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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the effectiveness of an organization's communication strategy in enhancing its crisis management capability in public management. The relationships between two types of communication strategies (bridging and buffering), crisis management capability in public management, relational improvement, reputational improvement, and conflict avoidance have been tested to suggest how an organization's overall strategic orientation may help its ability to weather a crisis. A survey of communication managers was conducted in South Korea with 105 responses, representing 105 organizations. Results revealed that organizations which are predisposed toward adopting the bridging strategy as their main communication strategy also report better crisis management capability in public management, and as a result, experience positive relational and reputational outcomes.

On 5 December 2014, the vice president of Korean Air, Heather Cho, verbally and physically abused flight crew members because macadamia nuts were served to her incorrectly, and forced the chief manager to deplane (Lee, 2014). This incident caused an 11-minute delay of the flight and ignited public outcry in South Korea. Korean Air's statement of apology on 8 December 2014 further fueled Korean citizens' ire as it mainly reflected a defensive position to justify the executive's actions (H. Kim, 2014), when the company was expected to adopt responsible, rebuilding actions for the crisis since it was preventable (Coombs, 2007a). As 'crises are largely perceptual' (Coombs, 2009a, p. 100), managing publics' perceptions of an organization's crisis responsibility is crucial (Coombs, 2007a), which Korean Air failed to do, incurring public and governmental censure.

In such crisis situations, failure to consider publics' sentiments may result in damage to reputation and organizational performance. Kim, Cha, and Kim's (2008) notion of crisis management capability in public management, which refers to an organization's ability to identify and manage the key publics in a crisis, may provide a starting point in understanding how to incorporate publics' voices. Support for such a publics-centered approach

is also found in dominant crisis theories, such as the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2012). And yet, such research is limited, perhaps in part due to crisis communication literature's focus on image repair (e.g. Benoit, 1997, 2004). However, we argue that it is also important for organizations to minimize reputational damage by proactively building their crisis management capability in public management, and examining the conditions under which they may do so.

One such condition, we propose, is an organization's tendency toward certain strategies in general. Although flexibility may exist in decision-making, organizations tend to make certain strategic decisions based on past decisions and predispositions (Ashmos, Duchon, & McDaniel, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994; Steyn, 2007). Extending this idea to communication strategy, we argue that organizations may have preferences for certain kinds of communication strategy when they deal with crises. In this study, we look at organizations' strategic predisposition to either buffering or bridging (Grunig, 2009) and its effects on crisis management capability in public management and on outcomes of such capability. Buffering refers to an organization-centric, messaging-based strategy that focuses on protecting organizations from the consequences of their actions by manipulating publics' perceptions. The bridging strategy, on the other hand, is a relationship-oriented, action-based approach (S. Kim, 2014; Kim, Hung-Baeseke, Yang, & Grunig, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2016), wherein the organization seeks to narrow the gaps between the positions of publics and management by incorporating publics' voices in decision-making.

Accordingly, the goal of this study is to understand how an organization's strategic predisposition toward certain communication strategies helps improve its crisis management capability in public management, and, eventually helps avoid future conflict and improve relationships with and reputation among key publics. This study adopts an approach similar to the IABC Excellence Study; that is, by surveying communication practitioners this study seeks to understand how organizations' strategic predisposition impacts their crisis management capability, as well as organizational effectiveness-related outcomes. Identifying how crisis management capability in public management and strategic predisposition are related may provide the practice and scholarship of communication with a more nuanced understanding of how crises and crisis responses are situated within an organization's overall communication strategy and plan.

Literature review

Crisis management and crisis response strategies

Crisis management is defined as 'a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted' (Coombs, 2007b, p. 5). Coombs (2009b) suggested that this set of factors should consider crises to be in three stages – pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. As a critical function of an organization, crisis management aims at preventing or lessening threats to the organization including those of public safety, financial loss, and reputation loss (Coombs, 2011). The failure of crisis management may result in harm to stakeholders as well as to the organization's operations, and threaten the very survival of the organization. It is important to understand what approaches and strategies help organizations enhance their crisis management capability.

One of the key contributors to the body of knowledge on crisis communication and corporate communication is the taxonomy of crisis response strategies. Benoit's (1997) initial work on identifying and synthesizing image-repair strategies from several disciplines of research is seminal to crisis management. Integrating Benoit's work, Coombs (2011) created a master list of reputation repair strategies (e.g. denial, justification, and ingratiation). Several scholars since then have tested the effects of specific image-repair strategies (e.g. Cha, Suh, & Kim, 2015) or combinations of strategies on crisis communication, and contributed to the development of attribution theory and SCCT (Coombs, 2011; Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Furthering the extensive work on crisis response strategies, Coombs and Holladay (2002) proposed the SCCT. The SCCT recommends crisis response strategies to communication managers based on the level of responsibility attributable to the organization for the crisis. Communication managers may further evaluate crisis responsibility by understanding key crisis features such as crisis threat, crisis history, and prior reputation. The SCCT therefore provides scholars and practitioners with a roadmap to understanding publics' responses to crisis communication strategies.

