

CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF A CHINESE HIGH-SPEED RAIL ACCIDENT

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CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

With more than 100 years of development, organizations are beginning to understand the importance and value of public relations. One of the most important goals of public relations is to build better communication between communities and organizations especially in the aftermath of crisis situations. To highlight the importance of this goal, two of the most mentioned functions in public relations are crisis communication and reputation management.

The effectiveness and value of public relations in organizations was demonstrated by the excellence theory, which was the result of a 15-year study of practices in communication management and public relations funded by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation. James Grunig, Larissa Grunig and David Dozier led a research project that indicated that public relations should have 4 levels of analysis: program, functional, organizational, and societal. These 4 levels of analysis are important because

“Effectiveness at a lower level contributes to effectiveness at higher levels, but organizations cannot be said to be truly effective unless they have value at the highest of these levels” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier, 2002, p. 8).

Crisis communication and reputation management are vital to organizations because they help mitigate risk. Although environmental crises like earthquakes occur suddenly, a crisis is not always a catastrophic event. Organizational crises frequently evolve from some small problems inside or outside the company. Any inappropriate methods for resolving the situation might result in significant reputational, operational or financial harm to the organization. A crisis is defined as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry as well as its publics, products or good name” (Fern-Banks, 2007, p.1). When facing a crisis, it is important for the organization to already have a comprehensive crisis communication plan and management strategies (Coombs, 2010).

Crises can affect the reputation of the organization, and it is very important for a company to restore or repair its reputation after a crisis situation. Understanding the value of reputation to an organization is a vital part of public relations work. “Reputation confers advantages and privileges on companies. We trust those companies that we respect, so we grant them the benefit of the doubt in ambiguous situations” (Fombrun, 1996 pp.9). Jeffries-Fox Associates (2000) pointed out the value of reputation to an organization: “1. Increasing market share; 2. Lowering market costs; 3. Lowering distribution costs; 4. Ability to charge a premium; 5. Avoiding over-regulation; 6. Ability to weather bad times; 7. Greater employee

alignment and productivity; 8. Being able to attract and retain talent; 9. Being able to attract investors; 10. Being able to gain access to new global markets; 11. Gaining more favorable media coverage (pp. 9-10).”

Reputation is a fragile, intangible resource that every company needs to learn how to build and save. Building a good reputation is the most crucial and strategic task that every company should realize, especially in the highly competitive, information-rich business environment (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004).

As one of the most developed examples of public transportation in China, high-speed rail suffered a crisis because of an extremely serious collision accident on July 23, 2011 at Wenzhou, Zhejiang. High-speed rail in China refers to any commercial train service in China with an average speed of 200 km/h (124 mph) or higher. China has the world's longest high-speed rail (HSR) network with about 9,676 km. In 2010, based on a report from BBC News China was expected to have more high-speed rail track than the rest of the world combined by 2012 (Robinson, 2010).

This paper used content analysis to analyze the responses and the strategies that were used by the Chinese Ministry of Rail and other involved government departments in the aftermath of the crisis. This research paper's purpose was to provide recommendations and implications for public relations about crisis communication and reputation management and especially for government public relations in China.

Case Background

On July 23, 2011, two high-speed trains collided on a viaduct in the suburbs of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. This accident happened on the Yongtaiwen rail line and the Ministry of Rails of The People's Republic of China officially named the crisis as "7.23 Yongwen line extremely serious rail accident." The casualties and injurers sustained were extensive as 40 people were killed and 172 people were injured. Transportation was interrupted for 32 hours and 35 minutes, and the direct economic loss was more than 193 million yuan (about \$30,595,505) (7.23 Yongwen, 2011).

Crisis Erupts

Four minutes after the collision, the first message was sent out by a passenger via Sina Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter). Meanwhile, after the news broke, hundreds of media agencies from all over the world headed for the site of the accident to report on this crisis. The questions at that time period focused on why this accident happened? Was it a mistake in the operation or was the accident caused by weather? How would the government react to this issue?

The government assigned about 1,100 military troops and various medical teams to go to the accident site and form an emergency rescue. However, the cause of the accident was still unclear and rumors were flying quickly.

The cause of the accident was initially stated to be a lightning storm occurring 20 miles (32 km) south and 60 miles (97 km) west of the viaduct. However, 5 days later

on July 28, the Beijing National Rail Research & Design Institute of Signals and Communications Co. Ltd., a rail research institute, claimed responsibility for the accident. They stated in a report that a signal on the track failed to turn red, and staff failed to notice the error (Wenzhou, 2012).

The entire rescue process took about 25 hours, and the rail was open to traffic again on the morning of July 25. After the rescue, the team rushed to bury the wreckage of the train because they said it contained a lot of highly confidential technologies. The short rescue time and the inappropriate behaviors made the public think the government deliberately eliminated evidence of the accident without consideration for loss of life. People felt the government was hiding the true cause of the accident.

Most discussions on the Sina Weibo and news reports focused on speculation about why the government offered such a short time for rescue and made the quick decision to bury the train. The stories about the accident included some information that was uncovered by the Chinese news media and posted on Sina Weibo, and the information spread rapidly. The accident was a huge crisis for the Ministry of Rail. In addition, the Chinese media coverage spread speculation about the accident, expanding the problem further.

Media Coverage

Thousands of reporters covered this accident, and articles were written by journalists from both China and overseas. Based on the later analysis of media coverage, the reports in the Chinese media could be divided into two types. The first

focused on reporting this accident fairly, based on the known facts and without speculation. These reports reported the facts and did not allow rumors or opinions to be reported. The second type focused on criticizing the rescue process. Furthermore, some of these reports seemed out of control because they blamed the high-speed rail itself, instead of blaming the people who should take responsibility.

International media agencies and reporters from Hong Kong and Taiwan reported the story, and their reports included some speculation like the reports in Mainland China. However, the reporters were more objective. These reports criticized the rescue time as not long enough and saw the burying of the train as the government's attempt to destroy evidence of the accident.

In addition to reporting the accident, Hong Kong and Taiwan media agencies also distributed a lot of "inside information" that would never appear in Chinese mainland media parts. According to the Deutsche Welle (2011) and Agence France-Presse (2011), the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China issued inside-only policies for reporting the accident for Chinese mainland news media. The inside-only policies' directives were: all the media should only report the information that was issued by Ministry of Rail, should not send reporters to the scene, should not report too much about this issue and should not comment on the development of Chinese high-speed rail. Furthermore, the tone of the reports were to be understood as settled, and the reports should use "great tragedy, great love" as a theme, which was used to cover the reason why the accident occurred.

Press Conference by Wang Yongping

To cope with the outpouring of negative opinion, the Ministry of Rail held an official press conference on July 25. It was held and hosted by Wang Yongping, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Rail. Reactions to this press conference were extremely negative and made public response more negative.

The first area of criticism involved finding a 2-year-old girl was alive after the rescue team announced the rescue work was finished. Many journalists who attended the conference asked how this happened. The explanation from Wang was, “this was a miracle. We did find a living girl in the work thereafter. That was what happened” (Wenzhou, n.d). Most of the journalists of the conference shouted, “This was not a miracle” in accusatory voices.

Second, when one journalist asked why the rescue team couldn’t wait to bury the train, Wang said the burial was because it was the best way to provide more space for the future rescue vehicles. And he then had this statement to say, “whether or not you believe (this explanation), I believe it.” This phrase became so popular it was turned into an Internet meme (Wenzhou, n.d). To further complicate matters, explanations from Wang were totally contradicted by reports from CCTV (China Center Television).

Another important thing at the press conference was the improper language chosen by Wang. He created a tense atmosphere, and this led to chaos at the conference. All the TV stations that were reporting live interrupted by the chaos, and that was the end of the press conference for the public. One reporter at the press

conference recalled that this was the most disordered conference she had ever attended before (7.23 Yongwen, 2011).

Premier Wen Jiabao's Visit

In addition to the press conference, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited to the accident scene on July 28. He called for “all-out efforts to rescue passengers.” He mourned the passengers that were killed in the accident, went to visit the passengers that were injured and expressed his sincere compassion to the family members of the passengers. He also held a press conference and invited more than 70 media agencies and 150 journalists from all over the world.

The main points of the press conference by Premier Wen Jiabao were: “1. He sincerely apologized for his lateness coming to the scene because he was sick in the hospital for 11 days; 2. He commanded the investigation team to create an open and honest report for the public, and the report should only contain the truth while pointing out the people who should be held responsible. 3. The high-speed rail had made huge developments in recent years, but this accident was an alarm for the government and was a reaction to rethink anything that was missed in the development. We needed to combine the speed, quality, and safety together in developing the high-speed rail. 4. The only thing we care about is the safety of the passengers” (7.23 Yongwen, 2011).

The Process of the Investigation

On July 25, the State Administration of Work Safety held another press conference hosted by spokesperson Huang Yi. Yi said the government had already

formed a special investigative team to investigate why the accident occurred. Results would be published by September.

On August 4, Huang Yi said the accident was not caused by the weather or by a disaster; it was an extremely serious accident caused by staff negligence.

On August 16, Wang Yongping was officially fired by the Ministry of Rails because of his unprofessional attitude and unfit words at the prior press conference held by the Ministry of Rail on July 25.

On August 22, Huang Yi said that the accident happened due to negligence by employees. He also mentioned that based on the information he had received, this accident was not supposed to happen and it could have been avoided if the staff had taken the correct actions.

On September 21, the investigation team announced that they needed some more time to form a final report because a large number of the questions that related to the techniques and management aspects needed deeper analysis and tests.

