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Communicating crisis: How culture influences image repair in Western and Asian governments

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Communicating crisis: how culture influences image repair in Western and Asian governments

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to seek to understand the differences in image repair strategies adopted by two governments that operate in the Western and Asian societies when faced with similar crises.

Design/methodology/approach – Textual analyses are presented of communication of Hurricane Katrina and Typhoon Morakot by the Taiwanese and US governments, respectively.

Findings – Faced with similar accusations of slow response, the Asian culture, represented by the Taiwanese Government, used predominantly mortification and corrective action strategies. The Western culture, represented by the US Government, used predominantly bolstering and defeasibility and a mixed bag of other strategies such as shifting the blame and attack the accuser.

Research limitations/implications – A limitation of the study is that it depends on news reports, instead of news releases and speeches, for analysis. However, given the rapidity and volatility in the unfolding drama of each of the two crises, many of the comments made were to the media and not in prepared speeches. It is a limitation the authors accept.

Practical implications – Strategies reflected Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance and power distance dimensions. These dimensions should be considered when designing communication strategies in different cultures so as to be culturally sensitive and relevant.

Originality/value – Few, if any, studies on image repair theory have addressed the role of culture in strategies used. This study fills the gap by integrating Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory.

Keywords Case studies, Communication management, Crisis management, Cross-cultural management, National cultures, Rhetoric, Disaster management, Government policy, United States of America, Taiwan

Paper type General review

Introduction

A veteran practitioner once said:

> A good image – one that's well made and well cared for is something that stands the test of time, it is something that can survive everything – scandal, change, bad earnings (Lerbinger, 1997, p. 100).

An organization's image and reputation are assets that are built up over a long period of time (Benoit and Pang, 2008). Individuals and organizations go to great lengths to protect and maintain positive images in the minds of their publics.

On a larger scale, the image of a government can be threatened by crises that they do not handle well, and this impacts the trust it has with its citizens as well as its standing internationally (Cai *et al.*, 2009). Fairbanks *et al.* (2005) argued that trust is eroded when citizens feel they are not informed of government actions, especially in times of crises when it is imperative to respond to the threat in the socio-political

system and where promptness is required of governments to engage its citizens (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). Communication can help restore some level of trust, argued Longstaff and Yang (2008).

Two recent crises, representing two different cultures, are instructive on how governments can communicate with its citizens. Conceivably, they may not be similar nor is there a prescriptive model of communication (Dardis and Haigh, 2009), but these crises offer a view of how sensitivity to culture can play a critical role in communicating crises. On one end of the spectrum is the Asian culture, represented by Taiwan. On 8 August 2009, Typhoon Morakot hit Taiwan, resulting in the worst flood the country experienced in 50 years. The island's southern areas, Kaoshiung, Pingtung, Hualian, Yunlin, Chiayi, Tainan, Taitung, Miaoli and Taichung were pounded by fierce winds and heavy rainfall. Pingtung and Kaoshiung counties experienced the equivalent of a year's rainfall in two days. Worst hit was Xiaolin Village in Kaoshiung where 500 villagers were buried alive by the mudslides. The heavy rains flooded the rivers and created mudslides that caused widespread damage. Roads, railway tracks, and bridges were washed away. The Council of Agriculture estimated that the country suffered NT$7.26 billion (US$220 million) in agricultural losses. After the storm, close to 850,000 households had no water supply and more than 110,000 households were without electricity for days. Tourist attractions such as the Maolin National Scenic Area and its tourist centre in Liukuei, Kaoshiung, Hongyeh Hot Spring Zone were completely destroyed. The Taiwanese Tourism Bureau estimated that damage to scenic areas topped NT$570 million (US$18.7 million). On the other side of the spectrum is the Western culture, represented by the USA. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the American Gulf Coast in what was termed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as "the most destructive storm ever to strike the United States" (Parker and Levin, 2005, p. 1A). A category four hurricane, Katrina caused extensive damage to the USA in terms of the number of deaths, displacement and economic loss caused. The hurricane showed up the lack of crisis preparedness of the Federal Government. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was widely criticised for their lack of planning and were accused of directing funds from disaster management to fighting terrorism.

Despite the differences in culture, the two crises shared several similarities. There were massive death and destruction in both crises; and they shattered the people's confidence in their respective governments' ability to handle the crisis. The accusations made against both governments were also similar. Both governments were accused of:

- being slow in their response and were not prepared for the crisis; and
- showing lack of empathy and compassion for the victims.

Crisis type, in this case, natural disaster, serves as a frame that defines how people interpret crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2006). Even though the loci of control for both these disasters were external, the culpability for mismanagement of the disaster was evident. Another similarity was the massive efforts undertaken by both governments to repair their image subsequently. Given the similar conditions these two governments faced, it presented a unique opportunity to study the image repair strategies used by both governments, identify similarities and differences in the use of strategies, and examine the influence of culture on the choice of strategies.

Many studies have been conducted to analyse how organizations (Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit and Pang, 2008; Cowden and Sellnow, 2002); prominent individuals (Benoit, 1997; Benoit and Brinson, 1999), and politicians (Benoit, 2004), repaired their images. Few have examined image repair strategies employed by nations and governments (Cai *et al.*, 2009; Zhang and Benoit, 2004) and in a non-Western setting (Meng, 2010). This study is significant as it fills the gap by examining image repair strategies used by governments in both a Western and an Asian setting but also compare the differences in image repair strategies used.

More importantly, while studies have extended to examine perceptions of corporate social responsibility, relationships and source credibility in image repair (Haigh and Brubaker, 2010), this is arguably the first study examining the influence of culture on the use of image repair strategies, through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. This study thus aims to fill the cultural gap by applying Hofstede's theory to understand reactions to image repair strategies in Western and Asian countries. With the USA representing the Western culture and Taiwan representing the Asian culture, it is hoped that this study can inform practitioners the skill sets required to function in the global marketplace, where different cultures often converge. It is hoped that practitioners can benefit from the findings to begin to learn how to be more culturally attuned.