However, these seminal works in crisis communication and management mainly focus on the crisis and post-crisis stages, and on message-based approaches to mitigate the reputational threat of a crisis (e.g. Zhang & Benoit, 2004). The function of strategic communication in crisis management and the significance of reputation as an intangible asset to an organization have been echoed in diverse disciplines of research, from strategic management to organizational communication (e.g. MacMillan, Money, Downing, & Hillenbrand, 2005; Men, 2014). Accordingly, much crisis communication scholarship has been devoted to understanding the best persuasive strategies to influence publics' opinions about the organization, especially during crisis (Wan & Pfau, 2004).

Recently, however, scholars have called for organizations to reorient their communication practice toward building mutually beneficial relationships with key constituencies (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Veri, & Sriramesh, 2007), which may be achieved through a more strategic and behavioral approach to communication instead of a symbolic and interpretive approach (Grunig & Kim, 2011). Publics often exhibit their emotional reactions toward an organization's misconduct (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). As a consequence of their negative emotions about the crisis, activist publics may arise to engage in hostile actions against the organization such as negative word of mouth behaviors, or calling for boycotts of the organization's products (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011). To prevent such negative outcomes from occurring, more proactive and strategic approaches to crisis management are needed. In the following section, two types of public relations approaches, bridging and buffering, are discussed in detail.

Bridging and buffering strategies

In relation to the above discussion, S. Kim's (2014) conceptualization of two types of communication strategies deserves scholarly attention. By reinterpreting Grunig's (2006a, 2006b, 2009) two paradigms of public relations activities, bridging and buffering, as two communication strategies, S. Kim (2014) redirected attention from previous discussions of symmetrical *versus* asymmetrical communication, and pure accommodation *versus* pure advocacy, to a discussion of problem-solving *versus* manipulating. While bridging

aims at narrowing the gaps between the positions of the management and publics for problem-solving and favorable organization–public relationship, buffering aims at manipulating and shaping publics' perceptions about the organization's behaviors, thereby buffering the organization from publics' opposition and ensuring that the organization can continue its problematic or unethical behaviors (S.Kim, 2014). Massey's (2001) discussion of the institutional approach of focusing on the cultural environment to engage in 'expected, normative behaviors' (p. 155) versus the strategic approach of manipulating symbols in crisis communication are conceptually parallel to S. Kim's (2014) ideas of buffering and bridging strategies.

The core of the bridging strategy lies in the focus on relationship building and maintenance as the function of public relations. Such a philosophy to communication strategy adds legitimacy to the organization's functioning, empowering the communication departments with a strategic management approach aimed at favorable organization–public relationships and reputational outcomes. Chung, Lee, and Heath (2013)'s study, for example, found customer–business relationship to be the primary predictor of brand equity. Such results are representative of a shift in strategic focus from trying to build a positive 'image' in the minds of publics, to building relationships, and adopting a problem-solving approach with the publics, one which may be achieved through dialogic two-way communication and alignment of organizational activities to the needs of publics. A positive reputation and image, then, is an outcome of the relationship building and cultivation efforts through ethical and responsible management of organizational behaviors rather than management of messaging efforts (Kim, Bach, & Clelland, 2007).

This shift has not gone unnoticed by communication practice. Communication consultants too have also noticed the significance of a communication strategy which values stakeholder relationship and responsible organizational behavior. Montague (2013) says that the age of storytelling has gone and that storydoing has arrived. He suggests that an organization's communication needs to be authentic and transparent, made possible by incorporating genuine actions in their story: this, he says, is their storydoing. The storytelling of brands, he says, does not help businesses grow and survive and that their brand stories should be based on what organizations truly are and actually do. Burson-Marstellar's (2013) *Power of Purpose Report* also confirms the significance of storydoing: 'Now there has to be real substance behind communications, you can't just *say* things - you have to be doing them' (p. 7). The doing aspect of communication practice, we suggest, is consistent with the implementation of the bridging strategy.