On October 25, Huang Yi told the public in a public announcement that the investigation had reached a crucial moment, and the team had attained an abundance of evidence that could determine who was responsible for this accident.

Results

Finally, on December 28, the State Council released the official accident investigation report to the public. The report pointed out “the accident occurred due to severe defects in the design of control center equipment, lax equipment inspection and failure to adequately respond to equipment malfunctions caused by

lightning.”(Wenzhou, 2012)

In this report, 54 officials were named as being responsible for the accident and failed rescue effort. The most senior official named was the former minister Liu Zhijun. He was fired because he disobeyed the basic rule of construction: he increased the speed limit from 200km/h to 250km/h without any authorization.

The first compensation agreement was announced on July 26, 2011. The victim Lin Yan received 500,000 yuan dollar. First, the government said it was responsible to pay all the victims according to this standard. However, this compensation aroused extensive public discussion because professionals pointed out that the compensation should pay different damages based on the different conditions of the victims. After careful discussion with the family members of the victims and legal advice, the final total of damages to each victim was 915,000 yuan dollar. This is the highest compensation paid in a public transportation accident in Chinese history.

Influences

1. Raise the public's concerns about the safety of high-speed rail travel in China.

After the accident happened, the occupancy rate for high-speed rail was less than 50%, which was a significant cost to the rail. Some reports mocked the rail system as having to transport the seats instead of passengers.

Because the occupancy rate was extremely low, some of the booking rates did not even achieve 1%, and the Ministry of Rail reduced or stopped running parts of the Jinghu high-speed rail.

2. The ticket prices and speed limit the high-speed rail were lowered.

Since August 13, the 9,000 kilometer high-speed rail has decreased ticket prices and speed limit in Mainland China. The speed limit of the rail was been reduced from 350km/h to 300km/h and 250km/h to 200km/h. The price of tickets was discounted 5%.

3. The influence on the growth and expansion plan for Chinese high-speed rail

This accident threatened growth plans for Chinese high-speed rail. China was planning expansion in order to compete with the Japanese Shinkansen. China wanted to export the high-speed rail train with a “made in China” label that could help rid of the nation’s image as a low cost manufacturing country and placed Chinese high-tech product exports in the other countries, instead. However, the accident increased doubts by the public about the quality and safety of Chinese rail.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Crisis communication and reputation management are the most mentioned functions of public relations, and they are extremely important for any organization (Coombs, 2007). Before going in-depth to review the literature about crisis communication and reputation management, it was necessary to review the basic definitions of a crisis and reputation.

Crisis Communication

In Chinese, crisis translates as “weiji” which means threats and opportunities. Crisis can be seen as “a turning point in organizational life” (Regester 1989, p.38). After reviewing several famous definitions of crisis, Coombs (2007a) defined the crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p.2-3). In addition, the potential threat that a crisis could bring to an organization is represented by harm to public safety, financial loss and reputation loss (Coombs, 2007b).

According to Seeger, Lester & Ulmer (2003), a crisis always suggests an unusual event of overwhelmingly negative significance that carries a high level of risk, harm and opportunity for further loss (Seeger, Lester & Ulmer, 2003, p.4). The crisis could have different effects on organizations and organizational stakeholders. A crisis could bring a radical threat to the system's stability, a questioning of core assumptions and beliefs and threats to high-priority goals, including reputation, legitimacy, profitability and even survival (Seeger, Lester & Ulmer, 2003, p.4). For stakeholders such as crisis managers, customers, employees, and victims, the personal benefits lost could be the most important influence (Seeger, Lester & Ulmer, 2003).

A crisis could also be viewed as an event that has the potential to seriously impact an organization, and it is important to note the negative outcomes to the stakeholders, including physical, financial, and psychological outcomes (Coombs, 2010). Although crises cannot be predicted, they can be expected. One study by the Institute for Crisis Management (www.crisisexperts.com) found that only 14 percent of business crises were unexpected. The other 86% were crises in which an organization was aware of a potential problem long before the crisis "officially" occurred to the public (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). In addition, the study found that 78% of the crises were caused by mismanagement.

Crisis management was defined by Coombs (2007b) as "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted. In addition, crisis management should seek to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage. (p.5)"

Scholars who focused on the crisis management divided crises into several stages (Coombs, 2007, Fink, 1986, Mitroff, 1994).

Fink (1986) said that a crisis could be divided into four segments: the prodromal crisis stage, which is a warning signs of a crisis appear; the actual crisis stage, which is when crisis occurring; the chronic crisis stage, which is recovery period and including learning from the crisis; and the crisis resolution stage, which is the organization back to normal. In the prodromal crisis stage, the organization has the chance to anticipate the potential crisis and time to prepare as opposed to other crisis stages. It is very important for the organizations to figure out the weaknesses in development and management because in this stage organizations still have the ability to control most of the situation. Additionally, this stage is also a good time for the organization to seek the potential opportunities from of crisis.

Mitroff (1994) developed a five-stage model for crisis management which included: “ 1. signal detection, seek to identify warning signs and take preventive measures; 2. probing and prevention, active search and reduction of risk factors; 3. damage containment, with the purpose of containing the effects of a crisis from spreading further and from infecting other uncontaminated parts of an organization or the environment; 4. recovery, with the purpose of recovering normal business operations as soon as possible; and 5. learning, when people review the crisis management effort and learn from it” (p.105-108). Coombs (2010) said how this model of crisis management process is more effective because it also added the management factor, which was not just a part of the crisis process itself. Furthermore,

the biggest difference between the Fink's model (1986) and Mitroff's model was the learning stage as a separate stage (Coombs, 2010).

Coombs (2007b, 2010) developed a way to divide the process of the crisis management that was more accepted in later research on crisis communication. He noted that the whole process of crisis management should be divided into three stages: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis.

It is important to realize the value of crisis communication in the crisis management process. Crisis communication is a critical element in effective crisis management (Coombs, 2010). The crisis communication should have some very important functions to the organization. Communication could be an important resource for crisis managers. The content of the communication to the public and stakeholders would influence the extent of the reputational and financial damage a crisis could inflict on the organizational image (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Fearn-Banks (2007) pointed out that the crisis communication must fulfill at least two functions (p.9-10):

First, it must allow the smooth transfer of information required for viable crisis management. The process is dual and it boils down to the proper communication between the crisis management team (CMT) members, as well as between CMT members and the organization (smooth internal communication), experts, and other parties involved in crisis resolution; Last, but not least, crisis communication must guarantee as little organizational image damage as possible. It must maintain the organization's reputation and credibility. This is where we need to stress once again the importance of internal communication, whose crucial aim is to preserve employees' trust and loyalty. Media relations, as well as stakeholder communication, are also included in the effort of maintaining organizational reputation. Should this process be suitably managed, the organization may eventually come out of the

crisis with a better reputation than before.

In the different stages of crisis, the communication should have different emphases and focus points.

In the pre-crisis stage, crisis communication should focus on collecting information about risks, and make decisions on how to handle the potential crisis and conduct the necessary training for the people who will be involved in the process. Crisis spokespersons and crisis team members must be trained (Coombs, 2010).

Before the crisis, a well-planned communication plan would help the organization reduce response time and possibly prevent missteps in an organization's initial response to a crisis (Benoit, 1997). The pre-crisis stage is more about proactive action for the crisis. The exercises are designed to improve the crisis management skills of the crisis team and are a big part of the preparation.

Coombs (2007b) provided some best practices for the pre-crisis stage such as developing a crisis management plan, selecting and training the crisis management team, and conducting exercises to test the crisis management plan and crisis management team (p, 2). In these best practices, organizations should place emphasis on the training of the spokesperson. The spokesperson should avoid "no comment" because it will indicate the organization is guilty and trying to hide something. In addition, the spokesperson should have professional communication experience and avoid unprofessional behavior when dealing with the media and public (Coombs, 2007b).

The crisis response stage is usually the most heavily researched aspect of crisis

communication. This stage focuses on how and what an organization communicates during a crisis, and how that has a significant effect on the crisis outcomes (Coombs, 2010). In fact, some scholars have suggested that the organization should have a quick response to the public about the crisis, and ideally within one hour or less (Barton, 2001). In addition, the communication in the crisis response stage should place transparency as the first principle. The lack of transparency could favor the birth and spreading of rumors and unfiltered information in the media (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Silence is perceived as too passive and allows others to frame the crisis, so it is very important for the organization to respond to the crisis response as soon as possible (Brummett, 1980).

The crisis communication stage should always focus on managing the organizational reputation. If the crisis has resulted in victims or injury, the organization must provide the instructions and information to publics so they know what to do to protect them from the crisis. This is necessary before addressing reputational concerns (Coombs, 1999a; Coombs&Holladay, 2001; Sturges, 1994). The public always expects an organization to do more for victims of the crisis when the organization is held accountable for the crisis (Coombs, 1995).

The communication content in the crisis response stage serves a critical function. The guidelines are focused strategies that could be enacted quickly, accurately, and consistently, which means the strategies should come out in fast speed, focused on the crisis situation, and consistent with the organization communication plan (Coombs, 2007). Sturges (1994) developed an advanced framework for coping with a crisis

which was divided into three phases: instructing information, which should emphasize how to analyze physical aspects of the crisis on the physical aspects; adjusting information, which should focus on the psychological parts of the crisis; and reputation repair, which attempts to repair the damages from by the crisis.

In the post-crisis communication stage, the period after the crisis is considered to be resolved, the important aspect is to manage the continuing effects of the crisis. In this stage, the crisis communication in the post-crisis stage uses stakeholders' reactions and is also coupled with learning from the crisis (Coombs, 2010).