Literature review

Image repair theory

Research in crisis communication focussing on shaping organizational strategies in response to a crisis has relied on the image repair and the situational crisis communication theories for analyses. The former focuses on texts (Benoit, 2004), while the latter extends to contexts, like the organization's crisis history and relationship history (Coombs, 2008a, b). While these are important, for the purposes of this study, the context and characteristics we would examine are:

- *Crisis type*. Similar, both natural disasters.
- *Locus of control*. Similar, both external.
- *Nature of accusations*. Similar, both governments were accused of slow in response and displayed lack of empathy and compassion to victims. Benoit (2004) described this as the offensive act.
- *Attributions of crisis responsibility*. even though it is supposed to be low, based on the situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2008a, b), it became high over time because of poor management of the crises. Benoit (2004) described this as the accused being held responsible for the act.

Our aim was to keep these variables consistent and constant between the two cases while exploring the role of culture. In that regard, we have followed closely the ethos of research using image repair theory, which examines, first, what is the nature of the crisis (or what Benoit (2004) called, what is the offensive act); and is the accused held responsible for the act (Benoit, 2004). This study thus uses the image repair theory, described as the "dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crises" (Dardis and Haigh, 2009, p. 101), as its theoretical lens.

The image repair theory, which is an extension of apologia (Coombs *et al.*, 2010), asserts that an organization's credibility depends on its image to a very large extent.

Image plays a crucial role in building and maintaining international relations (Zhang and Benoit, 2004). Threats to this image often necessitate massive efforts to repair it (Benoit and Brinson, 1999). While previous studies have shed light on how politicians, organizations and celebrities engaged in restoration discourses (Benoit and Brinson, 1999), the question remains, what strategies can governments use when accused of being irresponsible and ineffective?

Benoit's image repair theory can be applied to analyse communication strategies nations use to repair its image during a crisis. It is divided into five major typologies (Benoit and Pang, 2008).

Denial. Denial has two variants: simple denial or shifting the blame to another party. The purpose of the latter strategy is to position the accuser as victim.

Evasion of responsibility. The second major typology is evasion of responsibility. The first variant is provocation, where a nation reacts by responding it was egged on to do so. The second is defeasibility, when a nation argues its case on the basis of lack of information and control. The third is accident, where the "accused" states that the accident happened unintentionally. Last is good intention, where a nation argues that the offensive act was done with good intentions.

Reducing offensiveness. The third major typology is reducing offensiveness. One can do so by bolstering, which seeks to highlight one's positive traits. Minimization strategies can also be used to reduce the severity of the situation. Differentiation strategies seek to reduce offensiveness by suggesting that the act was less offensive than perceived. Transcendence strategies seek to place the situation at a higher level, with more important concerns. Attacking the accuser seeks to reduce the credibility of the accusations. Compensation strategy is where those responsible decide to offer something of value to the victims.

Corrective action. The fourth typology is corrective action, which aims to reassure stakeholders that such crisis situations would not reoccur.

Mortification. The final typology is mortification, when one admits its mistake and seeks forgiveness.

The role of culture

In an attempt to understand various cultural orientations, Hall (1976) introduced the concept of high versus low context. According to him, the concept of cultural orientation appears on a continuum on which countries may be placed to study the extent to which "contexting" occurs in various cultures, with the high and the low contexts occupying the two extreme ends of the continuum. On the high end of the continuum are countries like Japan, China and Korea and towards the lower end of the continuum are countries like Switzerland, Norway and Sweden. France, Africa, Spain and the Middle Eastern Arab countries are placed in the middle of the continuum.

A high context culture is where members of the society are deeply involved with one another, forming intimate relationships. Existence of social hierarchies, use of simple meanings to disseminate information and individual self-control are indicators of this culture. On the contrary, members in a low context culture are highly individualized, alienated and less involved with the other members of the society. Less social hierarchies and limited communication characterize this culture. Hall (1976) suggested that social structures and hierarchies had a significant impact on determining whether a culture belongs to the high or low context.

Building on this, Geert Hofstede identified five basic dimensions of culture: masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, long-term orientation, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. According to Hofstede (2009), masculinity versus femininity refers to the roles both genders play in society while individualism-collectivism refers to the degree to which individuals are segregated into groups in society. A collectivist society is characterized by strong groups, extended family members which continue to support each other while an individualist society is characterized by loose ties where members of the society are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family members. The new dimension of long-term orientation was added following a study conducted in 23 countries based on a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars. According to Hofstede (2009), long-term orientation is characterized by values of thrift and perseverance while those associated with short-term orientation include respect for tradition, protecting one's face and fulfilling social obligations. The power distance index (PDI) measures the extent to which less powerful members accept the unequal distribution of power in society. For instance, high power distance nations encompass a latent conflict between individuals and organizations that have prestige and resources and those who feel powerless. While the powerless accept their position in society, they are not very forgiving when the powerful makes mistakes (Taylor, 2000). Asian cultures typically have higher PDIs compared to the Western cultures. The uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) indicates the extent to which a culture programs its members to feel comfortable in unstructured situations (Frith and Mueller, 2003). UAI also provides information about societal tolerance for inequality.

The cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede were not without limitations. Questions were raised about its methodological rigor (McSweeney, 2002; Westwood and Everett, 1987); his failure to demonstrate a causal link between his dimensions of a particular national culture and a specific national action (McSweeney, 2002); his failure to consider the impact politics and power may have upon the national culture (Westwood and Everett, 1987); and the assumption of equating national culture with national uniformity (Westwood and Everett, 1987; McSweeney, 2002).

Despite the criticisms, it is without doubt that Hofstede's dimensions broke new ground. It is unprecedented in scope and it remains unsurpassed to this day (Draguns, 2007). Since the publication of Hofstede's work, even though many studies have been conducted on national cultures, Draguns (2007) noted that Hofstede's original monumental multinational study has not been replicated in its entirety. By the end of 1999, the first edition of *Culture's Consequences* had been cited in 1,800 publications in several disciplines.

