The Impact of Contextual Factors on Social Mediated Crisis
-Revisiting the Concept of "Modifier" in Situational Crisis Communication Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of contextual factors on social mediated crisis by revisiting the concept of "modifier" in situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Existing studies on "modifiers" in SCCT constrain their scopes within the organizational domain and overlook the impacts of contextual factors beyond organization, such as society, politics, and culture. To advance the understanding of the impacts of contextual factors on social mediated crisis, the study conducts an inductive framing analysis to measure the top 100 forwarded (retweeted) tweets of a corporate crisis- murder at McDonald's- in weibo, the China's microblogging service. The study identifies a repertory of five contextually embedded frames and nine sub-frames. The findings demonstrate that social media enable multiple crisis communicators to engage in crisis communication at different stages by distributing diverse crisis frames. Diverse crisis frames entail corresponding contextual factors, which constrain or facilitate the reality construction in a crisis. The power dimensions among these frames are in a state of flux, which constantly influences the crisis attributions. This study concludes that the contextual factors beyond organization shape crisis communication by transforming the attributions generated by crisis types.

Key Words: social mediated crisis, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), contextual factors, modifier

INTRODUCTION

The crisis communication has been thrust into a new era, namely "mass self-communication" that brings grand challenges to governments or corporates in the networked society (Castells, 2009). In particular, with ever-widening accessibility to media contents and unprecedented availability of online data, social media open up a discursive struggle platform for more actors to be "involved" into the crisis as crisis communicators (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Various crisis communicators, such as individuals, government agencies, media, NGO, and other institutions of a society (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Qualman, 2011), bring in contextual factors which consequently contribute to the dynamic process of crisis communication and unparalleled level of complexity in crisis (He & Chen, 2010).

Nevertheless, current studies on social mediated crisis communication focus exclusively on the behaviors or strategies (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1995; Heath, 2010) of organizations without scrutinizing the role of multiple actors and their entailing contextual factors. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the influence of contextual factors on crisis attribution. More specifically, the study asks whether and how contextual factors function as modifiers that alter the attributions generated by crisis type. I first provide a critical review of the current studies on SCCT and modifier, addressing that existing researches have overlooked the impact of contextual factors beyond organizations. Second, I present the theoretical framework of this study, followed by the research questions. Based on framing theory and rhetorical arena, this study proposes that multiple crisis communicators participate in a dynamic and ongoing process of crisis framing. Third, I elaborate the method used in this study, including case selection, data collection, and a brief introduction of framing measures. Fourth, I explain the empirical data of inductive framing measures. Five interpretative framing packages, including nine sub-frames are accordingly presented. Fifth, I argue that diverse crisis frames by multiple crisis communicators are in interactions with various contextual factors. The contextual factors beyond organizations, the political, cultural, economic factors in this case, function as modifiers that altered the attribution generated by basic crisis types. This study concludes that crisis attribution is influenced by a variety of contextual factors, both internal and external to an organization. The impacts of contextual factors are executed through the diverse framing providing by multiple crisis communicators during the ongoing crisis communication process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Modifiers" in SCCT

In the field of crisis communication, SCCT (Coombs, 2006) emerges as one of the most widely used theories (An & Cheng, 2010; Cheng, 2014). Based on the attribution theory, SCCT connects crisis situations and crisis response strategies by identifying attributions of crisis responsibility. It proposes a two-step process for assessing the crisis responsibility. The first step is to categorize basis crisis type by investigating how the crisis is being framed (Coombs, 2006, 2007, 2010). The second step is to evaluate the effects of crisis history and prior relational reputation, which Coombs coined as "modifiers" (2006) or "intensifying factors" (2010). More specifically, Coombs defines "modifier" as variables that "…can alter attribution generated by the crisis type" (2006, p. 162). Existing studies examine the influence of perform history (e.g., Coombs, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Griffin, Babin, & Attaway, 1991) and prior reputation (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) on crisis situation. The concept of "modifier" is relevant to our understating of a crisis situation in that it, first, implies the possibility of the modification of crisis type. Second, it gets the crisis type out of discrete components in practices.