Organizational Reputation

Fombrun's book "Reputation: Realizing Value from the Corporate Image", 1996 was the first book that comprehensively reviewed the academic resources about reputation management and the effectiveness of the corporate reputation. Fombrun described reputation as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's appeal to all of its key constituents when compared with other leading rivals"(P. 72). Formbrun also pointed out there were 3 key characteristics of corporate reputation (Formbrun, 1996):

- 1.a cognitive feature of an industry that crystallizes a company's perceived ranking in a field of the other rivals.
2. created from the bottom up as each of us applies our own personal combination of economic and social, selfish and altruistic criteria in judging a company and its future prospects.
3. a snapshot that reconciles the multiple images of a company held by all its constituencies. It signals the overall attractiveness of the company to employees, consumers, investors, suppliers and local communities (p.72).

Fombrun and Rindoval (2001) defined corporate reputation as “a collective representation of a firm’s past actions and results that described the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders. It gauged a firm’s relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments” (Fombrun and Rindoval, 2001)

However, some scholars believed that this definition just paid attention to the consumer, investor, employees and general public’s emotional reaction and missed the cognitive factors (Gray and Ballmer, 1998). Gray and Ballmer (1998) pointed out that reputation was the sum of judgments about the organization’s substantive and symbolic action from a constituency group. This definition did not take into account emotional factors. Schwaiger (2004) defined of reputation from a different aspect. He believed that the corporate reputation should be divided into two dimensions: cognitive and emotional. When discussing reputation, one should not only understand the subjective opinions about the corporate attribution such as “successful company” and “high quality products,” but also see these attributions’ effect on the people. For example: “even the corporate is not successful, but I like it anyway” (p.49).

Public relations scholars J. Grunig and Hung (2002) defined reputation as “the distribution of cognitive representations that members of a collectivity hold about an organization, representations that may, but do not always, include evaluative components” (p. 20). J. Grunig and Hung (2002) also suggested: 1) Reputations refer to collective representations in minds of multiple publics about organizations; 2) Cognitive representations are not always evaluative (either evaluative or neutral); 3)

Cognitive representations consist of objects, attributes, the connection among them (objects-attributes) and behaviors; and 4) Operationalization of cognitive representations can be the distribution of such components in a free-description (open-end measure) (Cited in Yang, 2005, p. 92).

Why Reputation Matters

It is very important for public relations practitioners and organizations to understand the importance of reputation to organizations. “Reputation confers obvious advantages and privileges on companies. We trust those companies that we respect, so we grant them the benefit of the doubt in ambiguous situations” (Fombrun, 1996, pp.9). The function of reputation is really important for any organization facing a choice between the same types of products; consumers will always be willing to pay for products that they are familiar with. Consumers believe the product they are familiar with is the right thing that can fulfill the personal needs and expectations rather than the unfamiliar one. “A company’s reputation derives from its identity. It could be traced to managerial practices that make a good company a great workplace for its employees, a good provider of products and services for its customers, a good investment for its shareholders and a good citizen in its local communities.”(Fombrun, 1996, p.11)

Jeffries-Fox Associates (2000) noted the value of reputations

1. Increasing market share
2. Lowering market costs
3. Lowering distribution costs
4. Being able to charge a premium
5. Avoiding over-regulation
6. Being able to weather bad times

7. Greater employee alignment and productivity
8. Being able to attract and retain talent
9. Being able to attract investors
10. Being able to gain access to new global markets
11. Gaining more favorable media coverage (pp. 9-10).

Fombrun (1996) pointed out that reputation is not only useful for individuals and products, but also very important for big companies. The reputation could also affect consumer behavior when consumers are making purchasing decisions, the securities in which shareholders invest, and the job offers employees accept.

Fombrun and Shanley (1990) researched 292 large U.S. firms to test the general hypothesis that publics construct reputations on the basis of information about firms' relative structural positions within organizational fields. The authors discussed the relationship between reputation building and corporate strategy. They noted that the public will gain information from the media or from other monitors, and this kind of information would form their perceptions of corporate reputation. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) also pointed out that the corporation will always issue some signals to the public, and these kinds of signals are about firms' activities, achievements and prospects' individual interpretations. The public would combine these signals with the judgments that contributed to the reputation of the corporation. These established reputations are the signals that influence the actions of firms' stakeholders.

Fombrun and Shanley (1990) indicated that positive reputations often attract investors, lower the cost of capital and enhance competition with other companies. They found that reputation rankings constitute a very obvious and understudied form of standard control. Good reputations give relative competitive advantages to

organizations.

In addition, Fombrun (1996) pointed out that reputation was an intangible asset for the company. This is always a very important factor for a company to achieve a competitive advantage. Reputation benefits the company by shaping a unique identity and projecting a coherent and consistent set of images to the public. Specifically, Fombrun (1996) gives six parts of the practices:

- (1). Designing advertising campaigns that promote the company as a whole, not just its products and brands.
- (2). Carrying out ambitious programs that champion product quality and customer service with an eye to keeping customers happy.
- (3). Maintaining control systems that carefully screen employee activities for their possible reputational side effects.
- (4). Demonstrating sensitivity to the environment, not only because it's socially responsible but because actions that safeguard the environment also dovetail with marketing programs to generate sales.
- (5). Hiring internal staff and retaining specialized public relations agencies to safeguard communications through the media.
- (6). Demonstrating "corporate citizenship" through philanthropy, probing activities and community involvement(Fombrun, 1996 pp.6).

Furthermore, the value of the reputation to an organization was focused on two categories: financial value (Dowling, 2006; Roberts and Dowling, 2002; Fombrun, 1996; Graham & Bansal, 2007; Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004) and the strategic value (Barney, 1991; Weigelt and Camerer, 1988; Dowling, 2004).

Considering financial value, "a strong reputation enhances the value of a company's potential licenses, products and services, and so raises revenues. In turn, better revenues translate into superior market value on time (Forbrun, 1996, p.108)." Dowling (2006) analyze in what aspects of a good reputation would affect the

financial value of the corporation. He noted that the most important thing was a good reputation, which would increase sales revenue, and this effect would influence any one or more of the following mechanisms:

- Increase the size and stickiness of the customer base, where size means the number of customers and ‘stickiness’ is the number of loyal customers.
- Increase the volume purchased by each customer.
- Increase the price premium obtained relative to competitive products and services.
- Reinforce customer satisfaction (a halo effect) and counter an isolated episode of customer dissatisfaction (by allowing customers to rationalize a service failure). These effects increase the probability that a customer will repeat purchase.
- Decrease the sensitivity to price rises.
- Decrease the effects of price discounts by competitors, especially with loyal (and sometimes switchable) customers” (Dowling, 2006, p138).

In one of the most important books in the field of reputation management, “Fame and Fortune: How Successful Companies Build Winning Reputations,” Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) compiled a large number of important perspectives on how leading companies build financial value through reputation. Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) pointed out that the higher level of operating performance that resulted from having a good reputation could ensure that a company would have favorable endorsements from stakeholders and media.

For the strategic value part, Fombrun (1996) pointed out that a good reputation has an extremely high strategic value. Companies would pay more attention to their attractive features, and these features will widen the options available to its managers. It would even relate to whether to charge higher or lower prices for products and

services or to implement innovative programs.

Weigelt and Camerer (1988) discussed reputation-building behavior within the company. They pointed out a good reputation-building model can provide qualitative suggestions that will enable the corporation to be more effective in making strategic decisions. The authors used the game theory as the framework and discussed the strategic value of the reputation to the company from two aspects.

The first aspect was reputation and product quality. Reputation plays a role when consumers choose products because the quality of the product could only be known after they made a purchase. So, reputation becomes the main factor that will affect the customer's choice. This kind of action from the consumer was a signal that the firm used its reputation in guaranteeing high quality products (Weigelt and Camerer 1988).

The second aspect was reputation in the service sector. Weigelt and Camerer (1988) pointed out that "reputations play a strategically important role in service markets because, like good experience, the pre-purchase evaluation of service quality was vague and partial" (p.450). Reputation building would provide reasons why they need to protect shareholders' interests. The corporation protects the interests of shareholders because this kind of behavior will benefit their reputation and protect their celebrity status (Weigelt and Camerer, 1988).

Reputation Management in a Crisis Situation

Many articles in public relations discipline have argued that public relations should take most of the responsibility for reputation (Schreiber, 2008; Grunig & Huang, 2002; Yang, 2005). According to Deephouse (2002, p. 9), reputation

management was analyzed in the 1990s by Fortune magazine. He said that interest in reputation management in the United States grew following the lead of Fortune magazine's 'Most Admired Corporations' survey; other magazines and public interest groups began evaluating corporations and publishing their findings to the public.

In the public relations area, most scholars paid more attention to the organization's public relations and reputation. In the excellence study, J. Grunig, L. Grunig, Dozier (2002) provided abundant evidence to prove that organization-public relations was the main factor that affected the reputation of organizations. J. Grunig and Hung (2002) also pointed out that the term image was the most important topic for public relations, but now the terms are reputation and brand. This indicates that the organization-public relationships and organization reputation have already become the most important aspect for the public relations scholars to explore.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

When a crisis occurs, the most important thing for the organization to do is to follow the comprehensive crisis communication plan and conduct good crisis management. The reason is because the crisis will damage the reputation of the organization. Scholars have already done abundant research on this topic (Coombs and Holladay, 1996, 2002; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs, 2007b; Andreas, 2007). In the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), Coombs provided one framework for maximizing reputational protection during a crisis (2007).

