Rhetoric of Public Crises: Constructing Communication Networks in Transcultural Contexts

Lin Dong

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RHETORIC OF PUBLIC CRISES: CONSTRUCTING COMMUNICATION NETWORKS IN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXTS

by

LIN DONG

Under the Direction of Baotong Gu, Ph.D

ABSTRACT

This study explores public crisis communication related to multinational corporations through a high-profile case, Apple’s after-sale policy crisis that happened in China in 2013. Defining public crisis as a rhetorical contest in Ulrich Beck’s postmodern, world risk society, this project constructs a public crisis communication model based on Manuel Castells’ network society theory and further investigates the rhetorical structure using Kenneth Burke’s pentad/hexad model. My purpose is to investigate the transcultural rhetoric of public crisis in the age of global information through careful description of communication components, contexts, process, and transformation, and critical explanation of the mechanism for crisis development.
To achieve this goal, I propose a prototype of public crisis communication model and argue that in corporation-related public crisis, participants’ roles shift compared with those in traditional corporate crisis. The semantic network research methods in computational science is adopted to extract textual data and draw the intuitive semantic networks for 17 variables (the <agent-agency-scene> tuple as the independent variables and the <act-attitude-purpose> tuple as depend variables) in the corpus of 120,354 words from print media and 7568 social media posts. Based on the quantitative results, this study examines the semantic relationship of <agent-agency-act-attitude-purpose-scene> hexad and uses this hexad as rhetorical grammar to build rhetorical networks of public crisis communication. The rhetorical networks of the Apple case demonstrate its failure to identify the conditions of accusation, a fundamental mistake contributing to the crisis aggravation. Surrounding the rhetorical networks of this case, contextual elements in cultural, economic, and political aspects playing in the local market and global situation also underlie the crisis initiation and development.

It concludes that the rhetorical network of public crisis is an intricate ecosystem during which participants pluralize their identities, increase their dependence and mutuality, and transform crisis roles while contesting for and collectively architecting the meaning of crisis and finally negotiating solutions for the crisis. It also suggests practitioners to pay close attention to the shifting power dynamics in global and local business, politics, and society and act proactively to intentional agency acts in the media.

INDEX WORDS: Multinational/Transnational Corporation, Semantic network, Rhetorical network, Global media, Computational methods, Visualization
RHETORIC OF PUBLIC CRISSES: CONSTRUCTING COMMUNICATION NETWORKS IN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXTS

by

LIN DONG

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RHETORIC OF PUBLIC CRISES: CONSTRUCTING COMMUNICATION NETWORKS IN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXTS

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August 2019
DEDICATION

To my son, Michael, whose smiles and unconditional love empowered me to go throughout the long journey of writing
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was a long time in the making, even though it came together recently. I have been thinking, and living, transnational culture and identity since I started my doctoral study seven years ago. This project is a distillation of that thought. My interest of crisis communication stemmed from Dr. Holmes’ class of Contemporary Rhetorical Theories in 2013, when I learned Burkean Rhetoric and in the course final paper, applied it to the analysis of Apple’s crisis in China. Since then, I followed the rhetorical approach (such as the narrative method) to study the multidisciplinary and transcultural topic of crisis communication. Portions of these previous studies were presented in conferences such as NCA (National Communication Association) and RSA (Rhetoric Society of America). Along the way to explore this topic, I gradually felt that the rhetorical perspective has limited power when dealing with large amount of information generated in the process of a transnational crisis. A computational or computer-assisted method is highly necessary for the big data analysis to extract the linguistic characteristics, which would lead to a fuller rhetorical analysis in the next step.

Taking this theoretical shift was not quick or easy. I was concerned if the combined computational and rhetorical methods was too experimental to be accepted. I was fortunate to have mentors to support and help me whenever I needed. My first word of thanks goes to Baotonng Gu, the chair of committee, who completely believed in the acceptability of this research methodology and encourage me to undertake challenging work. Not only has Dr. Gu’s broad knowledge of the subject and always insightful comments guided me through the dark phases of bewilderment and uncertainty in research design, his has given me generous support in every way imaginable to elevate my academic and professional skills. My second word of thanks goes to my committee: to George Pullman and Elizabeth Lopez, for their understanding and
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Finally, I thank my family members for their boundless love, patience, and encouragement all along the way. My son, Michael, who I owe the most, patiently waited for mommy to return home soon. His smiles and delightful talk light up my days after long hours of writing.
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1 CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE NETWORK SOCIETY

No corporations will be immune from crisis, and no corporate crisis will remain local. Crises involving multinational corporations (MNCs, also called transnational corporations, or TNCs) in home countries and the global market usually make the news headlines. Recent examples include Toyota product failures and recalls across the U.S. from 2009-2012, Starbucks’s Race Together campaign encountering consumer backlash in the U.S. in 2015, Samsung Galaxy Note 7 battery explosions worldwide in 2016, Facebook user profile leak related to 2016 presidential election and its other massive data breaches, among many other notable cases that received massive public attention worldwide. Each of these cases suggests that in a “world risk society” (Beck, 1999), corporate crises seem to become more frequent, intense, unpredictable, and unpreventable. Once happened, such MNCs crises are tough to manage and very likely cause unmeasurable damage to corporations’ finance and reputation if their crisis communication to stakeholders fails.

Different from major transgression cases we may have heard a lot like those mentioned above, the number of “public crises”—the non-routine, media-exposed events accusing MNCs regardless of their misdeeds—is increasing especially in emerging markets (Zhao, 2013, p. 492). Accusers in these cases usually claim that the corporation they are against “has caused or will potentially make a loss of their interests due to the perceived (not necessarily actual) unethical behavior” (Zhao, 2013, p. 491-492). In other words, stakeholders’ perceptions of the corporate misdeed, rather than the actual occurrences related to the corporation, will contribute to a public crisis, in which the agitated stakeholders accuse the corporation for being unethical even before
such an accusation is proved valid. A typical example of public crisis involves Johnson & Johnson. In March 2009, the Campaign of Safe Cosmetics, an NGO in the U.S, reported finding toxic chemicals formaldehyde and 1,4-dioxane in Johnson & Johnson baby bath products (“No More Toxic Tub”, 2009). About the same time in China, an online article titled “Johnson & Johnson almost Disfigured My 18-Month-Old” went viral in a Chinese BBS news outlet, Tianya, receiving more than 29 thousand views and thousands of comments. Days later, a large-scale consumer survey conducted by an influential news portal, Fenghuang, showed that 75.2% online users would not purchase Johnson & Johnson products. Although Chinese Quality Inspection Administration and CFDA announced that a complete examination of Johnson & Johnson baby products only found one problematic wash that contained little dioxane under the legal amount, sales immediately dropped 70% in some markets and dropped 7.4% nationwide (“Four recalls within a year”, 2010).

The rising public crises provoked by the media-empowered stakeholders are beyond a game of punishing bad apples. The ongoing rapid change of social, political, and market environments and the complicated stakeholder dynamics aided by new media all bring serious challenges to MNCs encountering crises in emerging markets. In this sense, public crises targeting MNCs in global context can be rather seen as a clash of foreign and local cultures, as well as a rivalry among capital forces, political power, and social interests at global, transnational, state, and communal levels.

