

Visit to the Theory of Image Restoration: Asiana Airline Case

Yeonkwon Jung
yeonkwon@hotmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates Asiana Airlines' image restoration strategies used to restore their image after unionized pilots' strike in 2005. After looking at types of image repair strategies, we focus on whether they show culture specific features different from crisis management communication in Western cultures.

The data for the study consist of news articles on the strike that appeared in major Korean newspapers (press conference, in particular). Benoit's (1995) typology of image restoration strategies is used for analyzing data.

This study identifies culturally universal and stereotyped patterns in international crisis communication, in that the similar strategies as in research work on crisis communication in Western cultures are used in non-Western culture (i.e. mortification; corrective action; scapegoating; denial; compensation).

This study clarifies the limitation of image restoration theory, which does not look at the data within the whole context. In this respect, this study shows that linguistic pragmatics becomes a useful tool for categorizing image restoration strategies.

1. Introduction

Asiana Airlines' pilots took full-scale strike action for 25 days starting July 17, 2005. The unionized pilots at Asiana Airlines demanded better conditions and job security, including the extension of the retirement age and a cut in flight hours. Although several negotiations were held between the management and the union, the talks ended without any results. The pilot union's walkout was eventually over after the Korean government's intervention. The government used emergency powers to settle the labor dispute. The

government forced the unionized pilots to return to work immediately for a 20-day cooling period. The strike had a significant impact on Asiana's services during the high demand summer vacation period. The airline, the country's second-biggest carrier, canceled over 2000 domestic and more than 130 international flights during the strike.

There is a wish-list of things organizations would not like to happen (e.g. accidents and natural events; health and environmental disasters; technical breakdowns; economic and market forces, and so on) (see Newsom and Haynes 2005 for detailed crisis typology). As shown in Asiana's case, every organization can be subject to crises causing an urgent problem that must be addressed immediately. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can threaten the existence of the organization. Therefore, organizations in a crisis situation try to properly manage the crisis. Basically, the goal of crisis management is to keep the company functioning smoothly during or after a crisis (Bovee & Thill 2005: 145). More fundamentally, crisis management can be interpreted as an endeavor to save or restore corporate reputation or face. Business organizations have face, which is public self-image (Brown & Levinson 1987), like people. If they lose their face, they have an inclination to restore it. Organizations losing their face organize image repair strategies, the dialog between the organization and its publics after the negative occurrence designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization. To restore image may be an effort to "restoring the confidence of key publics, which means communicating a return to normal business" (Fearn-Banks 2002: 12). This is the fundamental idea for the theory of image restoration (Benoit 1995; Benoit & Czerwinski 1997).

This study discusses a case in corporate image repair. It aims to explicate which image restoration strategies were used by Asiana Airlines to restore their image after unionized pilots' strike. Furthermore, this study investigates whether the theory of image restoration discourse provides a complete approach to crisis communication in light of the following research questions:

1. Do image repair strategies work well together?
2. Does image repair discourse show culture specific features?

In other words, first, this study explores the limitation of image restoration theory in that it deals with a single unit of discourse, instead of looking at the data within the whole context. Second, it investigates whether the image restoration theory (which is mainly used to

study organizational crises in Western cultures) is also useful for looking into crises in non-Western cultures.

The data for this study are composed of articles pertaining to Asiana Airlines' pilots on strike in 2005 (press conference led by CEO, in particular) that appeared in major Korean newspapers (Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Daily, Donga Ilbo, Yonhap News). Benoit's (1995) typology of image restoration strategies is used for data analysis. Typology of image restoration is summed up in the following section.

2. Image restoration by apologia

Apologia is the speech of defense in response to public criticism and accusation (Hearit 1994, 1996, 2006). Apologiae can be done to neutralize the argumentative force of the initial charges of organizational wrongdoing. Scholars have attempted to articulate the strategies that apologists draw from in formulating their responses (Ware & Linkugel 1973; Brummett 1980; Coombs 1995; Hearit 1994, 1996, 2006). The fullest form of the apologetic strategies may come from Benoit's work articulated through image repair theory, which focuses on what a firm says when faced with a crisis.