SCCT is an extension of Coombs's decades of research on crisis response

strategies to crisis situations. SCCT is also based on works by other scholars on crisis management. The development of SCCT is related to attribution theory (Coombs and Holladay, 1996; Coombs, 2007b; Andreas, 2007). Attribution theory is based on the assumption that people need to control events, especially those that are negative and unexpected, that happen in their environment and to predict the future within their social reality (Andreas, 2007). At the same time, people attribute responsibility of an event and will have an emotional reaction. Anger and sympathy are the core emotions in attribution theory. Anger always indicated the negative behavioral responses. On the contrary, sympathy always shows the positive one (Coombs, 2007b).

Coombs and Holladay (1996) noted that attribution theory was a useful framework for explaining the relations between a situation and the selection of communication strategies. Because organizational crises were highly ambiguous and surprising events for which publics were seeking causes and making attributions. This kind of causal analyses would lead to judgment about whether a certain organization was responsible for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). The more that stakeholders consider an organization responsible for events, the more negative would be the image they develop of that organization (Coombs, 2007b).

Coombs (2000) analyzed the relationship between reputation and crisis management, and he stated that organizations might suffer reputational damage from media reports when the content is about the organization's failure to meet social norms. This reputation damage may transfer to financial damage. "Relational damage is a form of reputation damage because the reputation arises from the relational

history. Any threat to the relational history is a threat to the reputation” (Coombs, 2000, p.77).

Coombs and Holladay (2002) indicated the central focus of SCCT is how to manage organizational reputation during a crisis. Crisis response is what an organization says and does after a crisis, and this affects its reputation (Coombs, 2006). Crisis events will not always be the same; figuring out the type of crisis and then taking some actions to manage with the crisis is a correct way procedure for an organization. In other words, SCCT offers a set of principles to guide the selection of crisis response strategies in order to help restore the reputation of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Reputation Management Strategies

According to Coombs (2006), crisis managers should follow a two-step process to access reputational threats. First, determine the initial crisis responsibility and then identify the type of the crisis. This would help the crisis manager place the crisis into one of the three crisis clusters and then estimate the initial level of crisis responsibility. The second step involves crisis history, which describes both the direct and indirect effects of previous crises on an organization (Coombs, 2006). Lastly, prior relationship reputation which described the direct and indirect effects of treating stakeholders poorly in the past (Coombs, 2006).

For the crisis types, Coombs and Holladay (2002) grouped the 13 types of crisis into three crisis clusters (Table 1). The crisis types formed a frame and each crisis

type featured certain aspects of crisis. These could indicate how stakeholders interpret a crisis and how much stakeholders attribute responsibility for the crisis to the organization (Coombs, 2007).

Figure 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters

Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis (Weak attributions for crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)
<i>Natural disaster:</i> Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.
<i>Rumor:</i> False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated
<i>Workplace violence:</i> A current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.
<i>Product tampering/Malevolence:</i> An external agent causes damage to an organization.
Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional. (Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)
<i>Challenges:</i> Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.
<i>Technical-error accidents:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes an accident.
<i>Technical-error product harm:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes a product recall.
Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, and took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation. (Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)
<i>Human-error accidents:</i> Human error causes an industrial accident.
<i>Human-error product harm:</i> Human error causes a product to be recalled.
<i>Organizational misdeed with no injuries:</i> Stakeholders are deceived without injury.
<i>Organizational misdeed management misconduct:</i> Laws or regulations are violated by the management.
<i>Organizational misdeed with injuries:</i> Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

Adapted from Coombs and Holladay (2002)

When facing a crisis situation, the organization should know how to implement

the right crisis response strategies to save the reputation of the organization to the largest scale. The image restoration theory, presented by Benoit (1995), was always mentioned and discussed by other scholars. In the image restoration theory, Benoit & Pang (2007) developed a model that included five major image repair strategies. These five major strategies are: (1) Denial, (2) Evasion of responsibility, (3) Reducing offensiveness of event, (4) Corrective action, and (5) Mortification.

However, Coombs challenged that this theory was used in the case and drew “speculative conclusions” about the utility of the strategies used in the crisis response (2007). Moreover, the image repair restoration theory offers no conceptual links between the crisis response strategies and elements of the crisis situation (Coombs, 2007c. P.171). This research paper adapted part of the image repair theory and mainly focused on the SCCT strategies model to analyze the case. In the SCCT, the crisis response strategies are in Table 2.

Figure 2:SCCT crisis response strategies

Primary crisis response strategies
<i>Deny crisis response strategies</i>
<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.
<i>Diminish crisis response strategies</i>
<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.
<i>Rebuild crisis response strategies</i>
<i>Compensation:</i> Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
<i>Apology:</i> The organization takes full responsibility for the crisis .
Secondary crisis response strategies
<i>Bolstering crisis response strategies</i>
<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.

Adapted from Coombs, (2007c. P.171).

The correct crisis response strategies could help an organization save their reputation in a crisis situation. This could also benefit the company when rebuilding the organizational reputation. Coombs (1995) pointed out the three objectives relative to protecting reputations: (1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative affect generated by the crisis. In addition, , he pointed out that SCCT is the theory for an organization that helps them determine which crisis response strategies would be “the next best” one for them to

save their reputation as much as possible, and the SCCT could help the crisis manager understand his/her options (Coombs, 2007b).

Research Questions

For this study, Coombs's SCCT crisis response strategies will be applied to this crisis by analyzing the crisis response strategies by the Chinese Ministry of Rail and other related government departments in responding to the public about the 7.23 Yongwen Rail Collision in 2011. This paper answered the following research questions:

- RQ1. What crisis response strategies did the Chinese government use in this case?
- RQ2. How were these strategies used in the high-speed rail case?
- RQ3. What the role did the media played in this case?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Content analysis has been defined as a systemic, objective and quantitative method for researching messages (Wimmer and Dominick 2003). Holsti (1969) wrote a more broad and comprehensive definition for content analysis as, “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p. 14).

This paper employed content analysis because content analysis could be applied to code the quotes of Chinese government officials and other related resources from major newspapers, which further enabled the researcher to look at these qualitative data in a quantitative manner. In addition, this research method could enable the researcher to sift through large volumes of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion (GAO, 1996), which meant the method could be a useful means for the researcher to discover and describe the individuals, groups or intuitions (Weber, 1990).

Content analysis is also useful for examining trends and patterns in documents (Stemler, 2005). In this study, the researcher needed to find out the strategies that

were adopted by the Chinese government, and the role media played in the crisis.

Sample

The researcher chose three newspapers for data collection. The newspapers were The New York Times, which represented the international perspective on this case, the Wenzhou Business, which represented the local media perspective on this case, and the Xinjing News, which represented the media voice in Beijing. In order to collect data for the content analysis, the researcher first went to the official website of Wenzhou Business and Xinjing News to obtain archives of electronic editions of the newspaper for the specific time period. The New York Times articles were collected from the Lexis-Nexis database from July 24, 2011 to August 24, 2011, which was the first month after the accident happened. The search included the key words “Chinese high-speed rail”, “Wenzhou train collisions” and “7.23 train accident”.

The researcher selected three different newspapers to make sure variable voices from the media were included in the content analysis. Another reason for choosing The New York Times was because this newspaper would not be influenced by the reporting policy from Chinese Propaganda Department.

A total of 92 articles were analyzed (43 from Xinjing News, 38 from Wenzhou Business and 11 from The New York Times) with 223 total useable quotes (96 from Xinjing News, 98 from Wenzhou Business and 39 from The New York Times). The researcher reviewed all the news articles, highlighted and numbered the quotes (direct

quotes and paraphrases) that were attributed to the Chinese government (Ministry of Rail, and any official announcement from other related government departments), the spokesperson Wang Yongping, the Primer Wen Jiabao, experts, journalists and the rescue team (doctors, policemen, nurses).

Measuring

To conduct the content analysis, the researcher wrote coding instructions (See Appendix 1), a coding sheet (See Appendix 2), a crisis response strategy, which combined the Coombs's SCCT crisis response strategy content (2007), and part of the image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995).

To be specific, the researcher identified 13 categories of quotes which were: (1) rescue and aftercare work, (2) honest explanation to the public, (3) details about the investigation, (4) ways to reduce risk for the future,(5) explain reasons for the accident reason and the decision was made to bury the train within 25 hours,(6) care for all the victims, (7) quality of the high-speed rail in China, (8) this is the miracle of life, I believe it, (9) great love, (10) shift the blame, (11) compensation for the victims, (12) sorrow for the accident, (13) reporters' stories were retracted. These quotes were divided into 6 crisis strategies: excuse, justification, concern, scapegoat, corrective action, apology compensation (Table 3).

Additionally, these articles were also analyzed by the time periods which could be seen as the three stages of the crisis: crisis acute stage, chronic stage and crisis resolution stage, which were dated July 24-July 31, 2011; August 1 to August 15,

2011; and August 16- August 24, 2011, respectively. The divisions were made according to the crisis development background and the intensity of media reports from selected newspapers. In this way, the researcher could examine what were the attitudes from the media and how the government is use of different strategies in different crisis stages.

The unit of the content analysis for this study is the quotes of the news reports in the selected three newspapers.

Two coders helped the researcher to code all the articles with the quotes and sentences highlighted and numbered. On the coding sheets, coders were asked to record the sentence number, newspaper, crisis response strategy and the tone of the quote in the context.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to get the frequency and percent information. Using this means of analysis, this researcher evaluated the crisis response strategies the Chinese government employed, how these strategies were used, and what the role did the media played in the crisis situation.

