

THE ROLE OF MICROBLOGS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE RED CROSS SOCIETY'S CREDIBILITY
CRISIS IN MAINLAND CHINA

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	4
CASE HISTORY	6
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	9
Crisis Communication.....	9
Diffusion of Innovations	19
Symbolic Interactionism	22
Research Questions	29
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	30
Content Analysis	30
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	34
Discussion	46
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	54
Limitations of the Study.....	54
Suggestions for Future Studies.....	54
Summary	56
REFERENCES	62

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Crisis Response Strategies during a Crisis.....	17
Table 2: Symbolic Interaction.....	25
Table 3: A Piece of a Post on Sina Weibo	31
Table 4: The frequency of the four themes, off-topic comment and the tone.....	34
Table 5: The Sina Weibo posts from Red Cross Society of China Related to the Guo Meimei Case, 2011	43
Table 6: The percentage of mobile device used.....	49
Table 7: The model of microblogs spreads information	50

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

We are currently in an era where people are waiting for a crisis to occur. Rapid changes in businesses are bringing a high degree of uncertain and complex interactions with customers and stakeholders, which increases the potential for the threat of a crisis in all types of organizations. “A crisis can occur at any time and place and happen to any organization. It is an unpredictable event which disrupts an organization’s routine pattern of day-to-day life” (Ray, 1999), therefore, crisis management experts should always be ready for a crisis.

According to a survey by the American Institute of Crisis Management (ICM) (2000), product and service recalls or defects have caused disputes between consumers and businesses, resulting in numerous legal against companies. This makes consumer “class action lawsuits” the most prevalent U.S. corporate crisis. These trends are forcing modern organizations to take the threat of crisis very seriously. As more diverse and complex crises arise, the question of how effectively companies will prevent and manage these crises has become an essential part of an organization’s strategic policy.

In the 1960s, Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan first proposed the concept of the “global village.” This village allowed individuals access to public information simultaneously. With the emergence of the Internet, individuals were able to take part in the global village online, through reading recent news or talking instantaneously with people from around the world.

With the emergence of new media and new technologies, organizations have started learning that they have competition from the Internet, which can spread news of a crisis quicker than an organization can.

Online, people can post comments or share articles about anything almost without limitation, through using email, websites, and blogs. The Internet is not a gatekeeper of information or a filtering barrier, as is the case with the traditional media channels. True or false information alike can be immediately transmitted with the click of a button to every corner of the world.

Microblogging is “a broadcast medium in the form of blogging.” Compared to a traditional blog, microblog is smaller, for example like Twitter, which allows users to post 140 characters or less. “Microblogs allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links. These small messages are sometimes called microposts.” (Microblogging, Wikipedia, 2012) Microblogs often are the start of popular or negative trends in the Internet community.

In China, the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), China’s largest charity, was involved in a corruption scandal concerning of misuse of public donations when several microposts from Guo Meimei, a young Chinese woman, were posted to the RCSC. Guo’s action aroused public attention about the RCSC donations. The RCSC was condemned by the whole society. Although the Guo Meimei postings occurred through a microblog, the impact of the posts expanded throughout China. This study

analyzed the role of microblogs in a Chinese crisis. Crises are increasingly important today as more and more organizations find themselves facing of one. By exploring the process of spreading information through microblogging in China, this study sought to provides a complete understanding of how microblogs impact people, as well as creating guidelines for public relations practitioners when dealing with crises spread through social media.

CASE HISTORY

Background

Guo Meimei, a 20-year old Chinese woman posted a microblog on Sina Weibo, China's Twitter-like social media site. The post showed Guo's lavish lifestyle, including her luxury sports car and designer handbags. Because of the title of the microblog, the post became a focus of controversy and caused raised eyebrows all over China. She claimed that she was a "commercial general manager" for the Chinese Red Cross Chamber of Commerce (Hong & FlorCruz, 2011).

It is hard for the average Chinese person to connect luxury cars and handbags to charitable organizations like the Red Cross. "The Red Cross seems really rich," one Sina Weibo user said after seeing Guo's post. Internet users quickly began denouncing Guo Meimei. In addition, people also suspected her of having a relationship with the vice president of the Chinese Red Cross, Guo Changjiang (Liu, 2011). At first, both the RCSC and Guo Meimei said they had nothing to do with each other, but Internet users soon found out about a group called the Red Cross of the Commercial Sector, which has ties to the Chinese Red Cross.

The Guo Meimei event aroused questions about the management of the Chinese Red Cross. As a public organization, the Chinese Red Cross's financial information

has always been a closely guarded secret; the public donates but never really knows where their money goes.

As public pressure grew, the RCSC, issued several statements on its official website, denying any ties with Guo Meimei and the Red Cross Chamber of Commerce. “The Red Cross China has always been against invalid information, and we hope people will treat the issue calmly and refrain from being manipulated” said Wang Wei, the managing deputy president of the RCSC in a press conference (Hong & FlorCruz, 2011).

However, RCSC admitted in the same statement that the existence of an organization named “China Red Cross Society of Commercial Systems,” whose name is similar to the Chinese Red Cross Chamber of Commerce. This organization is independent from but also advised by the RCSC (Hong & FlorCruz, 2011).

In an attempt to calm public anger, the RCSC announced that it had invited accounting institutions to audit the Chinese Red Cross Society of Commercial Systems and to investigate the problems revealed by the media. The RCSC also decided to suspend all the work of the Red Cross Society of Commercial Systems until the investigation was finished.

The RCSC opened an official microblog on Sina Weibo after the event with the goal of responding to the crisis with trust. A day after it launched, the online microblogs posted by the charity had been forwarded by more than 25,600 Sina microbloggers, and more than 61,800 followers had posted comments. It is worth noting that the RCSC’s announcement may have been perceived as less sincere since almost all of the public comments were negative (Xinhua English, 2011).

Timeline

All of the events below happened in June and July, 2011.

June 2: Guo Meimei blogged and flaunted her rich life style, quickly drawing attention from social media users.

June 21: Guo posted another microblog to clarify her identity, saying she was employed by a company called the Red Cross Chamber of Commerce, which had a working relationship with the RCSC.

June 22: The RCSC issued a public statement saying that the Red Cross does not have a Red Cross Chamber of Commerce, nor a general commercial manager position, and did not hire Guo Meimei. The Red Cross said they reserved the right to prosecute the responsible parties.

June 24: The RCSC issued another statement reemphasizing that they had nothing to do with Guo Meimei, and that they had reported her to the police.

July 1: The RCSC decided to suspend all the work of the Red Cross Society of Commercial Systems and invited accounting institutions to audit its finances.

July 7: The Beijing Public Security Bureau official posted a blog about the Guo Meimei incident notification, and said that Guo was not directly related with the Chinese Red Cross Society.

Results

As a result of the scandal, donations to the Chinese Red Cross declined more than fifty percent in June. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, until the end of the second quarter of 2011, there had been 2.65 billion RMB (Chinese Yuan) of donations, 10.2 million RMB of which were in June. In late June, most likely because of the Guo Meimei incident, there was a sharp drop in the amount of donations. In July, donations amounted to 500 million RMB. From June to August, donations declined by 86.6%. (Sina Weibo rich flaunting event, Baidu Baike, 2012)

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Crisis Communication

What is an organizational crisis? According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, an organizational crisis is the “specific, unexpected, and non-routine events or series of events that creates high levels of uncertainty and a threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals” (1998, p.231). Burnett provided a more comprehensive definition, as “a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, and its existential core” (1998, p.476). Crisis is a serious disruptive continuum, and Burnett noted that different crises should be treated by different responses (1998).

Coombs (2002) revealed two essential definitions of a crisis. First, a crisis can cause a potential disruption that leads to organizational dysfunction. Second, a crisis may result in damages to an organization’s reputation. A crisis is considered as a significant threat that may cause serious damage or have a negative impact on an organization, its stakeholders, or an industry if it is not handled properly. Coombs (2007a) further summarized that a crisis may result in three related threats: public safety, financial loss, and reputation loss. According to Coombs, these three threats

are clearly interrelated because public safety threats, such as a company making or distributing a harmful product, or an industrial industry, will cause financial and reputation loss while reputation loss also impacts organizational finances (Coombs, 2007a).

Communication is important in a crisis is because it can influence the organization and it can influence the way stakeholders perceive the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Coombs said crisis communication strategies were the symbolic resources of crisis management (1998).

As a crisis occurs, a spokesperson for the organization or a crisis manager often communicates with stakeholders by using language and text. Coombs (1995) and Benoit (1997) used message-centered strategies for organizational responses to a crisis, both of which provided guidelines for organizational decision-makers to use a variety of symbolic resources in crisis discourse to resolve the crisis and save the organization's business.

