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Cultural Differences in Crisis Communication: Western Theory and the Japanese Context

危機コミュニケーションにおける文化間相違：

欧米理論の日本文脈への適用

Summary

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Navigating a crisis is tough on any organization, but such troubles are only compounded when a company is operating outside its comfort zone. With more and more companies growing into multinational organizations, crises increasingly cross national borders, requiring communication with diverse audiences with divergent information needs, and culture-specific communication standards and values (Claeys & Schwarz, 2016). Moving beyond its ethnocentric origins, the field of crisis communication has the potential to provide practitioners with a truly relevant international body of knowledge with increasing explanatory and eventually even ‘predictive’ capabilities within and across a number of national contexts.

Crisis Communication as an academic discipline has historically been a heavily Western-centric field of research with a majority of the research coming from Europe and North America. In order to align crisis communication practice and scholarship to the reality of vast cultural differences between stakeholders across the globe, an in depths study of crisis communication differences across cultural settings is essential. Claeys and Schwarz (2016)

recognize that any crisis communication effort in a cross-cultural setting “would need substantial research and knowledge about [stakeholder’s] information needs, communication habits, [and] culture-specific value orientations...” and emphasize the need for international comparative research. In recent years, a number of prominent crisis communication failures both by Japanese organizations abroad and international organizations in Japan have shown a spotlight on the need for crisis communication research for the Japanese context.

Chapter 2 introduces the state of the art of the crisis communication field and reviews relevant cross-cultural and international aspects of the field. Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the main theories in which this thesis is grounded. SCCT and Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) are introduced, and their theoretical underpinnings are discussed. Chapter 4 provides an overview over the psychological, socio-cultural and organizational context of Japan and its effects on communication practices in general. Chapters 5 and 6 constitute the qualitative section of this thesis and illustrate the impact of the cultural differences identified in chapter 4 on real life crisis communication situations. Chapter 5 examines the case of Olympus Corporation’s struggles with cross-cultural crisis communication differences. This chapter focuses on a Japanese company communicating with a Western audience. Chapter 6 introduces the case of McDonalds Japan, whose Western chief executive officer (CEO) encountered considerable difficulties when attempting to address a crisis situation with a Japanese audience. Chapter 7 addresses research questions concerning crisis communication messages and content while chapter 8 focuses on questions of form and spokesperson ethnicity. Chapter 9 concludes this thesis with final thoughts, and future research directions.

Both qualitative case studies illustrated the importance of the adherence to crisis communication conventions and standards in cross-cultural crisis communication situations, and the McDonald’s case in particular gave weight to the question of the importance of

spokesperson ethnicity and language choice. Chapter 7 takes a closer look at the effect of cultural variations in responsibility attribution and account giving on the effectiveness of SCCT recommended strategies in Japan. Findings indicated, that in the Japanese context, responsibility considerations, as defined by Western causal definitions of responsibility, are not sufficient to predict company image outcomes. Responsibility judgments only partially followed the responsibility attributions suggested by the SCCT crisis clusters. In terms of reputational threat, some deviations from the SCCT crisis clusters were found and the prevalence of proxy responsibility considerations, which is not sufficiently reflected in the Western causal concept of responsibility, was identified as the most likely explanation for these deviations. Overall, a culturally matched crisis response was found to consistently outperform the SCCT recommended responses. In other words, Chapter 7 gave scientific weight to what practitioners' guides in Japan have long espoused: when a crisis strikes, apologize.

Chapter 8 confirmed the vital importance of a culturally adjusted crisis response but also illustrated the considerable impact of spokesperson ethnicity and language choice on crisis communication efforts by foreign organizations. The chapter found that as long as a culturally matched response was utilized, foreign CEO received higher credibility evaluations and subsequently higher company image outcomes than their Japanese counterparts. Rather than hindering message delivery, speaking in English while using a translator, resulted in the most favorable reputational evaluations. For Western CEOs, speaking in Japanese was not required or even counterproductive.

In conclusion we can say that both, differences in responsibility attribution and account giving practices, seem to negatively influence the appropriateness of SCCT for the Japanese context. Future research should build on these findings to develop a culturally adjusted version of SCCT for the Japanese context. One consideration here should be the

inclusion of older respondents, as perceived ideological similarity to a foreign spokesperson and views on the importance of formal communication etiquette could differ across generations. A further potential future extension of this research would be the inclusion of a larger number of crisis cases that involve proxy responsibility elements (see Chapter 4) as such cases are likely to be perceived quite differently by Japanese and U.S. audiences. Finally, with this thesis, the author hopes to have made a substantial contribution to the holistic body of evidence-based knowledge about crisis communication in Japan and with Japanese audiences. However, it should be noted that the author views this volume as only the first step in an effort to develop a comprehensive theoretical crisis communication framework for Japan.