The key to understanding image repair discourse is to consider the nature of an accusation that demands responses from the accused. According to Benoit (1997: 178), an accusation or an attack has two components: (1) the accused is held responsibility for an action, and (2) the act is considered offensiveness. For these components, reality is less important than perceptions. In other words, the key issue is not whether the act *was* offensive, but whether the act is *believed* by the audiences to be offensive. Since each audience's interests, wants, and goals are diverse, corporations must address multiple audiences in a different manner and sequence, depending on the prioritization of important audiences.

The theory introduces five superstrategies with twelve substrategies of image restoration. 1. The accused denies the offensive act (denial): the accused simply denies committing the offensive action (simple denial); the accused shifts the blame to someone else or something else (shift the blame). 2. The accused evades responsibility (evasion of responsibility): the accused claims that the offensive action was merely a response to another's act (provocation); the accused cites a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation (defeasibility); the accused says that the offensive action

occurred by accident (Accident); the accused suggests that the offensive behavior was done with good intention (good intention). 3. The accused reduces offensiveness (reduction of offensiveness); the accused strengthens the audience's positive opinion of the accused by stressing good traits (bolstering); the accused attempts to downplay the extent of the damage (minimization); the accused distinguishes the act from other similar but more offensive actions (differentiation); the accused places the act in a more favorable context (transcendence); the accused uses a counterattack against an accuser or opponent (attack accuser); the accused reimburses the victim with goods, services, or money to help mitigate the negative feeling arising from the act (compensation). 4. Corrective action: the accused promises to correct/prevent the problem. 5. Mortification: the accused confesses and begs forgiveness

This study also uses the Hearit's (1994) notion of 'scapegoating' (transfer guilt to another), in order to make a clear distinction with a strategy of 'denial' (denial of accusation).

3. Background for image restoration in Asiana case

Given the definition of crisis in Korean (*wyuki* "the period which is likely to cause harmless or loss"), the crisis in the Asiana case means the period of the strike. In this respect, to overcome the crisis means doing successful negotiation so that the strike is quickly over. Presumably, that is the main reason why Asiana Airlines saved crisis management for later and made a great effort to restore their image after the strike was over. In this point, we may return to the definition of crisis and think about whose crisis it was. In business settings, crisis can be defined as events causing managerial and financial losses and preventing the maintenance of relationship with stakeholders (Barton 1993). Following this definition, we may raise a question about whether pilots' strike really put the company under crisis. First, we may think about Asiana's financial aspect after the strike. Media showed that the pilots' strike did not negatively affect Asiana Airlines' share value (Money Today 2005-08-12). This may go along with the reason why an apology was not made to shareholders during Asiana's press conference. Second, we may also think if the public in this event accused the company, so that their image was threatened. Now let us discuss this.

Given the interplay between the accuser and the accused, apologetic discourse is fundamentally dyadic (Benoit & Czerwinski 1997; Hearit 1994, 1996, 2006), as shown in figure 1.

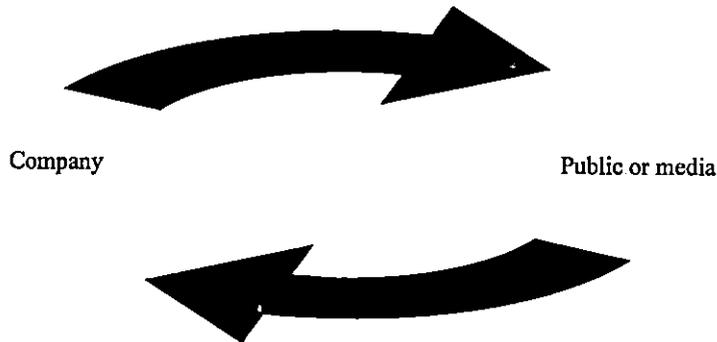


Figure1. Dyadic feature of apologetic discourse

However, image restoration discourse does not seem to be dyadic between company and public (or media), in case media participate in apologetic interface as third party not as the major accuser to the company, as shown in figure 2.

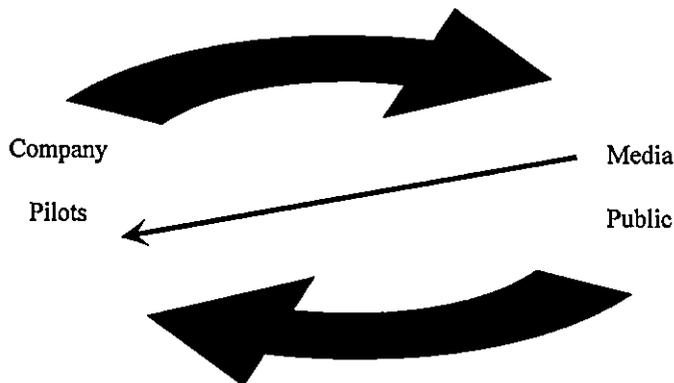


Figure 2. Media's intervention to apologetic interface

Media's intervention was made by their description of pilots as a union of aristocrats (Yonhap News 2005-08-10). Over the strike, major newspapers made on-line debating rooms to ask how the public think about a union of aristocrats and on-line polls were conducted.