Contextual factor: A key but missing element in studies on "modifiers"

Nevertheless, existing studies on modifiers limit their research scopes within organizational domain, which leaves significant lacunae in the following two aspects:

First, the impacts of crisis communicators beyond organizational domain are largely overlooked. Literature of modifiers in SCCT largely followed the tradition of organization-centered approach (Lee, 2004; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & van Atteveldt, 2012) in public relation. Such approach presupposes "the organization" as the main and *the only actor* in crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Waymer & Heath, 2007). In this way, the discussion on the variables that may influence the crisis privileges the organization factors by concentrating on organizational consideration. This reflects a specific univocal bias. However, new communication technologies, especially Web 2.0, provide platforms that are open for public engagement and discursive struggle. In turn, previous "receivers" have the capability to become "senders," who may take initiatives by seeking to influence the people and organizations

attached to the crisis. In this sense, current studies on modifiers have paid insufficient attention to crisis communicators outside the organization and their impacts on crisis attribution.

Second, current studies undervalue external environment. Existing studies fail to provide a comprehensive and strategic worldview to the fundamental understanding of crisis communication as a social phenomenon, which is affected by and has an impact on social systems like political, economic, culture, and media institutions. Some scholars argued that crises are social, political, and cultural phenomena in essence (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010). Others noticed that the multiplicity of factors can contribute to or aggravate an organizational crisis, or cause a crisis to change while it is in process (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010). Nevertheless, the discussions about how the crisis type is constantly influenced by contextual factors beyond organization remain missing from most of the literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the rhetorical arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012) and the framing theory (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), this study proposes that there are multiple actors engage in communicating about crises through providing context-embedded frames in social mediated crisis communication, which influences the attribution and the evolvement of crises.

Multiple and autonomous actors in crisis framing

Frandsen and Johansen (2012) propose a rhetorical arena that offers a multivocal approach to crisis communication. They suggest that, first, as crisis communicators, multitude actors are trying to communicate about the crisis. Against the backdrop, crisis communication consists of "a multitude of senders, receivers, and communicative processes". Traditional receivers accordingly become crisis communicators within the rhetorical arena. New communication technologies provide greater opportunities for the public to develop their "public relations literacy" (Holladay & Coombs, 2013). Even ordinary people are capable to utilize the media to practice public relations "in pursuit of a range of selfish or altruistic goals" (Holladay & Coombs, 2013, p. 131). Second, rhetorical arena emphasizes the initiatives of multiple actors in crisis communication. These actors attempt to influence both the crisis public and the directions of crisis. As Frandsen and Johansen address, "due to the sheer number and diversity, these actors very often accelerate the course of events and spin the crisis in new directions, contributing to its dynamics" (2012, p. 430). The study hereby examines the role of the multiple actors and the influence of "sub-arena[s]" (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 41) created by them.

Dynamic and ongoing process of framing

In crisis communication studies, crisis type refers to "the frame used to interpret the crisis" (Coombs, 2006, p. 203). When applying framing theory into crisis communication studies, we need to notice the following two issues. First, frames are in essence *unstable* (Steinberg, 1998). Instead, the concept of "framing" proposes a processual and contentious phenomenon of reality construction. As Benford and Snow explain, "it [the framing] is processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process" and "it is contentious in the sense that it involves the generation of interpretive frames that not only differ from existing ones, but that may also challenge them" (2000, p. 614). Accordingly, crisis communicators "communicate with, against, to, past or about each other" (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 43) during a crisis. In short, multiple voices and frames emerged in the crisis meet, compete, collaborate, and negotiate with each other (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012). As the multiple frame conditions have largely been unexplored (Borah, 2011), this project will first focus on "the dynamics of framing in competitive contexts" (Chong & Druckman, 2007) by scrutinizing the negotiation process of *different, competing frames* and exploring whether and how these frames "cancel one another and reinforce existing values" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 113). Second, the ongoing, dynamic framing process does not occur in a structural or cultural vacuum. Instead, this study examines frames as dependent variables (Scheufele, 1999, p. 107), which underscores that contextual factors constrain and facilitate framing processes. Crisis frames are different in terms of economic, political, and symbolic power (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012). As dependent variables, crisis frames locate on the contextual factors level. Each contextual factor entails certain kind of worldviews that would influence its practitioner's use as the guideline to attribute meaning to the various events and issues with which they are confronted (Gamson, 1992). More specifically, when crisis communicators frame an event, they connect a certain topic to notions that are part of certain "common ground" within a given context. As such, the association between the issue and contextual factors offers a new perspective from which crises can be perceived. Prior framing studies (e.g., Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978) point out that framing of an issue may be influenced by several social-structural variables (e.g., political, cultural or social values), organizational variables (e.g., social norms and values), and individual or ideological variables (e.g., ideological or political orientations). To overcome the shortcoming of existing studies, this study aims to reveal what kinds of social-structural factors of societal groups may

influence the framing of a crisis. More specifically, how various contextual factors affect the creation or modification of crisis frames?

