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Peijuan CAI
Nanyang Technological University

Lee Pei TING
Nanyang Technological University

Augustine PANG
Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

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Managing a nation's image during crisis: A study of the Chinese government's image repair efforts in the “Made in China” controversy

Cai Peijuan

Lee Pei Ting

Augustine Pang

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, 31, Nanyang Link, WKWSCI Building, Singapore 637718, Republic of Singapore

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Abstract

The image of a nation is crucial in the conduct of international relations (Wang, J. (2006). Managing national reputation and international relations in the global era: Public diplomacy revisited. *Public Relations Review*, 32, 91–96). A favorable image plays a critical role in asserting one's influence (Benoit, W. L., & Brinson, S. L. (1994). AT&T: “Apologies are not enough”. *Communication Quarterly*, 42, 75–88; Wang, J. (2006). Managing national reputation and international relations in the global era: Public diplomacy revisited. *Public Relations Review*, 32, 91–96). Often, strategic communication tools like public relations and media diplomacy are used to enhance a nation's image (Giffard, A., & Rivenburgh, N. K. (2000). News agencies, national images, and global media events. *Journalism Quarterly*, 77, 8–21). In 2007, China's reputation as “the workshop of the world” (Gaulier, G., Lemoine, F., & Unal-Kesenci, D. (2005). China: A workshop of the Cd and a market for Europe. At: <http://ideas.repec.org/a/cii/cepill/2005-245.html>. Accessed on 14 May 2009) came under severe threat with a series of product recalls. This was arguably the first time that allegations of product deficiencies were targeted at a country. Using the image repair theory, this paper examined the strategies used and the image these strategies generated for China. Findings showed that the initial defensive strategies generated an image of a hurried and harried country. After it was willing to confront the crises through corrective action, a surer and more determined image emerged.

Keywords

Image repair, Public diplomacy, Nation, Image, Crisis, Product recalls

1. Introduction

In 2007, China's production and manufacturing industry at large faced a severe onslaught from international trading partners questioning the reliability and safety of the country's produce. The “Made in China” crises started innocuously with a pet food recall in September 2006 in the United States. Subsequent recalls in Europe and South Africa came in response to reports of renal failure in pets. The crisis exploded in March 2007 when a Canadian-based pet food manufacturer notified the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that animals were dying after eating Chinese products (Coghlan, 2007). A

series of product recalls and bans involving a wide range of consumer products, including toothpaste, toys, candies, and even pajamas, followed.

While product recalls were not uncommon for organizations, this was arguably the first time that allegations of product deficiencies were targeted at a country. At stake were Chinese exports worth more than US\$ 969.1 billion (US-CBC, 2006) and its reputation as an emerging world power. This latest crisis comes in the wake of recent crises, including the AIDS epidemic in 2001 (Chan, 2001, Watts, 2003) and SARS in 2003 (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2004). It was incumbent for China to manage its image once again.

Most studies on image repair were applied to understand the strategies used by politicians (see Benoit, 2004, Len-Ríos and Benoit, 2003), corporate entities (see Benoit and Brinson, 1994, Benoit and Pang, 2008, Cowden and Sellnow, 2002) and prominent individuals (Benoit, 1997, Benoit and Brinson, 1999). Few studies have examined repair strategies by nations (Zhang & Benoit, 2004). This paper seeks to examine the image repair strategies used by China to restore global consumer confidence, from the time the crisis escalated in March 2007 to September 2007, before it embarked on the public relations campaign to repair its image (Lawrence, 2007). This period is critical to examine because this was when global fears about Chinese-made products were most intense. China's image repair represented the raw test of its ability to manage the crisis as well as negotiate its image.

