

# Putting Cultural Context into SCCT

## When Crisis Responsibility Does Not Tell It All

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Multinational corporations (MNCs) are facing an increasingly challenging business environment. Most significant is such firms' failure to understand the cultural context of host nations as such failures could cause crises. This study brings a cultural context to situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by exploring variables that influence crisis response decision making in Korea. In-depth interviews with ten public relations managers working for the top 20 Korean food companies revealed that—contrary to what SCCT suggests—factors other than responsibility influence crisis response decision making. In particular, anti-chaebol sentiment, public opinion, and media influenced crisis responses, often overriding crisis responsibility considerations.

**KEYWORDS** crisis, culture, SCCT, food crisis, crisis response strategies

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## Putting Cultural Context into SCCT: When Crisis Responsibility Does Not Tell It All

Multinational corporations (MNCs) are facing an increasingly challenging business environment characterized by, for instance, economic uncertainty, cultural and regulatory differences, and demanding consumers. Most significant, however, is such firms' failure to understand the cultural context and norms of host nations as such failures could cause and/or escalate crises (Choi & Cameron, 2005; Taylor, 2000). Taylor (2000) argued that "the ways in which organizations can effectively communicate with international publics are dependent on a variety of cultural and societal forces" (p. 278), hinting that crisis responses should be based on understanding of local culture.

Crisis communication research has produced a body of literature that informs public relations managers on how best to respond to a crisis. Most notable of these is the development of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Despite its significant contribution to the field of crisis communication, however, SCCT has been tested exclusively in Western cultures, thereby limiting the scope of theory building.

In the crisis research conducted in non-Western cultures, a gap has been found between what SCCT suggests for crisis re-

sponses and how crisis communication is actually practiced. In Korea, Lee and Lee (2007) found that crisis response strategies based on responsibility do not seem to work but an apology does. Cha (2002) found that, regardless of crisis responsibility, Korean organizations tend to take a defensive strategy at the beginning of a crisis and then move to more accommodative strategies as public opinion becomes more negative. When the social impact of a crisis is significant, however, Korean organizations resort to apology as an initial crisis response (Cha, 2002).

Similar findings were reported in other East Asian countries. In Taiwan, for instance, the cultural values of face saving for the company and avoiding risky communication have a strong influence on actual crisis responses (Yu & Wen, 2003). In Japan, Haruta and Hallahan (2003) found that national culture plays an essential role in crisis responses after airline crashes. In Japan, where Confucianism prevails, a virtue that helps achieve a common goal or social harmony is more heavily weighted than who is actually to blame. Thus, the CEO of Japanese Airlines (JAL) apologized even without knowing the cause of the airline crash, and this was the response that the Japanese public expected (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003). Haruta and Hallahan (2003) wrote that "JAL's use of apology was rather an obligatory action that presented the company as a morally competent member of Japanese society... It [JAL]

followed what is perceived to be ‘right’ in Japanese society” (p. 142). They concluded that cultural sensitivity is the key to successful crisis communications.

This line of research suggests that cultural context should be taken into account in crisis response decision making in non-Western cultures. A growing number of scholars (Coombs, 2010; Hu & Pang, 2016; Lee, 2005) have indeed emphasized the role of culture in crisis communication. Yet strangely, few studies have incorporated cultural context into SCCT and examined the effects of culture upon crisis perception, responsibility, and response strategies.

Coombs (2010) proposed culture as a critical variable in international crisis communication, suggesting that the role of culture in crisis communication is one of the key future research directions. In responding to the call, this study explores how culture influences crisis response decision making in Korea. The emphasis of this study is the crisis in the food industry, where the media has covered an increasing number of food crises. Despite the impact of food crises, little research has been done on them (Cheon & Lee, 2009). Ten public relations managers working for the top 20 Korean food companies agreed to in-depth interviews for this study.