Coombs said crisis communication was a continual process, with message construction and dissemination efforts that must be in place in before, during, and after crises (Coombs, 2007a). He said crisis communication can be separated into three phases: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2007a). The pre-crisis phase is proactive, encompassing prevention and preparation. The crisis response phase is strategic response to a crisis, and the post-crisis phase is reactive, focusing on developing better ways to prepare for the next crisis and providing follow-up information to the stakeholders and continuing repair (Coombs, 2007a). The three-part view of crisis communication served as the organizing framework for this process.

Pre-crisis phase

The pre-crisis phase is seen as the warning stage, and some signs of approaching crisis may be included in this phase (Ray, 1999). Warning signs in this phase can be hard to recognize, but if the warning signs are recognized and properly managed, the crisis might be avoided. Even if the crisis cannot be avoided, preparation would help the organizations to be prepared. Effective crisis communication can alert practitioners as to what would trigger a crisis.

Ray (1999) also found that, because the threats were from internal and external sources, pre-crisis conditions should include both internal and external factors. Internal factors could include organizational operation policy, the perceptions of decision-makers, and the precondition of organizations, while external factors are outside environmental changes, such as opportunities and threats.

According to Coombs and Holladay (2010), “in the pre-crisis phase, crisis communication concentrates on locating and reducing risk.” (p. 25) Prevention is a priority in a pre-crisis phase (Coombs & Holladay, 2010), but preparation should still be a concern, just in case. This preparation includes training a spokesperson, setting up media relations, and improving crisis management skills of the crisis team.

González-Herrero and Pratt (1996) integrated issue management theory into crisis management theory using the idea of “a strategically planned activity.”(p. 96) The crisis-communications manager should notice the trends within the different issues, such as organizational environmental changes and stakeholders’ attitude changes. They set up a four-step symmetrical model for the proactive phase: issue management, planning prevention, crisis, and post crisis.

In the first step, issue management, crisis managers scan the organization’s environment to find trouble issues which may affect the organization in the future,

and then take actions to deal with it. Effective issue management would help the organization avoid the crisis. In the step two, the issue would be to take care. At the same time, crisis managers would be design a plan to prevent the crisis and monitor the issue. “When an issue is perceived to have passed the limits of issues management, when it is recognized that a crisis is imminent, or when it is projected that its intensity might change quickly, the organization should use its information-gathering and early warning systems to monitor it carefully.” (González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 96) The third step, crisis, requires a crisis communication plan. Crisis managers should make sure the crisis plan, spokesperson and crisis management team are ready. In post-crisis, the fourth step, organizations follow the issue and keep tracking related news in the media, continuing to pay attention to stakeholders, monitor the issue and provide feedback.

Spence et al. (2008) suggested that crisis communication is made up of two parts: alerting people to the conditions surrounding the crisis and taking active remedial measures to resolve the risks involved. In order to function properly, crisis communication strategies should first take place during the pre-crisis stage. Spence et al. also said researchers and practitioners needed to work toward a better understanding of the most effective means of communicating critical information in the pre-crisis stage (2008).

Crisis response

The crisis response includes the process of managing the crisis. In this phase, the company usually draws a great deal of media attention. The organization faces a complex situation accompanied by many challenges. Coombs said that this process can be divided into two sections: the initial crisis response and repairing corporate reputation (Coombs, 2007a).

The Initial Crisis Response

When a crisis occurs, practitioners should make sure that communication takes place with stakeholders, especially through the media so that stakeholders know the information is a priority. The goal is to make sure the stakeholders and the public get accurate information. Public relations practitioners should work on three principles in the initial response: quickness, consistency, and openness, which refers to the willingness to share information about the crisis with the public (Coombs, 2007a). If information is not shared openly, the public will obtain their information from other, sometimes inaccurate, sources. In this case, the organization would lose their ability to manage the crisis situation (Coombs, 1999).

Because of the demand for information created by the crisis, a quick response will fill the vacuum with facts, and reduce the opportunity for others to attack the organization. A quick response will also help the organization create the perception of controlling the crisis situation, which may be helpful in restoring the organizational confidence and reputation.

Accuracy is a key point when companies communicate with the public and media. Accurate information can increase the opportunity to win the public's trust, while dissemination of inaccurate information could make the situation worse.

Repairing Corporate Reputation

Coombs defined reputation as the public's perception of a company, which is widely recognized as one of the most valuable assets for a company. An organization must pay attention to reputation and protect it, and a good reputation will help to reduce the possibility of negative word-of-mouth comments and the resulting negative effect on business as well. When a crisis occurs, companies must develop responsive strategies to gain public understanding and restore reputation and trust (Coombs,

2007c).

Coombs offered a framework for crisis managers to protect organizational reputations during a crisis, which is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Preparing, managing, and evaluating crisis communication is one of the core functions of public relations used to protect an organization's reputation. Coombs (1999) developed Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) based on the principle that different types of crises require different crisis responses. SCCT was one framework Coombs proposed to maximize reputational protection during a crisis (1999, 2007). SCCT was "designed to follow the use of instructing information," which "tells stakeholders what, if anything, to do to protect themselves physically from a crisis and what the organization is doing to prevent a repeat of the crisis" (Coombs, 2004, p.266). Coombs said the organization should first classify the crisis, and evaluate the likely variables which affect the organization, then select the most suitable crisis response strategies. The "protective powers" of an appropriate crisis response strategy should be compatible with the level of reputational damage generated by the crisis situation (Coombs, 2006).

Coombs and Holladay concluded that organizational crises are highly ambiguous and surprising events for organizations and publics. The organization seeks causes and makes attributions, such as causal analyses leading to the public's judgment of whether or not the organization was responsible for the crisis. The longer a stakeholder considers if an organization is responsible for the event, the more negative of an image the organization gets (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Coombs also found that “attributions of crisis responsibility are negatively related to [positive] perceptions of organizational reputation” (2004, p. 271). Thus, choosing the correct response strategy for a specific crisis is essential.

Coombs classified the crisis types into three categories based on attributions of crisis responsibility:

1. **Victim Cluster:** these types of crises are always natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence or product tampering. The organization is also a victim of the crisis.
2. **Accidental Cluster:** organizational actions unintentionally lead to the crisis.
3. **Preventable Cluster:** the organization takes inappropriate actions, or violates regulations. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002)

SCCT crisis response strategies are based on the attributed crisis responsibility. Coombs pointed out that SCCT provides a crisis manager with three basic options for using crisis response strategies to match the requisite level of crisis responsibility, the first of which is to deny, stating that there is no crisis to eliminate any reputational threat. Denial is used in the victim cluster.

The second is to diminish, that is to alter the attributions stakeholders create about the crisis in order to reduce the reputational damage from the crisis situation. Here, the crisis manager seeks to highlight the unintentional nature of the crisis and minimize damage associated with the crisis. This strategy should be used in the accident cluster.

The last response is to deal with the crisis, or rebuild, protect, or repair the organization’s reputation. The organization offers a wide range of measures of remediation that seem to accept responsibility and attend to victim concerns. This

should be used in the intentional cluster (Coombs, 2006).

Coombs presented a more comprehensive SCCT model in 2007 about the crisis responsibility that stakeholders will attribute to the organization. “A victim crisis generates the same reputational threat as an accident crisis when there is a history of crises and/or an unfavorable prior relationship reputation” (p. 168). The crisis history would increase the amount of crisis responsibility attributed to an organization; therefore, the possibility of reputation threat would also be amplified.

When stakeholders feel their trust has been violated, their feelings of anger and sense of “*schadenfreude* (drawing pleasure from the pain of others)” (Coombs, 2007c, p. 169) about the organization will increase. Coombs further suggested that these negative emotions can result in stakeholders holding negative perceptions about the organization and spreading them through word of mouth or ending the relationships with the organization (2007c). “The more negative the reputation, the less likely stakeholders are to report behavioral intentions that are supportive of an organization” (Coombs, 2007c, p. 169). Therefore, the reputational damage is between the organizations and their stakeholders. Once the relationship is damaged, behavioral changes, such as ceasing to buy products or boycotting, would occur.

Secondary crisis communication

According to Coombs (2007c), a crisis can affect an organization’s reputation by the information stakeholders received from the organization, from the news media, and by the second-hand information, such as word of mouth and weblogs. Word of mouth can include comments about the organizations on the Internet and other social media. Negative word of mouth can ruin organization’s reputation and damage future business (Coombs, 2007c).

Coombs developed a strategy to help crisis managers dealing with secondary

crisis response strategies:

1. **Reminder:** Telling stakeholders about the organization's good history. This was used to switch stakeholders' attention from the current negative crisis to the positive past works.
2. **Ingratiation:** Organizations praise stakeholders who discuss their past positive works.
3. **Victimage:** Organizations emphasize that they were also a victim of the crisis.

Coombs said that bolstering can offer a potential opportunity for managers to acquire stakeholders' sympathy (Coombs, 2007c).