Media's intervention to apologetic interface made the public blame the pilots because they *thought* that the pilots' demands at the bargaining table were too much, irrespective of whether they *in fact* demanded too much.

Likewise, media's function to make the public criticize pilots changes the direction of accusation and diffuses the anger and hostility directed to the company. It possibly made the striking party under crisis without being much empathized by the public to the strike. Therefore, Asiana airlines case is described as apologetic interface between media and pilots, rather than between media and company over the crisis, as shown in figure 3.

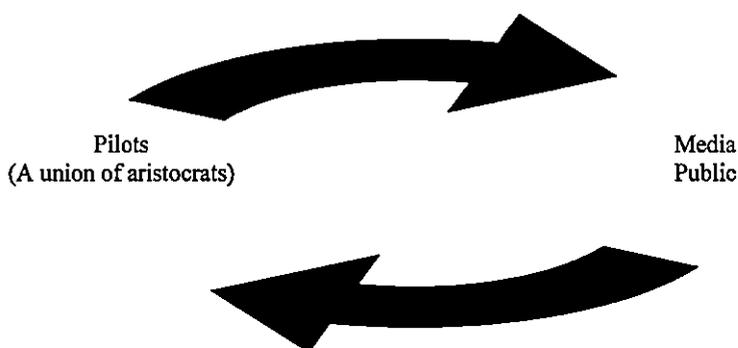


Figure 3. Apologetic interface over the strike

Naturally, these apologetic interface situations may not make the company have to make great efforts to restore their image over the strike. Nevertheless, Asiana Airlines was willing to have a press conference after crisis was over for image restoration purposes. It is because Asiana Airlines could not avoid *crisis responsibility* (Coombs 1998) to some extent. As slightly mentioned in the previous section, following the theory of image restoration, the important point is whether the firm is *thought* to be responsible for the offensive act, not whether the firm *in fact* is responsible for it by the relevant audience. Even though there were employees other than the chief executive actually causing the problem in the first place, in Korea the blame is attributed to the person in charge of the business (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007). On the other hand, the company can also be blamed for “acts of omission or poorly performed acts that it appears responsible for” (Benoit 1997: 178). That is, the company cannot avoid a fundamental responsibility because of the matter of *controllability of crisis*

cause, referring to whether the organization is perceived to have the ability to control or foresee the occurrence of the crisis (Weiner 1986). The company needs to acknowledge their responsibility about the failure of labor management, which is a fundamental reason for the strike. This makes the company need to take restorative approaches to their image. In this respect, image restoration discourse in Asiana case is in response to corporate image *threats* or *losses*, rather than corporate image *crises*. This study investigates how the company used image restoration discourse.

4. Asiana Airlines' Image Restoration Strategies

Most of the image restoration strategies realized by Asiana Airlines were limited in the choice of media for delivering their messages. Asiana Airlines preferred the press conference led by the CEO to announce their messages pertaining to image restoration (compensation only an exception). Probably, they chose the press conference in delivering their messages to enhance formality.

As mentioned above, owing to media play, the firm is not really to blame for the offensive act. This becomes an important component of their response. In principle, accordingly, the company has only to acknowledge their responsibility for the failure of labor management in response to the audience's criticism in that crisis was made by pilots' strike. In this occasion, image repair discourses may include (1) the company expresses their empathy to stakeholders (government, customers, people in shipping and tourist industries, etc), and (2) regardless of whose fault it was, the company acknowledges their responsibility for the failure of labor management.

Given this assumption, Asiana acknowledged their responsibility using the strategies of mortification and corrective action.