It is important to note, however, that the implementation of bridging strategy does not preclude the use of symbolic approaches or message-based strategies; the communication of the organization's corrective actions and rectifying behaviors through symbolic messaging is an important aspect of crisis management. Rather, it envisages the role of communication as a strategic tool to minimize potential conflicts between publics and management to promote a mutual understanding. For example, Bently (2014) found that an effective organizational apology is a combination of words and behaviors to fix problems and to rebuild relationships. Montague (2013), while not against the power of narrative, proposed a better way of strengthening brand-narrative power by incorporating insights about the needs and experiences of consumers and stakeholders into an organization's business model. This, he suggested, could be accomplished by creating a genuine story based on the model that would serve as the organization's competitive advantage for sustainability.

If an organization values its relationships with its strategic publics and adopts a strategic management approach in resolving issues that affect its publics, a logical extension of this approach would be to its crisis management strategy. An organization's crisis management strategy, then, should be understood as its genuine problem-solving effort to protect its own position as well as its relationships with key stakeholders and to resolve the issues between the management and publics. The following section will move this discussion forward to explicate the relationships between the two approaches and an organization's crisis management capability in public management.

Crisis management capability in public management

Calls for crisis management to become a proactive function rather than a reactive measure are not new (e.g. Carroll, 2009). It has been suggested that an effective proactive crisis management strategy requires elements of issues management, as the latter's aim is to prevent crises in the first place (Coombs, 2009b). Crisis management is also considered as a part of strategic management of public relations (Grunig, 2001) as it involves 'securing positive relationships important to the organization' (Sturges, 1994, p. 307). Strategic management of public relations begins with the public relations manager's identification and understanding of stakeholders and their issues. Sensing potential problems or emerging trends, scanning environment, and collecting information are critical as preventive efforts for devising effective strategies to avoid or resolve crises (Coombs, 2007a, 2012; Kash & Darling, 1998). Issues arise when publics identify problems with organizational decisions or behaviors; when public concerns or criticisms are not managed properly, it devolves into a crisis (Grunig, 2001; Kim et al., 2013). It is, therefore, crucial for the organization to have a good understanding of its publics and potential consequences of issues on organizational effectiveness and organization–public relationships.

While there are multiple dimensions to measuring an organization's crisis management capability (e.g. apologetic crisis management, see Hearit & Brown, 2004), this study suggests that the key element of crisis management capability is public management. Public management includes identifying and managing the issue/crisis-related publics (Kim et al., 2008). Kim et al. (2008) suggested public management and crisis recognition management as two contributing factors of organizational strategy, which in turn was conceptualized to be a part of crisis management capability. Taking their work forward, in this study, public management is examined as a key indicator of crisis management capability. For example, Chekkar-Mansouri and Onnee's (2013) case study of a French bank's (Société Générale) crisis management revealed that its success lay in its ability to identify and communicate with stakeholders, meet their needs, and eventually, gain their support against hostile takeover bids.

Public management is an ongoing process that should happen during both the issue management stage and the crisis management stage. For example, Grunig (2001) suggests that communication with publics before an organization makes a decision may be the most effective approach to conflict resolution and crisis management, because it allows the organization to incorporate and address publics' concerns before the decision is made, thereby reducing the likelihood of a crisis erupting. By communicating with key publics before making a decision, the organization may be in a better position to understand the consequences of its decisions and to be prepared for repercussions. A prepared

organization can deal with crises more effectively as well as recover faster while minimizing negative impact compared to an unprepared organization (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001).

If public management over the issue stage is not successful, the issue devolves into a crisis. During the crisis stage, an organization should work toward identifying its key publics who affect and are affected by the crisis situation. Public management in the crisis situation means ongoing management of threats as well as provision for care and reparation responses to the affected public (Coombs, 2011). Without a full understanding and identification of publics, their concerns and possible reactions, it is difficult for an organization to devise an effective communication strategy to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis and to protect itself and its relationships with its key publics. Noteworthy in the recent research regarding public management in crisis management is the social-mediated crisis communication model (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012), the aim of which is to predict publics' information transmission behaviors over social media. By identifying key publics, particularly hostile publics, and their communication behaviors, an organization can decide how to engage with them and how to react to unwanted consequences from their behaviors (e.g. spreading rumors, engaging in punitive actions; Gregoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010; Gregoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009).