## Literature Review

### **Crisis Communication and Culture**

Numerous calls have been made for research that encompasses the cultural and social aspects involved in crisis communication. Crisis management theory originated in Western countries, especially the United States, to theorize about crisis communication (Coombs, 2010; Haruta & Hallahan, 2003; Hutchins & Wang, 2008; Kent, 2010; Yu & Wen, 2003). Lee (2005), for instance, pointed out that culture has been left out of the crisis communication equation. She argued that such an omission is significant because it is through the cultural lens that we can better understand how different public respond to a crisis. Pancic (2010) asserted that culture influences both the public and the organizational response to crisis. According to Coombs (2010), “how culture affects the selection of crisis response strategies and how the expectations of stakeholders differ” (p. 723) is a main concern in international crisis communication.

Crisis is a social and cultural event (Falkenheimer & Heide, 2010) that cannot be discussed in a cultural vacuum. Yu and Wen (2003) pointed to culture as the main determinant of a crisis response. They found that, contrary to the U.S.-based recommendation, in Taiwan, face saving is even more important than telling the truth. Moreover, “no comment,” viewed as a deadly option because it generated perceptions of guilt (Maynard,

1993) in Western cultures, was received well in China, where the culture values silence as a form of wisdom. However, an apology, regarded as positive in Western cultures, was perceived as routine and overused in Chinese culture (Lee, 2005).

This line of research suggests that culture may influence crisis perception, crisis responsibility, and crisis response strategy. There has been a growing body of research that examines the importance of culture in crisis communication (e.g., consensus in attribution, Choi & Choi, 2013; Shimcheong, Kim & Choi, 2015; Chemyon, Kim, Sung, & Jang, 2014; revised SCCT model, Lee & Choi, 2014; Cheong, Yoon, Jwa, & Choi, 2013). However, research on the role of culture in crisis communication is still in its infancy as variables that may influence an organization's crisis responses in various cultures are not yet fully explored. Also, the range of crisis responses has not been addressed sufficiently when culture is incorporated into the SCCT model.

Culture shapes communication behavior in general and crisis communication behavior in particular. By including culture in SCCT, the dynamics of crisis response decision making is expected to be better revealed in non-Western cultures. In the following section, culture and attribution are discussed in the context of SCCT.

### **Culture, Attribution, and SCCT**

SCCT (for a review, Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Coombs, 2004; Coombs, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2014; Lee & Sohn, 2016) is one of the notable theories for crisis communication and is based on attribution theory (Kelly, 1972; Weiner, 1986). Attribution theory is concerned with the way in which individuals interpret events and how this interpretation influences both thinking and behavior. The premise of attribution theory is that people need to search for causes of an event, especially when that event is unexpected and negative. Thus, crisis responsibility (attribution) provides for an initial evaluation of the reputational threat and is the key for developing a list of crisis types (e.g., victim cluster, accidental cluster, intentional cluster) and crisis response strategies in SCCT (Coombs, 2004). Coombs (2004) wrote that "crisis responsibility offers a potential framework for organizing the crisis situations, crisis response strategies, and the system for matching the two," (p. 279) the fundamental assumption of SCCT. Attribution theory, however, has assumed a universal attribution process without taking into account cultural differences.

Semin (1980) criticized Kelley's (1967) covariation model, arguing that attribution theorists excluded a precise understanding of the social and cultural context within which such attributions are made. Semin argued

that “social and cultural dimensions of everyday social existence are central in the pursuit of the question of how we meaningfully interpret our social reality and engage in meaningful social action and interaction” (p. 293). He (1980) claimed that attribution theorists should first understand a person’s social reality in order to know that person’s attribution process, reiterating the importance of cultural context in attribution.

Other scholars (Moscovici, 1981; Tajfel, 1972) have asserted that attribution theorists assume that the individual is operating in a “social vacuum,” making it clear that the attribution process is culture-bound. In fact, a body of research in cross-cultural studies (e.g., Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Menon, Morris, Chui, & Hong, 1999; Peng & Nisbett, 1997; Ybarra & Stephen, 1999) has consistently reported a difference in attribution across cultures.