1.1 Problems with the Organization-Centric Paradigm

Although it is urgent to unpack increasingly public crises in a global market and implement strategic, effective crisis communication, these tasks are challenging for
communication researchers and practitioners. On the one hand, the exigency of a public crisis demands strategic communication over a problem (whether it relates to product quality, service, labor, environment, or other aspects); it also indicates that through effective communication, a positive change to the status quo of a problem can be made within an expected time period. Thus, public crises suggest a favorable opportunity to examine the way professional and technical communication operated transnationally and/or globally, to uncover perennial problems existing in such processes, and to explore effective communication strategies. On the other hand, current scholarship of crisis communication could only offer limited support for this type of research. Main problems in this area exist in the following aspects:

Although theoretically and practically valuable, the well-established paradigm—organization/institution-centered crisis studies largely built on image restoration (Benoit, 1995, 1997) and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2007)—has seriously narrowed scholars’ scope of research subjects within internal organizational variables (such as products, services, and organizational culture), excluding many extra-organizational elements (works of this type such as Bowen & Zheng, 2015; Choi & Chung, 2013; Haigh & Brubaker, 2010; Maiorescu, 2016; Pace, Feduik, & Botero, 2010 and many more). This organization-centered crisis communication paradigm usually isolates a crisis from its societal, economic, political, and external cultural environments. It is commonly recognized that these contextual conditions could shape crisis development (Ding, 2007, 135-136). For MNC crises, examining greater contextual elements beyond their home culture should be as important, if not more, as studying the institutional elements. Therefore, the traditional organization-centered crisis communication model is not proper for MNC crises.
In addition, few MNC crisis communication studies address the emerging issues along with the advent of a global information network. A new communication mode has changed the imbalanced producer-consumer relation in the era of social networking communication. Social media creates a participative public sphere, a virtual place/means that empowers consumers to have voices and become active stakeholders. A global information network with greater accessibility and intense connection has changed the power dynamic of corporate crisis and facilitated abruption of public crisis. However, in academia, studies about corporate crisis communication in social media has arisen just since recent years (works such as Etter & Vestergaard, 2015; Liu et al, 2011; Ngai & Jin, 2016; Romenti et al 2014; Wang, 2016; Yin et al, 2015; Zhao, 2017; Zhu et al, 2017 etc.), but many still cannot jump out of the narrow confines of the aforementioned institutional framework. More than one decade after the birth of social media (in 2004 when Facebook was founded), questions about how corporate crisis communication has been constructed in the electronically based networks and many other significant issues are still waiting clearer answers.

These problems have caused severe theoretical, contextual, and methodological disfigurements in corporate crisis communication scholarship. As MNCs deeply integrate into the global chain of production and consumption and thus encounter more challenges, conflicts, and crises in the new information age, studies of corporate crisis communication in the contexts of trans-culture and digital media is imperative and insightful for scholars in many disciplines and practitioners too.
1.2 Project Goals, Methodologies, and Significance

This dissertation aims to narrow the gap in the field of crisis communication, as well as to respond to critical professional challenges and keep up with new academic trends. To this end, this project will define a crisis as a rhetorical exigence that prompts concerned parties to attend to for positive changes (which could be, for example, saving reputations for corporations, solving problems for stakeholders, etc.) through communication. This definition comes from such a premise that despite the occurrence of a concrete event, communication plays a central role in the process of crisis management as communicative actions taken to define and describe a crisis will fundamentally influence crisis development (Hearit & Courtright, 2004). Admittedly, crisis episodes are subject to different people’s understandings of what has happened, is happening, and will happen. Thus, the rhetorical construction about communication process, in which people form their narratives about the crisis event, become a necessity. For MNC crisis, a rhetorical approach means to create a conceptual map of the crisis event, depict the “whole story,” decode the complexities in the communication process between a corporation and its stakeholders and among stakeholders, highlight the contextual influences on a crisis, and trace the fundamental reasons of crisis creation, development, and mitigation. In short, this study will construct a transcultural rhetoric of corporate crisis in the age of global information to fully depict the crisis communication process and deeply analyze the mechanism of corporate crisis in this context.

Acknowledging that globalization and information technology have fundamentally broken old modes of individual and organizational communication and have been restructuring the nature and form of social relations today (van Dijk, 2012, p. 34; Inglis, 2012, p. 267; Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 6), I adopt Manuel Castells’ “network society” theory and his network model, the social-structural expression of social organization in the Information Age (2000, p. 5-
15), to mathematically represent the relations of the involved actors in a crisis event, visually
describe the information flow between different actors in their communication, and try to reveal
the full picture of the complexities and dynamics in crisis communication processes that exist in
communal, national, transnational, and global contexts. I would treat the network as a
measurable depiction (in matrices, graphs, etc. with data) of crisis rhetoric as well as a systematic
architecture or a broad ecosystem of crisis communication about a case. The network serves to
describe the transcultural rhetoric architecture of public crises and helps to explain the
emergence or formation of a specific type of network related to a crisis event and its
communication.

To construct a transcultural rhetoric of corporate crisis in the age of global information
based on communication network will pose a series of research questions. Considering the scope
of this study, I ask the following research questions and situate them in the current context of
global digital media and information network era:

1. What is the general pattern of the communication network for multinational
corporation related public crises that happened in transnational or global context?
   What elements constitute this communication network: such as what actors can be
   identified, what are their relations, what messages have been created, and what
   contexts underlie this crisis event?

2. How is the flow of messages among communicators? How does crisis information
   move from one point to another or be cocreated by network members as such
   message circulates locally, globally, or in between? Is any message transformed in the
   process of information diffusion within and across borders?
3. If situating the crisis communication network in larger contexts, how do historical, cultural, political, economic, ideological, media elements interact with crisis messages and shape crisis rhetoric through time and space?

4. What individual, collective, institutional, or contextual reasons can help to explain the emergence or formation of a typical communication network?

5. What methods can be incorporated into crisis management to better prepare future professionals for challenges they may encounter in such complicated and dynamic events in global information era?

Given the prospect of the unpredictable and detrimental public crises becoming more complex and frequent in the globalized networking and “world risk society” (Beck, 1999), my study is both historically significant and highly relevant to contemporary events. This study will contribute to the largely untapped topic of transcultural/transnational public crisis communication in many fields: public relations, cultural studies, rhetorical studies, and particularly in professional and technical communication. To be specific, the contributions lie in three aspects. First, theorizing crisis communication in a network logic reflects the historical trend that communication processes, information flows, and cultural exchanges increasingly take place around networks and thus reshape the power dynamics in crisis communication. The network model is an ecosystem that includes agents, messages, flows, context, and draws connections with larger social contexts, which together will promise a thorough and profound analysis toward rhetoric of crisis. This framework will not only help to break the traditional institution-centric paradigm in crisis communication scholarship, but also offer ideas for transnational theories and approaches to rhetoric, which scholars suggest as a new direction of technical communication studies (Ding & Savage, 2013, p. 2). In addition, the mathematical
representation, statistical measurement, graphic visualization of the complexities and dynamics of crisis communication is a meaningful endeavor to renovate the rhetorical analysis tradition that heavily relies on textual description and narrative interpretation. The computed, statistical method does not deny the value of discursive analysis for a crisis event, nor does it serve as a complete substitution of textual interpretation; rather, it works as an empirical basis and a necessary complement for more valid rhetorical constructions of any cases. Besides the theoretical and methodological significances, this study will also explore possible means to effective crisis engagement for both corporations and stakeholders. Such a research design will not only meet the urgent needs in workplace, but also will help discover the “underexamined issues such as power politics, access and exclusion, ethics and social justice” in transcultural professional communication (Ding & Savage, 2013, p. 1). At last, I hope this study could be a significant attempt, as Grabill advocates, that pushes the humanities, especially the field of technical and professional communication, away from being the “handmaiden to technology and science” but instead toward a direction to “focus on rhetorical problems with a particular emphasis on domains of technical and scientific complexity” (2009).