Hofstede's four major cultural value dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and collectivism-individualism has received considerable support from other researchers (Dorfman and Howell, 1988; James, 1993; Smith and Bond, 1993). Taylor (2000) posited that Hofstede's cultural dimensions is one of the most popular and best treatments of culture and business communication. It is also rigorous (Erez and Earley, 1993).

Hofstede's model has been found to be useful for describing intercultural communication (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988) and crisis situations (Soeters, 1996; Taylor, 2000). In this study, we argue that even with its limitations, Hofstede's framework provides a useful starting point for an exploratory study to

examine how culture impact crisis strategies. Of the five dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and the power distance dimensions have been found to be most applicable for studying the crisis management efforts of an organization. Coombs (2008a, b, p. 1058) argued that:

> Maureen Taylor (2000) is right in arguing for the need to apply intercultural concepts such as those of Hofstede to crisis communication. Cultural variables such as ambiguity tolerance and power distance must be factored into the socio-psychological tradition research to permit an international application of the findings.

Uncertainty avoidance examines how humans cope with ambiguity and power distance examines how members of a community deal with inequality and conflict (Taylor, 2000). Thus, we apply the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and power distance to our study.

Based on the literature, this study examines:

RQ1. What are the image repair strategies used by a government that represents the Asian culture, in this case, Taiwan in Typhoon Morakot?

RQ2. What are the image repair strategies adopted by a government that represents the Western culture, in this case, the USA in Hurricane Katrina?

RQ3. What are the differences in the strategies adopted and what role does culture play in the strategies used?

RQ4. What can practitioners learn about the role of culture in an international setting?

Method

This study employs textual analysis of news reports, which has been the prevalent and primary method of analysis in image repair studies (Benoit, 2000). This qualitative method allows the researcher to make an educated guess of the likely interpretation of the text (Garyantes, 2006) when questions about the social impact of the message are asked (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). The texts were analysed based on the categorizations of image repair strategies. Durham (2005) argued that the selection, emphasis and exclusion of texts enable the researcher to grapple with the complexity, nuances, and contradictions of media artifacts.

Even though the strategies used in the two crises were studied for intrinsic value, more importantly, their instrumental values were more critical in shedding insights on how different cultures communicate in crisis, which is the larger purpose of this study. In instrumental studies, Stake (1998, p. 88) argued that the cases are examined to provide "insight into an issue" whereas intrinsic studies are cases analysed in detail. Thus, the intrinsic values of the cases must illuminate the instrumental purpose.

Data collection

News articles. Benoit (2000) argued that news reports are a viable way of analysing a crisis. As the full texts of the speeches made, especially those made by the Taiwanese Government were not readily available; or if they were, they were in other languages (namely, Mandarin and Hokkien, a dialect) which when translated may lose some of its nuances; the researchers decided to analyse news articles published by the English

national dailies of the two countries as the primary texts of analysis to eliminate interpretation errors resulting from translations.

In image repair studies, news stories have often been used as primary texts of analyses (Cai *et al.*, 2009; Drumheller and Benoit, 2004; Liu, 2007; Zhang and Benoit, 2004). In all of these studies, the researcher 's intentions were not to study the role of the mass media in a crisis. Instead, media texts were used as tools or data sources to understand how a crisis was communicated by the governments. Carey (2003, p. 6), in analysing the uses of media in reporting the 9/11 crisis, had described media reportage of the crisis as "robust". In examining whether there was any difference between what was transmitted through the media channels compared directly to by the organization through its own channels like the web site, Coombs and Holladay (2009) found little meaningful difference between the print and video delivery. They argued that organizations should continue to deliver their messages through the media. Based on this argument, we can argue that media texts remain a viable tool to capture the messages delivered by organizations.

Additionally, even though there might be some elements of bias and subjectivity in some of these news reports, we believe that prestige newspapers, as argued by Krippendorff (2004) and Riffe *et al.* (1998), would project a fair representation of what had happened. Noll (2003, p. xviii) argued that media content may be studied to "verify assumptions of content". In our verification of content, we had examined beyond media framing to distilling to its fundamental forms the key messages communicated with the primary goal of understanding strategies, not to prove or disprove media biases.

News articles that contained words spoken by Taiwanese President Ma Yingjeou, US President George Bush and key members of their administrations were analysed to extract the accusations made against them, as well as what was said, in direct response to those accusations. All the statements analysed were primary statements made by the respective officials and not gleaned through second or third person accounts. For this study, only prestige, national dailies were selected for analyses. Goh and Hao (2000) argued that broadsheet papers were found to cover stories in a less sensational fashion than the "tabloid" newspapers. Riffe *et al.* (1998, p. 86) argued that prestige newspapers are valid instrument for analysis because they play a "key role in history".

For Taiwan, *Taipei Times* was selected for analysis. It is the mainstream English-language daily in Taiwan and one of the top three newspapers with a daily circulation of 285,130. Its credibility has been recognized with awards from the USA, Canada, and the UK. *The Guardian*, a major English newspaper in the UK, listed *Taipei Times* as a "quality, English-language daily [with] thorough reporting and considered editorial judgment" (*The Guardian, World News Guide*, n.d., www.Guardian.co.uk). For Typhoon Morakot, 187 stories published between 9 and 29 August 2009 were obtained from Factiva, using the search term "Morakot". Out of the 187 stories, only 22 stories that reflected the use of image repair strategies to address the accusations were analysed.

For the USA, the newspaper selected for analysing Hurricane Katrina was *The New York Times*, the newspaper of record (Gitlin, 1980). Using search terms "Hurricane Katrina" and "Bush Administration" or "US Government", news articles published between 20 August 2005 and 18 September 2005 were studied. Out of the 92 articles generated on the LexisNexis database, 20 stories that contain the accusations directed against the government and the ones that reflected the use of image repair strategies were used. Opinion editorials are excluded from this study.

Data analysis

The data analysis was carried out in three stages. The first stage was identifying the key issues and how the crises developed. Issues form the researchers' theme (Stake, 1998). The key issues were identified through a careful examination of news articles. The stories were read to understand the general issues present.