Mortification

Mortification is a strategy of making an apology. One of the most favorable crisis management strategies, mortification, is frequently used by the highest ranking person in a business organization, such as the CEO. There are pros and cons in the case of the CEO's apology for crisis management. The CEO's apology can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of their fault in causing trouble, so that the extent of the crisis can possibly appear bigger than what it actually is. However, the CEO's apology is generally a proper and

efficient method of crisis management to show ‘responsible leadership’ (Baum, 2006), and it plays an important role in corporate image restoration. It may go hand in hand with the remark that “a company at fault is most persuasive when it *admits* that fault and apologies” (Benoit & Czerwinski 1997: 53, emphasis given).

Asiana Airlines’ CEO formally made an apology, 사과의 말씀을 드린다 ‘to make an apology’, during the press conference two days after the strike was over (August 12, 2005).

국민 일상생활과 국가경제에 엄청난 불편과 피해를 끼쳐드린 데 대해 사과의 말씀을 드린다.

‘We apologize for causing public’s daily life and national economy massive inconvenience and damage’

Apology in Asiana case, however, does not seem to be a normal functioned apology (an apology made to an accuser) to accept its fault, but a pseudo-apology functioning only to empathize stakeholders. It is because Asiana did not admit their responsibility using the strategy of scapegoating. That is, Asiana Airlines tended to avoid or shift the blame to someone else. Regarding scapegoating, it will be investigated in the following section.

Corrective action

The accused promises to correct/prevent the problem or provides concrete solutions (to stakeholders) using corrective action. Corrective action is an essential part of mortification (Benoit 1995). In fact, corrective action was preceded by mortification in the CEO’s press conference. Apology can be completed by giving solutions, so that it will fully meet the accuser’s wants or needs. In this respect, corrective action can be interpreted as an obligatory *move*, a functional unit of texts determined by their communicative purposes (Swales 1990), in a mortification strategy. On the other hand, corrective action can be an *indirect* form of mortification in that corrective action also implies the meaning of mortification. This claim indicates that an image restoration strategy can include another one at the same time. This overlapping characteristic of image restoration discourse may discourage Benoit & Czerwinski’s image restoration to be suitable for quantitative studies.

During the press conference on August 12 2005, Asiana Airlines’ CEO promised that they would prevent a recurrence of a similar incidence by establishing an advanced labor-management culture.

선진 노사 문화 정착을 위해 힘쓰겠다.

'We will make an effort to establish an advanced labor-management culture'

To establish an advanced labor-management means that the company admits their problem in managing labors. Furthermore, to say that the company will establish an advanced labor-management culture is a promise that they will make a great effort to issue management in terms of strengthening the ability of the company to control such an issue as the strike.

5. Additional image restoration discourse

In case Asiana is accused only for the failure of labor management, they have only to take a responsibility for it as the claiming of responsibility was made through mortification and corrective action. However, data demonstrated that Asiana Airlines used more image restoration strategies than them. They are scapegoating, denial, and compensation strategies.

Scapegoating

Crisis communicators have a tendency to focus on types of strategies without in-depth consideration of the harmonization between different strategies. Alongside mortification and corrective action, the use of scapegoating strategy in Asiana case may show this claim.

Mortification and corrective action show their acknowledgement of crisis responsibility. Nevertheless, the strategy of scapegoating makes us cast doubt about how much Asiana admit their responsibility for the crisis. Unlike simple denial of accusation, scapegoating is a strategy to transfer guilt to another.

When the CEO made an overt apology, he said:

“이번 조종사 노조 파업으로 인해 국민 일상생활과 국가경제에 엄청난 불편과 피해를 끼쳐 드린대 대해 사과의 말씀을 드린다”

'Because of the pilot's strike, we apologize for causing public's daily life and national economy massive inconvenience and damage'

The company tried to avoid their responsibility for causing public's daily life and national economy massive inconvenience and damage by placing a subordinate clause, 이번 조종사 노조 파업으로 인해 'Because of the pilot's strike', immediately before an apology

sentence, 국민 일상생활과 국가경제에 엄청난 불편과 피해를 끼쳐 드린대 대해 사과의 말씀을 드린다 ‘We apologize for causing public’s daily life and national economy massive inconvenience and damage’. That is, the company asserted that the inconvenience and damage are solely caused by the pilot’s strike. This may not go along with the claim that unlike American organizations, the Japanese are much more likely to locate responsibility in individuals at top to some extent (Sugimoto 1999).

Likewise, in the use of corrective action strategy, the CEO said:

이번 사태의 상처를 빨리 치유하고 선진 노사 문화 정착을 위해 힘쓰겠다.