Table 1: Crisis Response Strategies during a Crisis

<i>Primary crisis response strategies</i>
Deny crisis response strategies
<i>Attack the accuser:</i> Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.
<i>Denial:</i> Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
<i>Scapegoat:</i> Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.
Diminish crisis response strategies
<i>Excuse:</i> Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.
<i>Justification:</i> Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
Rebuild crisis response strategies
<i>Compensation:</i> Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
<i>Apology:</i> Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
<i>Secondary crisis response strategies</i>
Bolstering crisis response strategies
<i>Reminder:</i> Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.
<i>Ingratiation:</i> Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.
<i>Victimage:</i> Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

The data was adapted from Coombs, 2007c.

These strategies are applied to protect organizations against negative reactions during a crisis. The denial strategies try to remove ties between the organization and the crisis. Diminish strategies focus on control of the situation and changing people's perception. The rebuild strategies attempt to restore the image and reputation of the organization (Coombs, 2007c).

Social media plays a key role in secondary crisis communication and organizational reputation. Twitter users prefer to share news more than non-social media users. People who use both Twitter and blogs were exposed twice to the messages and thus processed it more thoroughly. Twitter users were less likely to boycott the organization or spread negative word-of-mouth communication about the organization than people who preferred reading newspaper articles and blogs (Schultza, Utza, & Goritz, 2011).

Schultza, Utza, and Goritz first focused on the use of social media in crisis communication. They extended the role of SCCT to different media, analyzing the effects of crisis communication through the Internet and traditional media. They found that the choice of medium resulted in different effects on reputation, secondary crisis communication, and reactions. They also found that crisis communication through Twitter led to less negative crisis reactions than blogs and newspaper articles (Schultza, Utza, & Goritz, 2011).

For successful crisis communication it might be important to address Twitter users. Organizations should pay more attention to Twitter, and strategically select their media choice and the target groups' media use (Schultza, Utza, & Goritz, 2011).

Post-crisis phase

Coombs (2007b) suggested that post-crisis communication is “a robust area of research in communication and management” (p.135). In the post-crisis phase, the

organization returns to business as usual. The crisis is no longer the focal point of the company's management, but still requires some attention. In this phase, reputation repair should be continued, and follow-up communication is also required (Coombs, 2007a). Researchers developed many theories to explore crisis response strategies and follow-up communication, one of which is image restoration.

Diffusion of Innovations

With the development of advanced technologies, practitioners have had more need for timely, accurate, and effective communication. Online communication has influenced how organizations communicate with the media and publics. The Internet has become more accessible to organizations and to their publics (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Diffusion of innovations theory was first studied by Ryan and Gross who studied diffusion of hybrid seed corn among Iowa farmers in 1943. During the 1950s, the studies of diffusion of innovation spread to other social sciences, such as marketing and political science (Singhal & Quinlan, 2008). Gabriel Tarde articulated some of the key concepts of diffusion of innovations, including "opinion leadership, the S-curve of diffusion, and the role of socioeconomic status in interpersonal diffusion." (Rogers & Singhal, 1996, p. 410-411) Everett M. Rogers provided a general model of diffusion of innovation theory in his 1962 book *Diffusion of Innovations*.

Rogers (2003) claimed that diffusion is a special type of communication "in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (2003, p. 5). The messages transmitted were designed to convey a new idea, reduce uncertainty, and provide information. When new ideas were diffused, a social change occurred as a consequence.

According to Rogers (2003), there are four main elements in the diffusion of innovations theory: the innovation, communication channels, time, and a social system. An innovation occurs when a new idea, concept or object is presented to individuals within a social system. Innovation is “an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 12).

Rogers (2003) also pointed that a communication channel was the way to exchange information from one individual to another. Mass media channels are rapid, efficient, can reach large target audiences, and can create awareness of the existence of innovation among potential adopters.

Rogers and Kincaid (1981) said that an individual’s behavior is influenced by his or her relationships with others, and the interpersonal communication channel persuades effectively (Rogers, 2003). This is the reason that interactive communication through the Internet is important in diffusion of innovations. Based on Rogers’s theory, Pētersone (2007) said that the goal of diffusion was persuasion and behavioral changes in people of the non-industrial world. “The mass media is used to create awareness and knowledge about the new idea, while interpersonal channels are employed when the goals of communication are attitude and behavior changes about the innovation”(Pētersone, 2007, p.6).

Time is involved in the diffusion process because an individual requires a period of time from first receiving the innovation to adoption or rejection. The social structure impacted the diffusion of innovation in some ways such as social structures, system norms, opinion leaders, and change agents (Rogers, 2003).

The Internet can serve as a crisis communication tool when organizations use it in crisis response (Perry et al, 2003). According to Taylor and Perry (2005), the Internet can “support strategic communication efforts, inform, seek opinions and positions

from relevant publics, and most importantly, serve as a crisis communication tool” for organizations attempting “to prevent and minimize crisis” (p. 210).

The Internet can be used to help organizations scan an environment to alert and avoid a crisis. The Internet also helps organizations collect information to adjust their policies and actions to prevent crisis. Because of the existence of the Internet, many traditional crisis tactics, such as news releases, memos, and third-party endorsements, can be accommodated easily and effectively (Perry et al, 2003).

Taylor and Perry (2005) noted two benefits of using the Internet, the first being the frequent and consistent updating of webpage content. This allows for an evolving response to key issues, which can greatly help an organization integrate and define the crisis. When crises occur, organizations can quickly issue responses to minimize public concern.

The second benefit is that the Internet provides both one- and two-way communication to stakeholders, because stakeholders demand an immediate and thorough response from organizations.

Two-way communication gives the organization the additional opportunity to directly communicate with visitors and get feedback quickly and accurately. This provided media representatives’ insight into public response to the crisis. Moreover, links to audiences and the public provide easy access to the important webpages that offer a differing point of view where people can get the entire story. The use of the new media tactics would greatly help organizations to rebuild consumer trust during the crisis (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Neil said that in the process of crisis communication the Internet played an important role (2000). On the one hand, the Internet is an important and indispensable tool in the crisis communication; on the other hand, the Internet can be the first source

of a crisis, such as by spreading Internet rumors (Neil, 2000). Neil (2000) said the Internet can act as the “trigger” for business crises. González-Herrero and Smith (2008) explained the facilitator as “an agent that accelerates the crises news cycle and breaks geographic boundaries” (p.145). The Internet affected the world discussion about the topic, acting like the mainstream media but much faster in message delivery. With the Internet, a crisis can be accelerated extraordinarily quickly. The Internet can also be a trigger to cause a crisis, through hacking or cyber-terrorism.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism was based on studies of human group life and human conduct. George Herbert Mead is well known as the founder of symbolic interactionism (Manis & Meltzer, 1972). He first accurately defined the concept of symbolic interaction, which he called “social behaviorism” in *Mind, Self and Society* (1934). Blumer (1969) used the term “symbolic interactionism” and defined three simple premises of symbolic interactionism: “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them,” “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows,” and “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2). Blumer claimed that human behavior is like a social product created by many kinds of factors working on humans.

Factors can be stimuli, attitudes, concerns, motivations, personal perceptions and those psychological and sociological particular ones. Symbolic interactionism refers to the meanings that humans have for a thing: recognition, personal psychological accretion and perception. Symbolic interactionism applied itself to “respect the nature

of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect” (Blumer, 1969, p.60).

Manis and Meltzer (1972) further updated symbolic interactionism to six basic theoretical propositions:

1. Mind, self, and society are most usefully viewed as processes of human and interhuman conduct.
2. Language is the mechanism for the rise of mind and self.
3. Mind is an importation of the social process—that is, of interaction--within the individual.
4. Human beings construct their behavior in the course of its execution, rather than responding mechanically to either external stimuli or such internal forces as drives, needs, or motives.
5. Human conduct is carried on primarily by the defining of situations in which one acts.
6. Socialization of a human being both enmeshes him in society and frees him from society. The individual with a self is not passive but can employ his self in interactions which may result in behavior divergent from group definitions. (p. 575)

Symbolic interactionism “clearly [represents] the most sociological of social psychologies,” because it indicates the interactive relationship between individuals and society. Symbolic interactionism relates to social derivation of man’s unique attributes, showing a microcosmic society integrated by mind and self. It describes the process of human society developing into a common world. It also shows that human society is like symbolic interaction because humans

interact with each other and not only respond to actions, but also interpret or define their actions by using some symbols (Manis & Meltzer, 1972).