Once the issues were identified, the second stage involved delineating the time frame to examine how each of the issues developed over time. The reports were further analysed based on the occurrence of each type of image repair strategy used. The prominence and development of the use of particular strategies were plotted against the date to identify patterns in the strategies used and the intensity of image repair efforts. Each crisis was also divided into three phases, each phase indicating a change in the crisis management efforts by the government bodies. For both crises, what was evident that both share similar characteristics in the way the governments responded to the crises: in phase 1, it was inertia; in phase 2, it was reactive communication; and in phase 3, it was characterized by proactive communication.

The third stage was examination of the strategies. This systematic process of evaluating and illuminating persuasive messages was informed by definitions in the image repair theory. Zhang and Benoit (2004, p. 163) argued this examination of the relationship of context and the message allows the researcher to make a:

> [. . .] judgment of the importance of the elements of the message as a gestalt that considers not only simple frequency but also prominence as indicated by placement, development, and relationship of ideas in the persuasive messages.

Throughout the three stages, close attention was paid to patterns of consistency and contradictions. This would ensure what Plowman *et al.* (1995) described as systematic analysis of data.

Findings and discussion

RQ1 examined what were the image repair strategies used by a government that represents the Asian culture, in this case, Taiwan in Typhoon Morakot? As discussed, this can be examined through three phases. As the cases are thus studied for the instrumental value of larger purpose of understanding how different cultures communicate in crisis while not ignoring the intrinsic value, the strategies used are described in snapshots.

Phase 1 – inertia (9-15 August 2009)

The Ma administration predominantly used shifting the blame and simple denial as two variants of the same strategy. Bolstering and minimization were used once but not repeated.

Shift the blame. From the onset of the disaster, the Ma administration shifted the entire blame of the death toll to the villagers themselves. President Ma reportedly said, "When the residents do not see [flash floods] with their own eyes, they are not alert" and "some people did not feel comfortable evacuating". President Ma also accused the weather bureau for releasing inaccurate forecasts (Loa *et al.*, 2009).

Denial. Premier Liu Chao-Shiuan, however, took a different approach by denying the accusation of being slow to respond to the crisis. He said that the "reaction this time was faster than after the 921 earthquake" (Wang *et al.*, 2009). The 921 earthquake

occurred on 21 September 1999 in Jiji, Nantou County. Measuring 7.3, it killed more than 2,400 people were killed and injured over 11,000. It was the second-deadliest quake in recorded history in Taiwan, after the 1935 Hsinchu-Taichung earthquake (http://eng.taiwan.net.tw/pda/m1.aspx?sNo=0002111&id=A12-00013).

Bolstering. Bolstering was also used when Premier Liu announced to the survivors, "I am here today to understand your problems" (Hsu and Ko, 2009).

Evidently, defensive strategies, or what Pang (2006) characterized as advocacy strategies aimed at defending one's position, were evident in this phase.

Phase 2 – reactive communication (16-22 August 2009)

The second phase of the crisis was marked by a spike in the intensity of image repair efforts. As many as six image repair strategies were used simultaneously in their attempt to contain the damage.

Mortification and corrective action. The Ma government started a mortification campaign here. Mortification and corrective action were the predominant strategies and were consistently reflected in media reports throughout the second stage of the crisis. Ma apologized for being slow in the rescue efforts (Mo, 2009), and during a visit to Neipu Township, Ma also apologized to the victims for coming too late (Ko, 2009c) and "for any shortcomings" (Ko and Lu, 2009). At an orphanage, he apologized again for "coming too late" (Ko, 2009b). Ma (2009) said that "the government would ask local governments to conduct disaster prevention drills before flood season and evacuate residents living in dangerous areas". The government would also map out a standard operating procedure (Ko and Lu, 2009). On the lack of compassion and empathy to the victims, Ma "apologized for the 'improper' remarks he made" (Ko and Lu, 2009) and apologized to a family which was still missing a family member (Ko, 2009a).

Shift the blame. Even as it engaged in mortification, the Ma administration continued to shift the blame to the local government. In a report, Ma said, "So many problems would be solved if residents could be evacuated in time before floods or mudslides occur" (Mo, 2009). He said this again in a weekly video chat that was reported in the papers, saying that "if people could have been evacuated earlier, so many problems could have been solved" (Loa and Shan, 2009a, b).

Ma also blamed the local governments for their mentality of not taking typhoon drills seriously (Ko, 2009d). When accused of not being concerned enough to visit the victims, the Presidential Office spokesperson deflected the criticism by explaining that "the President had delayed visiting the disaster area to avoid interfering with the rescue effort" (Mo and Shih, 2009).

Denial. While the President apologized and conceded relief efforts could have been faster, Taiwan's Premier Liu Chao-shiuan undermined the President's image repair efforts by saying that the government was "prompt in rescuing people" stranded by mudslides and floods (Ko, 2009a). Minister of National Defense Chen Chao-Ming also "dismissed criticism that the military reacted too slowly" (Ko, 2009a, b, c, d, e; Ko and Lu, 2009).

Other strategies. Defeasibility was used when Ma was asked if more could have been done to learn from previous crises. He quoted as saying that "disasters get increasingly serious each time, making some experience useless" (Mo, 2009). Compensation was another strategy used during this phase. The Ma administration offered compensating the surviving flood victims by helping to "cover their rent and basic living expenses because they may not be able to make a living on their own for some time" (Wang, 2009a).

Evidently, the strategies used can be described as more accommodative strategies (Pang, 2006) aimed at winning over one's audience. However, remnants of advocacy remains, particularly when criticisms were raised about what the government could have done.

Phase 3 – proactive communication (23-29 August 2009)

The predominant strategy is mortification and the Ma government continued a weak attempt to deny the accusations made against them, employing denial and corrective action strategies, as well as mortification.