To advance such an understanding, this study takes the online public discussion of the McDonald's murder in China (Charles Liu, 2014) on *weibo* as a case. It aims to explore whether and how contextual factors function as modifiers that alter the attributions generated by crisis type.

The sub-research questions include:

1. What kind of contextually embedded frames do crisis communicators use in their communication about the crisis, and how do these frames find expression?

2. How does contextually embeded frame affect the crisis attribution and further the evolvement of the crisis?

METHOD

Case selection

On May 28, 2014, a 35-year old woman was beaten to death in a McDonald's restaurant in China. This event triggered widespread anger among Chinese internet users. Discontent public opinions continued to articulate on the *weibo* platform, which has gathered significant attentions from various societal groups (Ramzy, 2014). For instance, the government and traditional media framed this incident as a crime by a religious cult. Surprisingly, although this is just a murder happened in a commercial premise, McDonald's became one of the main accusing targets in this incident. A substantial amount of tweets questioned why McDonald's staffs did not stop "the mobsters" or accused McDonald's for not providing a safety place for customers. A feminist NGO even presented McDonald's with a petition signed by thousands of customers (Yu, 2014). While the stakeholder, customers in this case, contended that the corporate should take responsibility for the incident, it evolved into a corporate crisis for McDonald's. Since it is an organizational-centered crisis that has been triggered, fertilized, escalated or shifted on *weibo* platform, murder at McDonald's is a suitable case to analyze how various crisis communicators contribute to crisis communication process by promoting distinct crisis frames, which entails both internal and external factors of an organization.

Data collection

This study proceeds[1] the crisis from 21:00 May 28 to 0:00 June 6, 2014. This period fits the timeline of the crisis, which covers the eruption of the crime to the extinction of online discussion. This study considers 10:48 on 31 May 2014 as the turning point in the crisis (Cong Liu, 2014), when the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China (MPS) identified this case as "evil cult," [10:48, 31 May 2014]. According to this turning point, the data collection is preceded in two phases: *Phase one* lasts from 21:00 May 28nd to 10:48 on May 31st and *Phase two* from 10:49 on May 31st to 0:00 June 6nd. I use "Zhaoyuan" and "McDonarld's" as key words and search the top fifty most forwarded tweets in each phase from *weibo*. One hundred tweets in total have been collected for coding. The collection elements includs *weibo* accounts, verified or not[2], the content of the tweet, the number of followers, forwards, comments, tweet modalities (e.g., text, picture, photo, website link, long-tweet and so on).

Framing Measures: inductive framing analysis of top 100 forwarded tweets

This study conducts inductive framing analysis to measure the frames used in the crisis. The inductive approach to framing analysis holds an open view to attempt to reveal the array of possible frames (e.g.,Gamson, 1992; van Gorp, 2005; van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012). The advantages of the inductive approach include, first, the researcher can detect, to the larger extend, of how the issue has been framed. Second, this approach can reveal how frames can contribute to defining and meaning construction of a situation (van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012). In this regard, this study employs inductive framing analysis to scrutinize how various frames have been used by societal groups in defining the crisis and what kind of contextual factors contribute to the creation and modification of crisis frames.

The aim of the inductive framing analysis is to provide an outline of frame packages (frame elements) (Gamson, 1992; van Gorp, 2005). Each frame package is an integrated structure of a core frame, framing devices, and reasoning devices. The coding and analysis procedures are guided by the heuristic principle, namely a series of manifest variables that can

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[1] The data was accessed at 7 Jan. 2015.