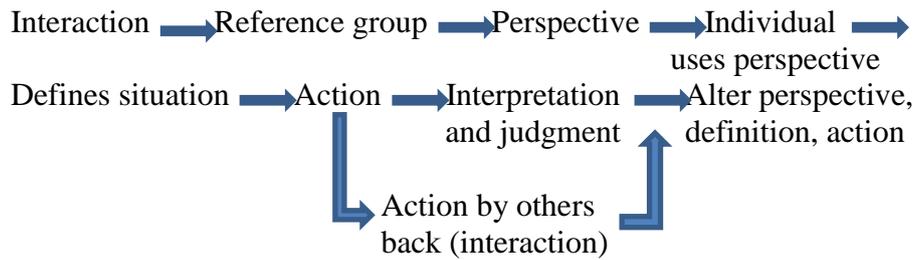
Faules and Alexander applied symbolic interaction with communication to enhance interpersonal behavior (1978). They looked at symbolic interaction from a sociological-psychological perspective and found that symbolic interaction tries to find the four activities of interacting individuals, which are negotiation, process, emergence, and holism. They also derived three important positions: “one’s interpretation and perception of environment depend on communication;” “communication is guided by and guides the concepts of self, role, and situations;” and “communication involves complex interaction” (p. 15-19).

Charon (1989) said that as a perspective, symbolic interactionism is a guideline to define what will influence human action. While an attitude is difficult to change, a perspective is dynamic and changeable. If one does not know another’s perspective, he or she will not know the behavior the other will take. As Shibutani said:

A perspective is an ordered view of one’s world--what is taken for granted about the attributes of various objects, events, and human nature. It is an order of things remembered and expected as well as things actually perceived, an organized conception of what is plausible and what is possible; it constitutes the matrix through which one perceives his environment (1955, p. 564).

The environment surrounding people includes social objects, symbols, and language. These three factors are perspectives with premises to interpret a situation, and then cause people’s later action. Charon summarized former researches to get the work of the perspective and symbolic interaction:

Table 2: Symbolic Interaction



The data was taken from Charon, 1989. p.26.

Shott (1979) brought the factor of emotion into symbolic interaction theory. He discussed how emotions enter into the socialization processes. MacKinnon (1994) presented affect control theory in symbolic interactionism. He stated that the affect control theory sets twenty-four propositions with respect to emotions.

Symbols, Language, and Affective Meaning:

1. Social interaction is represented in accordance with the social cognitions of actors and factors, which means external stimuli and the human capacity to manage symbols.
2. Language is the main symbolic system as the special means of cognition expression.
3. All social cognitions cause affective associations which might result in quantitative or qualitative actions.
4. Affective associations can receive kinds of dimensions of response.

Cognitive Constraints:

5. Events are settled on the interpretation of the situation and identification of the participants.
6. Grammatical structures organize the cognition of social events.

Affective Response and Control:

7. People tend to be affective when they react to a social event. The reaction always lies in the meanings and act in the event.
8. People try to experience events that are as close as possible to fundamental sentiments.
9. If people fail to confirm fundamental sentiments, the new sentiments will be confirmed to redefine the situation.

Event Assessment:

10. Events are categorized by the defined situation.
11. Grammatical structures influence the specific case of event recognition.
12. The possibility of event interpretations has a converse relationship with the affective disturbances they produce.
13. The perceived possibility of events has a converse relationship with the affective disturbances they produce.

Event Production:

14. A person's actions are relatively impacted by the situational identities of self and other object.
15. Cognitive constraints limit the actions to a set of relevant grammars, using the linguistic metaphor.
16. The possibility that a person will engage in one feasible behavior rather than another has a converse relationship with the affective disturbances which the behaviors produce.

17. In the process of confirming social identities, people engage in the corresponding appropriate role acts.

Emotions:

18. People's emotion to an event reveals the outcome of the event and the personal identity they are holding.

19. People are more like to maintain emotions of their salient identities.

20. Emotion displays help people understand the identity experience process of each other.

Cognitive Revisions:

21. Social labeling passed down the credibility when they are re-identified.

22. Dispositional inferences give more credibility by assigning new identities that are validated by the past events.

23. Dispositional inferences are a process of re-identification.

24. When a person's emotion is corresponding to his conduct, observers will give up reassessments of an actor's character.

Many researchers have already demonstrated that an online community is an important social construct which significantly relies on the new media (Fernback, 2007). Fernback (2007) found that people's ideas about community can be formed both in online interactions and real community interactions. But people were more active when they had a sense of propinquity or defined in their online experience, and most of them held ambivalent attitudes about their experience. Because the online community was a virtual community that disengages from the real world, it was sentimental and anti-democratic.

Soule found the framework of symbolic interaction clearly became a

necessary communication plan in a crisis situation. She believed symbolic interaction was “the ideal theory to study crisis communication” (p.33, 2010), because the fundamental tenets of symbolic interaction theory are clear in crisis situations that require a communication plan as useful. She provided three signs that prove the emergence of symbolic interaction during a crisis: individuals who have experienced similar situations will feel strong involvement during a crisis; when people have similar experiences, they will be more influenced by interactions than others who have not; messages can be changed during a crisis. She also summarized a framework of people’s reaction to a social event in social media: change of behavior, polarization, effectiveness of social media, defining the crux of the problem, and alternate utility of comment forum.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What was the online public's response to the Guo Meimei crisis as obtained from microblog posts?

RQ2. What public relations strategies were used by the Red Cross Society of China in response to the case involving Guo Meimei?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis

Content analyses provide both logical and statistical bases to help understand the process of how messages are created, and which can be seen as a methodological tool that bridges qualitative and quantitative research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Content analysis was chosen for this study because, when coding the collected data into the defined units, the content analysis method allowed qualitative data to be countable. Therefore, qualitative data can be changed into quantitative data. For the purpose of understanding how microblogging works in a crisis situation, microblog posts related to the Guo Meimei event were analyzed.

Sina Weibo is a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, and has dominated the Chinese microblogging market since 2009. According to Sina Weibo, users are allowed to post a 140-Chinese-characters limit text, images, sounds or videos. Users can also add posts to the writer's timeline, which is marked by "Follow," and post comments, pictures, or videos relating to the real time "Hot Topic;" When mentioning or talking to other people, users use "@Username" format, add hashtags with "#HashName#" format, follow other people to make his or her posts appear in users' own timeline,

re-post with “//@Username.” “V certification” is Sina Weibo’s unique marketing promotion strategy: users can upload personal information such as ID numbers to get verification if the user is a celebrity. Sina also provides many mobile platforms to access Sina Weibo, including Android, Blackberry OS, iOS, Symbian S60, Windows Mobile, and Windows Phone (Wikipedia, Sina Weibo, 2011).

Table 3: A Piece of a Post on Sina Weibo



The table was taken from real time Sina Weibo, 4/26/2012.

Based on research from Manis and Meltzer (1972), language is considered the main mechanism that plays an important role and impacts people’s minds and selves. Soule (2010) used Manis and Meltzer’s language theory to examine public reaction to a crisis in social media platform associated with the United Breaks Guitars crisis in 2009. The findings indicated that public’s response to a crisis when using social media could be divided into five themes: “change of behavior, polarization, effectiveness of social media, defining the crux of the problem, and alternate utility of comment forum.”(Soule, 2010, p. 35) Therefore, the first research question focused

on microblog users' language during a crisis. Based on Soule's research, the researcher applied Soule's framework to the Guo Meimei case. The researcher considered the significant special features of the Guo Meimei case and the differences between Chinese and American society.

To address these research questions, a content analysis of the users' reactions was conducted. The researcher examined the posts related to the crisis randomly. A sample size of 384 posts were calculated using Wimmer and Dominick's (2009) sample size calculator. The confidence level and confidence interval were 95% and five. The collection dates were based on the timeline of the crisis, from June 21, 2011 to July 14, 2011, one week after the last statement that the RCSC issued.

The researcher chose keywords "Guo Meimei," "Guo Meimei crisis," and "Chinese Red Cross" to search related posts during the crisis. The researcher harvested 1,167,735 "Guo Meimei" related posts, 186,719 "Guo Meimei crisis" posts, and 301,113 "Chinese Red Cross" posts, totaling 1,655,567 pieces of data.

The researcher randomly selected page ten to code. According to the percentage of the three keywords, the first 271 comments started from the tenth page using the keywords "Guo Meimei" were coded. The rest were done in the same manner, forty-three posts were taken from "Guo Meimei crisis," and seventy posts were chosen from "Chinese Red Cross."

The RCSC responded to this crisis on its Sina Weibo account, each post received millions of comments, and the researcher recorded all the posts that related to or alluded to the Guo Meimei event.

Two coders were employed in the coding process. Both were familiar with Sina Weibo and understood Chinese. When coding the related posts, the coders were able to analyze people's responses, which included text, pictures, and multimedia

information such as videos and songs. Some of the posts were original, and some were forwarded posts with new comments. People interacted with others by this “post and forwarded” process, and that is how symbolic interaction was observed.

The Holsti Inter-Coder Reliability formula was applied to evaluate the agreement of the two coders. The formula $[PA_0=2A/(n_1+n_2)]$ was used, where “ PA_0 ” was the proportion agreement observed, equals reliability, “ A ” is equal to the number of agreements of the two coders’ items, and “ n_1 ”, “ n_2 ” are the coded items of the two coders (Neuendorf, 2002). The coders reached agreement on 94.53 percent of the coding. After discussion the disputed microblogging posts were recoded and the two coders reached agreement.