Mortification and corrective action. Ma personally visited the family of one of the victims to apologize for the "improper" remarks he made when they asked him for help to look for their missing father (Ko, 2009c). On 12 August, the visibly distraught pair had complained to Ma that his bodyguards had tried to stop them from telling him about their father, who was missing after the flooding. Ma responded by saying, "I didn't know you were looking for me" and "I have come, haven't I?" (Wang, 2009b). He continued to lead a team of officials in a "deep bow" to apologize for being late in getting to the villages affected by the disaster (Ko, 2009c). After his apology, Ma announced corrective action would be undertaken to relax what is perceived as bureaucratic relief regulations. Applications for compensation would be simplified for typhoon victims.

Denial. In one of the villages, Ma said that criticisms about the slow response to the disaster were "unfair" and that the military risked their lives to rescue people from the onset of the disaster (Ko, 2009e).

Evidently, similar to phase 2, the strategies used can be described as more accommodative strategies (Pang, 2006) aimed at winning over one's audience. Again, remnants of advocacy remains, particularly when criticisms were raised about what the government could have done.

The *RQ2* examined what were the image repair strategies adopted by a government that represents the Western culture, in this case, the USA in Hurricane Katrina? Similar to the *RQ1*, this too can be examined through three phases.

Phase 1 – inertia (29 August-4 September 2005)

The first phase of the crisis was characterized by much criticism levelled by state and local authorities and politicians, from the Louisiana governor Kathleen B. Blanco to New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, at the US Federal Government for its inefficiency in preparing for the crisis and for their slow response to the disaster. At one point, the criticism even took on a racial slur. Rap star Kanye West, who claimed he echoed the views of the African American, said the government's response would be been faster if the majority of the victims affected had been whites. "George Bush doesn't care about black people" was his famous refrain (Bumiller, 2005b).

After the initial inertia, the Bush Administration undertook massive efforts to reduce the damage. Thousands of National Guards and security troops were deployed by the administration to help with the relief operations. Search and security teams along with more aid including food, water and temporary shelter were also promised to the victims. The President issued orders to deploy around over 10,000 Army and Air National Guard personnel in Mississippi and Louisiana and the Pentagon dispatched around 60 helicopters to assist in the search and rescue operations (Stevenson, 2005).

However, what was remembered about the federal government's strategies were as follows.

Defeasibility. While responding to accusations made against the US Government for their slow response to the victims and that many victims took refuge at the convention centre, Federal Emergency Management Agency Director, Michael D. Brown stated, "The federal government did not know about the people in the convention centre until today" (*The New York Times*, 2005).

Bolstering. When asked if the USA should respond to offers of assistance by international allies, US President Bush said that the USA could fend for itself. He added, "I do expect a lot of sympathy and perhaps some will send cash dollars, but this country is going to rise up and take care of it" (Forero and Weisman, 2005).

Evidently, defensive strategies, or what Pang (2006) characterized as advocacy strategies aimed at defending one's position, were evident in this phase.

Phase 2 – reactive communication (5-11 September 2005)

The second phase of the crisis was characterized by an increase in the intensity of the image repair strategies adopted by the US Government. Up to six strategies were employed during this period.

Corrective action. Besides bringing in over 7,000 National Guard troops into New Orleans, the president also promised relief in the form of food and other supplies for the hurricane victims (McFadden, 2005). The Bush Administration also removed the head of its Federal Emergency Management Agency, Michael D. Brown, for "poor performance" post-Katrina (Stevenson and Kornblut, 2005).

Bolstering. A weekend after the hurricane struck New Orleans, news channels and television programs began displaying images of helicopter rescues, troops assisting the rescue operations (Stanley, 2005). The President visited the Red Cross headquarters in Washington to personally thank the volunteers to publicly display his concern (Stanley, 2005). At an event held in the White House, President Bush stated, "In these difficult days, we have again seen the great strength and character and resolve of America; we will continue to work to help the people who are struggling" (Stevenson and Kornblut, 2005).

US President Bush, along with former President Bill Clinton, also appeared at the shelter in Houston to announce the creation of the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund in an effort to aid the hurricane victims (Nagourney and Broder, 2005). The President also stated that the Department of Education was working on a plan to provide donations to schools enrolling displaced students (Dillon, 2005). The administration also initiated a number of regulations, such as, larger tax deductions for organizations participating in charitable work and tax credits for investment companies pursuing community development projects (Andrews, 2005). Job placement services were also being offered for the evacuees along with medical care, cash assistance and insurance benefits (Andrews, 2005).

Denial. Responding to some of the remarks that the administration did not care about the victims, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "How can that be the case? Nobody, especially the President, would have left people unattended on the basis of race" (Broder, 2005).

Attack the accuser. White House Spokesperson Scott McClellan attacked the accusers when he used the phrase, blame game, to describe the criticisms directed

against the administration. White House Speaker, Representative J. Dennis Hastert defended the Bush Administration saying, "Some people are really very anxious to start pointing fingers and playing the blame game. I think we need to get our work done" (Nagourney and Hulse, 2005).

Defeasibility. As questions regarding the ineffectiveness in responding to the crisis emerged, some federal officials admitted uncertainty over who was in charge, which had contributed to some of the delay in providing aid (Shane *et al.*, 2005). Homeland Security Secretary, Michael Chertoff stated, "The local government's capacity to respond to the disaster was severely compromised by the hurricane and flood" (Shane *et al.*, 2005). Members of the Federal Government stated that owing to the state's emergency communications system either being knocked or overloaded, the officials were unable to fully identify the extent of the damage in Louisiana and thereby, provide adequate help to the state. Some of the delay caused was also attributed to miscommunication. A spokesman for the DHS said, "There was a significant amount of discussions between the parties and likely some confusion about what was requested and what was needed" (Lipton *et al.*, 2005b).

Mortification. Senior officials admitted that the hurricane revealed certain critical flaws in the national disaster response plan, especially with regards to its failure to recognize the role of the local police, fire and medical professionals (Lipton *et al.*, 2005a, b). Responding to the accusations made against the federal government following their response to the disaster, the Press Secretary at the DHS said, "I don't believe there is one critical error, but some missteps that were made by everyone involved" (Lipton *et al.*, 2005a, b).