Western culture is more analytical, and Westerners make more internal attributions, paying more attention to the object and its category. However, in East Asian cultures, people think more holistically and make more situational attributions, attending more to the entire field. In their study, Ji, Nisbett, and Peng (2000) found that the Chinese are more field-dependent than their American counterparts and explained that East Asians perceive the field in its entirety. Nisbett and colleagues (2001) also examined the difference in causal attributions between East

Asians and Westerners. They found that East Asians are more attentive to contextual factors and tend to make situational attributions whereas their counterparts in the West demonstrate more dispositional attributions.

Hamilton and Sanders (1983) examined how people judge misdeeds and reported that the Japanese weighted an actor’s role position and the social context of an action more than Americans, who tend to place more emphasis on the aspects of an actor’s action per se. They (1983) argued that understanding attribution requires not only knowing what the actor did, but also the social expectations of what the actor should have done.

This line of research suggests that East Asians as holistic thinkers are likely to perceive a crisis as not just an event or action in and of itself (i.e., object, its category), but as a whole, paying more attention to context than their Western counterparts do. In other words, Korean public relations managers would consider a crisis in light of the context in which that crisis occurred, including the public’s expectations of a crisis response. Thus, not knowing the cultural context in which a crisis occurs can make it difficult for SCCT to predict crisis communication decision making in non-Western cultures. Several Korean scholars have argued that it may be too simplistic to consider crisis responsibility alone when choosing crisis responses to restore a reputation (Cha, 2002; Kim, 2002).

The next section examines the cultural context of crises in Korea.

### **Understanding Cultural Context of Crises in Korea**

The large conglomerates, also known as chaebols (family-owned and -managed conglomerates) have dominated the Korean economy since the 1960s. In the early phase of economic development in the 1960s and 1970s, the Korean government granted financial assistance, low interest and tax rates, foreign exchange allocation, and import and export licenses exclusively to chaebols in order to step up the nation's economic growth. With this monopolistic access to resources, the assets of the top five chaebols were reported to have increased by as much as 1,150% from 1971 to 1983 (Kim, 2004). Moreover, the top 10 chaebol groups in Korea accounted for 80% of the national GDP in 2011 (Lee, 2013). The Korean government's exclusive support for the top chaebol groups inevitably resulted in disparities in opportunity, income and the distribution of wealth. It is somewhat true that the Korean economy grew fast thanks to the chaebol system; the country's GNP was reported to have risen 20 times from 1965 to 1985 (Chang & Chang, 1985).

However, there is a different perspective. Chaebol is thought to have led Korea into the 1997 financial crisis by taking on dangerously high levels of debt and diversifying into unrelated businesses (Kim, Jang, & Granovetter,

2005). A growing number of Koreans started to see the largest chaebol groups too powerful and involved in too many business sectors, from pizza to advertising to construction to ship manufacturing.

Given the tremendous wealth inequality between the chaebol families and the rest of the country, Koo (2015) even calls Korea as a chaebol republic. He wrote:

South Koreans live in chaebol-built apartments; wash and dress themselves in chaebol-made and -imported products, bought at chaebol-run shops; and subsist on chaebol-processed food, while watching imaginary chaebol families on television. They are, in other words, citizens of a chaebol republic... (Koo, 2015)

Instead of sharing their success with the rest of the country, the chaebol groups' enormous wealth accumulated mostly from the government support was inherited to their second and third generation of offspring. In addition, chaebol groups have been involved in unethical business practices such as politics-business collusion, authoritarian management style, accounting fraud, illicit wealth transfer, and prioritizing the interests of founding families over those of shareholders. Chaebol executives have been convicted of accounting fraud, embezzlement and breach of duty. However, special pardons have been given to CEOs of chaebols, eliciting public

criticism that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. Thus, the Korean public distrusts the government as well as the chaebol groups and expresses a combination of anger, resentment and envy in relation to chaebols (Koo, 2015).

