerging communication technologies in crisis management. This study highlights the importance of adapting communication strategies to the evolving dynamics of high-stakes crises, emphasizing the need for transparency, empathy, and strategic face management.

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