[2] Weibo accounts can be verified by Sina Company to ensure the integrity and validity. Once the accounts are verified, they will get "V" icons next to their logos.

represent a latent concept (Neuendorf, 2002). To be clear, when some frame elements group together systematically in a specific way, they form a pattern that can be used to identify latent meanings in frames. The analysis process was conducted as followed: First, I identify the framing devices. The framing devices are demonstrable indicators of the frame (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). In this step, I create an inventory of framing devices, which includes word choice, metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, depictions, arguments, visual images, and so on (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; van Gorp, 2007). By close scrutinizing of the messages, I employ "initial coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47) to reveal all possible frame devices to emerge. Second, I identify the reasoning devices. The reasoning devices provide a route of causal reasoning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Entman's (1993, p. 52) definition of framing[3] provides us with operational elements to reveal reasoning devices. They are problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgments, and treatment recommendation (Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 264). I accordingly look for the reasoning device by adding codes when an element or argument in the list suggested frame devices. Third, I synthesize the core frames. The synthesization of core frames defines the package as a whole. I adopt "axial coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60) to sort and synthesize the data achieved from the last two steps. By examining the inherent and coherent among the framing devices and reasoning devices, I identify the core frames. Fourth, I reconstruct a matrix to represent frame packages (e.g.,Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012) in which the row entries represent the core frame[s] and the column provides framing devices and reasoning devices.

FINDINGS

The analysis of selected case demonstrates that multiple crisis communicators have engaged in crisis communication at different stages of the crisis by providing diverse crisis frames. The various crisis frames contribute to the evolvement and attributions of the crisis. This section presents the findings from tweets regarding the murder at McDonald's on *weibo* as followed. Five frames and nine sub-frames are identified through inductive framing analysis. An overview of these frames and sub-frames packages and their characteristics features is presented in *Table 1: Frame matrix of core frames used in McDonald's crisis*. The following paragraphs describe

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[3] According to Entman, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item descried."

these frames, including what they are and when and which crisis communicators used which frames.

Multiple crisis communicators and diverse crisis frames

Problem identification frame

The frame gives definition and description of the incident. It includes the tweet that describes an incident, offers the definition of an incident, and lists the related issue regarding an incident. Regarding this case, I make a distinction between the ordinary criminal case and the religion-related criminal case (i.e., "evil cult") sub-frames. For instance, MPS's tweet decided that the six suspects are "members of a religious cult" and they aimed to "recruit members". The MPS's tweet turned the conversation into religion-related one, especially "evil cult," it is no longer categorized as a frame of an ordinary criminal case.

Attribution of responsibility frame

The tweets included in this frame state the attribution that who or which organization should take responsibility for the incident, including the responsibility for its cause or possible solutions. They either suggest that who has the ability to alleviate the incident, imply who is responsible for the incident or propose that who should take responsibility for solving the problem.

There are various variants of this frame. Five sub-frames have be recognized in the case, which have different opinions about the attribution of the incident: government (including police department), corporate, citizens, media, or social reform. In government responsibility sub-frame, the tweets emphasize that the governments (police departments) should take responsibility for the incident. The content of this frame includes, for example, the long police response time to emergency calls, the lack of transparency of public information, and unsound legal system. Corporate responsibility sub-frame mainly focuses on the obligation of a corporate, such as the security of commercial premises. Citizen responsibility sub-frame in this case consists of two aspects. One criticized the witnesses that had not lent a hand to the victim to save her life. The other underlined that as a citizen, everyone should stand out and call for his (or her) own right. Regarding the media responsibility sub-frame, it contends that the media should contribute to the information transparency, instead of only serving for the authority. Social reform responsibility sub-frame argues that the cause of the incident is introduced by the social reform, which underscores the social degeneration should take responsibility for the tragedy.

Human interest frame

This frame brings human faces, feelings or concerns to the presentation and discussion of an incident. It includes following content of tweets: the one mentions the private or personal lives of the actors in the incident, the one emphasizes how individuals and groups are affected by the incident, and the one provides the knowledge of how to protect individual or rescue others when encountering a similar incident.

This frame is divided into two sub-frames in terms of different focuses. The first sub-frame concerns people involving in the crisis. Thus, it personalizes or emotionalizes the incident. In McDonald's case, the "people involved in the crisis" sub-frame payed attention to the victim or her family members. This sub-frame is mainly used by the media. The second one is "ordinary people" sub-frame, which provides knowledge of how they can protect themselves in similar incidents. The modalities of this frame are long-tweet[4] and links which are capable to provide more information. For this reason, the ordinary people sub-frame extends the discussion beyond a specific case. The main themes in these tweets include how to do or what to do as an individual during incidents.