The symbolic interaction theory, SCCT, and diffusion of innovation theory were used to distinguish the meanings of these comments. The content of these 384 posts identified themes into four main themes: general attitude, personal behavior, alternative actions, different perspectives to this event, and plus off-topic comments.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

RQ1

The sample of 384 posts was sorted into five themes: general attitude, personal behavior, alternative actions, different perspectives to this event, and off-topic comments. The “tone of response” referred to the feeling of the individual toward the Guo Meimei event.

Table 4: The frequency of the four themes, off-topic comment and the tone.

Category N=384	Description	%
General Attitude(n=180)	Supportive of the Chinese Red Cross(n=1) Supportive of the Philanthropy Industry(n=8) Negative about the Chinese Red Cross(n=87) Negative about Guo Meimei(n=76) Negative about the Philanthropy Industry(n=8)	46.9
Personal Behavior(n=194)	Media Responsibility Especially involving CCTV(n=29) Shared Similar Negative Events(n=37) Shared Other Scandals about the Chinese Red Cross(n=34)	50.5

	Shared Positive Examples(n=15) Questions about the Chinese Red Cross(n=13) Questions about the Government and Appeals for More Attention(n=20) Post News and outside Links(n=32) Guo May Be Performing a Public Stunt(n=2) Questions Guo's Background(n=16) Public Rights(n=5)	
Alternative Actions(n=73)	Lost Confidence and Donation(n=18) Shame on the Chinese Red Cross(n=15) Suggesting Further Investigation(n=19) Considering Guo as a "Hero"(n=18) Effectiveness of Sina Weibo(n=4)	19.0
Different Perspectives to the event(n=12)	Failed Supervision(n=8) Political Institution Problem(n=5) Advice and Suggestions(n=8)	0.03
Off topic Comments(n=39)		0.10
Tone of Microbloggings(n=187)	Sarcastic(n=87) Neutral(n=6) Expletive and critical(n=94)	

General Attitude.

The “general attitude” theme showed users’ attitudes toward Guo Meimei, the Chinese Red Cross, and the philanthropy industry. A majority of the posters objected to the Chinese Red Cross and Guo Meimei. Many people even created videos, songs, and poems to satirize both of them.

Supportive of the Chinese Red Cross. Only one post was supportive toward the Chinese Red Cross. This individual thought people were too intense in criticizing the

Chinese Red Cross because it is a non-profit undertaking which claimed to benefit society. The post suggested people should be more rational rather than criticizing both parties.

Supportive of the Philanthropy Industry. Generally speaking, people who expressed this attitude toward the philanthropy industry also had a supportive view of the Chinese Red Cross. According to the coding, this group of people still trusted and sided with philanthropy, even though they held negative attitude about the Chinese Red Cross.

Negative about the Chinese Red Cross. A large number of negative comments and posts were directed toward the Chinese Red Cross. Users expressed their anger and disappointment about the Chinese Red Cross. Some of them claimed that they lost their confidence in the Chinese Red Cross, and even to the entire philanthropy industry.

Negative about Guo Meimei. For this theme, all the posts were blatantly critical of Guo Meimei. Users did not cover their disgust of and abhorrence for her, because they considered Guo an embezzler.

Negative about the Philanthropy Industry. For some individuals, Guo's event had successfully cast doubt on the entire philanthropic industry. They had doubts about other philanthropic organizations and said they had a problem with the financial disparity.

Personal Behavior

Compared to other themes, personal behavior indicated what people used Sina Weibo to do. For example, people have posted questions about “who is Guo Meimei?” or “What is she doing with Chinese Red Cross?” Some used Sina Weibo to share more information they found, such as more of RCSC's financial problems.

Media Responsibility Especially involving CCTV. A group of individuals blamed media especially China Central Television (CCTV) for diverting the public's attention purposely from the Guo Meimei event to other news which they believed was unimportant. They asked for news media's continuous attention to the event so that it could be settled quickly.

Shared Similar Negative Events. Some people used Sina Weibo to share other stories; in this part these stories were other events of injustice that were similar to the Guo Meimei event.

Shared Other Scandals about the Chinese Red Cross. Users here exposed more RCSC scandals, their posts were filled with anger at the situation.

Shared Positive Examples. Users here shared some good examples about the RCSC, and even other governmental departments. Some of them hoped to arouse their sense of responsibility; the others only intend to humiliate Chinese Red Cross.

Questions about Chinese Red Cross. A few people said they expected the Chinese Red Cross to be held responsible for the Guo Meimei event. Their questions were more concentrated on questioning the China Red Cross's mode of operation and management of funds.

Questions about the Government and appeals for more attention. People were accused the government of lack of supervision over RCSC. Because of the closed relationship between the Chinese Red Cross and the government, many people thought the government should also be held responsible for Guo's scandal.

Questions Guo's Background. Questions arose immediately about who Guo Meimei really was. People were eager to know her relationship with the Chinese Red Cross, where her money came from, and what her mother's job was.

Guo May Be Performing a Publicity Stunt. Two comments cast doubt about

Guo's purpose for being a well-known microblogger. According to Sina Weibo's current information about Guo's identity, these two users said they believed the whole event was a publicity stunt, and the Chinese Red Cross had been used as a stepping-stone.

Public Rights. A few individuals posted comments asking for public rights. These posts mainly demanded their right to understand where Chinese Red Cross funds went.

Post News and Outside Links. Some individuals used Sina Weibo as a place to share some outside information, such as comments on media programs, links to other news media, critics' blogs, or progress in resulting the event.

Discussing Effectiveness of Weibo. Four posts claimed that, with the help of social media sites like Weibo, people can find and expose serious issues, making them public. One of these comments discussed how this crisis had damaged the Chinese Red Cross's reputation by citing the great numbers of re-posts of the RCSC's official microblogs.

Alternative Actions

This theme included statements or appeals to Sina Weibo's users to change behaviors or take action in regard to Chinese Red Cross. For example, some people claimed that they would never donate money to Chinese Red Cross again. Others called on the government to supervise more stringently.

Lost Confidence in Chinese Red Cross and Will Not Donate in Future. These were the worst comments about RCSC. The comments proclaimed that the Guo Meimei event could convince someone never to donate again. Many posts like this not only stated personal opinions, but also encouraged others to "boycott" the Chinese Red Cross and promise to spread the word, "I will never donate to Chinese Red Cross

anymore!” and “People who still donate money to them are foolish and flush their money away.”

Shame on the Chinese Red Cross. These were some abusive comments about the Chinese Red Cross. These posters thought Chinese Red Cross was the shame of the whole country and this event was certainly a stain on the conscience of the Chinese Red Cross.

Suggesting Further Investigation. This group of people expressed a demand for truth. They suggested the government should intervene and investigate further, especially in financial details and flow of capital, and that the Chinese Red Cross must issue the results of the investigation to the public.

Considering Guo as a “Hero.” An interesting observation was that some people said they considered Guo Meimei as a kind of “hero” for her unintentional microblogging that brought the dark side of Chinese Red Cross to light. They hoped for more “Guo Meimei” posts. These posts mainly pointed out willingness to expose “key figures.”

Different Perspectives on the Event.

Failed supervision. Some people believed that the Guo Meimei event just revealed the defects of the Chinese Red Cross’s self-supervision and the failure of government regulation.

Political Institution Problem. Many people commented on politics, for example, discussing the rationality of the current Chinese philanthropic system and management of Chinese government. They believe an institutional innovation is needed and that government institutions should be more just and more transparent, not only the Chinese Red Cross, but all governmental institutions.

Advice and Suggestions. Some people gave suggestions and advice for the

Chinese Red Cross to help with the current situation. They posted “what Chinese Red Cross should do” and included implications for future.

Off-topic Comments

In this section, users’ posts were not directly related to the Guo Meimei event, but these posts can be summarized. For example, a girl talked about Guo’s luxury handbags with her friend. She said she has never heard of those luxury brands before, but because of Guo Meimei, she knew them now. She thought because of the scandal, those luxury brands were promoted and more accessible to the public.

Tone of Microblogs

Because the Guo Meimei event dealt with some of the most sensitive issues in Chinese society, people were very emotional and sentimental. This was very clear to see from the posts, especially when people were talking about Guo Meimei and the Chinese Red Cross. Most people expressed their feelings by using some extreme words, such as “Guo Meimei should go to hell,” or “Chinese Red Cross is like an abscess; that Guo Meimei event is just a drop of pus extruded from the abscess.” There were people who did not participate in the abuse, but the tone of most of these comments about the Chinese Red Cross and Guo Meimei were extremely negative.