The right strategy allows organizations to devise effective preventive measures and conflict resolution plans (Kash & Darling, 1998). Appropriate strategic decisions and strategies will also help reduce publics' negative reactions or negative behavioral intentions (McDonald, Sparks, & Glendon, 2010). The bridging strategy, or an action-based, relationship-oriented strategy, indicates an organization's strategic propensity for public engagement (Kim & Kim, 2016). Organizations which seek public engagement listen and participate in conversations with publics and embrace the attendant chaos (Edelman, 2009). Heath (1997) and Ulmer (2001) also suggest that an organization's proactive relationship building efforts before crises and its emphasis on corporate responsibility in its corporate communication in case of a crisis may help its conflict resolution efforts. An organization prone to using bridging strategy may be better equipped to reflect the needs or issues of publics in its strategic decision-making, and to make its goals compatible with those of its publics. Such an organization may have strong insights about its publics and the issues that affect them, which it can use to its advantage during a crisis situation. Specifically, the relational properties of the bridging strategy, where building strong relationships with key publics is central to the communication approach, are likely to aid the organization in (a) identifying crises-related publics at an early stage, and (b) anticipate which publics may develop into active publics against the organization and plan for their (communicative) needs well in advance, all of which are indicators of crisis management capability in public management. The organization's crisis management capability in public management, then, is likely to contribute to relational improvement if the publics' concerns are handled well.

Additionally, consistent dialogic communication with key strategic publics may also offer communicators insights into what kinds of crises publics are likely to attribute to the organization more than others, which would also help communicators determine whether or not to use accommodative or defensive strategies as prescribed by the SCCT (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Such a publics-centered approach to understanding crisis attribution may also help organizations justify the use of defensive strategies when the use of such a strategy may not be intuitive or prescribed. This publics-

centered approach to crisis attribution is deserving of its own empirical research, and while noteworthy to our discussion, is beyond the scope of this particular study.

On the other hand, an organization prone to using buffering strategy or an organization-oriented, messaging-based strategy may try to manage a crisis by creating messages to manipulate and shape publics' perception of the organization's behavior. The focus of the crisis management effort would be to buffer the organization from publics' negative opinions rather than to resolve issues that affect publics. Freeman (1984) pointed out that an organization which neglects its stakeholders is likely to experience a negative impact from them. In addition, Sturges (1994) suggested that 'communicating to constituents with an intent to influence the development of internalized opinions that will influence constituents' behavior toward the organization may be the least effective' (p. 297). Instead, 'communication content to the public at each stage should be customized to maximize its effectiveness: positive residual opinion among the public' (p. 308). Hunter, Le Menestrel, and de Bettignies (2008) propose that crisis communication strategies for controlling public opinions may increase risks of conflicts and credibility loss while strategies for dialogic communication with both supportive and hostile stakeholders should be sought. Lee (2007) also suggests that 'public expectations need to be accommodated, not manipulated' in crisis management (p. 213). Shaping publics expectations via strategic messaging, which is central to the buffering strategy, is inherently not a dialogic approach, and is unlikely to contribute to an organization's knowledge and understanding of its publics, and in times of crisis, may not help an organization's crisis management capability in public management. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are posited:

> H1a: The degree of adoption of the bridging strategy is positively associated with perceived level of crisis management capability in public management.

> H1b: The degree of adoption of the buffering strategy is negatively associated with perceived level of crisis management capability in public management.

Outcomes of crisis management capability in public management: relational improvement, reputational improvement, and conflict avoidance

While by no means does our discussion attempt to dichotomize bridging and buffering strategies as effective versus ineffective – indeed, they are more along a continuum of effectiveness dependent on the situation. The inherent characteristics of bridging strategy lend themselves to helping (a) relational improvement, (b) reputational improvement, and (c) conflict avoidance, the three major outcomes of its application in crisis management capability. One of the core underpinnings of the bridging strategy is the importance of relationship cultivation and maintenance. An organization's relationship cultivation strategies refer to 'any organizational behavioral efforts that attempt to build and sustain quality relationships with strategic publics' (Ki & Hon, 2009, p. 245). Suggested by Stafford and Canary (1991), Grunig and Huang (2000) adapted relationship cultivation strategies for public relations, positing that access, positivity, openness, sharing tasks, networking, and assurance are the most effective strategies for relationship cultivation. These relationship cultivation strategies, coupled with principles of strategic management and two-way symmetrical communication, form the basis of the bridging strategy. Strategic

predisposition to the bridging strategy, therefore, not only would contribute to crisis management capability in public management, but also contribute to relational improvement. We posit that the publics-centered management of a crisis, indicated by crisis management capability in public management, would help improve cooperation, understanding, and communication between the organization and publics, and in doing so would also help improve overall relationship between them. The following hypothesis is therefore posited:

> H2: Perceived levels of an organization's crisis management capability in public management is positively associated with relational improvement.