The public's criticisms about the fairness of chaebol formation resulted in distrust and anti-chaebol sentiment in Korea (Jwa, 2002). According to an Accenture survey of 880 firms in 22 countries, anti-business sentiments, mainly directed to chaebols was found to be strongest in Korea. The main reasons for this animosity are found to be accounting fraud, illicit wealth transfer, and unethical business practices (Korea Development Institutes, 2005). Media's unflattering coverage of the chaebol groups was also cited as one reason for the widespread antipathy against them (Kim, 2005; Lee, 2005; Shin, 2004). The media are capable of shaping public opinion, government, and social systems in Korea (Kwon, 2004). Thus, the way in which the media frame a crisis is also likely to influence the public's perception of that crisis.

Given the history of chaebols, it is not surprising that anti-chaebol sentiment is higher in Korea than in other societies (Korea Chamber of Commerce, 2003). Upon closer inspection, anti-chaebol sentiment seems to be based on an entrenched perception among Koreans that the strong/wrongdoer is chaebol and the weak/victim is consumer. Some psychologists claim that this dichotomy serves as a frame of

reference for Koreans, especially netizens, whose collective power to build public opinion is quite powerful (Sung, 2012). It seems possible that this anti-chaebol sentiment in Korea could raise the level of responsibility as a default when a crisis occurs. In fact, scholars (Yoon & Choi, 2009, 2011; Yoon and Ku, 2016) found a significant positive relationship between anti-conglomerate sentiment and responsibility for a crisis; there also was a strong negative relationship between anti-conglomerate sentiment and apology acceptance in Korea.

For the Korean public relations practitioners in large corporations such as chaebols, this is the environment in which they should decide how they will respond to a crisis. They should consider not only what they did in a crisis but also the cultural context in which the crisis occurred when selecting crisis responses (Hamilton & Sanders, 1983).

Based on the discussion thus far, the following research question is proposed:

- RQ 1: How does culture affect the selection of crisis response strategies in the Korean food industry?

## Method

### Research Participants

Among the 1,000 top-selling Korean companies listed in the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2008), top 20 food companies

were initially contacted for an interview. A total of 10 crisis managers from the top 20 food companies finally agreed to be interviewed (9 males, avg. of PR experience = 7.4 yrs, avg. age = 35.2). If there is no specific unit actually taking charge of crisis management, PR managers in the PR department or external affairs were interviewed (Park & Cho, 2007). The interview data were collected from December, 2009 to April, 2010. The list of Korea's top companies such as chaebol has rarely changed (Cho, 2014) and there still is a need to understand cultural variables that potentially influence crisis communication. Thus, although a bit dated, there are values to the present interview results. The food industry was chosen because there have been an increasing number of food crises reported in the media but little research conducted on food crises (Cheon & Lee, 2009). Additionally, scholars point out that what is effective in one industry may not have the same result in another industry (Kent, 2010; Seeger, 2006). Thus, a decision was made to limit the scope of the present study to the food industry only.

### **Interview Procedure**

In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain rich, detailed data that reflected each informant's language, experience, and perspective (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Spiggle, 1994). An interview guide was developed that contained open-ended questions and some general back-

ground data questions to facilitate the dialogue, but which also let the interviewees direct and provide the content of the interviews (McCracken, 1988). Before each interview, which lasted about 50 minutes to 1.5 hours, the participants were provided with a copy of the interview guide, together with information about the study and a statement of confidentiality regarding the recording of the interviews. All interviews were tape recorded except for one case where the interviewee was uncomfortable being taped. All interviews were conducted in person at the workplaces of interviewees in Seoul, Korea. The interview session gradually moved from general to more specific questions, giving each participant ample time to offer his or her opinions. More specifically, a brief description of their job, company, and type of work were asked first. The follow-up questions were broadly divided into three areas: (a) What are the crisis cases you have experienced so far? (b) How did you respond to the crises you have experienced? (c) What are the factors you take into account in crisis response decision-making?