1.3 Crisis Case

As the world’s largest emerging market, China has a wide range of stakeholders who are craving quality goods and services from world brands yet also becoming aggressive in questioning MNCs. MNC crises in China probably involve the most complexities in the eyes of westerners due to the state quo of this red star state: the burgeoning middle class with expanding need and power of consumption, a deluge of MNCs seeking benefits in this socialist market economy, a communist party that has control over economic policy and media outlets, among other unique contextual factors. Thus, a study of MNC’s recent crises in China is highly needed
for developing the field of corporate crisis communication. I select Apple’s after-sale crisis, a high-profile public crisis event that happened in 2013 in China. This crisis was initiated by a state media platform of CCTV on March 15, 2013 and immediately attracted diverse stakeholders’ strong concerns. It lasted about two weeks and had a dramatic process. At the dawn of social media becoming the information center of public opinions (Liu, Lu, & Qiu, 2014), the Apple crisis provides sufficient evidence for us to examine the transition from traditional corporate crises to emerging public crises largely propelled by the advent of social media networking. Through this case, this study aims to illustrate the architecture of public crisis communication and explore the driving mechanism rooted in the changing power dynamics and cultural conflicts in the global risk and information age.

2  CHAPTER 2. CRISIS COMMUNICATION STUDIES—HISTORY AND TRENDS

2.1 Crisis Communication and the Organization-Centric Paradigm

Crisis communication is an applied communication field originated in the 1980s (Coombs, 2015, p.147). Corporate crisis communication has been among the most frequently studied research topics and had the most significant increase in the recent decades (see Meadows and Meadows, 2014). Studies of corporate crisis communication are naturally interdisciplinary (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006). Scholars from public relations, communication, business, etc. have contributed influential crisis management theories and significant bodies of work that describe crisis cases and offer prescriptive strategies for industry and beyond. Meta-analytic reviews of literature on crisis communication (Avery et al., 2010; Ha & Boynton, 2014; Ha and Riffle, 2015; Diers-Lawson, 2017) prove that the image repair theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2014) and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2007) are the two most
frequently used theories in crisis communication. The latest and broadest meta-analysis by Dier-Lawson (2017) reviews 690 articles in crisis communication from 1953 to 2015 and concludes that near one third apply image repair and SCCT as their principle theory.

The Image Repair Theory (originally referred to as Image Restoration) appears in Benoit’s (1995, 2014) *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, in which he uses rhetorical (frequently called *apologia*, self-defense) and sociological (“accounts” and “excuses”) perspectives to analyze image repair/restoration discourses in corporate, political, entertainment context of crisis communication (2014, p. ix). Defining image repair as a defensive rhetorical act that responds to attacks or suspicions and aims for persuasion and reputation maintenance (p. 10, 14, 16), Benoit proposes five image repair strategies: denial (simple denial, shift blame), evasion of responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions), reducing offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation), corrective action, and mortification (p. 22). In the chapter of corporate image repair, Benoit employs these strategies to analyze the image repair messages in two corporate crisis cases: BP and the Gulf oil spill, and Grunenthal Group’s apology for thalidomide drug birth defects. Essentially, the image repair theory is a series of crisis response strategies that serves the attacked in a crisis for the most effective persuasive outcome.

Similarly, Coombs also deems “crisis communication was primarily corporate apologia” (2013, p. 263). Holding the basic premise that situations influence the selection of communication strategies (Coombs, 2013, p. 263; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 281), a long-held assumption shared by many rhetoricians (such as Bitzer, 1968; Black, 1965; Metts & Cupach, 1989, etc.) on the importance of rhetorical situation, Coombs constructs the situational
crisis communication theory (SCCT) to “link the crisis situation and crisis response strategies” (2013, p. 263). SCCT draws on attribution theory to develop this connection. Through measuring the attributions of the organizations’ ability to control the crisis event (together with other two variables: severity and crisis history), crisis managers can then determine the crisis responsibility of the accused party and further choose a crisis response strategy appropriate to the level of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 167-169). The basic logic behind the SCCT model is to evaluate crisis responsibility for the purpose of deciding a matching response strategy for that situation. Crisis types are descriptions of crisis situations and affect attributions of crisis responsibility. Coombs pairs clusters of crisis types with degrees of crisis responsibility: victim crisis cluster—very low attributions of crisis responsibility, accidental crisis cluster—minimal attributions of crisis responsibility, intentional (or preventable) crisis cluster—strong attributions of crisis responsibility. According to different crisis types, crisis managers can select proper crisis response strategies from an accommodation continuum, from denial to diminish to rebuild (additionally, bolstering as a supplemental strategy) in order to maximize reputational protection.

Although the image repair theory and SCCT are two different approaches to crisis communication (descriptive vs. predictive; qualitative vs. experimental), they share fundamental sameness in terms of purpose: to offer effective crisis response strategies for crisis managers to repair or protect organizational reputation (Benoit, 1995, 2013, 2014; Coombs, 2013, p. 264; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). Admittedly, both are theoretically and practically beneficial (recent works such as Bowen & Zheng, 2015; Choi and Chung, 2013; Haigh & Brubaker, 2010; Pace, Feduik, & Botero, 2010; Maiorescu, 2016; and many more). but they are not flawless theories, especially if examined in the changed contexts nowadays. To be specific, I have several fundamental reservations about these two crisis communication theories.
First, Benoit emphasizes the importance of audience analysis for a successful image repair effort, arguing that “understanding the accusations expressed to the audience…may provide insights into potential image repair messages” (2014, p. 30). However, it needs attention here that rather than explicitly referring to the audience’s actual perceptions, Benoit suggests understanding the rhetor’s perceptions of the audience’s accusations, an argument that first appears in his first elucidation of the image repair theory in 1995. Benoit differentiates these two versions of perceptions, noting that they “may or may not correspond” (p. 82). While he admits the differences, Benoit insists analyzing the rhetor’s perceptions of the audience’s reaction to attacks since “[they] are all the rhetor has available to prompt and guide image restoration efforts” (p. 82). Benoit’s excuse is no longer valid in the context of social media and Internet where the audiences’ perceptions can be instantaneously available for the interested parties. Benoit details audience analysis in his 2008 book Persuasive Messages, but unfortunately, he just suggests not only focuses on factors of audience’s size, homogeneity, history with the persuader but also on their knowledge about, interest in, and attitude toward the persuasive messages without offering an empirical basis. The purpose of conducting audience analysis, however, is not for the stakeholders’ good but for the accused organizations. Benoit also acknowledges the wide array of audience’s perceptions, arguing that “audiences can be different, so messages that might be persuasive for one audience could be a disaster for another audience” (2013, p. 218). However, Benoit does not propose any audience-specific crisis-response strategies.