Furthermore, this relational improvement brought on by crisis management capability and bridging strategy is conceptualized to be associated with positive evaluations of the organization's reputation. Strategic management scholars have long argued about reputation being a by-product of an organization's efforts to improve relationships with key strategic publics (Kim et al., 2013). Fombrun (1996) too suggested that the reputation is a product of organizational behavior and of organization–public relationships. In other words, while reputation cannot be managed directly, it can be indirectly impacted by managing the behavior of the organization such that it is in line with the key publics' expectations (Grunig & Kim, 2011). Such efforts may take the form of two-way communication with these publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) or even behavioral management of the organization, such that decisions and policies of the organization are developed to align corporate needs with key publics' expectations (Kim et al., 2007). Similarly, Chung et al. (2013) also highlighted the 'experiential nature of relationship impact on brand equity' (p. 434). In order to provide further empirical support for several scholars' proposition about the association between relationships and reputation (e.g. Fombrun, 1996; Kim et al., 2013), particularly in the context of an international population of professionals, the following hypothesis is therefore posited:

> H3: Relational improvement between organizations and publics is associated with positive reputation.

The idea of conflict avoidance[1] as an indicator of organizational effectiveness goes back many decades (Campbell, Brownas, Peterson, & Dunnette, 1974). Taking this idea forward, the IABC's Excellence Study examined conflict avoidance as an outcome of effective communication programs and found that not only does effective communication reduce the likelihood of publics' complaints, but also helps bring (hostile) activist groups to the negotiating table (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). The notion of conflict has been a foundational concept of public relations theory building, as it involves strategic decision-making with profound implications for both the organization and its publics (Plowman, 2005). Plowman (2005) posited that the process of strategic management begins with identifying an issue that might impact organization–public relationships. Managing those issues and minimizing negative impact on the organizational–public relationships, and by extension, organizational reputation, then, is one of the central goals of strategic management. Plowman (2005) further proposed and tested three principles for conflict resolution as part of strategic management – strategic thinking, internal and external problem-solving, and sound judgment, and found that relationship building was critical to the strategic thinking aspect of conflict resolution.

Murphy and Dee (1992) too found credence to the claims of strategic, behavioral management theorists (e.g. Ehling, 1985; Grunig & Hunt, 1984), and found that compatible ground rules, compromise, negotiation, and two-way symmetrical communication could effectively help resolve conflicts. That their conclusions were based on a scenario where the two conflicting parties used a pure zero sum game, thereby preventing any positive change in the conflict situation is particularly noteworthy. Furthermore, Grunig (2006b) argued that an organization

> must behave in ways that solves the problems and satisfies the goals of stakeholders as well as of management. If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organization to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions. (p. 159)

However, the implementation of any particular crisis management strategy by itself may not necessarily reduce the incidence of conflict directly. Rather, the results of the IABC Excellence Study discussed that the avoidance of conflict was a non-financial indicator of an effective public relations program, the value of which was in cultivating long-term positive relationships with key publics (Grunig et al., 2002). Furthermore, Huang (2001) also found that good quality organization–public relationships were associated with publics' cooperation with the organization, and lower instances of outright conflict. It would follow then that a relational improvement brought on by increased crisis management capability in public management and the use of the relationship-oriented strategy would also be associated with increased conflict avoidance. The following hypothesis is therefore posited:

> H4: Relational improvement between publics and an organization is associated with conflict avoidance.

Method

Given that the unit of analysis in this study is an organization, and the hypotheses require an assessment of an organization's propensity toward certain communication strategies, an online survey of in-house public relations and corporate communication managers in South Korea was conducted. These public relations and corporate communication managers are in the best position to evaluate their organization's preference for communication strategies and the outcomes of their public relations and corporate communication programs. South Korean organizations were chosen because South Korea is considered to be one of the strongest emerging markets in public relations industry. This growth of public relations in South Korea is attributed to the operations of multinational corporations there (Key, 2014). Details of the recruitment strategies, operationalization of constructs, and testing of proposed relationships follow.

Recruitment and data collection

Three professional associations of PR and corporate communication managers were identified to aid data collection and get a wide sample: The Korean Federation of Industries (KFI), Korean CEO's Association of Multinational Corporations (KCMC), and Korean Research-based Pharmaceutical Industry Association (KRPIA). The KFI publishes its 499 member organizations' contact information annually, making it easy to send their

members a survey link, while the other two organizations were contacted through their respective representatives. Of those associations, KCMC declined to participate in the study. The KRPIA had a total of 30 member organizations.

An online survey was developed using Qualtrics. Given the target population of the study, the survey was developed in Korean by the first author of this paper, who is a native speaker of Korean. A total 529 organizations (i.e. 499 KFI and 30 KRPIA member organizations) were contacted. An email was sent out to a total of 2242 communication practitioners whose organizations were members of KFI, and 44 communication practitioners whose organizations were members of KRPIA soliciting their response between March and July 2013, with a reminder email being sent between September and October 2013. A total of 105 organizations responded (unit of analysis: organization), yielding a response rate of 19.8% (105/529). There was one case where two managers from the same organizations responded to the survey; however, one of the responses was incomplete and was not used for data analysis. The final sample, therefore, consisted of 105 organizations represented by one communication manager each.