Evidently, the strategies used shifted from advocacy to more accommodative strategies aimed at responding to long-standing criticisms while acknowledging that more could have been done.

Phase 3 – proactive communication (12-18 September 2005)

Bolstering. President Bush acknowledged the magnitude of the disaster by saying, "Protecting a city that sits lower than the water around it is not easy, but it has and will be done" (Bumiller, 2005a). On his third visit to New Orleans following the hurricane, President Bush attempted to reassure the public about his administration's commitment to rebuild the area of New Orleans (Johnson *et al.*, 2005). The President, while speaking in Jackson Square, stated:

> Tonight I offer this pledge to the American people: Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives (Bumiller, 2005b).

Responding to the accusations of racism directed against his administration, President Bush stated:

> As all of us saw on television, there is also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. And that poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality.

He added, "That is our vision of the future, in this city and beyond: We will not just rebuild, we will build higher and better" (Bumiller, 2005b).

Attack the accuser. Another strategy employed was attacking the accuser; in this case, government critics like rapper Kanye West and Chairman of the Democratic National, Howard Dean. On being asked about the comments made by the rapper Kanye West, Laura Bush, the first lady, said, "I think all of those remarks were disgusting, to be perfectly frank, of course President Bush cares about everyone in our country" (Bumiller, 2005b).

Corrective action. Responding to a federal government assessment of his administration's response to the hurricane, the President promised, "This Government will learn the lessons of Hurricane Katrina" (Bumiller, 2005b). The president also pledged to rebuild the Gulf Coast and promised the creation of a Gulf Opportunity Zone which would be used to provide help to the hurricane victims with their taxes, education, healthcare and job training (Bumiller, 2005b). While speaking to the victims, the president promised to help the hurricane evacuees by setting up "worker recovery accounts" of up to $5,000 which they could use for educational and job training purposes (Bumiller, 2005b).

Evidently, similar to phase 2, the strategies used can be described as more accommodative strategies (Pang, 2006) aimed at winning over one's audience.

The *RQ3* examined what were the differences in the strategies adopted by both governments and what role did culture play in the strategies used?

Same accusations, different strategies

The predominant image repair strategies adopted by each government to defend itself against the accusations were different despite similar accusations. It is also observed that the image repair strategies used by both governments changed in each phase. One of the key differences between both the governments was the use of mortification and corrective action by the Ma government after the initial inertia. It began to use these strategies in phase 2 and this was evident when the government engaged in proactive communication, in phase 3, of the crisis. Even though other strategies were used, like shift blame-denial, defeasibility and compensation, these were used less predominantly compared to mortification and corrective action. Benoit (2004) argued that a firm commitment to correct a problem is an important component in image repair. Corrective action, when combined with mortification, has been found to be strategies that are effective image repair (Benoit and Drew, 1997). The Bush Administration, however, used a diversity of strategies, ranging from the advocacy end of the continuum in Pang's (2006) conflict positioning conceptualization, to the accommodative end. It began with defeasibility and bolstering in the initial phase, then moved to corrective action-bolstering-attack the accuser-denial-defeasibility-mortification in phase 2, and then bolstering-attack the accuser-corrective action in the third phase. In Benoit and Henson's (2009) analysis of President Bush's image repair discourse on Hurricane Katrina, defeasibility and bolstering were used together with corrective action. However, when the US Government's discourse is taken as a whole, defeasibility and bolstering were more frequently used, and they were evident in all three phases (Table I).

The *RQ3* examined the differences in the strategies adopted and the role culture played in the strategies used. While we may not be able to draw direct correlations between the dimensions and strategies, which can be achieved if quantitative tests like experiments had been done, through this qualitative study, it is hoped we can provide some inferences on how dimensions influenced strategies used.

Phase	Accusations	Strategies adopted by the Ma government	Strategies adopted by the Bush government
1	1. The governments were slow in their response and were not prepared for the crisis	Shift the blame, denial, bolstering, and minimization	Corrective action, defeasibility, and bolstering
2	1. The governments were slow in their response and were not prepared for the crisis 2. The governments showed lack of empathy and compassion for the victims	Corrective action, mortification, shift the blame, denial, and defeasibility	Defeasibility, compensation, bolstering, attacking the accuser, mortification, corrective action, and denial
3	1. The governments were slow in their response and were not prepared for the crisis 2. The governments showed lack of empathy and compassion for the victims	Mortification, corrective action, denial, defeasibility	Bolstering, defeasibility, attacking the accuser, and compensation

The role of culture in image repair

Uncertainty avoidance index. Uncertainty avoidance translates into the level of stress and the desire for predictability among cultures (Naumov and Puffer, 2000). Hofstede's cultural dimensions indicate that Taiwan has a significantly higher UAI score compared to the USA. According to Hofstede (2009), this implies that the Taiwanese culture seeks rules, formality and structure (Frith and Mueller, 2003). Uncertainty avoidance requires explicit, logical and direct information on the part of the communicator. The people believe in the expertise of those in power. Shows of emotions in people are accepted as tension and stress that need to be released (Frith and Mueller, 2003). People in high UAI nations tend to show more nervous energy (Hofstede and Soeters, 2002).

What we may infer: it has been observed that in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, the need for the existence of rules is much needed, and people tend to react unfavourably when rules are unclear or uncertain. These cultures tend to be satisfied with the existence of a formal structure. Taiwan's significantly higher UAI score could have influenced Ma and his officials to embark on a mortification campaign after they were accused of not responding to the people's needs, bowing to apologize to the victims and making himself accessible to angry victims by visiting disaster sites. Even though Ma and his officials were verbally attacked, this venting process allowed the villagers to release their anger, and helped in the government's bid to win the people back. It is no coincidence similar image repair strategies, i.e. shift the blame and denial strategies taken during the onset of the crisis before moving on to mortification and corrective action strategies, were observed to be taken by an organization in another the high UAI nation of Japan. Toyota first announced the recall of its cars in 2010 to fix a brake problem without admitting to any defect (Kwan, 2010). It only admitted to brake and accelerator problems after a massive recall of eight million cars (The Straits Times, 2010). Subsequently, its President Akio Toyoda, made a trip to Washington to apologize to the US Congress for Toyota's mistakes, and said he was "deeply sorry" (BBC News, 2010).