Second, like the image repair theory, SCCT also does not address audiences’ actual perceptions about crises. However, unlike Benoit’s incongruence between his preach and practice, Coombs totally ignores the audience’s beliefs and attitudes, asserting that the crisis
situation (crisis type) dictates what defensive response to be chosen. Coombs points out that the nature of SCCT is “a set of prepositions” that “predict how much crisis responsibility stakeholders are likely to attribute to an organization during a crisis” (2013, p.272). The situational variables constitute a relation model to determine the degree of crisis responsibility. Audiences’ perceptions about crises are not considered in this model.

The preposition in SCCT—crisis situation (type) as the only factor influencing the selection of crisis response strategies—is a priori and static view of “organization” and “crisis communication.” Scholars commonly accept that messages are socially constructed, not pre-and sole-determined by one element like crisis type. The strategic turn starting this decade (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015) argues that organizations are communitive entities “established, composed, designed, and sustained” through human communication (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011, p.1150). Communitive entities are with purposes to fulfill their missions (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007, p3). This new definition of organization requires crisis communication practitioner and researchers not merely focus on what an organization says or with which it communicates, but also the words from anyone who is affected or will be potentially affected by its existence or activity. This is to say, as Torp (2009) suggests, stakeholders should become the targets of strategic communication within the organization’s communicative universe.

Third, the matching relationship between crisis type and the degree of crisis responsibility attributions is a fallacy and cannot be applied to many public crises—especially the ones emerged in developing markets that accuse MNCs. Coombs claims that crisis type, crisis history, and performance history are the three variables that significantly affect attributions
of crisis responsibility (2013, p. 264). One typical case of public crisis happened to the Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) on November 19, when it posted commercial videos that featured a Chinese female model well-dressed in D&G luxuries struggled to eat typical Italian food with chopsticks. These “Eating with Chopsticks” ads were widely seen as offensive due to the obvious trivialization and unflattering stereotypes of Chinese culture. The D&G public crisis does not support Coombs’ assumption since this brand had a clean crisis history and good performance history (endorsed by many celebrities, enjoyed large share of high fashion market). Yet, D&G was fully responsible for assaulting Chinese people and culture. In addition, according Coombs’ clusters of crisis types, D&G case falls into the type of “challenges”, a subcategory of accidental crisis cluster that is assigned with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility—another false principle that contradicts with the facts.

Fourth, Coombs and Holladay’s experimental study (2002) that initially tests SCCT and develop this theory has serious limitations besides the artificial manner per se. Their study enrolled 130 undergraduate students in communication courses at a midwestern and a southeastern university to identify and measure situational factors through surveys. Students are not typical targets for crisis communication but Coombs claims that former studies proved that a student population was no difference from a crisis manager or consumer population (2013, p. 270). The limited empirical evidence for SCCT’s predication reduces this model’s reliability. In fact, Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke’s study (2010) finds that “matching crisis types and crisis responses does not lead to more positive perception of firm reputation than nonmatches” (p. 261).
A fifth concern is that although Coombs acknowledges that media reports play a pivotal role in influencing stakeholders’ opinions when making reputation judgements (2013, p. 271), the problem of agenda-setting in communication study, he does not further analyze media effects on the public opinion towards the corporation under discussion. Instead, Coombs only explains the function of media reports, saying that media messages “become part of the indirect experience used to construct a corporate reputation” (p. 271).

Overall, Benoit’s image repair theory and Coombs’ SCCT share the basic perspective about crisis communication that both theories view it as apologia, persuasive or defensive discourses and take rhetorical approaches to image repair and reputation protection. My analysis above has pointed out some fundamental flaws with these two theories. Furthermore, if examined using a classic rhetoric frame, neither theory guides a complete rhetorical analysis of all components, namely, author, audience, texts, purposes, and context. Benoit points out the two key assumptions underlying the theory of image repair strategies are first, “communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity” and two, “maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication” (1995, p. 63). His image repair theory is based on analyses of the nature of attacks and defenses, not on actual audience or context analysis. Same as Bitzer’s rhetorical situation theory, which declares the situation “dictates the significant physical and verbal responses” (1968, p.5) and “prescribes its fitting response” (p. 11), SCCT also argues that the only factor that should influence selection of crisis response strategy is crisis situation type. An effective crisis response should not rule out many other factors or merely focus on the persuader’s purpose or situational factors. In addition, crisis communication should also be guided by a series of elements, such as audience’s attitudes, the dynamics of attitude
formation, internal (institutional) and external (social) contexts, the evidence for a crisis response message, etc. in order to generate studies with valid, persuasive results.

In the scholarship of crisis communication, however, the well-established organizational/institutional-centric paradigm based on these two influential theories has long orientated this field as being industry/profession-faced, focusing on organizational variables (such as the situational variables in SCCT) to pursue effective crisis response strategies for reputational protection. Doing so unjustifiably excludes actual and potential stakeholders outside the foci of crisis communication. Doing so also vacuumizes crisis communication from an actual, larger situation with complex societal, economic, political, or cultural contexts where the crisis is born and raised. These wrong doings have led to severe contextual and methodological disfigurements in corporate crisis scholarship.

2.2 Crisis Communication: Toward a Theoretical and Process-Oriented Study

Facing the problems in crisis communication (such as heavy application of the image repair theory and SCCT, overemphasis on the effectiveness of crisis strategies, etc.), meta-analytic reviews of literature on crisis communication (Avery et al., 2010; Diers-Lawson, 2017; Ha & Boynton, 2014; Ha and Riffle, 2015) generally suggest more diverse contextual and methodological applications in this field, including: 1) broadening our subjects of research to previously neglected things, such as outcomes and goals beyond reputation maintenance, cross-cultural crises, relationships with publics in a crisis, the pre-crisis and post-crisis stages, pedagogy, and so forth, 2) broadening the use of a diverse range of applicable theoretical perspectives, incorporate more “outside-the-discipline” theories, and/or more theoretical critiques, and 3) enhancing methodological diversity toward mixed or multiple method
approaches to better reflect the multidisciplinary nature of crisis communication. As Ha and Boynton (2014) suggest, crisis communication research has been practical and result-oriented; to develop our field, a theoretical and process-oriented approach that focuses just beyond the practical effects of crisis management is urgently needed (p. 40).

The call for a theoretical and process-oriented approach echoes with the linguistic turn in the twentieth century and the strategic turn in recent years (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). Everything is not only communication, but to be accurate, strategic communication. In the organizational context, this does not only mean that organizations are communitive entities “established, composed, designed, and sustained” through human communication (Gooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011, p.1150), but also emphasizes that organizations are also communitive entities with purpose to fulfill its mission (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007, p3).