Participants

Of the 105 participating organizations, each represented by one individual from their communication team ($N = 105$), 44 were from production goods manufacturing companies (41.9%), 23 were from consumer goods manufacturing (21.9%), 9 from finance-related companies (8.6%), 17 were from the services sector (16.2%), 3 from construction companies (2.9%), and 9 which were classified as other industries (8.6%). Most organizations (31 companies, 29.5%) reported having more than 4000 employees, 17 (or 16.2%) reported between 2000 and 3999 employees, 19 companies (18.1%) had between 1000 and 1999 employees, 21 (20%) organizations reported between 300 and 999 employees, while 17 had fewer than 300 employees (16.2%).

Although the unit of analysis for the study was the organization, some data related to the individual communication managers are provided to give the reader a holistic picture of the data. The average of length of tenure for the individual in the communication manager position was 9.92 years (SD = 6.32[2]). Six of the respondents reported being at the employee level (5.7%), 14 were at the deputy section chief level (13.3%), 25 were section chief level (23.8%), 35 were at the deputy head of department/head of department level (34.3%), 18 were at the director level (17.1%), and 4 were executive/C-Level (3.8%) (missing = 3, 2.9%).

Measures

Conceptualization of communication strategies

This study adapted and revised S. Kim's (2014) scales to measure organizational propensity toward bridging and buffering, which were developed based on Grunig's (2006b) conceptualization of two communication paradigms and Kim et al.'s (2007) definitions of the symbolic management approach and the behavioral management

approach. Four questions for buffering and six questions for bridging were used to measure organization's propensity to certain public relations strategy. Cronbach's alpha for buffering was .842 and .963 for bridging.

Crisis management capability

Kim et al.'s (2008) crisis management index was adapted and utilized to measure an organization's crisis management capability for public management, yielding Cronbach's alpha of .933.

Relational improvement

Relational improvement was measured using items adapted from Grunig et al. (2002), including greater cooperation between the organization and the relevant public, quality of communication, and long-term favorable relationship. Cronbach's alpha for reputational improvement was .857.

Reputational improvement

Based on Yang and Grunig's (2005) work, two questions were developed to measure overall evaluations of organizational reputation, with one measuring personal overall evaluation n (i.e. how do you rate the organization's reputation in general?) and the other measuring perceived overall evaluations of others about organization's reputation (i.e. how do you think others would rate the organization's reputation?). Cronbach's alpha for relational improvement was .953.

Conflict avoidance

Conflict avoidance was measured with items adapted from Dozier et al. (1995) and Grunig et al. (2002). Measures of conflict avoidance include avoiding potential conflicts, yielding Cronbach's alpha of .906. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Data analysis

To test the proposed hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. Maximum likelihood procedures, which are robust to non-normal data (Yuan & Bentler, 2007, p. 17), were selected for data analysis with AMOS. Missing data were treated using Expected Maximization imputation.

Results

Structural model testing and hypothesis testing

To evaluate the proposed structural equation models, the following model-fit indices were used: CFI .90 (moderate fit), CFI .95 (good fit) (Hu & Bentler, 1999), .08 (RMSEA) .10 (moderate fit), RMSEA .08 (good fit) (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996), 0 SRMR .10 (moderate fit), and SRMR .08 (good) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Although there is no consensus on model fit for SEM, conventional reporting includes CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR as model-fit indices (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010).

A structural equation model was used to test the possible relationships between the two communication strategies, crisis management capability for public management, relational improvement, conflict avoidance, and reputational improvement. First, overall measurement model analysis was conducted using IBM AMOS 22. The measurement model showed a moderate model fit (CFI = .940 RMSEA = .070, SRMR = .062 when χ^2 [df] = 359.353 [237], $p < .001$). By referring to the modification index and the theories (Grunig, 2009; Kim et al., 2008), modifications using error covariance within a factor were made with caution for model respecification (Byrne, 2010). One error correlation was made between two items of bridging strategy regarding the purpose of communication, as those two items are theoretically connected. The other error correlation was between two items of crisis management capability in public management, which measure if the management can understand the difficulty of crisis management at each stage, and if the management can manage crisis-related publics. These two items are also conceptually linked to one another. Then the proposed structural models were tested as specified. The model was found to be of acceptable fit based on CFI and RMSEA indices, and approached good fit based on SRMR (CFI = .950, SRMR = .103, RMSEA = .063; χ^2[df] = 347.104[244], $p < .000$).