### **Analysis of Findings**

All of the recorded interview data were transcribed first in Korean and then later translated into English by the researcher. The interview analysis was conducted through an adaptation of the constant comparative method for inductive data analysis of interview da-



ta (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That analysis began by noting each statement, illustration, and anecdote provided by the interviewees. For instance, one interviewee said, "In Korean culture, even when a company is not responsible for a crisis, overall public expectation is that a company needs to apologize." This became a "unit of meaning." The interview notes and transcription were read to write down each unit of meaning. Insights were noted as the transcripts were read and reread. This comparative method allowed themes to emerge and reveal notable exceptions to the themes. The process began when one interview was completed and continued to compare the units and generalizations for each new interview to the findings found in previous interviews.

## Results

The research question is concerned with the variables that influence crisis responses in the Korean food industry. Participants indicated various factors, including anti-chaebol sentiment, public opinion, and media. In analyzing the interview data, a mechanism of how crisis responses are chosen in a crisis was revealed. Once the media cover a food crisis, PR practitioners swing into crisis mode as they believe that the media coverage tends to trigger a consumer as the victim mentality and anti-chaebol sentiment among the Korean

public. The anti-chaebol sentiment then seems to color the way in which the public interprets a crisis, often assigning a level of responsibility to a corporation even before consumers know the cause of the crisis. Thus, crisis response strategies based solely on responsibility would likely have a disastrous outcome. The angry public would move to SNS, rapidly forming and spreading negative and often devastating opinions about the corporation. For this reason, the participants in the study also indicated that—regardless of the locus of crisis responsibility—they tended to engage in an active and more accommodative actions during a crisis.

A more detailed description of each variable found in this study is described below.

### Anti-chaebol sentiment

The majority of interviewees agreed that anti-chaebol sentiment plays a critical role in selecting crisis responses. They also emphasized that understanding a crisis from a purely legal and logical standpoint is not appropriate in Korea. Like prior history or previous relationship, anti-chaebol sentiment seems to play an intensifier role in consumers' perception of crisis responsibility and set expectations of what a company should do in a crisis.

One interviewee commented:

In case of a crisis involved in foreign substance, product exchange is a legally appro-

priate response. In reality, however, consumers rarely accept the response as appropriate... They often want financial compensations along with a sign of regret or apology from the company. If you stick to laws and take an action based on legal and logical understanding of a crisis, saying that we do not have a responsibility for the crisis, the result could be devastating. The Korean public would get outraged about your company if you do not express apology. They would go ahead and post negative comments on SNS, stirring up negative public opinions. The legal aspect of a crisis could be considered after taking care of consumers' anger.

Another interviewee also shared a similar story:

The Korean publics are especially sensitive about the word "cancer-causing," even if the amount of cancer-causing substance included in a product is within the acceptable standard. Moreover, sensational media coverage of a food crisis tends to make consumers believe that they will get a cancer even after they consume just one pack of cookies, which is nonsense! They [consumers] then quickly plaster the internet with negative comments about your product and company... When a crisis occurs, the overall public expectation is that the company needs to apologize to show a sign of regret for causing consumers worry or inconvenience... As you know, chaebols such as ours have been a pain in the neck for

Korean consumers and I feel like crisis is a chance where consumers vent out their deep-seated resentment toward the chaebol group, charging against us [chaebols] big time.

It should be noted, however, that an apology in these cases did not mean that the company had taken full responsibility as in Western culture, but rather that the company would apologize from a moral standpoint for causing consumers trouble and worry so that the company can assuage the public's hostile and emotional responses.

### Media

The participants in this study emphasized the role of media in crisis responses. Media seem important because they make the deep-rooted consumer as victim mentality and anti-chaebol sentiment prominent in a crisis, thus, leading to emotional and explosive public opinions. Interviewees also pointed out that Korean media's sensationalist reporting of a food crisis often has great impact on crisis response selection. Of the 10 public relations managers who participated in this study, nearly all agreed that the media play a critical role in crisis responses. Some participants even described the media coverage as a crisis in itself.