The USA, on the contrary, has a low UAI score. Countries that score low on uncertainty avoidance generally ignore isolated incidents as contributing

to a crisis (Taylor, 2000). Low uncertainty avoidance cultures are characterized by the implementation of rules, only when required.

What we may infer: this could be the reason why the Bush Administration appeared less forthcoming in pursuing a consistent and coordinated mortification-corrective action strategy like Taiwan, as uncertainty is tolerated in such cultures (Naumov and Puffer, 2000). Instead, it embarked on six different strategies to deal with its situation: denial to defend accusations that it did not care about the African Americans; attack the accuser to describe the finger-pointing that was going on; defeasibility to explain the lack of information it had; bolstering to galvanize the American people to rise from the setback; corrective action to deal with the increasingly dire situation; and mortification to explain how relief efforts were less than efficient.

Power distance index. Countries with high power distance point to a latent conflict between individuals and organizations that have prestige and resources and those who feel powerless. While the powerless accept their position in society, they are not very forgiving when the powerful make mistakes (Taylor, 2000). In high PDI nations, dependence on more powerful people is a basic need. People expect their leaders to lead autocratically and make decisions (Hofstede, 1983/1998).

What we may infer: the high PDI environment in Taiwan could have played a role in influencing the Ma government to pursue mortification, the most accommodating strategy, to reduce this gap. Dependency is also an element of hierarchical relationships between and among people in high PDI nations (Frith and Mueller, 2003). Taiwan's higher PDI score than average Asian countries could have been a predictor of the people's adverse emotional response to strategies Ma used in phase one. Shifting the blame to the villagers for not evacuating was a bad strategy because it ignored this element of dependency in the hierarchical relationship. This was manifested in the accusations that Ma failed to exercise his responsibility as commander-in-chief. By shifting the blame to the villagers, Ma ignited the latent conflict between the "powerless" people and the powerful government. Rodrigues (1990) argued that in this context, a directive leadership style would be most effective in societies with high power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism.

For countries with a low PDI like the USA, there is a lower tendency to accept inequalities in their position in society. The USA's low PDI could have caused the accusation on the government's lack of compassion to morph into a racial discrimination charge, the basest of accusations.

What we may infer: a study conducted by Taylor (2000) of the Coca Cola scare in the European Union bore similarities to Hurricane Katrina. In 1999, school children in Belgium fell ill after consuming Coca Cola. The Belgium Government ordered an immediate recall and ban of all Coca Cola bottles. Spain and France followed. However, countries like Denmark, Norway and Sweden did not take any such precautionary measures. Taylor (2000) argued that nations that scored high on both the UAI and the PDI indexes showed a lower tolerance for the crisis compared to those with a lower UAI and PDI scores. Thus, countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway, which had lower UAI and PDI than Belgium, Spain and France, watched and waited for more evidence on the crisis before responding. These countries had similar UAI and PDI scores to the USA.

During a crisis, the two dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and power distance are believed to affect the way the organization acts during the crisis. For instance,

a low uncertainty avoidance organization will tend to ignore isolated incidents as constituting the crisis and may therefore take minimal action to rectify the situation or even communicate to publics about the situation. Similarly, a low power distance organization may not see the importance in communicating with the local government about a troublesome situation (Taylor, 2000). For countries with high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, organizations may have to take an entirely different approach. They are most likely to communicate immediately with their governments during a crisis to garner maximum support. These cultures are not tolerant of ambiguity and risks and may take all the necessary actions to rectify the situation.

What was interesting from these two crises was that regardless of a country's PDI, the notion of power distance did not prohibit the less powerful to question the more powerful. The questions by the Taiwanese were equally vociferous than those from the USA. Perhaps, when audiences are driven to desperation as in a crisis, questions would come fast and fiery, regardless of power distance. How organizations, or the more powerful, respond would depend on the nature and status of PDI.

Despite pursuing a systematic mortification strategy, the Ma government's image repair efforts still ended in failure. Poll results published on 22 August showed that more than 70 percent of respondents were not satisfied with the government's performance in dealing with the aftermath of Typhoon Morakot. More than 70 percent also disagreed with Premier Liu's claim that the government's rescue and relief efforts were faster than Former President Lee Teng-Hui's after the 921 Earthquake on 21 September 1999 (Loa, 2009). Perhaps, Meng's (2010) argument that in a non-Western setting, if an organization had paid more attention to victim-oriented strategies, perception of the crisis handling would have been better.

This could be because mortification, although the most accommodating of all image repair strategies, would not always be the silver bullet that would salvage a situation if from the onset of the accusations, the wrong set of strategies were used. Similarly, Bush Administration image repair efforts did not seem to have created much of an impact with newspaper columnists continuing to question his leadership abilities throughout the crisis period. Benoit and Henson (2009) argued that only 40 percent of the public approved of how the President managed the crisis.

Even though natural disasters belongs to the low attribution cluster in Coombs' (2008a, b) typology in the situational crisis communication theory, inertia and inaction on the part of the government can lead citizens to change the attribution from low to high. The use of wrong strategies to assuage looming anger would tip the attribution scale further off the culpability charts.

Referring to studies on stealing thunder, Arpan and Pompper (2003) stated that in the framework of crisis communication, stealing thunder is an admission of a weakness (usually a mistake or failure) before that weakness is announced by another party. It is said that stealing thunder is useful in courtrooms, especially when a defendant's weakness is apparent and known to the opponent. Tests suggested that the stealing thunder strategy can result in favourable jury verdicts, higher credibility ratings for the defendant, lower perceptions of crime severity, greater sympathy for the defendant, weaker perceptions of the defendant's guilt (Arpan and Pompper, 2003). Applying this strategy here, both Ma and Bush administrations would probably have a higher success in winning over the citizens in their image repair efforts if they had taken a strong

mortification strategy from the onset of the accusations since in a crisis belonged to the low attribution category.