Regression coefficients were analyzed to test the hypotheses. In H1a, a positive relationship between an organization's extent of relationship orientation in bridging strategy and its level of crisis management capability in public management was expected. Then, it was predicted that an organization's tendency toward the buffering strategy would be negatively associated with levels of crisis management capability (H1b). The test results supported H1a (.669, $p < .001$) indicating a positive relationship between an organization's degree of adoption of the bridging strategy as its primary communication strategy and its perceived levels of crisis management capability in public management. H1b was not supported, in that a negative relationship between levels of organizational orientation to buffering strategy and crisis management capability was not found. However, the results indicated a lack of any significant relationship between the two, which further supports our argument for the ineffectiveness of the buffering strategy.

In H2, a positive relationship between levels of crisis management capability and relational improvement was predicted. H2 was supported for a positive influence of crisis management capability on relational improvement (.527, $p < .001$). Next, relational improvement was found to contribute to reputational improvement (H3) (.381, $p < .001$). Although the regression coefficient between relational and reputational improvement is relatively low, especially compared to the other paths reported, the fact that it is statistically significant is noteworthy. Finally, H4 for the relationship between relationship improvement and conflict avoidance was also supported (.780, $p < .001$) (CFI = .950, SRMR = .103, RMSEA = .063, χ^2[df] = 346. 104[244], $p < .001$) (Figure 1).

Discussion

The results of this study have profound implications for the theory and practice of corporate communication, crisis management, and public relations. First, this study extends Grunig's (2009) and S. Kim's (2014) two paradigms of communication strategies and brings it into conversation with another crucial area of public relations
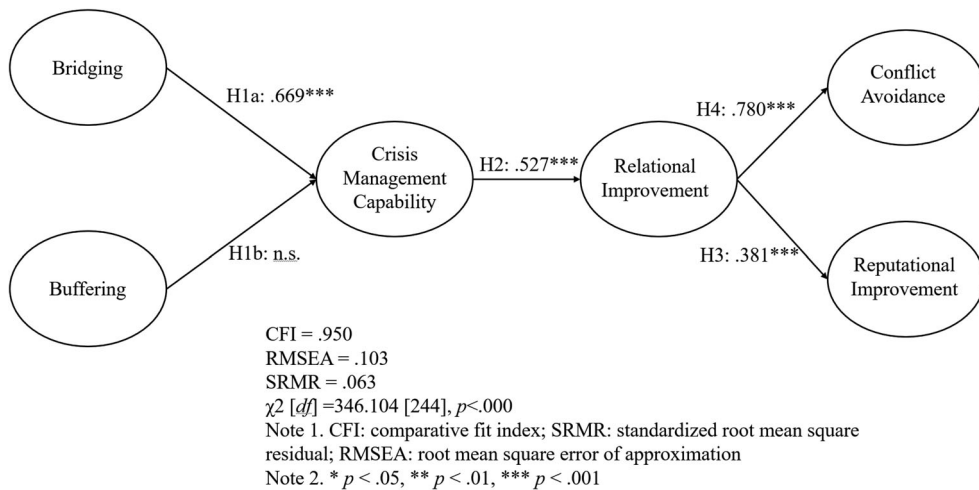
Figure 1. Results of the structural equation model.

research, crisis communication. The results of this study demonstrate that an organization's strategic predisposition to a communication strategy influences its crisis management capability in public management and its relational outcomes. In other words, the advantages afforded to an organization when it adopts the bridging strategy, such as better communication with key publics, may also translate to the organization's ability to withstand a crisis, particularly through public management. Such crisis management capability in public management also then contributes to organizational performance through improved organization–public relationships, ethical behaviors, and conflict avoidance.

Additionally, the results of this study move those of the IABC Excellence Study and the body of literature that it generated forward by extending the two communication strategies emerging from it, and by conceptually bridging them with crisis management. In previous literature, communication strategies have been limited to the discussions of symmetrical versus asymmetrical communication, and pure accommodation versus pure advocacy in public relations, as well as image-repair strategies for managing a crisis at the crisis stage and at the post-crisis stage. By adopting S. Kim's (2014) reconceptualization of bridging and buffering strategies and IABC Excellence Study's approach (Grunig et al., 2002), this study is an effort to capture an organization's strategic choice and its outcomes in the context of crisis communication and management.