One interviewee said:

The most serious crisis is the fact that the media have covered the issue involved in our

company. Reporters are looking for items that are sensational and issue-making. Once a food crisis is covered by the media, it surely is too late. The crisis certainly becomes a hot topic, making us face angry and anxious consumers... Say that the media reported that product A was found to contain potentially cancer-causing ingredients. Once it is reported, that's it. It doesn't matter whether the story is 100% accurate or not. There is no way of going back. Public gets outraged and they go online to spread the news. You can publish a correction, but who's going to read it? ...

In the past, residual pesticides exceeding the acceptable limit were found in our imported cumin from India, one of the ingredients in curry. The pesticide was found in the process of ingredient inspection prior to distribution. At that time Korea did not have the standard for imported ingredients such as cumin. But several weeks before the incident happened, Japan announced the standard for imported ingredients. Then the KFDA [Korea Food and Drug Administration]<sup>1)</sup> rushed to inspect imported cumin and they found that the level of residual pesticide in our imported cumin slightly exceeded the acceptable limit set by Japan. Although our curry product made of the imported cumin had not yet been distributed, the media broke the news with the headlines, "Pesticide was found in company A's curry product," "Company A sold curry

containing pesticide." We received numerous calls from angry consumers. We tried to inform consumers that the product had not been distributed but after the media coverage, the issue became a nationwide topic, and created a harsh public opinion. We had to apologize in order to calm the public.

He then added, "The main purpose of doing crisis management is to take preemptive measures before the media cover the story."

Other interviewees shared that once a crisis occurred, media would sensationalize the story, galvanizing anti-chaebol sentiment. Thus, the fact that a crisis actually happened often times signals that the company involved in that crisis should apologize or express regret even when it had no direct responsibility for that crisis. Otherwise, the company's product crisis could spiral into a nationwide disaster.

According to one participant:

The media usually report a food crisis, maximizing the negative outcomes of potentially harmful ingredients included in food products. But if you really carefully investigate the probability of getting a disease by taking one or two packs of cookies per day, the likelihood of negative consequences is quite low. Negative outcomes such as cancer usually occur, say, when you consume five bottles of ketchup every meal per day. This way of covering food crises directly influences the way public per-

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1) Now, The Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS)

ceives a food company, often causing public anger and distrust toward the company.

Another interviewee added:

Media's saturated coverage of a food crisis often amplifies public's response toward a crisis. In 2008 [the melamine crisis], for instance, media even covered some trivial foreign substances found in the product, which they would never have reported otherwise... A major broadcasting company aired an exclusive about a foreign substance found in brand A. Then another major broadcasting company competitively aired a feature story on a similar issue in brand B, a case that might not have been highlighted as much as it was if it had not happened in 2008. Whatever channels you turn to, you are listening to the same issue, it then sounds like a big problem!

These comments might indeed explain why PR managers in this study even defined crisis as media coverage itself and why they have paid so much attention to the media when making a crisis response decision.

### **Public Opinion**

A majority of interviewees mentioned public opinion as a factor that influences crisis responses. They agreed that when public opinion becomes negative, responsibility is not a major concern in responding to a crisis. One participant said:

After media exposure, SNS is a place for angry consumers to pour out negative comments about a big corporation. Their comments get quickly spread throughout the nation not within 24 hours but within 24 minutes. Then what? Public opinion turns negative toward your company and the issue becomes a social controversy. At that point, there is not much you can do about it. You just have to apologize or take a corrective action regardless of who's to blame.