Sarcastic

Those posts clearly had negative tones; 87 posts included negative responses about the Chinese Red Cross or Guo Meimei. Usually they did not criticize directly but wrote doggerels, made videos or songs, or kuso. One of the most forwarded posts was named “Shameless” and was a selection of music television created by user luke6. His song represented most people’s feelings toward Guo Meimei and the Chinese Red Cross.

Neutral

Only six posts demonstrated a neutral tone about the Guo Meimei event. These people were neither supportive nor negative toward Guo Meimei and the Chinese Red Cross. They encouraged the public to think about this event in a rational way. They provided some further questions about transparency in the philanthropy industry and commented on flaunted wealth and hate for the rich, the relationships between corruption and the government officials, and human flesh search and network tyranny. Human flesh search is “a primarily Chinese Internet phenomenon of massive researching using Internet media such as blogs and forums. It has generally been stigmatized as being for the purpose of identifying and exposing individuals to public humiliation.” (Wikipedia, Human flesh search, 2012)

Expletive and Critical

More than half the people (94) using Sina Weibo directly expressed their anger. They were free to present their anger and disappointment by using Sina Weibo. Most of them used very strong expletives to convey their feelings, such as “Fuck Guo Meimei/Chinese Red Cross!” and “What the hell is the Chinese Red Cross doing?”

RQ2

After the crisis broke, the Chinese Red Cross issued statements attempting to clarify the situation. The key leaders of the Chinese Red Cross also conducted interviews to explain they had no relationship with Guo Meimei, but these strategies didn't work. Public outrage became more and more serious. It became clear that the sincerity of Chinese Red Cross was not enough. The crisis occurred on June 21th, and one day later the RCSC released their first announcement, taking a tough stance denying any relationship with Guo and giving no further explanation. The China Red Cross did not realize that the nature of the event was very serious and would raise so

much public anger. Coombs (2007) said that when responding to a crisis initially, practitioners should be quick, be accurate, and be consistent. However, the China Red Cross failed to check these factors carefully and failed to follow them.

Following Coombs's crisis stages (2007), the process of the Guo Meimei crisis could be divided into three stages: initial, burst, and post. The crisis happened on June 21 and quickly attracted the public's attention. On June 22, the Chinese Red Cross issued their first public statement claiming that they did not have a relationship with Guo Meimei. They also said the Red Cross reserved the right to prosecute the responsible parties.

On June 24th, they issued a second statement saying they had no relationship with Guo Meimei and they had reported this case to Beijing Police. This area can be seen as the initial time of the crisis. An analysis of the Chinese Red Cross's statements indicates clearly that they adopted the denial crisis response strategy. Their report to the police was meant to clarify the relationship with Guo; here the scapegoat strategy was used. The RCSC wanted to persuade the public to blame Guo Meimei instead of taking blame themselves.

However, two simple and insincere statements aroused serious public anger. The public continued to question Chinese Red Cross and this generated numerous mass media reports. Under public pressure, on July 4, the Chinese Red Cross opened an official microblog in Sina Weibo and posted its first four posts:

1. "International Red Cross Movement originated in the field ambulance. Henry Dunant, a Swiss, is the founder of the movement. On June 24th, 1859, the Austrian army fought against Sardinia (one of the Italian states) in northern Italy. More than 30 million soldiers were involved, and the war was extremely tragic. Henry Dunant mobilized local residents to treat numerous wounded

soldiers indiscriminately no matter where they were from.”

2. “Driven by Henry Dunant’s recommendations, the International Wound Committee was founded in 1863, which marked the birth of the International Red Cross. The International Red Cross has evolved into the oldest and largest global humanitarian movement and has 186 members since it was founded.”
3. “Red Cross Society of China was founded in 1904. In January 1912, Red Cross Society of China was recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross officially, and joined the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1919. After the founding of People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Red Cross was restructured and admitted as the sole legitimate national Red Cross in China in 1952.”
4. “China Red Cross Society Secretary-General, Wang Rupeng answers public’s question: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_51018c580100s8rd.html.”

On the same day the last microblog was posted, comments reached more than 2,000, and the post was forwarded more than 1,000 times. However, the comments after each microblogging were almost all negative. (Wang, 2011)

Table 5: The Sina Weibo posts from Red Cross Society of China Related to the Guo Meimei Case, 2011

	Time	Content
1	July 4 19:25	International Red Cross Movement originated in the field ambulance. Henry Dunant, a Swiss, was the founder of the movement. On June 24 th , 1859, the Austrian army fought against Sardinia (one of the Italian states) in north Italy, more than 30 million soldiers were involved, and the war was extremely tragic. Henry Dunant mobilized local residents to treat numerous wounded soldiers indiscriminately no matter where they were from
2	July 4 19:26	Driven by Henry Dunant’s recommendations, the International Wound Committee was founded in 1863, which marked the birth of the International Red Cross. The International Red Cross has evolved into the oldest and largest global humanitarian movement. It has 186

		members.
3	July 4 19:28	Red Cross Society of China was founded in 1904. In January 1912, Red Cross Society of China was recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross officially, and joined the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1919. After the founding of People's Republic of China, the Chinese Red Cross was restructured and admitted as the sole legitimate national Red Cross in China in 1952.
4	July 4 19:28	China Red Cross Society Secretary-General, Wang Rupeng answered publics question: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_51018c580100s8rd.html .
5	July 6 17:03	The Chinese Red Cross official microblog has been formally launched. We are very welcome your attention and communication. We will take a more open mind to listen to your comments and suggestions.
6	July 6 17:06	We sincerely thank you for your care and supervision; we hope to continue to have your support and trust in future. We will be cautious and pragmatic, continuing to carry forward the humanitarian spirit, committed to the protection of human life and health, passing love and money to the most needy people.
7	July 6 17:38	In order to implement the central requirements on clean government, on July 6, the Red Cross Society of China held the Independent Commission Against Work Conference of National Red Cross system in Beijing. They met the requirements of the National Red Cross system and to further strengthening good governance, building systems to ensure openness and transparency of the Red Cross work, and promote the healthy development of the China Red Cross. http://www.redcross.org.cn/zx/yw/201107/t20110706_42673.html
8	July 7 10:53	The National Audit Working Group Business Systems has been stationed in the Red Cross audit. We will promptly to notify the audit results when it comes out.
9	July 7 10:56	Honest work for the National Red Cross Conference was held in Beijing on July 6, 2011. Hua Jianmin, the vice chairman of the National People's Conference Standing Committee and the president of Chinese Red Cross, pointed out that honesty and uprightness is the lifeblood of the Red Cross Society. The China Red Cross should be held in a serious manner, with the strict requirements, strict system and discipline to do the future work.
10	July 7 21:41	On July 7, the Chinese Red Cross promised the public to keep donated funds and materials open, keep financial management transparent, use open bidding, and keep the distribution and use of funding open. http://www.redcross.org.cn/zx/yw/201107/t20110707_42677.html
11	July 7 21:56	Beijing police announced that Guo Meimei is not directly associated with the Red Cross Society of China. http://www.bj.xinhuanet.com/bjpd_sdzx/2011-07/07/content_23188016.htm
12	July 15 15:09	China Bone Marrow Bank: Free for patients type retrieve, without any collecting fee. http://society.people.com.cn/GB/1062/15160179.html

13	July 15 15:10	How much is a harmonic scalpel? http://society.people.com.cn/GB/1062/15160199.html
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Coombs developed three crisis response strategies that comprised his final three propositions: deny, diminish and rebuild. The goal of these strategies was to “shape attributions of the crisis, change perceptions for the organization in crisis and reduce the negative affect generated by the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). When an organization is involved in an accident, crisis managers should use the diminish strategy; in a preventable situation they should use the rebuilding strategy.

The Chinese Red Cross began to use microblogging as their main tool to manage the crisis, on July 4th the crisis process entered into the second phase - burst. Their first three posts were about the history and background of the Chinese Red Cross, until the fourth one, which was finally related to the topic. The Chinese Red Cross used the diminish strategy with the goal of minimizing image damage. They tried to establish an authoritative, trustable, and positive image in their first three microblogs, and then provided an outside link to the blog of the president of the Chinese Red Cross, Wang Rupeng, in the fourth post.

Rupeng’s blog was a collection of most of the public’s questions and the corresponding the information they wanted. These explanations carried forward the spirit of their statements in the initial phase, continuing the denial of any relationship with Guo and focusing on talking about the importance and the meaning of the Chinese Red Cross. Rupeng applied the justification strategy to describe the Chinese Red Cross as meaningful. He did admit there was actually a lack of openness in their work, but he believed that was a kind of social emotional venting.

From here, Rupeng used the excuse strategy to absolve the responsibility of the Chinese Red Cross. He implied the whole event was just an outlet for the Chinese

people to communicate their mood to the society, although it was unfortunate that the RCSC was the outlet in this case. This microblogging received more than 235,000 comments and was forwarded more than 42,000 times, but most of these comments were abusive. Users replied with a the word “呸,” which means detested and contempt, as their response to the Chinese Red Cross’s explanation.