Another emerging opinion in strategic communication is the “rejection of linearity in the communication process” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 7). “Linearity” refers to the way of communication in Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) transmission model from one point to another, with the assumption that communication can be controlled or regulated. On the contrary, influenced by postmodernism (in the writing of Michel Foucault for example), the constitutive model of communication asks the question of how the shared meanings are shaped and co-created through the communication process itself and what actual changes or actions happen in the process of communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 8).

Converging these new understandings about communication and organization and applying to crisis communication, we can have some basic ideas that contribute to my theoretical
framework (more details in next chapter): 1) Crisis communication studies should value the voice of every stakeholder, especially non-traditional stakeholders (such as social media users), since they shape and co-create meanings with other communicative entities; 2) The communication path in crisis communication is not linear between the organization and its stakeholders. Corporates are no longer the container within which or from which to circuit crisis information; media are not merely the channels of communication; customers are not only receivers. A static model of crisis communication fails to reflect the complex interactions and information exchanges among different players in crisis communication. I would rather treat each player in the crisis communication process as a strategic communicative being and part of the complex, dynamic, and interrelated network of crisis.

2.3 New Contexts for Crisis Communication: Cosmopolitanism, Transculturality, and Social Media Meditation

Renewing theories and methodologies of crisis communication requires a close and subtle examination of current contexts beforehand. Compared with the contexts where the organization-centric paradigm situates in, nowadays crises are significantly impacted by three contextual challenges: cosmopolitanism, transculturality, and the popularity of social media.

Unlike globalization, cosmopolitanism does not imply an epistemology of the West (global) and the Rest (local) distinction, nor does it carry the negative connotation of uniformization in globalization. Featherstone (1990) notes that globalization would inevitably make uniform world cultures preferably following the Western model. This homogenizing effects on world cultural traditions is later identified as “cultural globalization” (Palmer, 2013). Multinational corporation crisis is one of the unfortunate products of cultural globalization. On
the contrary, cosmopolitanism breaks the West-Rest dichotomy to embrace the diversity of world cultures and value their uniqueness. More broadly, it includes all forms of social and cultural transformation in both global and local level, as well as the products (such as identity, lifestyle, artifacts, or discourse strategies, etc.) created in the process (Delanty, 2006).

The term of cosmopolitanism requires a matching word for the scene where cultural transformation and diffusion process simultaneously in multiple dimensions. In this case, neither interculturality nor multiculturality is proper since both premise culture as an entity, having clear sphere and thus, natural gap to cross when communicating with another culture. Wolfgang Welsch (1999) proposes the concept of “transculturality” to refer to the altered cultural constitution, in which cultures are entangled both at society’s macrolevel and at individual’s microlevel. Welsch points out the fact that “cultural determinants today...have become transcultural” (199) or in other words, “everything is transculturally determined” (198) in a cosmopolitanism context. Transculturality can also be viewed as an analytical method for cultural studies, as Beck (2006) advocates, “a single phenomenon, transnationality, for example, can, perhaps even must, be analyzed both locally and nationally and transnationally and translocally and globally” (p.82). MNC crisis is also a phenomenon involving complex communication network with global, transnational, national, regional, communal, and personal dimensions but unfortunately, our scholarship contributes very few theories, methods, or case analysis about this transcultural problem.

Few cosmopolitan products have comparable transcultural influences on facilitating dialogue and shaping public discourse as social media do. Falkheimer & Heide (2015) attribute “participatory communication” to social media (p. 337). Different from the traditional one- or
two-way communication, this multiple-way communication is non-linear and co-created, both of which are the characteristics of strategic communication (which we have discussed before). With social media members directly participating in public debate without going through those mediated channels such as traditional media, the participatory communication makes the public sphere into a “communication sphere” where everyone matters (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 6). This is to say, social media, like other new communication technologies, has a democratizing effect (Heath, 1998) largely led by the historically excluded publics, a group who nowadays has gained increasing mobilizing power for initiating social movements and generating influential opinions.

Given the participatory and democratic traits of social media, more empirical studies emerged these years to explore what role social media play in crisis communication field. Research discovered social media’s role as a rapid information exchange channel to mass audiences in government crisis (Graham, Avery, & Park, 2015), as information sharing resources for the publics to accumulate data, validate information, and curate knowledge in natural and human-made disasters (Potts, 2014; Antony & Thomos, 2010). For organizational crisis, according to Coombs (2014), social media comments have two functions: checking if the public accepts the organization’s crisis response message and shaping organizational reputation (p. 44). Social media also helps to avert crisis escalation in the initial phrase of organizational crisis (ver der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013) or sometimes does the opposite—to trigger or escalate organizational crisis (Mei, Bansal, & Pang, 2010; Hassan & Chong, 2014). For corporate crises, social media provides emotional support for the stakeholders (Johansen, Johansen & Wechesser, 2016; Ngai & Jin, 2016); it also enables corporates to monitor the ongoing public conversations, create partnerships with stakeholders, and effectively prevent major crises (Etter & Vestergaard,
2015; Romenti, Murtarelli, & Valentini, 2014). Some also argue that social media have the potential to set the frames for traditional news media (Antony & Thomas, 2010; Meyers, 2012; Pang et al, 2014) and this “inter-media agenda-setting relationship” is proved by some crisis communication studies (e.g. Sung & Hwang, 2014 on a single crisis case), but this effect has not been supported by other empirical real-crisis analyses in corporate communication (e.g. Etter & Vestergaard, 2015).

The burgeoning literature on crisis in the context of social media prove social media’s function as a new “rhetorical arena” (a term in Johansen and Frandsen’s rhetorical arena theory raised in 2007, 2009, 2018) for corporations and stakeholders to mediate crisis communication. This shift from a previous focus of stakeholders being managed by corporations to a new focus of corporation-stakeholders interaction marks a theoretical advance in crisis communication scholarship (Coombs, 2014, p. 40). Although research on corporation-stakeholders interaction on social media (e.g. Etter & Vestergaard, 2015; Ngai & Jin, 2016; Romenti et al., 2014; Wang, 2016; Ye & Ki. 2016; Yin et al 2015) or publics’ framing of corporate crisis on social media (e.g. Johansen et al, 2016; Zheng et al., 2018) remarkably update corporate crisis communication studies to new contexts, limitations still exist in the following aspects:

First, the corporation-stakeholders interaction process is abstracted into a two-direction communication—how stakeholders, usually the general public, address the crisis on social media and how the corporate reacts to the public). It is also common that many studies overemphasize the publics’ framing of a corporate crisis. Neither of these models constructs a nonlinear, multipoint-connected communication network to represent the actual communication process. In other words, current corporate crisis communication on social media studies isolate public and
organizational discourses from their dependent communicative network, in which discourses are co-created by all participants, including but not limited to corporates, employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, community, government, environment and other contextual factors.