He then added, "Negative public opinion may well disrupt your regular business operation and it may turn a product crisis into a company-wide disaster." Another interviewee indicated that crisis responses are constrained when negative public opinion is dominant: "When public opinion is negative, you just have to sit and wait until it calms down." A third participant described a crisis involving his company and talked about how public outrage led to a nationwide boycott:

In the past, a foreign substance was found in our popular snack. The media rushed to cover the story, releasing a vivid picture of the foreign substance found in the product. After a thorough investigation, however, the KFDA [Korea Food and Drug Administration] announced that it was impossible for the substance to enter the product in the production process. They [KFDA] concluded that the foreign substance was likely included in the con-

sumption process. However, the majority of the public was still dubious about our product safety and didn't trust our explanation. No wonder the public was shocked by the vivid picture of the foreign substance shown in the media! Despite the KFDA's announcement, however, negative public opinion led us to voluntarily recall the product from the market. A couple of months later, a foreign substance was found in both our snack product and our competitor's product. Around this time, the Korean public eagerly promoted a boycott campaign against three major conservative newspaper companies and tried to force major companies to stop advertising in those conservative newspapers. Since our company had advertised in the major conservative newspapers, people suspected that the major newspapers did not cover the story about the foreign substance issue found in our product, while focusing on the competitor's case that had not run advertising in the newspapers. To make matters worse, a service representative in our company misspoke in a phone conversation with a consumer. This seemingly trivial phone incident ignited the public's anger and was spread through the Internet pretty quickly, which finally turned into a nationwide boycott of all of our product lines. Consumers even said that they would buy the competitor's product even when it contained not only bolts and nuts, but also car engines! But they would never buy our product no matter what! This hostile public opinion made

us abandon the snack product containing a foreign substance and let the snack brand perish.

## Discussion

A growing body of research has suggested a need to examine the role of culture in crisis communication (Coombs, 2010; Hu & Pang, 2016). In responding to the call, this study explored how cultural context may influence the selection of crisis responses in the Korean food industry, hoping to bring culture back into SCCT model.

The result of the present study suggests that, when public relations managers respond to a crisis, several variables, such as anti-chaebol sentiment, media, and public opinion play critical roles, often well overriding crisis responsibility considerations. As previous studies have suggested (e.g., Ji et al., 2000; Nisbett et al., 2001), Korean public relations managers seem to perceive a crisis not just as an event in and of itself, but as a whole, thereby taking into account the context in which the crisis occurred (e.g., the public's expectations of a crisis response, public opinion, media coverage). This finding is in line with those of previous studies, in which Korean public relations professionals have been found to consider media, public opinion, and public sentiment in managing crises and conflicts (e.g., Choi & Cameron,

2005). However, this result stands somewhat in contrast to the fundamental assumption of Coombs' (2004) SCCT model, where crisis responsibility is proposed to play a central role in organizing crisis situations and crisis response strategies. Coombs suggested other variables (i.e., intensifiers) to consider in crisis responsibility judgment, such as previous relationship (Coombs & Holladay, 2006) and crisis history (Coombs, 2004). However, these factors are directly related to a company or a crisis event (i.e., intrinsic factors) while being unable to include the situational and contextual factors.

The anti-chaebol sentiment prevalent in Korea seems to set an expectation of how a corporation is supposed to respond to a crisis as well as intensify crisis responsibility. As a result, this sentiment tends to turn into negative and often explosive public opinions. It is not that difficult to find cases where media, public opinion, and anti-chaebol sentiment influence the direction of corporate responses as well as legal decisions in Korea. For example, the 2014 nut rage case in which the Korean Air heiress Hyun-ah Cho, dissatisfied with the way a flight attendant served her nuts on a plane, ordered the aircraft to taxi back to the airport's gate, thereby provoking public outrage and anti-chaebol sentiment in Korea. Cho ended up being sentenced to one year in prison. Some critics, however, expressed concern that—driven by intense public opinion—Cho was treated more harshly

than she legally deserved to be in order to appease public anger (Mundy, 2015).