Sentiment frame

This frame presents intense or violent emotion. The tweets belonged to this frame show intense emotion expressions that induce public anger, sadness, or sarcasm by using visual or video information that generate human feelings.

The main characteristic of this frame package is that frame devices in which the frame has been applied contain more symbols than other frames. For instance, suspension points, question mark, and exclamatory mark are frequently used in this frame. One massage used three exclamation marks at the end of the last sentence to draw the attention from readers. In addition to symbols, the tweet also includes Chinese idioms. Those idioms have been used in succession to convey intensive emotion.

Conflict public opinion frame

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[4] Long tweet is a popular format used in *weibo*. Ineternet user can share longer than 140 characters in *weibo* with the help of special tools. Those tools convert rich texts into an image which can be used in a single tweet thus allowing users to bypass the 140 character limit. *Weibo* users can use long tweet to publish mini-essays, paste Word documents, press releases and other long snippets of text without any limits.

This frame stresses the conflict opinions among individuals and groups. The crisis is framed largely in terms of opinion conflict. This includes the tweet that mentions disagreement between individuals or social groups, the one refers to two or more sides of the public opinion, and the one aims to correct different view or opinions from other individuals or social groups. In general, these tweets reflect a reproach to other individuals or social groups. For instance, the government used conflict public opinion frame to rebuked online rumors and online public opinion leaders (Big Vs[5]) of intentionally inducing public cynicism and mistrust of the authorities.

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[5] "Big Vs" are popular microbloggers on *weibo*, who have been verified not to be writing under a pseudonym (and so they have a "V" beside their names).

Table 1 Frame Matrix of core frames used in McDonald's crisis

Core frames	Sub-frames	Frame devices						Reasoning devices				Who	When
		Words	Pictures	Video	Links	Long tweet	Symbols	Problem definition	Causal interpretation	Moral judgments	Treatment recommendation	Who	When
1. Problem identification frame	1.1 Ordinary criminal case	Quarrel, molestation, girl, murder, police, beat, died despite efforts, arrest, crime, sub judice	Murder scene(victim and police); Screenshot from scene(murders were beating the victim)	Video film from bystanders (murders were beating the victim); News report from television media	*	*	*	Criminal homicide (purposeful murder)	The murders beat the victim to death.	The brutal and bloody acts of the assaults defy all comprehension.	Solving the crime and punishing the murders	local munic-ipal police, media, indivi-duals	Phase one
	1.2 Religion related criminal case	Religious cult, recruit member, victim, beat, suspects, died despite efforts, crackdown	Screenshot from television interview of the murders	Television Interview of the murders	*	*	*	Criminal homicide (purposeful murder)	The members of cult beat the victim to death.	The brutal and bloody acts of the cult's members.	Launching a special crackdown on cults	Govern-nment and media	Phase two

12

| 2. Attribution of responsibility | 2.1 Government | Government, police, duty, interact, handle the case according to laws, official, nomocracy, death penalty, law, efficiency | Screenshot from government microblog account | * | * | * | * | Access to public information; statutory construction | Why bystanders stood by and the victim did not defense is related to the weak role of law. The reason why the assailants were so unbridled is the authorities take part with dignitaries. | The unbridled of the murders. The untransparen-t and unfair of the trail. | Improve relevant laws and regulatio-ns; improve the transpare-ncy of public information; response to public's request. | Indivi-dual and media | Whole |
| | 2.2 Corporate | Consumer, staffs, security personnel, nonfeasance, McDonald, company, surveillance video, prevention, suspense of business, personal safety | The image of McDonald's restaurant; the logo of McDonald's. | * | * | * | * | The obligation of corporates and the rights of consumers. | The poor security and the nonfeasance of the staff lead to the tragedy. | The nonfeasance of McDonald's staff | McDonald's should improve the security and make compe-nsation to the victim's family. | Indivi-dual | Phase one |

2.3 Citizen	We, strangers, bystanders, silence, ignorance, assistance, protection, obligation	Screenshot of Zhaoyuan Municipal Public Security Bureau's tweet; Murder scene (victim and police);	Video film from bystanders (murders were beating the victim)	*	*	*	Criminal homicide (purposeful murder; dignitary murder)	The victim was dead because no one lent a hand. Whether the victim and her family can represent their grievances depends on the fairness of the authority.	The indifference of bystanders; the unfairness of the authority.	Citizens need give pressure to the authority by express-ing their opinions.	Indivi-dual and media	Whole
2.4 Media	Media, news, report, broadcast, interview, publicity, real name	*	*	*	*	*	Criminal homicide (purposeful murder; dignitary murder)	Because the mass media are controlled by and serviced for the authority, they have not released enough information to the public.	The lack of media supervision	Improve the transpa-rency of public informati on	Indivi-dual	Whole