Second, the simplified two-way or one-way communication model eliminates lots of communicative beings surrounding a crisis, which is a static analysis of crisis information that flows among all participants during crisis development. This static model idealizes the information as something controllable under human regulations, no matter from corporation to the public or vice versa. An authentic crisis communication network, on the contrary, is dynamic, with an unsettled source center and ever-changing power relations among all parties.

Third, the current mainstream scholarship has done little research on various social media tools except Facebook, particularly being inattentive to many regionally popular tools in some countries that are inaccessible to global social media. For example, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube are all censored in China; whereas, Weibo, WeChat are among the dominant social media networkings. As Etter and Vestergaard (2015) noted that their findings about Facebook cannot simply be generalized since social media tools vary in many significant ways. Besides, local social media platforms (such as Weibo, WeChat, and Zhihu in China) have cultural-adapted forms and features (Men & Tsai, 2013) that deserve in-depth examination in the native contexts.

Last, most of the corporate crisis communication on social media are heavily text-based, focusing on online discourses but overlooking significant contextual factors. This narrow focus on text over context is not a holistic view about crisis communication, nor is applicable for MNC crisis analysis since MNCs generally face contextual challenges in emerging markets with different cultures and growing stakeholders.
Thus, situating corporate crisis communication research in cosmopolitan, transcultural, and social media-mediated contexts, and conceptualizing it as a dynamic network could 1) provide an opportunity to break the limitations above in current scholarship, 2) synthesize these burgeoning yet fragmented streams of crisis research in different disciplines (public relations, professional communication, social media studies, etc., and 3) offer a more integrative identification of the increasing corporate crisis in a global scene.

2.4 (Con)textual Approaches to Global Crisis Communication

Crisis communication researchers have long been crying for studying “the dynamics, complexity, and in some cases, conflictuality created by the ongoing process of globalization” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 362) and “the effects of the international context on crisis communication” (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010, p. 343). The call originates from the defects of the dominant theories—Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory, Coombs’s Situational Crisis Communication Theory, or Shin and Cameron’s Contingency Theory since they are “more receiver oriented” (Coombs et al. 2010, p. 343), or in other words, “focusing on a single organization”, and thus “less useful if we wish to include the interorganizational dimension” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018, p. 93). These theories also fail to “pay enough attention to the high degree of complexity and dynamics characterizing most crises” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2007, p.11). More recently, Coombs and Laufer (2018) calls for studies of global crisis management by comparing crisis across countries instead of conducting contextual crisis communication research in one country. Although scholars are eager to see works on crisis communication in a global setting and some even describe the status of our field as in “state of emergency” since it “fails to reflect the needs and global reality of crisis communication today” (Diers-Lawson, 2017, p.2), very limited studies (less than a dozen) have been done according to Coombs and
Laufer, Frandsen and Johansen’s Rhetorical Arena Theory, Huiling Ding’s Critical Contextualized Methodology, and Lisa Potts’ social web experience architecture based on Actor Network Theory are among the most valuable ones that shed lights on global crisis communication.

Frandsen and Johansen (2010) apply Hearit’s (2006) rhetorical model of apologizing and apologetic ethics to analyze three statements from Vatican and/or Pope Benedict XVI after the Pope’s lecture at a German university in 2006. The lecture received accusations from various Muslim countries due to the Pope’s disputed quotation about the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Their research results show that Hearit’s rhetorical model and the ethical standards in it do not justify the Pope’s apologies. The Pope’s case reflects the global contexts, such as more opportunities to offend and apologize, increasing sociocultural differences, challenging linguistic and rhetorical obstacles, media’s accelerating role as the “agents provocateurs”, and the growing number of third parties, and more and more people who “stand on their rights”. Thus, it becomes easier to transgress a sociocultural order by wrongdoings and meanwhile more difficult to apologize for wrongdoings. Hearit does not take these contexts into account, so his model fails to explain this case. Frandsen and Johansen propose the “rhetorical arena,” a multivocal approach to deal with crisis communication in global settings. Their rhetorical arena theory can address the popular situation that “we have to apologize for something that we normally do not need to apologize for according to our own sociocultural order, but which is considered a kind of wrongdoing within other sociocultural orders” (p. 362) as the Pope’s case illustrated.

To be specific, the rhetorical arena model of crisis communication advances our understanding about “the communicative complexity of organizational crises” (Frandsen &
Johansen, 2018, p. 94) from two aspects. First, it is based on a multi-vocal approach that takes into consideration of many crisis-related responses in the social space where both senders and receivers meet or compete, collaborate or negotiate during a crisis. This approach emphasizes that the interaction between communicators are diverse, unstable, and chaotic, in which the sender’s production of a text and the receiver’s active interpretation take place in synchronic dimension. The concept of voice, according Frandsen and Johansen, has a focus on complexity rather than on power (2018, p. 94). Second, this model conceives crisis communication as mediated through four parameters—context, media, genre, and text, which together guarantee a complete analysis including both textual and contextual analysis. These four parameters also guide researchers to examine the diachronic dimension of crisis communication, namely the periods before, during, and after a crisis. Notably, the concept of “context” in this theory is much wider than that in Coombs’ SCCT: in addition to crisis type, crisis situation, crisis evolution, and relational history (all of which together constitute the “context” in SCCT), Frandsen and Johansen’s “context” also considers the “different actors, structures, and processes, and other pertinent phenomena connected to culture, organization, and society” (2005, p. 14). Frandsen and Johansen argue that their rhetorical arena model is “an elaboration” and “an extension of the text-oriented model of Benoit and the context-oriented model of Coombs” (2007, p.13), and “an appropriate choice” for a crisis involving two or more organizations (2018, p. 94).

Although the rhetorical arena theory has significant advantages compared with the traditional models, it is not a theory with a systematic analytical framework to study interorganizational crisis communication, nor has it been tested in substantial empirical studies. It is an approach that could guide us to critically examine the research tradition of our field, jump out of the box, and derive new theories from the critical look at the new contexts.
Huiling Ding (2014) proposes a new conceptual framework and a set of operational theoretical tools for the study of transcultural professional communication in her book *Rhetoric of a Global Epidemic: Transcultural Communication about SARS*. Ding constructs SARS as a social/cultural disease (in addition to a media disease) and as a global risk. She constructs a critical contextualized methodology to examine the transcultural rhetoric of this global epidemic in its full complexity. Departing from the research tradition in intercultural professional communication that conceptualizes culture as a stable substance and equated with nationality, Ding defines culture as differences or contrasts and investigates the complex “global cultural flows” from ethnical, media, technological, economic, political, and ideological perspectives. Her framework studies the complexities of transcultural communication in different cultural sites (for example, where international, national, institutional, extra-institutional, and transcultural actors communicated about SARS). What constitute the transnational networks, according to Ding, are the so-called “transnational connectivities” (p. 19) that refer to any technological, ethnical, cultural, linguistic, or personal connections. Emphasizing transnational connectivities and cultural flows in a crisis, she constructs a medial-cultural-rhetorical model for global epidemics based on her critical contextualized methodology. The critical contextualized methodology consists five dimensions—key players, time-space axes, tipping point, interaction analysis, and power-knowledge relations, and an additional dimension of context outside. Ding emphasizes that these dimensions are not placed in a specific order and can be approached in different ways or through various combinations. This model is not only operational but has theoretical advantages: it solves the common problem in intercultural communication that essentialize or homogenize non-Western cultures; it also expands arenas of crisis communication to include the historical and material contexts as well as their influences on rhetorical
constructions. This point can be seen, for example, in the conclusion about the nuanced investigation of the viral discourses about SARS, where she states that this epidemic was “rhetorically transformed from a medical epidemic into epidemics of anti-communist and anti-immigration ideologies, infrastructural inadequacy, and technological backwardness” (p. 239). Ding’s study offers an insightful conceptual and operational framework (which is illustrated through a pioneering case study) to tackle the complexity, interactivity, and richness of transcultural communication.