‘After curing wound from the strike, we will make an effort to establish an advanced labor-management culture’

Asiana described them as a victim in terms of a word, 상처 ‘wound’. Although Asiana partially admitted their responsibility for the strike through corrective action, they emphasized that they are also a victim in that wound is something caused by an injury. In this respect, although Asiana seem to acknowledge their fault superficially, in fact they did not admit their fault through scapegoating.

Scapegoating was also made through the omission of company name and the repetition of the scapegoats’ names, 조종사 ‘pilot’, or their behaviors accused, 파업 ‘strike’.

Typologically speaking, Korean is a ‘situation-oriented language’ (Sohn 1999) in that contextually understood elements (e.g. subject) are frequently omitted. In normal Korean contexts there is no problem in identifying which one is acting as a subject even though it normally does not overtly appear in the sentence. Therefore, using contextually understood elements may make sentences unnatural and it may be redundant in normal (spoken, in particular) discourse situations in Korea.

However, the matter of impersonalization through the omission of subject could be relevant to face-saving purposes (Yamada 1997). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), dissociation or self-effacement from the face-threatening situations may be achieved by impersonalizing speaker. In particular, one of the necessary processes in people’s evaluation of face during the face-threatening events may be the attribution of the agent. In a ‘face’ event, the action must be assessed for its agent (i.e. is the agent fully or at least partly responsible for

the face-threatening events?) (cf. Lakoff 1977). Therefore, basically assessing the agent in the face-threatening situations permits a decision about who gets the blame (i.e. who will be responsible and losing face?). Following this claim, Asiana did not mention their name over the press conference, as in the following sentences.

“파업을 했다는 사실만으로 문책할 생각은 없다”

“(We) would not ask pilots to take responsibility for the strike”

“국민 일상생활과 국가경제에 엄청난 불편과 피해를 끼쳐 드린대 대해 사과의 말씀을 드린다”

‘(We) apologize for causing public’s daily life and national economy massive inconvenience and damage’

“선진 노사 문화 정착을 위해 힘쓰겠다”

‘(We) will make an effort to establish an advanced labor-management culture’

Only an exception is made in a sentence, 회사는 조종사들을 따뜻한 마음으로 맞이한다 ‘The company warmly welcomed the striking party back to the company without blame’. The subject in the sentence, 회사 ‘the company’, is exceptionally used because the strategy of denial for enhancing company’s gentle image is used in the sentence. Nevertheless, Asiana used a noun phrase, 회사 ‘the company’, as a subject, not the company name, Asiana. In contrast, it is of interest to see that the company uses the terms, 조종사 ‘pilot’ and 파업 ‘strike’ three times each over the press conference.

The use of nominalized sentences may also support the claim that the omission of subject is strategic for avoiding responsibility. By topicalizing nominalized action in the subject position, the agent becomes oblique. When nominalized constructions are topicalized by attaching the delimiter particle, 은 *-un*, after them in sentence-initial position, they can function as subjects, so that they defocalize the real agent in the sentence. For example, in the following sentence, a nominalized phrase 이번 파업과 구조조종을 연결 짓는 것 ‘to make a connection between strike and company restructuring’ is topicalized attaching the delimiter particle, 은 *-un*, is placed towards the very beginning of the sentence, so that the real agent for making a connection between strike and company restructuring, Asiana, is hidden.

이번 파업과 구조조정을 연결 짓는 것은 곤란하다”

“There is no relationship between strike and company restructuring ”

Denial

This is a strategy to deny accusation. It seems a denial of accusation from pilots, in that things that the company denied are related to what pilots accused to the company, 구조조정 ‘company restructuring’. A strategy of denial is realized by setting a company (regulation) and a crisis (source or environment) apart. Concretely speaking, it is an effort to save corporate face by stressing a gentle image through making distance between pilots causing troubles and company restructuring, as shown in:

이번 파업과 구조조정을 연결 짓는 것은 곤란하다. 구조조정은 노선의 수익성과 앞으로의 경영환경에 달려있다.

“There is no relationship between strike (or its participants) and company restructuring. Company’s restructuring would be on the sole basis of company regulations and future management environment, irrespective of participation in the strike ”.

Likewise, Asiana Airlines’ CEO announced that the company warmly welcomed the striking party back to the company and would not pursue pilot’s culpability:

회사는 조종사들을 따뜻한 마음으로 맞이한다. 파업을 했다는 사실만으로 문책할 생각은 없다.