This paper seeks to examine what strategies China used to repair its image and the image these strategies generated for China. Data comes from rhetorical analyses of official Chinese government statements from March 1, 2007 to September 30, 2007. This study is significant on two fronts. First, it advances current limited understanding on how nations repair their image. Image repair strategies are used differently in individual, corporate, and political levels (Benoit, 1997). Strategies for individuals and corporate entities may, for instance, be motivated by legal liability considerations while political and nation image repair may be motivated by repercussions on national reputation. In an interdependent world, countries are realizing that maintaining a favorable reputation should dominate diplomatic efforts (Hiebert, 2005, Wang, 2006). Second, this study attempts to address the call (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992) to examine how public relations insights can be applied to public diplomacy in the management of a nation's image.

1.1. Literature review

The theory of image repair discourse focuses on identifying message options (Benoit, 1997) during crisis. The theory offers five general defense strategies: Denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit & Pang, 2008).

This study examines

RQ1: What image repair strategies did China use?

RQ2: What image did China's communication efforts generate?

2. Method

The qualitative method of rhetorical analysis (Andrews et al., 1998, Kinney, 2002, Zhang and Benoit, 2004), which has been the prevalent and primary method of analysis in image repair studies (Benoit, 2000), is used to analyze China's repair efforts. Besides speeches, news stories have often been used as primary texts of analyses (Liu, 2007, Zhang and Benoit, 2004). All the 7 press releases, statements, and transcripts of press conferences conducted by the Chinese government officials from March 1, 2007 to September 30, 2007 were analyzed. News articles from two news agencies, *Xinhua News Agency* and *Reuters*, were analyzed to reduce potential bias in any single publication. Articles were searched from Factiva. Articles from *Xinhua News Agency* were used as they represented official views from China (Tai, 2003, Wu, 2006, Xin, 2006). *Reuters*, which represents the Western perspective, was

selected for its predominance in international news coverage, accessibility, and reliability (Bardhan, 2001, Horvit, 2006). Of the 204 articles found, only 120 articles were analyzed as these contained statements from government officials.

3. Findings and discussion

The first research question examined what image repair strategies China used. There were three distinct stages in its image repair.

3.1. Initial reaction

Denial was a common image repair strategy utilized when it tried to diffuse criticisms. In the days following the US pet food recall, for instance, China denied that grain protein products caused the spate of pet deaths (China announces controls after U.S. pet food scare, 2007). As more crises emerged, denial was again the first reaction undertaken by the authorities. The new crises included products like biscuits, candies, cooking pots, clothing, toys and toothpaste. When Philippine authorities found that Chinese biscuits and candies were tainted with formaldehyde, denial was again used (Chinese candy maker says no exports of alleged tainted product, 2007).

China also used the strategy of denial in conjunction with the strategy of bolstering. For instance, when accused by the US of faulty tires, China's General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) first denied it and then engaged in bolstering by arguing that the problem lied in the misuse of the tires rather than the quality of the tires (China says alleged faulty tires up to U.S. standards, blames misuse for fatal accident, 2007). In another instance, when confronted by accusations in New Zealand that some Chinese fabric products contained excessive levels of formaldehyde, the AQSIQ said that test results showed that they met the appropriate standards. A government spokesperson further reiterated how China would “face up to any quality problems of our products” (China's kid pajama exports to New Zealand tested qualified, 2007).

Over time, China included the strategy of corrective action. In response to contaminated toothpaste, China's Ministry of Health argued that even though the long-term use of its toothpaste was not harmful (China says U.S. self-contradictory detaining toothpastes from China, 2007), it would investigate. Another example related to the high levels of lead found in China-made toys. Even as China engaged in denial, it used the strategy of bolstering to argue for the safety of the toys (China says toys recalled by Mattel safe, despite some failing U.S. standards, 2007). Subsequently, it promised corrective action to crack down on counterfeit certification symbols (China tightens quality control on toys, 2007). As worries about food manufacturers' use of toxins and fake ingredients soared, China announced that it would strengthen its domestic food safety (CF, 2007, CFES, 2007, Heavey, 2007).