Microblog post numbers five to 13 used the rebuild strategy. The numbers five and six microblog posts focused on using the justification strategy. The Chinese Red Cross projected their core image on philanthropy and humanity, trying to show their concern for the public. Numbers seven to 13 were event updates. The Chinese Red Cross kept answering the public’s new questions. These microblog posts applied the excuse strategy.

Discussion

The role of Sina Weibo in the Guo Meimei crisis

In the data collection phase, a total of 384 microblog posts were coded and categorized into four themes: general attitude, personal behavior, alternative actions, different perspectives of the event, plus off-topic comments. Each of these themes represents one meaning that was associated with the Guo Meimei event. The results indicated that the two main themes of people’s posts are their general attitude toward this event and personal behavior, such as providing contextual information, or reporting of detailed facts. The results examined the nature of language during a crisis; it also supported Soule’s five themes and further updated them to four themes related to the Chinese public.

The first theme, general attitude, revealed people’s attitudes toward the Guo Meimei event. In this part, 95% of the posts contained negative statements, 48.33% of

the posts were negative about the Chinese Red Cross; 42.22% were negative about Guo Meimei, and only 0.05% were supportive posts. People's views of Guo Meimei were mostly as a material girl, with moral decay, and a thoroughly corrupt element of the society. The Chinese Red Cross was associated with "corruption to the point that you cannot imagine." It is clear that these microblogs were the most direct response to the Guo Meimei event after they knew about it.

The second theme, personal behavior, concentrated on all the reactions to the crisis people posted on Sina Weibo. Together with the third theme, alternative actions indicated a clear shift of preference. Both of these themes signaled a negative result for the Chinese Red Cross. From here, we can clearly see how the Sina Weibo had an impact on shaping public opinion during and after the crisis.

The Guo Meimei event originated from a microblog, but its influence connected both the online and real community. In this case, Sina Weibo played a key role, not only in the process of diffusion, but also in crisis communication. In online communities, microblogs provide an approach which played an important role in the network-public opinion. People actively used social media to participate in public issue discussion, exposing unjust events via microblog or other social media, and becoming more focused on the social issues of the Chinese societal development.

Microblogs have been innovative in the existing online communication process. They are open and provide a platform that allows more people to hear the voice of the ordinary people. In the way they spread public issues and comments microblogs impact public opinion. The openness of the microblog lets individuals become part of the social network from the moment of posting personal information. A chain reaction exists in the microblogging updates. User-published content can be immediately seen and forward by users' followers or friends, and each of these transponders' friends or

followers can also see the forwarded content. Thus, the proliferation of information is no longer a one-on-one or one-to-many broadcast, but it is multiplied by the number of times it is forwarded.

As a source of information present in the complex interpersonal network, each microblog post about the behavior of release, acceptance, and forwarding information has actually participated in the construction and dissemination of communication content. This instant and rapid expansion of information dissemination has a proliferation advantage that is difficult to compare to other microblogging sites.

When most people are concerned about an event, especially related to an incident of public interest, microblogs can play a role in creating a message alert, collecting, and collating the information. According to the data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of the end of December 2011, the number of microblog users in China reached 250 million, which means the microblog has become Internet users' primary source of access to information (People News, 2012).

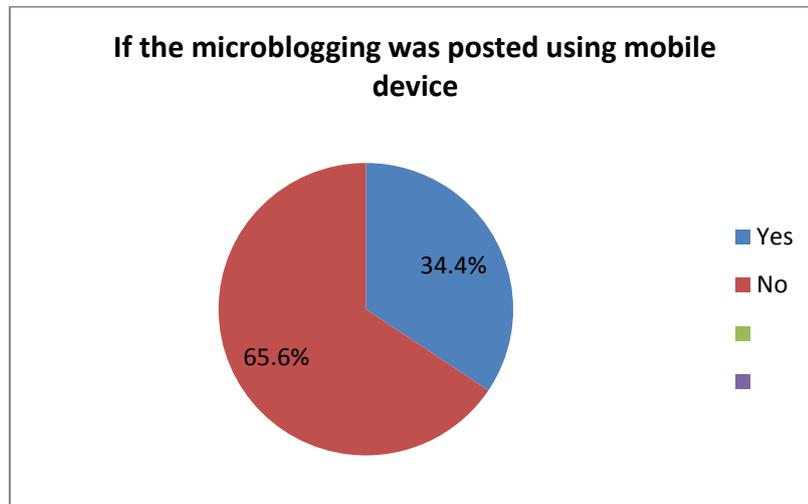
According to the results, 32 posts that shared links about outside resources such as news, reports, and analyses of the Chinese mass media. Before the microblog, the world and public opinion was controlled by mass media. Feedback from the public was very minimal and always had a longer time delay, which had less influence on mass media. However, in the microblog era, mobile features allow individuals to have the same rights as mass media, allowing microblog users to express their own news and opinions in a timely manner.

Microbloggers have begun to report news like the mass media does. They interact with others, share information, and create a latent influence on their followers. One microblogger involved in a discussion might post new information, transforming the role into a news reporter to his or her followers. This is a fission cycle, an interactive

process that considers the microblog as an information center. The information center radiates a strong chain of public opinion, which further influences media coverage, and eventually government decision-making.

After the Guo Meimei event, the public formed strong opinions, and mass media began to pay a great attention to and eventually exposed the long-standing problems of the Chinese Red Cross. The Chinese Red Cross correspondingly held press conferences to issue explanations, creating a new round of microblog posts triggered by the media coverage. There are many microblog posts aimed at the explanation given by the RCSC. Users further questioned the Chinese Red Cross and wanted the Chinese Red Cross to conduct institutional reform.

Table 6: The percentage of mobile device used.

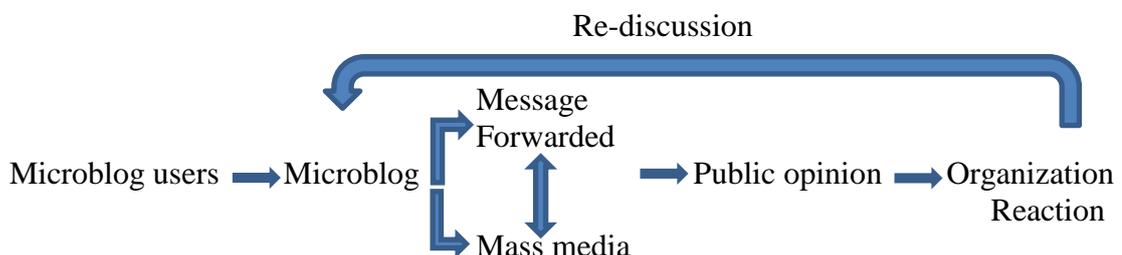


132 microblog postings were accessed via mobile devices, 34.4% of the total 384 posts (Figure 3). According to DCCI (Data Center of China Internet), as of the end of 2011, nearly half of all microblog users accessed the microblogs with their mobile phone (DCCI, 2012). The combination of microblogs and mobile phone stretches interaction behavior on the Internet because can connect to the Internet wherever they

go. They can view others' posts and reply instantly. More importantly, because of using mobile devices, microblog users can become real-time reporters, quickly reporting on what is happening, much faster than traditional media coverage. Thus, from the technical area, as a mobile internet device, microblogs possess four elements: anywhere, anytime, anyone, and anything.

From the tone of microblog posts, it is easy to find the microblog's huge impact on public opinion. The microblog intensified the social contradiction to some degree. According to the report "Analysis of China citizens' online opinion and public administration 2010," with the development of new media, the Internet has become an important way for Chinese citizens to express their demands, and their views of supervisory powers, and to offer advice and suggestions (Zou, 2010). As the representative of independent media, the microblog is like a convenient and flexible tool to help Chinese citizens protect their rights. Online public opinion has reached the point that it cannot be ignored. Therefore, we can present a model that how microblogs works in communication:

Table 7: The model of microblogs spreads information



In evaluating the Chinese Red Cross response strategies, the findings indicates that they used common response strategies outlined in Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Clearly the Chinese Red Cross needs to rethink their crisis

communication strategies because of the Guo Meimei crisis, which has become an example for all organizations, especially non-profit ones, on how not to handle a situation.

The situation that the Red Cross faced was a severe crisis of credibility in public and media. The Red Cross's credibility crisis was not accidental. Guo Meimei was undoubtedly just a fuse which could detonate many long-term accumulations of distrust. As a public organization, the Chinese Red Cross's financial information has always been a closely guarded secret; the public donates but never knows exactly what their money is being used for. It can be said that the credibility crisis is due to the Chinese Red Cross's long-term non-transparent management and closed internal and external information.