“The company warmly welcomes the striking party back to the company. Pilots would not be asked to take responsibility for the strike ”

Denial in this occasion may be able to be an image restoration strategy against pilots’ accusation about the relationship between strike and company restructuring. However, it is interesting to see that Asiana denied the pilots’ major accusation not through face-to-face talk (at the bargaining table), but through press conference to the public. It implies that the primary function of using the denial strategy is to save corporate face in terms of showing the company’s generous image to the general public.

Compensation

Information about compensation was released through advertisements published in newspapers six days after the press conference (Hankyoreh 2005-08-18, Yonhap News 2005-08-18, etc). Asiana Airlines offered a one-day free boarding service for all domestic lines, except for Cheju island, to general publics. They provided this service on August 18th 2005 as a promise that they will offer a better service to customers who suffered inconvenience during the strike. Following the one-day free boarding service, they offered a 30% discount service to customers using the same domestic lines for three days from August 19th to 21st.

From the perspective of crisis management, compensation refers to forms of financial returns and tangible services and benefits stakeholders receive as part of an stakeholder relationship (Milkovich & Newman 2005: 6). Following this definition, it is of interest to see that this one-day free boarding service does not serve the function of authentic meaning of compensation to the victims. It is because Asiana does not identify the most important audience (stakeholders: Asiana customers, people in local tourist industry, and so on). In a similar vein, it is important to ask whether Asiana Airlines made satisfactory compensation to. They offered a 'one-day free boarding service' for domestic lines to the general publics. They exclude Cheju island, the largest island in Korea and famous for sightseeing. Probably, it is because Cheju line is the most profitable among domestic lines. However, to exclude Cheju island line does not seem to be effective in compensation in that Asiana Airlines' pilots strike was highly damaging to the local community on Cheju island, as Asiana Airlines admitted this by making a formal apology (for empathy) to locals in Cheju island during the press conference. In fact, the public in Korea tended to visit other provinces than Cheju because of Asiana's one-day free boarding service and three-day discount service for a substantial period ever since Asiana provided the service. The offer might have a dampening effect on the island's vital tourism industry as rival destinations became suddenly attractive.

6. Concluding remarks

This study clarifies the limitation of image restoration theory in that it does not look at the data within the whole context, but deals with a single unit of discourse. This claim raises a question if image repair strategies work well together. Alongside mortification strategy, for example, Asiana Airlines used scapegoating strategy. Asiana Airlines seem to *accommodate*

their responsibilities for the crisis through mortification. In Asiana case, however, mortification is a *nonapology apology* (Cohen 1999; Hearit 1994). The use of scapegoating with mortification shows that the company releases a statement where it expresses “sympathy or sorrow that harm has occurred but is linguistically careful not to assume responsibility or culpability” (Hearit 2006: 215). Furthermore, although Asiana Airlines issued a defensive statement (i.e. scapegoating), they also offered accommodative statements (i.e. compensation & corrective action). These *apologiae* may place the company in an ironic position, because they claim that they did nothing wrong and yet promise the prevention of future ones, as in the case of USAir (Benoit & Czerwinski 1997).

This study also shows that linguistic pragmatics becomes a useful tool for categorization of image restoration strategies. Linguistic pragmatics is the discipline/study of how utterances have meanings *within context* (Levinson 1983). It deals with the relations between language and context that are grammaticalized (e.g. topicalization of nominalized action), management of facework by making reference to a certain person or object without using a proper expression (e.g. impersonalization through the omission of subject), and so on. In this respect, the perspective of linguistic pragmatics helps us overcome pitfall of *conventional strategy-oriented* approach to image restoration discourse.

Another goal of the study was to see if perspectives used to understand organizational crises in Western cultures are also useful for investigating those in non-Western cultures. Because no sample from a Western culture is available, it is hard to assess cross-cultural differences. Given the perspective used to study crisis communication in Western cultures, this study identifies culturally universal and stereotyped patterns in international crisis communication (Lee 2005). It may be because of the less degree to which stakeholders blame Asiana for the crisis event, so that their emotions (e.g. sympathy, anger) are not much triggered. It is expected that the crisis more seriously perceived (e.g. large number of casualties or injuries) may show distinctive cross-cultural differences, like showing overwhelming emotions, in image restoration discourse.

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