3.2. Intermediate action

Even as China was responding to emerging crises, existing crises continued to escalate. To protect its reputation, it used strategies that helped to reduce offensiveness. For instance, the strategy of bolstering was evident when China argued its quality of toys was of high quality (Blanchard & Lin, 2007). When confronted by a new slew of food product scares, a Cabinet minister in charge of the AQSIQ bolstered China's position by arguing that China imposed a “very strict supervision of exported goods and more than 99 percent of Chinese exports were qualified” (China, US to consult on food safety, 2007). A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington also announced that China was cooperating with other countries to seek solutions on issues of food safety and product quality (Chinese government attaches importance to food and drug safety, 2007).

Apart from bolstering strategies, the Chinese government also employed the strategy of denial, specifically shifting blame, to isolate the “bad apples.” In response to product safety issues, the Chinese government argued the mistakes made by certain companies should not tar the overall image of the

government (CFES, 2007, CGAI, 2007, China gets, 2007). Attack the accuser was another strategy China used to fend off accusations of product failures, like how it warned the US not to exacerbate the problem. At the same time, it argued that it was “unfair and irresponsible for the US media to single China out” (China officials, 2007, China warns, 2007). When the US advised its citizens not to use Chinese-made toothpaste, China attacked the US by arguing that the toothpastes were of good quality as the FDA had approved them for distribution (Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang's regular press conference, 2007).

3.3. Remedial action

Towards the latter part of the crisis, as China became overwhelmed by mounting evidence of product deficiencies, it began to engage in the strategy of corrective action. To rectify the pet food crisis, China revoked the business licenses of the two companies that exported wheat protein tainted with toxic chemicals found in pet food (China revokes licenses of two companies involved in pet food scandal, 2007). The government also announced that it found no further melamine-contaminated products after checking samples from exporters (China's recent steps to quell product safety fears, 2007). Guilty officials were also detained (Four Chinese detained for involvement in Mattel toy recall, 2007) and executed, including the former head of China's State Food and Drug Administration (China arrests, 2007, Kahn, 2007).

At the national level, a four-month campaign was launched (Wu & Wu, 2007) to improve product and food safety. Through these measures, the Chinese government promised that there would not be any uncertified producer by 2012 (Wu & Wu, 2007). Besides instituting massive reforms internally, China also established mechanisms with its trading partners to ensure food safety (China's food quality and safety, 2007, China food, 2007). In September 2007, China announced the formation of a product safety working-group and held its first ministerial-level safety conference (U.S., China promise Americans lead-free toys, 2007). Other corrective measures included a five-year plan to counter dangerous medicines and bad food and a commitment to improve food and drug safety by 2010 (China calls, 2007, China drug, 2007). Many of the corrective actions were published in a 39-page White Paper (Wu & Wu, 2007).

The second research question examined what image did China's communication efforts generate? In the early stage, China used the strategies of denial and bolstering. Benoit (2004) argued the use of this dual strategy could be persuasive as one attempts to distance oneself from the accusation. However, instead of defending itself vigorously, China utilized a counter-intuitive strategy of corrective action at the same time. In doing so, China contradicted and compromised its initial position that its products were of good quality. This invariably raised the suspicion of culpability. One should not deny an offensive act and offer corrective action at the same time (Benoit, 1995, Cowden and Sellnow, 2002).

Subsequently, China chose to shift the blame to a group of bad companies, bolstered its position, attacked the accusers, followed by corrective action. This combination of strategies of denial, bolstering and attacking the accuser (Benoit, 2004) may be viable to distance oneself from accusations. However, promising corrective action in the midst of attempting to distance itself further added to the already formed suspicion of culpability. In the last stage, China's remedial action was characterized by the predominant use of one strategy, corrective action.