Figure 3: Elements of Crisis Response Strategies

Strategy	Quotes
Corrective Action	"Details of rescue and aftercare work"; "Honest explanation to the public"; "Details about the investigation"; "Ways to reduce risk for future"
Justification	"Explain reasons for the accident reason and the decision was made to buried the train with 25 hours rescue"
Concern	"Care for all the victims"
Denial	"Quality of the high-speed rail in China", "Reporters' stories were retracted"
Excuse	"This is the miracle of life, I believe it"; "Great love"
Scapegoat	"Shift the blame"
Compensation	"Compensation for victims"
Apology	"Sorrow for the accident"

Inter-coder reliability

The coders for this research were two Chinese graduate students, one in journalism and one in public relations. The researcher performed the Holsti inter-coder reliability test on the selected samples. The Holsti Inter-coder reliability was used to measure the percentage of agreement between coders. The coders reached agreement on two dimensions: 0.96 (quotes), 0.95 (tone). The disputed quotes were discussed and agreement was reached.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

After collecting data from 92 news reports from the three chosen newspapers and analyzing the 233 quotes in these articles about the 7.23 high-speed rail crash accidents in Wenzhou, the research attempted to answer the research questions as follows:

Research Question 1: What crisis response strategies the government use in the case

The researcher designed the content analysis coding process by having coders decide in which quote categories and strategies the quotes belong. After analysis of data, Figure 4 could be used to answer the question of what strategies the Chinese government used in this crisis.

Figure 4: Quotes Frequency and Responding Strategy

Strategy	Quote	Frequency	Percent
Corrective Action	"Details of rescue and aftercare work"	52	22.30%
	"Honest explanation to the public"	27	11.60%
	"Details about the investigation"	29	12.40%
	"Ways to reduce risk for future"	18	7.70%
Justification	"Explain reasons for the accident and the decision was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue"	36	15.50%
Concern	"Care for all victims"	12	5.20%
Denial	"Quality of the high-speed rail in China"	5	2.10%
	"Reporters' stories were retracted"	3	1.30%
Excuse	"This is the miracle of life, I believe it"	9	3.90%
	"Great love"	23	9.90%
Scapegoat	"Shift blame"	2	0.9%
Compensation	"Compensation for victims"	9	3.90%
Apology	"Sorrow for the accident"	8	3.40%
Total		233	100.00%

Figure 4 shows the answer for research question 1: What did strategies the Chinese government use in this case?

The top three strategies the government used in the high-speed rail accident were:

Corrective action (54.1%), which contained 126 quotes and included the quotes "Details of rescue and aftercare work," "Honest explanation to the public," "Details about the investigation" and "Ways to reduce risk for future."

Justification (15.95%), which contained 36 sentences and included the quote, "Explain reasons for the accident and the decision were made to bury the train with 25

hours rescue.”

Excuse (13.7%), which contained 33 sentences and included the quotes “this is a miracle; I believe it” and “great love.”

Besides these three most used strategies, the government also employed the strategies such as “concern,” “denial,” “scapegoat,” “compensation” and “apology”. However, the frequencies of these strategies did not represent a significant number compared to others, and all of the percentages of these strategies were under 5%.

Research Question 2: How were SCCT crisis communication strategies used in this case?

Regarding research question 2, how were the SCCT strategies used in the high-speed rail case. The researcher designed the content analysis by dividing the one month period into three Time Sections, which represented the crisis acute stage, chronic stage and crisis resolution stage. The three Time Sections were July 24-July 31, 2011; August 1 to August 15, 2011; and August 16- August 24, 2011. Analyzing the frequency and percentage of the strategies used can indicated how the government used the SCCT strategies during different stage of the crisis.

Figure 5 (p.43) shows the frequency and percentage of the quotes used in three Time Sections and the results for the RQ2 is as follows:

For the Time Section I, 7.24-7.31, 79 articles were collected from the three newspapers. This time period was the time the accident that just happened. What the public eagerly wanted to know was why the accident happened, how many people

died and the status of the situation.

From Figure 5 Time Section I, we can see that the “details of rescue and aftercare work” appeared 51 times which represented 25.8% of all the quotes. The Chinese government also focused on how to get words out. They offered an honest explanation to the public with details about the investigation. These quotes belonged to the correction action category.

Because the accident happened suddenly, the public was eager to know why the accident happened. Figure 5 said that the quote category “explain the accident reason and why buried the train was build with 25 hours rescue” appeared 33 times, and it was the second highest used quote in the Time Section I which is 16.7%.

One interesting thing was that the “great love” quote appeared 23 times and took up 11.6% of all the quotes. This indicates the “inside only” policy on reporting the accident for Chinese mainland news media from Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China was enforced. The policy required the journalists to use “great tragedy, great love” as the theme in order to shift the public’s attention from the accident.

In Figure 5, the Time Section II represented the chronic stage of the crisis. During this time period, the public wanted to know why the accident happened from an official aspect. During this Time Section, the quote “offer an honest explanation to the public” appeared the most: 29.2% total.

In addition, the results of the study showed the public lacked confidence about high-speed rail after the accident. To cope with this kind of perception, the quote

“ways to reduce the risk for the future” was used 25% in total, and it was the second highest quote used in the Time Section II. In addition, “details about the investigation” was used 12.5% of the time, the third highest one in this time period.

In Time Section II the quote category that “reports’ stories were retracted” was included 12.5%, and all of the quotes coded are from The New York Times.

Time Section III was the crisis resolution stage. In this stage, the government announced that they would conduct a comprehensive investigation, and the quote “details about the investigation” occupied 28.6% in total. This was the second highest quote in this Time Section.

In addition, the most used quote in this Time Section was “this is the miracle of life, I believe it”, representing 42.9%. Most of the news reports commented on the spokesperson Wang Yongping, and these reports criticized him because of his inappropriate words in the press conference.

To answer “How were these strategies used in the high-speed rail case?” The researcher summarized:

First, in the Time Section I (July 24-July 31, 2011), the acute stage of the crisis, the strategies that were used included corrective action (such as: “details of rescue and aftercare work), justification (“explain reasons for the accident and the decision was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue”), and excuse (such as “this is the miracle of life, I believe it”).

Second, in the Time Section II (August 1 to August 15, 2011), the chronic stage of the crisis, the strategies that were frequently used included correction action (such

as: “details of rescue and aftercare work), denial (such as “Quality of the high-speed rail in China”), and justification (“Explain reasons for the accident and the decision was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue”).

Finally, in the Time Section II (August 16- August 24, 2011), the chronic stage of the crisis, the strategies that were highly used included correction action (such as: “details about the investigation”), justification (“Explain reasons for the accident and the decision was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue”), and excuse (“this is miracle of life, I believe it”)

Figure 5: Frequency of the quote in three Time Sections

Quote	Time I		Time II		Time III	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
"Details of rescue and aftercare work"	51	25.8%	1	4.2%	0	.0%
"Honest explanation to the public"	20	10.1%	7	29.2%	0	.0%
"Details about the investigation"	22	11.1%	3	12.5%	2	28.6%
"Ways to reduce risk for future"	10	5.1%	6	25.0%	1	14.3%
"Explain reasons for the accident and the decision was made to buried the train with 25 hours rescue"	33	16.7%	2	8.3%	1	14.3%
"Care of all victims"	11	5.6%	1	4.2%	0	.0%

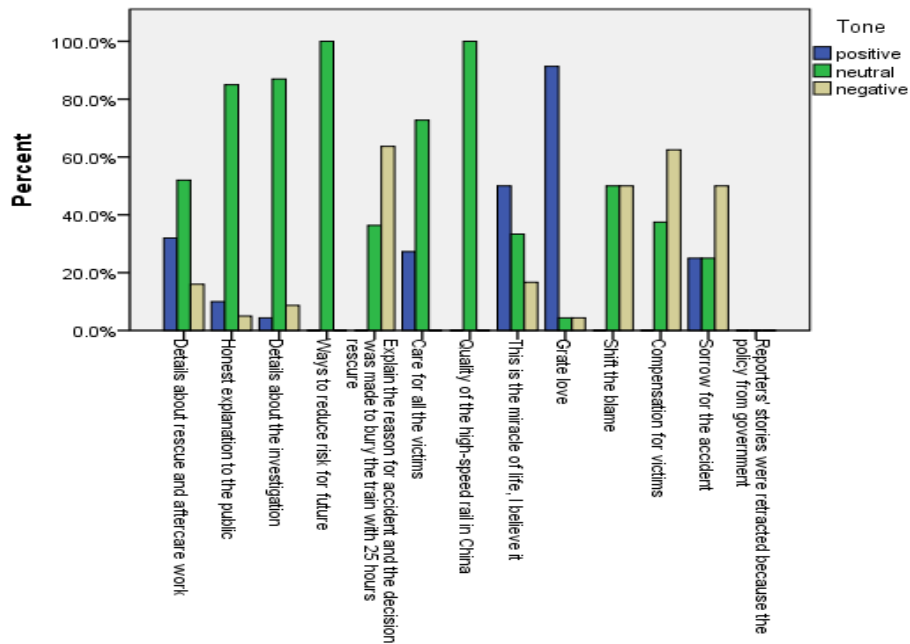
"Quality of the high-speed rail in China"	5	2.5%	0	.0%	0	.0%
"Reporters' stories were retracted"	0	.0%	3	12.5%	0	.0%
"This is the miracle of life, I believe it"	6	3.0%	0	.0%	3	42.9%
"Great love"	23	11.6%	0	.0%	0	.0%
"Shift the blame"	2	1.0%	0	.0%	0	.0%
"Compensation for victims"	8	4.0%	1	4.2%	0	.0%
"Sorrow for the accident"	7	3.5%	0	.0%	0	.0%
Total	79	100%	24	100%	7	100%

Research Question 3: What role did the media play in this case?