	2.5 Reform	Society, social problem, social climate, indifference, insecurity, individuals, anger, cruel and fierce, reform, scary, justice	*	*	*	*	*	*	The violence is due to the social climate.	Violence	Punish the murders; poetic justice	Individual	Whole
3. Human interest frame	involved in the	Son, mother, husband, wife, family love, never come back, relationship	Picture of victim first half her death.	*	*	*	*	A tragedy of a family	The family disruption is due to the loss of family members.	*	*	Media	Whole
	3.2 Ordinary people	Discussion, help, guideline, skill, protect, stop, help, what to do, how to do	*	*	Link to popular Internet forum, website	Provide information and knowledge about how to save one salve(s)	*	An opportunity to educate public of how to hedge bets or save one's lives.	One needs to learn how to save oneself because of the insecurity of the society.	Insecurity of the society	Learn more knowledge to protect oneself and save others.	Individual and media	Phase two

4. Sentiment frame		Sadness, pathetic, call for…, indignation, petition, unfairness, justice; and Chinese idioms, sarcasm	Murder scene(victim and police); Screenshot from scene(murders were beating the victim)	Video film from bystanders (murders were beating the victim); News report from television media	*	*	Suspension points; question mark; exclamatory mark	Criminal homicide (purposeful murder)	*	*	*	Indivi-dual	Whole
5. Conflict public opinion frames		Netizen, big V, public Intellectual, cult, incite, attack, police, propaganda, falsehoods, truth, rumor, venomous comments	Screenshot from online map (express the route from police office to locale); comparison of screenshots from the tweets of netizens and police	*	*	*	*	The credibility of governments;	Online rumors mislead public opinions	Someone intentionally misleads public's perception.	*	Indivi-dual	Phase one
												Individ-ual, media and govern-ment	Phase two

* Insignificant

The modification of crisis frames

New frame cancel and replace the old one

In problem definition frame, Zhaoyuan Municipal Public Security Bureau used a normal criminal sub-frame to define the murder at McDonald's. Zhaoyuan Municipal Public Security Bureau was the first organization who gave official statement and responded to the incident. The statement from local police department aimed to define the basic crisis type for this incident.

@Zhaoyuan Municipal Public Security Bureau (verified as official police department account): "At about 9:00 pm on May 28th, Zhang among six people had a quarrel with Wu, who had her dinner in McDonald's restaurant in Zhaoyuan. Zhang among six people beat Wu, leading up to her injury and death later in the hospital. Zhaoyuan Municipal Public Security Bureau responded quickly and arrested Zhang among six people. After the preliminary interrogation, Zhang among six people had confessed to their crime of beating Wu. The case is still sub judice by far." [04:19, 29 May 2014]

The local police department treated this incident as a normal criminal, which implied that public security bureau was in charge of the investigation. Whether the six suspects should take responsible for the tragedy need investigate. However, the definition of the incident shifted into religion related criminal sub-frame, when the MPS identified this case as "evil cult" at 10:48, 31 May 2014 with the following tweet:

@"Fighting the Four Blacks, Eliminating the Four Harms," MPS (verified as a department of MPS): [Notification]: It is reported that the six suspects of the homicide on May 28th in Zhaoyuan, Shangdong, are members of a religious cult. To recruit members, they asked for telephone numbers from people having meals in the restaurant…The local police has launched a special crackdown on cults."

The central police department defined this incident as "evil cult" crime, which emphasized that the incident was related to "evil faith" of the cult. Therefore, the murders and the cult behind them should take responsibility for the tragedy. The religion related criminal case frame has replaced the previous ordinary criminal case frame and accounted for 90% of the problem identification frame in Phase two. MPS, Shandong Public Security Bureau and state-owned traditional media were the main contributors of the religion ("evil cult") related criminal frame.