China's strategies in the initial and intermediate stages appeared confusing and because of the mixed signals it sent. It generated the image of a country that was hurried and harried. Its responses appeared piecemeal. On one hand, it attempted to defend itself by engaging in strategies of denial and bolstering. On the other hand, it wanted to avoid the escalation by attempting to assuage its accusers that it would correct the problems. However, over time, as it became acquainted with the extent and nature of the crisis, it unequivocally promised to correct the problems. Only then did China show a more coherent, determined and surer image of a country that was not unwilling to face up to its faults.

By doing so, it slowly regained the respect of other countries. Interestingly, shortly after the product crises, China faced another crisis, a massive earthquake that rocked China's Sichuan province and killed

tens of thousands of people. Despite the magnitude and severity of the crisis, China's handling was praised for its transparency and efficiency (Tan, 2008) as it displayed calm, competence and compassion (Peh, 2008, p. 8). It won the respect of the world.

4. Conclusion and implication

This study has investigated China's image repair in the product recall crisis. One limitation of the study was that the authors only managed to analyze articles English-language wire agencies. Future studies should include articles from the Chinese-language news sources like *People's Daily* to provide deeper insights to the analysis.

The strategies that China used, denial, bolstering, and attacking the accuser resembled those that Saudi Arabia used when it was accused of supporting terrorism and failing to support a possible US attack on Iraq (Zhang & Benoit, 2004). However, China could not sustain the use of these strategies because mounting evidence compelled it to engage in corrective action. What appeared to be a supporting strategy, presumably to assuage growing international concern in the initial and intermediate stages, assumed dominance in the latter stages. When China showed its sincerity in correcting the problem, it helped China repair its image. Benoit (2004) argued that a firm commitment to correct the problem is a very important component in image repair. How different is nation image repair compared to political, corporate or entertainment image repair? Benoit (1997) argued that as long as reputation was at stake, the same discourse options were available to rhetors to counter threats to image. However, nations, like political image repair (Benoit, 1997), are less likely to use mortification because it came with reputational repercussions, particularly for China's case, it involved the loss of face. Face-saving is an important communication device in Chinese culture. Protecting one's face helps to preserve one's dignity and empower oneself, especially if the audience is an important one (Lu, 1994). Thus when a nation admits guilt, embedded in corrective action could be an implicit mortification to save face.

Second, what public relations insights can be shed on public diplomacy to help nations manage their image? Hiebert (2005) argued nations' image could be rehabilitated in the media through public relations efforts. One way to do so is conceptualize diplomacy as a symbolic interaction process (Zhang, 2006) where nations actively construct and negotiate their image in the media through verbal and nonverbal symbols. In China's case, by not shying away from the accusations like it did in the 2003 SARS crisis (Pang et al., 2004), China demonstrated it was willing to be engaged. However, the initial image it constructed was one of obstinacy and showed lack of coherence. As the crisis prolonged, China's response became more coherent and consistent. An enduring lesson, thus, is the need for consistent messaging, and to speak with one voice using the media as the platform. For China, time and again, its lack of a strategic public relations approach has raised doubts and suspicions of its intentions and actions. One analyst ventured to suggest that China needs a "better media strategy" and strong public relations campaign (Choong, 2009). Such efforts could enhance public diplomatic efforts (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). A more certain media presence and consistent messaging in the latter stages of the crisis probably enhanced China's diplomatic efforts as it sought to rehabilitate its image through the mass media. This was also a timely precursor to the public relations campaign it launched subsequently (Lawrence, 2007).

Hiebert (2005) argued that success in diplomacy is when "words match action" and when communication is "credible" (p. 320). Yun (2006), however, raised the concern that "public diplomacy as a practice of governmental international public relations has faced the issue of accountability and, thus, the burden of demonstrating its value to a government's overall foreign affairs" (p. 309). Once that can be aligned, Van Dyke and Vercic (2008) argued that communication campaigns could promote constructive diplomatic relationships.

As Robert W. Grupp, President of the International Public Relations Association, argued, public diplomacy "isn't just good public relations; it's good business" (Grupp, 2008).

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