Liza Potts (2014) studies how emerging social web tools accumulate data, validate information, and curate knowledge to facilitate communication during times of disaster. In technical communication, sociotechnical usability studies usually focus on interface and structure but neglect important issues such as culture and participation (p.113). To narrow the gap, Potts adopts a participant-centered perspective to study the “experience architecture”—the interaction among content, context, and users in a disaster. Different from early researchers who view participants exchange and transform content “within a vacuum of computer-based interactions” (p.20) and without considering the social contexts in which users exist, Potts uses a rhetorical approach to examine all disaster-communication-related elements, including participation (audience), events (exigency), and architecture (form and context) (p.24). Such a rhetorical approach to social web experience could help pinpoint the moves of content, understand the social contexts, and appreciate the participatory culture on social web. As to the specific techniques to model social web systems, Potts uses actor-network theory (ANT). ANT visualizes an ecosystem of disaster communication, which include human, technology, organization, event, and so on (p.26, 27). This ecosystem is established through a process called “diagramming”—identifying the central and relevant actors and weighing their relationships.
ANT diagrams help researchers visualize the actors, their relationships, and shifts in cultural practices. With the aid of visualizations, our discussions about systems, processes, and policies of disaster communication could become more in-depth, comprehensive, and constructive for fostering more participatory culture in social web. Potts’ participant-centered experience architecture framework is insightful for technical communication and crisis communication researchers to think of the integration of science and humanity to address sociotechnical problems. However, Potts’ frameworks is macroscopical and thus need more application to more disaster or crisis cases to make it practical and substantial.

To summarize, Frandsen and Johansen’s rhetorical arena theory, Ding’s critical contextualized methodology, and Potts’ social web experience architecture framework focus on communication process (information transmission) and products (discourses), aiming to identify, depict, and evaluate the communicative beings from two interrelated systems of subjects—text and context. These theories explore problems like what/how an organization/institution/individual communicates in a crisis (questions about on text), and when/where/to whom their communication takes place (questions about context). However, some fundamental problems that none of these theories have explored or fully answered are: “Why does a crisis happen, develop, and cease?” “What mechanism propels or determines its birth, growth, and death?” “Can we abstract some regularities behind the seemingly unpredictable crisis outbreak and its chaotic, complex, and complicated situation?” Besides these questions related to the mechanism of global crisis, it is also necessary to examine crises in the changing context—emerging era of Web 3.0 with social media. A common problem with these approaches mentioned above are their inability to systematically/quantitatively deal with big data in global social media era. Facing our acceleratingly cosmopolitan world and the huge challenges
it poses for crisis management, looking for tentative answers to above questions is imperative for researchers and professionals and significant for the development of crisis communication profession and scholarship.

3 CHAPTER 3. THE NETWORK SOCIETY AND BUILDING CRISIS COMMUNICATION NETWORK

3.1 The Definition of Crisis in a Risk Society: A Rhetorical Contest among Concerned Parties

MNC crises are the byproducts of “global capitalism” (Inglis, 2012, p. 258) as multi- and transnational businesses span markets for a wider capitalist system of production and consumption and experience unexpected challenges in the process. Ulrich Beck thinks increasing global crises indicate the transition from the “first modernity”—the industrial capitalist society—to the “second modernity”, which Beck also calls “risk society” (1999). Such a transition happened by the later twentieth century, when the first modernity failed to deal with these new phenomena: a globalizing capitalist economy, the diminished power of national governments over their own affairs, environmental problems due to the capitalist production of goods, the very uncertain outcomes of scientific innovations, and the open question about morality (Beck, 1999). The trust the public previously had placed in authority and expert systems collapsed due to authorities’ inabilities to deal with the emerging issues mentioned before. Giddens calls this radical change as “dis-embedded social relations”, which could lead to a spiral of risks and risk management (1990). Social relationships are no longer primarily tied to “local” or “national” in scale or in nature. Together with disembedding comes reembedding, a process Giddens (2000) calls when people establish new ties at a distance, which restructures the world and shifts the
focus from local to the global. About this transformed social relations due to globalization, Inglis (2012) points out, “under the conditions of globalization what happens here is influenced not just by what happens there but in a whole series of theres. And what counts as “here” can get fundamentally changed too” (p. 268). The constant possibility of global crisis is just an expression of this closely tied relationships under globalization and a product of such a globalized (dis)order.

It should be noted that in Beck’s “risk society,” the term “risk” represents less actual damage but more presumable threats and human insecurity that comes along (2000a). For Beck, risk is a social and rhetorical construct built by a network of actors when they produce collective knowledge based on different cultural perceptions. Risk accumulates power when global actors formulate public discourses, stimulate fears and beliefs, and ultimately compel actions (Beck, 2000b). When actors compete to define risk and try to further determine its construction, rhetorical struggles arise. Eventually, the reality of risk construction comes into being under the influence of actors’ rhetorical impacts to the risk (Beck, 2008, p.143). Crises are rhetorically contestable (Heath, 1997; Heath & Millar, 2004).

Beck’s risk society thesis sheds much light on how to define and describe MNC-related public crises in transnational contexts. As I stated in the introduction, unlike typical corporate crises that usually involve major transgression or pose great potential threat to stakeholders, public crises are non-routine, media-exposed events accusing MNCs regardless of their misdeeds (Zhao, 2013, p. 492). The public usually accuse a corporation for its unethical behaviors and such an accusation originates from media, a friend circle, or other sources, which could be true or false. In short, the public crisis targets a corporation for its alleged wrongdoing rather than the
actual happening. A public crisis features the crisis discourses, especially the debates between the stakeholders and the corporation, as well as among the stakeholders about “what is the crisis”—the nature and impact of the corporate “wrongdoings.” As different parties compete for the definition of the crisis, create various narratives about the crisis case, and try to influence more people on this matter, they collectively construct the “complexities” of crisis communication full of conflicting rhetorics of crisis. As the rhetorics of crisis become significant through various means of communication, a public crisis arises. Most of times for the public, the rhetoric of global corporate crisis seems more influential than the objective measure of the crisis per se. An array of audiences (no matter whether they are the targeted consumers or not) from global markets contribute to the dynamic rhetorical activities of defining, evaluating, and responding to high-profile crises. These audiences have various consumption experience and abilities, political orientations, knowledge levels, cultural ideologies, etc. The means they usually employ to gaining public and policy-makers’ support for their positions are not by presenting new facts or evaluations of the facts, but by altering the rhetoric or interpretive framework for evaluating the facts. During this process, constant rhetorical struggles persist within the actor network of crisis cases. One of the actors, media, provides an important site in the staging of global environmental crisis as it enables connectivity, expands actor networks, and embodies the rhetorical construct of crisis. But, few studies have analyzed the complexities in the rhetorical construct of crisis; even fewer studies have pictured the actor network or examined closely how such a crisis network-formulates during time. Below, I will use network society theory to systematically theorize and visualize the crisis communication network in a transnational context.
3.2 The Network Society Theory