Decline and growth of frames

The dominant frame in 100 top forwarded tweets is the attribution of responsibility. Media and individuals are the most active contributors of this frame. They created 94.6% of the attribution of responsibility frames. However, although it remained the most popular frame in Phase two, the numbers of attribution of responsibility dropped dramatically from 56.4 % to 44.1% of all frames. One of the most significant changes of attribution frames is the decline of corporate frames in Phase two. The corporate responsibility frames used by crisis communicators reduced from 22.7% to 10% of all attribution of responsibility frames.

Conflict public opinion frame was mainly utilized by individuals in Phase one. However, the number of this frame undertook a remarkable growth in Phase two. More importantly, governments, both local and central, and state owned media institutions joined in the public debate by using the conflict public opinion frame.

The joined efforts of different frames

It is worthwhile to notice that first, 90% of the sentiment frame was used together with attribution frame in Phase One. Internet users appealed to the sentiment of sadness and sympathy that implies social injustice. For instance, @ YU Jianrong (a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Science) expressed his sadness in his tweet [07:15, 31 May 2014] "…a person has been beaten to death in broad daylight and in public… no one on the scene lent a hand to the victim, and society is so indifferent that everyone is afraid of being deterred by the danger…". At the same time he made attribution of the tragedy as "…assailants committed such a misdeed is nothing but the fact that they are rich and powerful…. It is because the public is afraid

of the fact that the authorities would connive at the crime due to the power of and the influence from the assailants." Yu also provided treatment recommendation, such as "I appeal to handle the case according to law."

DISCUSSION

The diverse frames do not occur in a structural or cultural vacuum. Instead, every frame entails the corresponding contextual factor. The findings indicate that the crisis framing of the selected case is mainly in interactions with (1) the state, (2) the market, and (3) the culture. This section explains how political, cultural, and emotional factors impacted the crisis attributions of murder at McDonald's.

The state: political factors

The political influence from the state is one of the main factors in this crisis. In Phase Two, the murder at McDonald's turned more complex when MPS identified it as "evil cult". Religion cults are politically sensitive issue in China (Akhavan-Majid, 2004). Since 1999, when Falun Gong was banned in October, the Chinese government has executed a range of anti-cult crusades, including legislative reforms and judicial instructions, to outlaw cult activities (Bristow, 2009). Labeling certain groups as "cult", the Chinese government condemns the evil nature of their activities. Furthermore, the Chinese government considers that the cult provides rival ideology to state power and imperial party legitimacy, which underlines its ability to challenge the established authority.

Due to the politically sensitive nature of the crisis, higher level police departements and stated owned media became the main communicators in Phase two. They joined their efforts and provided "evil cult" frame to public discussion, which became the "the size of the mouth (宣传口径)." for the rest of the media (Zhao, 2004). Empirical data shows that previous contributors of ordinary crime frame, such as individuals and marketized media, gave up their seats to central police departements and stated owned media. The "evil cult" frame replaced the ordinary criminal case frame in Phase two, which means that the discussion space for this crisis had been narrowed down by sidelining other crisis communicators and shifting existing frames. Furthermore, the modification of problem identification frame

affected the attributions of the crisis. The "evil cult" frames implied that the tragedy is related to "evil faith" of the cult. As such, the atrocity of the murder is out of the control of the governments or the corporate. Therefore, the corporate released its pressures as one of the main responsible organizations of the crisis. Data shows that the corporate responsibilities frames were not the dominant ones any more. Therefore, the corporate attribution frames which addresses that the corporate should take primary responsibility for the tragedy, was gradually altered by the new frame. Consequently, political factors functioned as a modifier altered the attribution generated by the basic crisis type.

The market: economic factors

The influences of the market forces on crisis attribution can be partially observed by scrutinizing the different frame that marketized media used to make sense of the crisis.

Marketized media in China not just serves the interests of the country's politics but economic elite, which provide more diverse frames during the crisis. In this case, both the marketized media, *the Beijing News* (China's first mainstream newspaper that adapts shareholding system) , and the coporate, McDonald's used attribution frame to discuss this incident. The empirical data showed that McDonald's and *the Beijing News* adopted the corporate responsibility frame coincidently to discuss the attribution of the crisis. Although addressing different aspects, they both emphasized the low responsibility of McDonald's in this incident.