Research question 3 is "what role did media play in this case?" This is a question that needs to be reviewed from both the qualitative and quantitative aspects. The researcher designed the coding process so that coding the tone of the quotes in the reports could be accomplished. The content analysis helped the researcher to analyze the media attitude quantitatively. In addition, the researcher analyzed this question by using some comments about the online environment.

Figures 6- 8 shows the relationship between response strategies and attitudes of media in three different crisis stages.

Figure 6: Time Section I



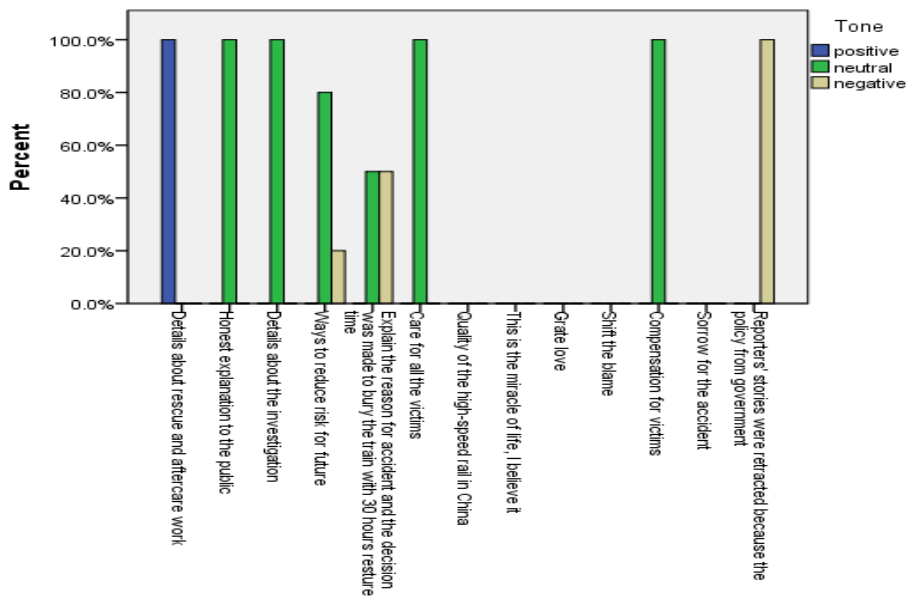
In Time Section I, the acute crisis stage, the tone that appeared most frequently in the reports was “neutral” one. The “positive tone” appears the same number of times as the “negative tone.” The most positive tone that appeared was in the “great love” category, which is reasonable because the “inside only” policy did not allow the Chinese media to report the news in a negative way.

Second, the negative tone that appeared most fell into the categories of “compensation to victims” and “explain the accident and the reason was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue time.” These two categories were more negative than positive because, 1), public did not trust the reason the government initially provided,

which was because of the weather. 2), when the government official announced the rescue was finished and a live girl was found, that made the public even angrier about the short time the government conducted rescue operation. 3), about compensation, the government first wanted to present the victims only 500,000 rmb, which was not enough for the victims according to the analysis of economic experts and lawyers. The government said they would give out a bonus to the people who signed the compensation agreement in the first week.

Time Section I shows some media in China were affected by the government policy and they followed the rules in reporting the news. The online environment was comparatively free and people were able to share their versions of information using different social media in China. Most of the information was quoted from the foreign news sources and newspapers such as The New York Times. The information shared online also made the public angry because what they read in the newspaper had a lot of variance from the information they acquired on the Internet. So from this aspect, it can be said, in the first Time Section, the media tried to shift the public's attention from asking about the responsibility to the "great love" theme; however, the effect failed and made the situation even worse.

Figure 7: Time Section II

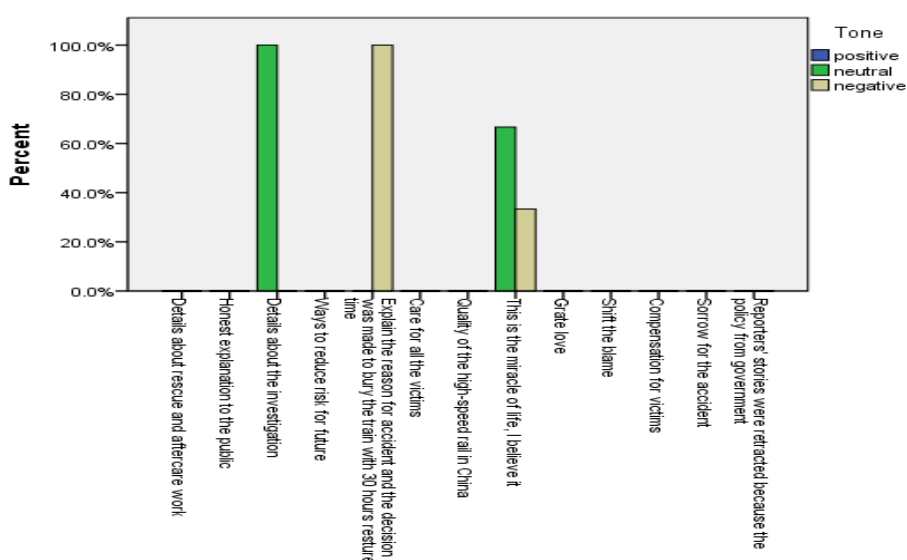


In Time Section II: the chronic crisis stage, negative reports exceeded the positive reports. Interestingly, the most negative reports and positive reports occupied in two different categories with similar percentages. The positive content was the “details about rescue and aftercare work” and these reports were all from the Wenzhou Business and Xinjing News. The negative comment was “reporter’s stories were retracted because the policy from government,” and all of these reports were from the New York Times of what does this say about the crisis.

In Time Section II, the reports about “great love” disappeared. The news stories about rescue and aftercare work were all positive. This could indicate that the government may have realized that the tactic of shifting responsibility was not working in this case, and they started to empower the media to report the facts instead of shifting blame. The positive category was all about the details of the rescue and aftercare work, and these reports helped the public to know about what government did after the accident.

The New York Times reported that three journalists' stories were retracted because the "insider only" policy in the first crisis stage in this time. Netizens or bloggers shared the front page of different papers in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and foreign countries to show the government still kept the strategy of shifting blame. However, based on the researcher's observation, in this time period, even though the online community still posted negative comments about the government, the negative comments decreased compared to the first stage. In addition, more and more people chose to take the wait-and-see attitude because they were waiting for the report from the government.

Figure 8: Time Section III



In The Time Section III, the crisis resolution stage, there were no positive reports, and the quotes were “details about the investigation,” “explain the accident reason and the reason was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue time” and “this is the miracle of life, I believe it.” Only “explain the accident reason and the reason was made to bury the train with 25 hours rescue time” had a negative tone; the other two

quotes had neutral tones.

Time Section III, the media did not pay too much attention to this case because another big crisis was making news seem to about a national charity organization in China. Most of the media placed their emphasis on this scandal, and only a few reports about the high-speed rail accident were found in the three selected newspapers. Most of them were about the investigation about the accident, the firing of Wang Yongping, and these were some comments from the experts on the reasons for the accident. The same situation also happened in the online environment; almost all the public started to blame the charity organization. Some of the public concluded that the summer of 2011 in China was really a summer of shame because of both the high-speed rail crisis and the scandal about a national charity organization. In this Time Section, the media reported the facts about the government's further action on the clean up of the accident.

To summarize, the media played different roles during in the three different Time Sections. During Time Section I, the local news media in Wenzhou paid more attention to the “great love” policy. The Xingjing News from Beijing followed the “great love” policy, but they also placed an emphasis on reporting the questions the public was most concerned about. However, some of their thoughts cannot be published because of the censorship of journalism in China. The New York Times was the only source that was able to report what happened at that time, and news reports were referenced thousands of times online. Basically, in the Time Section I, all of the news media made the situation worse by incomplete reporting or hiding the

truth.

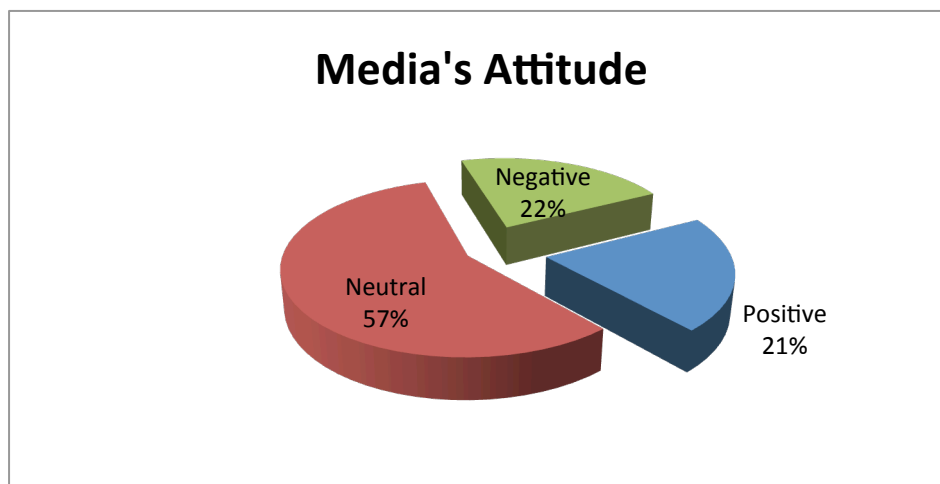
In Time Section II, the media in China started to focus on the accident. They rejected publication of the theme “great love” and paid more attention to the aftercare work and investigation. The foreign newspapers then started to report the censorship issue for the Chinese media. However, more and more of the public chose to wait for the investigation report, which could indicate that the media helped the government to solve the crisis to some extent.