The truism remains: one may not have started the fire, but if one has the responsibility of dousing the fire but did not, then one is held responsible. In this case, the responsible party often tends to be the organization or the government.

The *RQ4* examined what could practitioners learn about the role of culture in an international setting?

Need to understand local cultures to communicate effectively

Research into the role of culture in the practice of public relations reveals a great amount of ethnocentrism, perceiving one culture to be superior to another culture (Vasquez and Taylor, 2000).

The premise of this study is that there is no superior culture, that different cultures work differently, and there is no one-size-fits-all, or a prescriptive approach. Using power distance as an illustration, Hofstede (1983) found that in nations with high PDI, subordinates generally do not want to participate in decision making, deferring it to leaders to decide and lead autocratically. Practitioners who are transplanted to such surroundings from a low PDI nation will want to be more assertive in relating with local staff even if the organizational culture, like that of an MNC, may be one with a lower PDI. The practitioner in an MNC, tasked to maintain and manage communication and relationships between different societies and varied cultures (Sriramesh and Takasaki, 1999), has to have a firm grip on the local culture to be able to perform in the new role. Using insights from branding literature where descriptors are ascribed to brand characteristic in different cultures, an international practitioner may surmise that in a high UAI and low PDI culture, a friendly approach towards the local staff may be relevant. In a high PDI culture, one may want to accentuate the prestige factor from where one came from. In a high UAI culture, trustworthiness is often appreciated (Crocus, 2004, in De Mooij, 2010).

Beside uncertainty avoidance, the practice of communication across cultures may be underpinned by other cultural factors. In China, for instance, face is an important cultural factor (Ye and Pang, n.d.). As the Chinese maxim illustrates, "the ugly things in our family should never go public", the Chinese people would attempt to save face for their organizations whenever possible. "Losing face" tantamount to public humiliation. Thus, in a crisis, keeping dishonourable matters covered up is a common strategy used to "save face". The other cultural factor is high uncertainty avoidance. Chinese tend to "keep their mouths shut" since they believe that "trouble is born out of the words you speak". Thus, practitioners who find themselves in sensitive situations such as crises can expect Chinese organizations to decline to communicate or to divert attention (Yu and Wen, 2003). They should also be sensitive to the cultural practice that during a crisis, if mortification is not offered, corrective action is the pseudo-mortification (Cai *et al.*, 2009) as it is often the attempt of the organization to save face. The offended party should thus give face to this unspoken gesture because that would be counted as cordial. A persistent pressure for the offending party to apologize may be regarded disapprovingly as "too pushy."

So what do all these mean for the practitioner? First, any practitioner operating in an international setting, in addition to determining effective modes of communication, would want to also study cultural elements and symbols to avoid making blunders.

In the circuit of culture model posited by du Gay and colleagues, one would be better placed to understand practice if one understood how social meanings are produced and reproduced (Gaither and Curtin, 2008). As Taylor (2000) argued and as this study illustrates, PDI and UAI are useful indicators to understand what strategies to use. Second, one practical way of immersing in another culture is to manage ethnocentrism. The human tendency is to sub-consciously regard one culture more superior than another. Efforts have to be made to minimize that, especially one is on short-term assignments in another culture where time is not on one's side to fully understand the culture. Third, work with and through organizations with international influence that encourage international collaborations. Diaz *et al.* (2009) found that practitioners with an organic organizational culture (loose chain of command) and a long-term orientation of national culture are better placed to engage in international assignments than a practitioner with a mechanistic organizational culture (hierarchical command) and a short-term orientation of national culture.

Conclusion

This study has examined the image repair strategies used in both Asian and Western settings to understand how these cultures communicate during crisis. It is interesting to observe the differences in image repair strategies used by both the Ma and Bush governments, despite the same accusations, crisis type, scale of disaster, and external *locus* of control of the disaster. Both the Ma and Bush administrations adopted image repair strategies when accusations were first hurled at them. The wrong usage of strategies initially probably caused the natural crisis that each government faced to transform into a political crisis. The Ma government's image repair efforts were underpinned by mortification and corrective action campaign. The USA, however, did not pursue a mortification campaign, but used a mixed bag of strategies characterized by frequent usage of defeasibility and bolstering. From Hofstede's (2009) cultural dimensions, we inferred why Taiwan pursued a mortification strategy, given its high UAI and PDI scores. On the contrary, the USA, with a lower UAI and PDI scores, we inferred it pursued a different strategy. We infer that culture could play a role in the choice of image repair strategies adopted by governments, in this case, one Asian and one Western. We also infer that Hofstede's cultural dimensions can provide the basis to explain the failure of both governments' image repair strategies.

A limitation of the study is that it depends on news reports, instead of news releases and speeches, for analysis. However, given the rapidity and volatility in the unfolding drama of each of the two crises, many of the comments made were to the media and not in prepared speeches. It is a limitation we accept. Our intention was not just to capture the rapidly unfolding communication between the governments and their publics as enumerated in documents of public record, we submit that the ongoing public discourse would reflect, to a large extent, an accurate, present and fair reading of the reality. Even with the inherent methodological limitations, these limitations should not invalidate our findings. Another limitation is our inability to draw direct correlations between the cultural dimensions and the strategies used. It was not our intention to "test" for how dimensions correlated with strategies. Future study can explore such correlations. Our present study is a rhetorical/textual analysis, following in the tradition of image repair studies. Even though we could not present correlations which can only be achieved through quantitative approaches, through our qualitative study,

we adopt a more modest approach in this exploratory study by making inferences on how dimensions influenced strategies used.

The image repair strategies are used when the crisis leads to a loss of face. When face is threatened, face works is used to repair image, argued Benoit and Pang (2008). Face, image, and reputation are important because as a society, we pride ourselves on, and value those who enact tolerance, and sensitivity, to the feelings and traditions of others (Benoit, 2004). The work is cut out for image repair theorists to further understand how contextual factors like culture are related to rhetoric. In a crisis, it is not what is spoken – it is how it is spoken.

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