Next, the results of this study also point to the effectiveness of the bridging strategy, aimed at building meaningful relationships with publics, over the buffering strategy being a mere messaging function for attempting to shape public opinion and perceptions about an organization. In addition, the study results provide further empirical support for Kim et al.'s (2013) and Kim et al.'s (2007) suggestion that corporate reputation may be built and nurtured by the strategic management approach through the cultivation of strong, positive relationships and the alignment of organizational behaviors to the needs of key publics. The associations (or lack thereof) identified between the two communication strategies and organizational outcomes tell us that organizations need to

view and use communication strategy as a strategic management function. If an organization uses its communication strategy as a way of controlling its environment without making the necessary changes in its problematic decisions and behaviors, and instead seeks only to manipulate publics' perceptions, crises will only intensify rather than resolve, and result in further turbulence for the organization.

Fourth, the results of this study contribute to the body of knowledge on crisis communication and reputation management. Theory and practice of crisis communication are saturated with corporate apologies during crises, which are rarely backed by substantive actions to actually resolve the situation. The work done on image repair and crisis response strategies by crisis communication scholars provides an excellent starting point for scholars to start understanding preventive and proactive strategies to crisis management, toward which this study represents a first step. The bridging strategy is suggested in this study as a preemptive measure to build relationships and reputation with key strategic publics and to manage organizational behaviors responsibly, which may help protect the organization from repercussions in time of crises. The bridging strategy may act as a preemptive approach to crisis management as it helps improve crisis management capability in public management.

Finally, the results of this study complement those of existing crisis communication frameworks, particularly the SCCT (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). The SCCT's main assumption is that organizations should consider situational factors that influence publics' crisis attribution which subsequently affect the organization's selection of crisis response strategies. Rather than focusing on a specific crisis type, this study paid attention to an organizational factor which may also influence an organization's choice of crisis response strategies and crisis management capability. Strategic preferences are products of several factors, including organizational culture and top management's philosophy toward stakeholders (Meznar & Nigh, 1995). Regardless of situational factors such as previous reputation or history of crisis, organizations tend to have consistent behaviors particularly in their choice of strategy, which impacts their crisis management across situations.

Going back to Korean Air's nut rage case, one of the victims of 'nut rage,' a female flight attendant who was verbally and physically abused by the former vice president, filed a civil lawsuit on 9 March 2015 to the Supreme Court of the State of New York, Queens County (Park & Shin, 2015). The male flight attendant who had been ordered to deplane said that he never received a sincere apology from the former vice president ('Editorial: lessons from "nut rage,"' 2015). Even worse, in March 2015, a market research company reported that Korean Air's brand value had plunged after its nut rage case, clearly showing how low crisis management capability in public management may result in negative reputational outcomes. Rather than showing genuine action, Korean Air offered the female attendant a position as a college professor in exchange for favorable testimony during the vice president's trial, which she rejected. However, by asking for her testimony in exchange for a prestigious job for which she may or may not be qualified, Korean Air continued to ignore the issues related to the behavior of their management rather than addressing them.

Although the results of this study are rich in theoretical and practical implications, there are a few limitations associated with it. First, the sample size used in this study is relatively small, although it is adequate for statistical analysis (Anderson & Gerbing,

1984; Iacobucci, 2010). Second, the respondents were all from one country, South Korea, meaning that the results may not be generalizable to other countries. Future studies may explore the differences in practice across different countries. This study attempted to capture a key success factor of crisis management, identification and management of needs, and issues of publics who are affected by crises (i.e. public management). However, the definition of crisis management capability could vary as we have seen from Kim et al.'s (2008) extensive crisis management index. Future studies may use a scenario-based survey to see the impact of public's perceptions of an organization's communication strategy on public's intention to engage in punitive actions against the organization. Future research may also attempt to unpack the links between relational and reputational improvement, in light of the relatively weak (though statistically significant) relationship found in this study.

Furthermore, by asking communication managers for their evaluations of their own strategies, approaches, and outcomes such as reputation, we acknowledge that the data may have some degree of bias. However, given our interest in examining organizations' propensity toward strategy and the resultant outcomes of the use of specific strategies, the methodological approach adopted by the Excellence Study was deemed appropriate. We do caution the readers to use their own judgments in evaluating the data. Despite these limitations, we believe that our study has made significant contributions to the research and practice of crisis communication, and future research that may be generated from this particular study will further strengthen our understanding of the links between strategy and organizational effectiveness.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that the term 'conflict avoidance' is conceptualized and operationalized in different ways in different bodies of literature. In this manuscript, we derive the term from Grunig et al.'s (2002) 'conflict avoidance effect,' and trace the research emerging out of the Excellence Study to guide our usage of the term.
2. Only 92 of the 105 respondents provided a response to this question.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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