In Time Section III, all of the media organizations shifted emphasis to another scandal about a national charity organization. Stories on the train crisis were just update. This did not have significant effects on the crisis.

Discussion

The results for the research questions were answered by conducting a content analysis of news reports from the three selected newspapers. In Figure 9, 21% of the quotes were positive voices from the news media and 21.9% were negative. The next highest unit was 57.1%, the neutral attitudes. Based on these statistic results, it is hard to determine whether or not the crisis strategies employed by the Chinese government succeeded because the negative were comments from news stories that were close to even with the positive ones.

Figure 9: Media Attitude



An analysis of the stories from the content analysis showed the Chinese government employed eight strategies from the SCCT's crisis response strategy: corrective action, justification, concern, denial, excuse, scapegoat, compensation and apology. The top three strategies were corrective action, justification and excuse. Each strategy will be discussed in details.

Corrective Action

Corrective action was the most accepted strategy for publics after a crisis (Coombs 1999). Corrective action was also the most used strategy by the Chinese government and reached 54.1% compared to other strategies. The corrective actions in the high-speed rail accident case included providing "details of the rescue and aftercare work," "offer an honest explanation to the public," "details of the investigation" and "ways to reduce the risk for the future." Both Chinese media and foreign media, reported with a neutral tone for most of the quotes that belong to "corrective action" category.

After the accident, the public wanted to know why the crisis had occurred. The Chinese government actually chose the right strategy to respond to the crisis. The strategy was the corrective action. To be specific, after the crisis happened, most articles in the selected three newspapers were focused on reporting what the situation from the rescue scene. The rescue team, spokesperson Wang Yongping, and the director of the Chinese Rail Department Sheng Guangzu were the people or organizations that appeared a lot in the reports. These reports were all about how the government conducted the rescue work.

In addition, the Prime Wen Jiabao's visit and his directives to the related government segments significantly helped the government on saving the reputation of the Chinese high-speed rail. This is known because the reports about the Wen Jiabao were all positive in selected three newspapers and the online environment also praises Wen Jiabao frequently. Wen Jiabao announced that the government would provide results from an honest investigation to the public and discuss the reasons the accident happened. This portrayed that the government wanted to provide a testable explanation to the public about this accident, instead of shifting the public's attention. Almost all the news media used direct quotes from Wen Jiabao as front-page headline of July 28.

In the Time Section II and III, the quotes "offer an honest explanation to the public" and "details about the investigation" were the top two used by the media. Both of the quotes belonged to the corrective action category and indicated that the Chinese government still chose this strategy as the main strategy for coping with the

crisis. And government actions, such as trying to save the injured passengers and being open to the media, supported the strategy.

In the entire three crisis stages, media stories about corrective action fell into both the positive and neutral categories and were seldom negative comments. This indicated that the media accepted the corrective actions that the government took. In addition, the online discussions did not criticize the investigation and rescue work much.

Justification

The justification strategy was used frequently by the government with 15.9% of the stories, which was the second highest rate. The justification strategy was the mild high acceptance strategy based on Coombs's acceptance level of response strategies (1999). In the high-speed rail crisis case, justification was used in the three Time Sections. It did not have a good result because most of the comments blog about this quote were negative or neutral.

The justification strategy focused on the quote "Explain reasons for the accident and the decision was made to buried the train with 25 hours rescue." Based on the results of the attitude of different quotes on different Time Sections, the quotes were received negative feedback from the media. In the Time Section I, the negative tone was more than the neutral tone. In the Time Section II the two are even and in the Time Section III it was all negative. In the entire month, no positive report story was done on this quote.

The online public criticized the most including why the 2-year old girl was found alive after the rescue team was announced that the rescue all finished, why the rescue only lasted 25 hours and why the accident happened. In answering these questions, the government section did not achieve the results the justification was supposed to have. When the spokesperson answered the first question about the 2-year old girl, his reply of “this is a miracle” was highly unacceptable by the public and raised a lot of extremely radical comments online. About the second question, the spokesperson also said another absurd reason “whether you believe it or not, I believe it.” This did not answer the question and made the situation even worse. In addition, the Rail Ministry said the trains contained valuable "national level" technology that could be stolen and thus must be buried.

The third question was about why the accident happened. Findings indicated the government blamed the lightning storm that did not convince the public. The lightning storm was very normal; it could not cause such a huge accident. Second, even if the lightning storm was the reason why the accident happened, the quality of high-speed rail in China was still a big problem because normal weather conditions could cause such a huge tragedy. The government first claimed weather caused the accident, but later they changed this to “the accident happened because of faulted the quality of equipment, personnel and lack of on-site controls.”

After an analysis of the questions answered by the government, it is not hard to imagine that the government could only receive negative feedback from the media. The government’s choice to use the justification strategy was a right choice; however,

the way they justified their actions was not done in the right way.

Excuse

Analysis of the newspaper articles showed that the excuse strategy was used 13.7%. Coombs (1999) said that the excuse strategy had a mildly high acceptance. The organization tried to minimize its responsibility for the crisis by denying intent or control over the crisis (p.182). Coombs said the excuse strategy could be used with a crisis since there was a minimal attribution of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). However, the high-speed rail occurrence was a crisis that government related departments should take most of the crisis responsibility. So the government's choice of excuse strategy was not right.

The excuse strategy referred to the quote "great love" and "this is miracle of life, I believe it." These two quotes' content only appeared in Time Section I and III. The overall attitude from the media was more positive than the negative. However, this did not indicate that the excuse strategy was the right strategy.

Because the Chinese government has the right to control part of the media, the government created an "inside only" policy that mainland China media could not comment on the accident and used the "great love" to shift the public attention from the accident. However, the government did not predict that the social media platform could play such an important role in this case. The foreign media agencies and newspapers also helped the Chinese public to know more about the crisis.

In the Time Section II, the excuse strategy was not to be used, and only appeared

three times in the Time Section III. The researcher believes that the government had to change their communication plan when they faced the challenges from the social media and foreign reporters. The three times the strategy appeared in the Time Section III were also just some comments on the government's excuse strategy, which held the neutral tone.

The excuse strategy was a good fit for the low attribution responsibility crisis, while the Chinese government used this one received very poor effects.

Concern, Apology, Compensation

The concern, apology and compensation strategies were discussed in the same category because all of these should be used in a crisis with strong attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). In addition, these three strategies composed 13% of the total strategies used.

Form the results section, the quotes of three strategies (concern, apology, and compensation) received negative tone higher than positive. The largest number of quotes was still report neutral. However, the apology, compensation and concern strategy should be in the very high acceptance category compared to other strategies in the SCCT (Coombs, 1999).

Reason for the negative comments about the compensation could have been because at first the government wanted to compensate a small amount of money, around 500,000 rmb, and also gave out a bonus if the victims' family signed a contract in one week. This made the public feel the government did not have an

honest attitude toward the compensation. So the fact that the results of the media attitude on this strategy were more negative than positive is not a surprise.

The concern and apology strategies did not create a lot of positive reports because of the manner in which the government showed concern and apology. For instance: the quote “the President Hu Jintao showed sincere concern and made a full apology to the public” or any high-level leader showed concern and apology to the public. This is a cliché in the Chinese government media reports and announcements. However, the social media platform provided a way that the public could comment freely on this case. Most of the online public showed they were extremely tired of the way the government propagandized their so-called “sincerely concern” and faked “apology.”

For this reason, the concern, apology and compensation did not receive good media feedback, and this was supposed to have received the best outcome from the media.

Scapegoat and Denial

Denial and scapegoat strategies were used in the high-speed rail crisis case, which mainly focused on the government’s policy on reporting the accident in Time Section I. The government claimed that the Chinese high-speed rail was of a high quality and one of the most advanced technologies in the world. Coombs (1999) pointed out that the denial strategy would have no acceptance. Furthermore, denial scapegoat strategies are best used only for rumor and challenge crises (Coombs, 2007).

Both of the strategies totaled 4.5%. The quotes in these two categories were received negatively by the public. In the Time Section I, the government claimed that the quality of high-speed rail was trustworthy, and the cause of the accident was because of a thunderstorm. The newspaper comments about this quote were all neutral. However, the online public felt this is the way the government wanted to deny their responsibility and preserve the good reputation of high-speed rail in China. Some articles that reported that there were thousands of passengers who returned their high-speed rail tickets in order to take the bus or use other means of transportation. The news indicated that even though the government boasted about the quality of the good quality of high-speed rail, the accident had already resulted in negative perceptions about this technology.

The second denial strategy focused primarily on the influence the reporting policy had on the journalists. The New York Times, which pointed out that some of the reports of journalists were retracted because they did not follow the policy that government wanted them to. Furthermore, this policy was discussed online extensively and most of the online public felt the Chinese media environment was highly controlled by the government, and the journalists did not have the rights to report the “facts” of the accident. This topic was not directly related to the high-speed rail case, but it did have some after effects on the perception of government.

According to the Chinese government, the accident happened “because of severe defects in the design of control center equipment, lax equipment inspection and failure to adequately respond to equipment malfunction caused by lightning”

(Wenzhou, n.d). However, the government tried to shift responsibility for the accident to the weather. Government quotes received no positive feedback from the media and also made the public angry about the reason given by the government.

Responsibility for the accident should rest with the Chinese government. However, the government used denial and scapegoat strategies that ultimately were not accepted by the public. Even though the amount of the quotes involving this strategy were less frequent, they did affect the reputation of the high-speed rail and government significantly.

Recommendations for Chinese government

The 7.23 Yongwen train accident in China could provide many useful lessons for the Chinese government. Based on analysis of the crisis, the Chinese government used both the correct and incorrect strategies. However, the correct strategies that were adopted did not earn positive feedback from the media and public. In this section, the researcher provided some lessons for the Chinese government for the future.