Specifically, *the Beijing News's frame* can be seen as a complementary one to McDonald's. McDonald's tweet [14:16, 31 May 2014] stated that it has fulfilled its duty as a responsible company. When crisis happened, their staff tried to prevent the violence and reported to the police as soon as possible. After the crisis, they were cooperating fully with the investigation, including handed over the surveillance video. Meanwhile, *the Beijing News*'s tweet [17:51, 05 June 2014] aims to addressed a petition signed by 1843 female customers[6]. The tweet pointed out that the solutions suggested by some netizens, such as staff training for violence preventions or

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[6] A feminist NGO presented McDonald's with a petition signed by 1843 Chinese customers. They ask McDonald's to improve the security and provides a safe setting for diners.

establishing a smothering security for restaurants, were unrealistic. The tweet concluded that some customers magnified the responsibility of McDonald's. The tweet functioned like complementary frame to McDonald's.

The frame used by *the Beijing News*'s is quite different from stated-owned media. Because the economic concern of the marketized media had significant impacts on its choice of media frames. The reasons can be traced back to the China's media reform in late 1970s (Akhavan-Majid, 2004). Against a background of "reform and open-door" policies, marketized media developed in China three decades ago. While the media system has undergone a significant but gradually declining government control, market forces have permeated and transformed every aspect of the media system (Zhao, 1998). News has been recognized as commodities in China ever since the 1990s, domestic and multinational corporations have invested heavily in advertising of mass media (Abplanalp, 2009). Marketized media's survival has been determined by market forces while dealing with political pressure. In this sense, mass media in China is not just serves the interests of the country's politics but economic elite. The transforming media system brings more diverse perspectives of news framing. This is why marketized media are more focusing on economic interest, leisure, and relaxation, differentiating them from state-owned or party-owned media. In this regard, this article argues that the economic acts as the modifier which modified the attribution by the conjunction of corporate and marketized media frames.

The culture: emotional factors

Culture also has impacts on the attribution of the crisis. Emotional expressions, such as joy, laughter, anger, sadness, sympathy, are pervasive in online expressions that generated a unique internet culture in China (Yang, 2009). Sympathy and sadness together with humor and play are the most distinct ones within those emotional expressions. The shift of emotions of the crisis contributes to the modification of crisis attribution.

To be specific, the sentiment frames used in Phase one mainly contained the emotion of sympathy and sadness. They were used together with attribution frames to address the responsibility of the corporate. The contents included various emotion expressions, protests against the corporate, local police, and murders. To fulfil their goal of explicit appeals to consciences, humanity, and justice, sentiment frames are

21

used together with attribution frames to provided suggestions of solving these problems. In other words, the conjunction of these two frames focused on the responsibility of the corporate. However, there is an obvious turn in the usage of sentiment frame in Phase two. The dominant sentiments change into play and jokes by using cynicism and irreverent humor. Internet users participate both in the act of sense-making and in dissemination of jokes which are fabricated based on the murder, such as the one created by @Writer CUI Chenghao, serve both humor and entertainment functions, as well as the appropriation by netizens as expressions of dissent. It is worthy to notice that jokes do so not necessarily relate to the discussion of the crisis but for communal disappointing about the social climate, resentment against social inequalities and disaffection with bureaucracy. It means that the implication of this crisis had gone beyond the specific case. Also because the expressions of emotions are spontaneous experiences of internet users that lack of organizing and leading. While the crisis marched to its ending, the sentiment frames lose their focus on the murder itself. Most of the internet users immersed themselves in expressing their discontent towards the dignitary and resignation of social reality. The attribution of the incident was no longer the focus. In this sense, emotional factors can be recognized as a modifier that has a significant influence on crisis attribution.

Last but not the least, this paper does not the claim that political, economic, cultural dimensions are always or equally relevant to the crisis attribution. Instead, this study indicates that these factors are often entangled in predictable as well as unpredictable ways. So that, a closer study of when, how, why, and to what ends these contextual factors interact with crisis type is a vital when making sense of crisis situations.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the crisis attribution generated by basic crisis type is in a state of flux. Crisis attribution often demonstrates shifts from one type to another during a crisis. The attributions people made for a crisis are influenced by a variety of factors, both within and external to an organization. When we analyze the attributions of a crisis, we should not just look at crisis types with modifiers within the organizations, but take a broader view of the situation by asking whether there are other contextual factors affect the crisis. In other words, both the micro-level crisis attribution influences elements, such as the perform history and prior reputation, and macro-level attribution factors, such as political, economic, and cultural factors, have to be taken into consideration.

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