As the present study's findings suggest, if a company makes a crisis response decision based exclusively on responsibility, unattended to anti-chaebol sentiment and public opinion might well turn a product crisis into a company-wide disaster. Indeed, most of our participants said that, even when a company is not responsible for a crisis, it is expected to apologize or express regret for causing consumers worry or inconvenience. A couple of recent studies in Korea have supported this finding. Park and Ha (2014) found that the apology strategy was most frequently used (84.2%), independent of crisis type or responsibility in all business sectors, with manufacturing sectors including the food industry ranking at the top (Park & Ha, 2014). In their meta-analysis, Lee and Sohn (2016) also found that the effect size of an accommodative strategy such as apology was more than double compared to other crisis responses in Korea.

Media coverage also holds a lot of weight for Korean public relations managers' responses to a crisis. Given the strong influence of media in forming public opinion (Kwon, 2004), public relations managers explained that they try their best to prevent a crisis from generating negative publicity. More than half of the public relations managers interviewed mentioned that advertising in the media is one response option of many in a crisis. One interviewee said that "a news organization is a

business organization. Thus, you [public relations managers] should take into account the business interests of news organizations when making a crisis response decision.” Participants also indicated that, in a situation in which the media industry—especially newspaper organizations—is suffering from decreased revenues, paying for advertising in return for not covering a company’s crisis is not unheard of. Another interviewee even called running advertising in media an “insurance policy.” He said that during the melamine crisis, most newspapers intensively covered the case because—as he believed—food companies had rarely run advertising in newspapers. Since then, food companies have started running advertising in newspapers as an insurance policy.

Hu and Pang (2016) mentioned that the application of the western paradigm in understanding non-Western crises might not fully explain the influence of culture (Lee, 2005). They further urged the examination of indigenous crisis response strategies. Cultural differences may require different, indigenous crisis response strategies. In this study, anti-chaebol sentiment, the media’s power to trigger emotional public responses do seem to demand indigenous crisis response strategies such as moral apology and advertising in the media as a counterweight to negative publicity. Understanding the cultural context of host

nations is particularly important for multinational corporations (MNCs) in crisis situations. Unlike low-context cultures (e.g., United States, European countries), in a high-context culture such as Korea, communication should be understood with a great deal of contextual information. Thus, crisis responses reflecting such cultural differences seem essential for effective crisis communications.

Future research should further explore how culture influences crisis responses and how different cultures require or generate indigenous crisis response strategies. Such studies will require a thorough understanding of a local culture, and can widen our knowledge of crisis communication, ultimately contributing to theory building in SCCT.

By incorporating cultural context into SCCT, the role of culture in crisis decision making was explored. The groundwork laid in this study can be a good starting point for future research on this important topic. It is likely that, once cultural context has been incorporated into SCCT, the model and the dynamics of the variables already present in SCCT will need modification. This study was limited to Korea’s food industry. Other industries might require different considerations in responding to a crisis (Kent, 2010; Seeger, 2006), so further research on how crisis response decisions are made in other industries is encouraged.

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# 문화를 고려한 위기커뮤니케이션

## 위기 책임성이 모든 것을 설명하지 않을 때

**최윤형** 한양대학교 광고홍보학과 부교수\*

위기 연구에서 문화의 영향력은 중요하다. 특히, 다국적 기업들의 경우 현지 문화에 대한 부족한 이해가 심각한 위기를 가져올 수 있기 때문에 위기 책임성 외에 문화적, 상황적 요인을 고려한 위기 커뮤니케이션이 필요하다. 본 연구는 한국의 위기 대응 전략에 영향을 미치는 문화적 요인을 알아보고자 하였다. 매출액 기준 상위 20위권 식품 기업을 대상으로 심층 인터뷰를 진행한 결과 반재벌 정서, 여론, 언론 등이 위기 대응 전략에 영향을 미치는 주요 변인인 것으로 나타났다. 이러한 결과를 바탕으로 이론적, 실무적 함의점을 논의하였다.

**KEYWORDS** 위기, 문화, SCCT, 식품 위기, 위기 대응 전략

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