First, the government should realize that their typical way of communication is not working today, especially the pattern of communicating that has been used for dozens of years. The public has the right to know more and more in today's information age. What the public wanted to know was the real reason for the accident and what happened, not just a lot of clichés that portrayed the so-called concern and apology from the highest-level government. What the public needs to receive is useful information and the actual work that the government promised.

Second, the Chinese government should know that being open and honest is the “golden rule” for crisis communication and to reputation management. In this case, the government first fired three officials immediately, and this made the public feel these three people were just the scapegoats in the crisis. In a press conference, the spokesperson Wang Yongping’s attitude was good; however, the reply from him indicated that he lacked necessary training in communication. During the first half of the conference, he simply read the statements that insiders wrote for the public to hear. In the Q&A sections, his answers to the questions did not seem to be honest and logical.

Third, the government tried the “great love” theme to shift public attention from the crisis. The “great love” method had been used in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and other natural disasters in China before with good results. However, the government should have realized that the accident this time was not because of any natural disaster, it was because of the mistakes in the technology and design of the high-speed rail system.

In addition, the government also lacked a crisis plan to deal with online communication. Because of regulations from the government that have controlled most of the media in Mainland China, the mass media were required to obey these policies when reporting the accident. However, the government did not realize that the social media platform could be such an active place for the public to discuss the accident and government actions.

It is worth mentioning here that the social media platform was the only place that

was completely free for the public to express their opinion online. This also indicates that the online information should contain a lot of unfiltered information and rumors about the accident. For example, when the compensation plan become public, some people pretended they were the relatives of the victims in order to get the compensation money from the government.

The government should open an official account on a social media platform to distribute the real information online, too, and not just focus on traditional media means. Furthermore, the official account should also be the place that could clarify the rumors and untruthful information to the public. Last but not least, the government should communicate with the public immediately, and this could benefit the government. The reason is because the government could join into the discussion online, to create a two-way communications channel, which is better than traditional communication style of the Chinese government.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Yongwen line rail accident that happened in Wenzhou, China on July 23, 2011 created a crisis for the Chinese government and related organizations in China. The accident was also a test for the government conducting a comprehensive crisis communication plan to save the reputation of high-speed rail in China, as well as the reputation of the government. The government performed a number of unprofessional things after the accident happened: the government first tried to shift the responsibility to the weather, only spend 25 hours on rescue activities, a live girl was found after the rescue team announced that the rescue was finished, unprofessional answers were given by spokesperson Wang Yongping, and the “great love” policy for mainland Chinese media failed; all of these made the crisis even worse and really made a bad reputation for the high-speed rail. The people online criticized the government harshly and most of the comments were very negative.

This study used the content analysis method to analyze the quotes from the selected newspapers for a one-month period after the crisis. The SCCT

crisis response strategy was used as the theoretical framework to guide the research and analyze the results.

Results of the content analysis indicated the government employed eight strategies in three of the crisis communication stages; the top three of these strategies was the corrective action (54.1%), justification (15.9%) and excuse (13.7%). The government always placed the corrective action and justification as the main strategies in different Time Sections, which was the right choice for the government to save their reputation.

However, the right action and strategies did not mean the positive feedback from the media and public would be guaranteed. From the media, it is difficult to tell if the strategies the government adopted were effective or not, because of the percentage of the positive and negative tones was almost even. In addition, based on the researchers' observations on the social media platform discussion and the other newspapers' reports, it can be concluded that most of the strategies the government adopted were ineffective. Some of the strategies might be the right choice for the government, but it just did not work effectively because of many reasons discussed previously.

First, the government did not always provide the honest and open communication to the public. This is crucial in crisis communication. Most of the untruthful information the government disseminated was challenged and discussed on the social media platforms, which made the situation even worse.

Second, because the accident was caused by the design defects, the government was attributed a high degree of responsibility for the accident. However, the

government still used denial and scapegoat strategies. Furthermore, the topics the government wanted to deny and shift blame for were exactly what concerned the public the most: the reason why the accident happened, why the rescue only continued for 25 hours, and why a survivor girl was found after the rescue was announced finished.

Third, the apology strategy was not used many times. There were only 8 quotes about the apology (3.4%). The government should have used apology as much as possible. Furthermore, some of the related organization's attitudes made the situation even worse. For example, one organization that was directly related to this crisis in Beijing apologized to the public on July 26, but they said apology did not stand for anything except that we know we had done something wrong. The Chinese government needs to pay more attention in the future to these differences.

Last but not least, the government did not predict the social media platform could play such an important role in the whole crisis communication process. The government lacks experience in dealing with this new technology and understanding the communication methods for the online environment. This made the government seem really passive and unprepared for the two-way communication channels.

In addition, from the content analysis, the findings show that the media role played in this case was another interesting thing. In the Time Section I, both the Chinese media and oversea media made the situation worse because the "great love" policy from the government made the Chinese media shift the public concerns, while the international media told the truth about the accident. In the Time Section II, the

Chinese media changed its strategy and paid more attention to the rescue work and investigation. This helped the government solve the crisis to some extent. In the Time Section III, because another scandal happened in China, most of the media just reported the facts and updates about the investigation about the accident and shifted their focus to the new crisis.

From the research it shows that the SCCT crisis response strategy could be used as a theoretical framework to help the researcher to examine the case of the Chinese high-speed rail. Based on this theoretical framework, the researcher was able to analyze what the strategies the government used and whether they were used effectively. It also enabled the researcher make recommendations for the government.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this research paper were as follows.

First, in the crisis stages, there were a significant amount of the newspapers that covered this accident. However, the researcher was not able to use reports from all of these newspapers. Newspapers in Hong Kong and Taiwan covered the story very negatively, while some of the newspapers in Mainland China did some insightful analysis on this accident. The research was limited in the number of newspapers as the objectives to examine.

Second, the content analysis of this paper was based on the high-speed rail crisis, and this could not be generalized to the other government cases. This could not be used to predict the government's reaction and effectiveness in other crisis communications.

Third, the social media platform and online discussion was a huge part of this case. The results of the research questions were only based on the numbers and the observations of online discussions. Other research methods, such as survey could be used in order to help the researcher to have a more comprehensive understanding of the research.

The last limitation of the research is that the overseas newspapers could have a potential media bias. Some of the reports from The New York Times quoted a lot of extremely negative sentences from experts and journalists. These articles were almost all in the negative tone, which did not confirm the corrective behavior of the Chinese government.

Recommendations for future study

The study used western crisis communication theory that mainly focused on the image repair theory. This study about the Chinese government is a hot topic because it is included the culture factor, the history of the Chinese government, the relationship between the government and public and the way the government works in China. Many critical aspects need to be taken into consideration and investigated.

Furthermore, this study applied on the SCCT theory and reputation management in a setting where social media was dominated.

Finally, the researcher interested in public relations study in Eastern culture countries should try to apply more Western culture based public relations theory to test its generalizability in the international environment.

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APPENDIXES

Instruction to coders

You have been asked to evaluate newspaper articles about the 7.23 Yongwen high-speed train collision in Wenzhou, China. Please read each article carefully, and evaluate each quote from the chosen information source. Your task is to determine which type of crisis response strategy each quote sentence characterizes and what is the tone of the quote in the context.

Crisis response strategy definitions and elements are enclosed in this package, and you should read them prior to beginning your work.

Procedures:

1. Write the story number and your coder number at the top of the coding sheet.
2. Read each quotes.
3. On the coding sheet, provide the following:
 - a. Sentence number
 - b. Newspaper name: *Xinjing News*, *The New York Times*, *Wenzhou Business*
 - c. Quote goes to which categorize of quote content
 - d. Response strategy used
 - e. What is the tone of the quote in the context
4. Use one coding sheet for each story.
5. Please be aware that there is no right or wrong answers. Please code the sentence with the crisis response strategy that most closely relates to its characteristics.

CODE SHEET

Newspaper:

- 1 = "New York Times"
- 2 = "Wenzhou Business"
- 3 = "Xinjing News"

Strategies:

- 1 = "Excuse"
- 2 = "Justification"
- 3 = "Concern"
- 4 = "Scapegoat"
- 5 = "Corrective action"
- 6 = "Apology"
- 7 = "Compensation"

Tones:

- 1 = "Positive"
- 2 = "Neutral"
- 3 = "Negative"

The Quotes:

- 1 = "Rescue and aftercare work"
- 2 = "Offer an honest explanation to the public"
- 3 = "Details about the investigation"
- 4 = "Ways to reduce the risk for future"
- 5 = "Explain the accident reason and why buried the train with 25 hours rescue"
- 6 = "Care about all the victims"
- 7 = "High quality of the high-speed rail in China"
- 8 = "This is the miracle of life, I believe it"
- 9 = "Great love"
- 10 = "Shift the responsibility to the weather or any others"
- 11 = "Compensation to the victims"
- 12 = "Feels truly sorry about the accident"

- 13= "Reporters' stories were retracted"

Table: ELEMENS OF CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Strategy	Quotes
Corrective Action	"Details of rescue and aftercare work"; "Honest explanation to the public"; "Details about the investigation"; "Ways to reduce risk for future"
Justification	"Explain reasons for the accident reason and the decision was made to buried the train with 25 hours rescue"
Concern	"Care for all the victims"
Denial	"Quality of the high-speed rail in China", "Reporters' stories were retracted"
Excuse	"This is the miracle of life, I believe it"; "Great love"
Scapegoat	"Shift the blame"
Compensation	"Compensation for victims"
Apology	"Sorrow for the accident"