If the Chinese Red Cross conducted a comprehensive analysis based on media reports and the core issues the public most wanted to know about, they could make the public begin to gain trust. The Red Cross needed to use the scientific method, including investigating and analyzing their current situation. They needed to conduct comprehensive research on the issues the public wanted to know about. The purpose of their research was to collect questions that the public should be most concerned with, especially information about finances. This could help the Chinese Red Cross's public image, and provide a scientific basis for the decision-making, and enhance the possibility of public relations activities.

The goals for the Red Cross were to prevent the crisis from damaging the reputation of the Chinese Red Cross and to reestablish public's faith in the organization. The Chinese Red Cross needs to reevaluate its organizational management because the public cannot understand the procedure that occurs after they donate, which leads to mistrust. The Chinese Red Cross needs to change their

mode of operations to be more transparent in all activities.

In the 1990s, the Canadian Red Cross was involved in a blood collection scandal. Negligence in the management of blood transfusion service led to blood contamination, resulting in a large number of hepatitis C and hemophilia infections for those who received blood transfusions. Approximately 1,100 people were infected with HIV (World Net Daily, 2005). The Red Cross deliberately concealed the matter until 1994, then in 2000 the secret was out. The scandal was known as “the darkest page in history of Canadian Red Cross.”(World Net Daily, 2005) This led to a strong distrust of the Canadian Red Cross (The Canadian Encyclopedia). Public’s donations plummeted, and some patients said they would rather take the risk of surgery than accept a blood transfusion. Ultimately, the Canadian Federal Ministry of Health removed the Red Cross’s qualification of management blood transfusion and blood products. As a result the Red Cross “blood collection crisis” and the public’s fear of blood gradually subsided (CBC News, 2007).

In the Canadian case, the concern was that the crisis was also due to the fact that the Red Cross was trying to cover up facts which led to public distrust. At the beginning, the Canadian Red Cross ignored the American Red Cross’s warnings and acted irresponsibly as HIV and hepatitis C transmissions continued. Because RCMP launched a criminal investigation into Canada’s blood distribution system, the scandal came to an end. It was similar to the beginning of the Chinese Red Cross scandal: They all denied what happened, which resulted in public outrage.

Any one organization cannot be without crisis, and The Red Cross is no exception. When a scandal takes place, the best policy is always open communication. As a member of the International Red Cross society, the Red Cross is more well-known than other charities, and is the top focus of public and media attention. Once the Red

Cross image collapses, the consequences could be disastrous.

In 2007, because of a sex scandal with female subordinates, Mark Everson, chief executive officer of the American Red Cross resigned after intense public pressure (Clolery, 2007). Compared to the Guo Meimei scandal, the American Red Cross acted deliberately and transparently to address the problem. They undertook a forensic audit of money spent by Everson to determine if any of the charity's money was used inappropriately.

The spokeswoman, Carrie Martin, clearly explained the results of the investigation to the media, and answered the media's questions as much as possible. Just as Crompton, the CEO of BoardSource said, "What the board should be commended on is that they've taken swift action. Especially when you're in the kind of situation that the Red Cross is in, the worst thing to do is to prevaricate and to delay taking any action. Because you know it's going to be kind of devastating to you." (Clolery, 2007)

Because of the Red Cross's special position, they must be clearly aware of their higher status and the greater social responsibility they have. They must quickly clean up the scandal. If the handling of the situation is not quick, it is difficult to completely restore the public's trust.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this research paper is that there were thousands of posts that have mentioned the Guo Meimei crisis. because of the time and energy reasons, the researcher could not code every one of them, so there may have been different types of public responses that were not covered in this study. However, the sample used can still give an indication of the perspectives communicated.

Suggestions for Future Studies

We are in a highly transparent social media era where online public opinion has become the new social hot spot. The public shares their views via social media platforms, expresses their emotions and can monitor companies and social organizations' operations and performance in real-time. They act as a personal media microphone. The public is no longer a group of "rabble" who are satisfied simply with receiving messages. They release personal information, and hope to take on the role of overseeing social responsibilities. For companies and social organizations, every Internet user is potential become a "trouble maker."

The social media era crisis communication also occurs in real-time. Once the

crisis happens, the interactive messages are delivered between various media. An organization must “not let others speak for them,” because once the information vacuum occurs, rumors will grow rapidly and block your organization as a major source of information. People always trust the one who first tells the story, and so a real-time response is the right way to respond to a crisis.

After the Guo Meimei scandal, the Red Cross lacked sincerity in its official response: “hope you continue to support and trust in our future work.” Less than an hour and a half after the posting, the microblog was commented on more than 63,000 times, forwarded more than 115,000 times, and 99.9 percent of comments were negative. The crisis management in social media era should focus on enhancing organizational ability of microblogging communication and public opinion coordination.

1. Active response.

Organizations should be dedicated to strategies that are socially responsible, such as real-time monitoring and proactive response to all forms of communication from publics. They should build and maintain a proactive and direct dialogue with publics through social media platforms, thus contributing to the virtuous circle of organization’s reputation.

2. Timely response.

The instant communication of social media demands that crisis management be done in a timely manner. Organizations should establish a crisis management procedures and team in preparation for future crisis.

3. Appropriate handling.

In crisis management, ignoring what is right is also wrong, because successful crisis management should focus on a solution, not what has already been done.

This approach becomes the key to resolving the crisis.

4. Take responsibility.

No matter whether the organization is directly responsible or not, they should put social responsibility and public interest first, and deal properly with the crisis.

Shirking responsibility will result in an adverse effect on public opinion.

5. Keep open and transparent communication.

Organizations cannot prevent crises from happening. They should do their jobs responsibly, communicate with the public transparently, and monitor issues to prevent crises.

6. In today's technology and media environment, the public relations practitioners should have social media communication plans. Utilizing social media to build a better organizational reputation is important for today's public relations practitioners.

Summary

The Guo Meimei scandal has not only been tracked continuously in China, but also drew international media attention. "The Financial Times," "The New York Times," and CNN published stories about the event; even Paribas briefly analyzed Chinese microblog's powerful role. With the development of digital technology and social media, consumers are effectively given a powerful tool, but more power brings greater responsibility. Those who provide a "user-generated content" platform are facing the greater level of risk, and the challenges of organizational governance concern.

For the Chinese public, this scandal was not only a crisis of confidence in the Chinese Red Cross, but also a test of how the Chinese Red Cross response to it. The

charity and nonprofit organizations are a special group in the society, and credibility is always accumulated based on their openness. In fact, the Guo Meimei crisis was a social crisis: a community no longer believes it is the only legitimate charity, but because of this scandal, no one that legally raises money for charities can be trusted.

Appendix A: Coding Book

Code Book

This codebook is designed to assist in the process of coding the Sina Weibo posts about Guo Meimei event. The Sina Weibo posts should be coded using the code book.

Coding Instructions

This study will examine the Sina Weibo posts regarding the Guo Meimei scandal of the Red Cross Society of China. Three keywords will be included: Guo Meimei, Guo Meimei crisis, and China Red Cross.

Content should be carefully examined when coding.

Appendix B: Coding Sheet

1. General Attitude
0=No
1=Yes
2. Supportive of the Chinese Red Cross
0=No
1=Yes
3. Supportive of the Philanthropy Industry
0=No
1=Yes
4. Negative about Guo Meimei
0=No
1=Yes
5. Negative about the Philanthropy Industry
0=No
1=Yes
6. Negative about the Chinese Red Cross
0=No
1=Yes
7. Personal Behavior on Sina Weibo
0=No
1=Yes
8. Media Responsibility Especially involving CCTV
0=No
1=Yes
9. Shared Similar Negative Events
0=No
1=Yes
10. Shared Other Scandals of the Chinese Red Cross
0=No
1=Yes
11. Shared Positive Examples
0=No
1=Yes
12. Questions about the Chinese Red Cross
0=No
1=Yes
13. Questions about the Government and Appeals for More Attention
0=No
1=Yes
14. Post News and Outside Links
0=No
1=Yes
15. Guo May Be Performing a Public Stunt
0=No
1=Yes
16. Questioning Guo's Background
0=No
1=Yes
17. Public Rights

- 0=No
- 1=Yes
- 18. Alternative Actions
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 19. Lost Confidence in Chinese Red Cross and Will Not Donate in Future
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 20. Shame on the Chinese Red Cross
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 21. Suggesting Further Investigation
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 22. Considering Guo as a "Hero"
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 23. Effectiveness of Sina Weibo
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 24. Different Perspectives on the Event
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 25. Failed Supervision
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 26. Political Institution Problem
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 27. Advice and Suggestions
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 28. Tones of Microblogs
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 29. Sarcastic
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 30. Neutral
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 31. Expletive and critical
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 32. Off-Topics Posts
 - 0=No
 - 1=Yes
- 33. If the microblogging is original
 - 0=No

1=Yes

34. If the microblogging was posted using mobile devices

0=No

1=Yes

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