Information technologies have always been an important force to recast social relations. In the era of globalized economy and transculturality, questions remain as to how the most recent information technologies alter the nature and form of social relations and to what extent. So how thoroughly has our world/society been and will be transformed by new information technologies featuring Web. 3.0? Two tendencies might suggest the two sides of the same coin: “the world may never have been freer, but it has also never been so interdependent and interconnected” (Mulgan, 1997, p.1). One the one hand, the society is beset by individualization and fragmentation; on the other hand, our society is organized increasingly around a logic of network in individual, institutional, societal, global level.

Castells (2000) calls networks as “the new social morphology of our societies” (p.500). Similarly, van Dijk (2000) says networks are “the nervous system of our society” (p.2). What makes today’s networks so profoundly different from traditional social network is that, “for the first time, they scale well” (Stalder, 2006, p. 181). Castells argues that “to be sure, networks have always existed in human organization. But only now have they become the most powerful form for organizing instrumentality, rather than expressiveness. The reason is fundamentally technological” (Castells, 1999). More specifically, being fundamentally different from the concepts of “a global village” or “a connected world” that indicate the widening of human web and a mass society formed since the Industrial Revolution, the network society features new media (digital media or multimedia) communication which are both integrated and interactive through technical means of digital codes and hypertexts (van Dijk, 2000, p.7).
Network theorists think the new information technology breaks the fixed place and time (van Dijk, 2012, p.6), replacing the space of places with the space of information flows, and the clock time with the instant time of computerized network (Castells, 2000, p. 506). The new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for the network society and “substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture” (Castells, 2000, p. 500). With the infrastructure of social and media networks at every level—namely, individual, group/organizational, and societal (van Dijk, 2012, p. 24), all societies are ever more connected than any two parties that can be linked “via a short chain of intermediaries” (van Dijk, 2012, p. 37). Our world is a network society in the making. Monge and Contractor (2003) have predicted that over the next decades such a global transformation would impact people on how to view themselves, how to relate to organizations, and to what extent they are willing to tolerate (2003, p. 6). Today’s increasing MNC public crises seem to prove the rightness of this prediction.

3.3 Network Analysis: Research Traditions, Approaches, and Subjects

Communication network analysis, if placed in a wider context of social sciences, falls within the lineage of structural analysis or structural inquiry (Monge & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 304). Network analysis is both a theoretical framework and a set of research methods that identify structure in systems based on components’ relations (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). Emergent communication network analysis has a short history burgeoning in the late of 1990s (Monge & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 334). Monge and Eisenberg summarize three research traditions on organizational structure analysis: positional, relational, and cultural. The positional tradition conceptualizes the communication structure as “a pattern of relations among positions in social unit” and to each position attaches specific roles that people who occupy this position must
perform (1987, p. 305). The relational tradition, on the other hand, focuses on human’s communicative actions and sequent linkages established through interaction. These two theories are in stark contrast as the positional tradition view communication network as being stable, top-down, and determined by the positions and roles assigned to people, while the relational theory as being dynamic, bottom-up, and largely individually motivated, created by the “repetitive patterns of person-to-person message flow” (Monge & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 306; Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 19). The third approach of organizational structure is the cultural one, which studies the symbols, meanings, and their transmissions throughout communication networks. According to this perspective, a culture/social system emerges from interactions and yet constrains subsequent interaction (Monge & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 307-8; Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 19-20).

Defining public crises as rhetorical problems in network societies requires the necessary integration of the relational and cultural perspectives to study the communication structure. In a public crisis, sense-making process is central to all concerned parties. The cultural approach to communication structure is to examine how the rhetoric of crisis is continually produced and reproduced, has changed or will be changed through communication, as well as how this rhetoric constrains communication—a characteristic of both creation and constraint that Giddens believe in social structure (1976, 1984). However, rhetorical acts depended on agencies such as pre-crisis-existing social relations, patterns/mechanisms of communication to perform. In the digital media era, the means and forms of rhetors to forging and maintaining communication linkages deserve close examination.
Holding different perspectives about communication network, theorists thus have different opinions about the research subjects of network analysis. Monge and Contractor believe that the central task in network analysis is to “applying a set of relations” to the identified nodes (2003, p. 30) and studying the relations. Their idea echoes with Castells’ proposition on network’s function to our societies. As Castells put it, “presence or absence in the network and the dynamics of each network vis-à-vis others are critical sources of domination and change in our society” (1996, p. 469). In another source, Castells (2000) holds the same idea, arguing that “the architecture of relationships between networks…configure dominant processes and functions in our societies” (p. 501). Furthermore, he identifies the “switches connecting the networks” as the “power-holders” (p.502). Together with the inter-operating codes of a network, the switches “become the fundamental sources in shaping, guiding, and misguiding societies” (p. 502). Van Dijk (2012) criticizes this “formalistic and superficial” traditional network approach, claiming that it “emphasizes the morphology of ties and nodes to such an extent that it downplays the attributes of the social units and what happens inside or between them, that is, the communicative action of people who are suing and creating rules, resources and meanings” (p. 33). Instead, van Dijk suggests a network approach that studies both the relations and the characteristics of the units they link, especially the conflicts between these two elements (p. 33).

While insightful and useful, these network traditions with different propositions fail to specify the operation or mechanism of network analysis, with obvious limitations such as unclear concepts (switches, conflicts between relations and units, for example), overemphasis on a certain aspect of the network system, inadequate explanation of the network properties and their measurements, and so forth. As such, these network traditions suggest an unfortunate bias toward the evolution of network on actors’ ability and activity rather than on the situation or
environment that heavily influence actors’ behaviors. A comprehensive examination of both the configuration and affecting contexts of the network is urgently needed to discover the full complexity of the public crisis communication network. The communicative actions—how the corporation and its stakeholders forge, maintain, and dissolve relations, how they create crisis rhetoric and persuade others, and the contextual elements—what are they and to what extent they influence the communication will become the subjects of network analysis in this paper.

3.4 Public Crisis Communication Network

Focusing on network configuration, information flow, and affecting contexts, the analytical framework of public crisis communication on the model of network follows the process of (1) network articulation and role assignment, (2) a measurement of association at both local and global level and the explanation of associative strength, and (3) an analysis of the communication content.

3.4.1 The Constitution of Public Crisis Communication Network

Castells (2000) defines “network” as “a set of interconnected nodes” (p. 501). A node, according to him, is “the point at which a curve intersects itself” (p. 501). He does not objectify the concept of node, but merely says that a node can be anything (including human or nonhuman agents) in a society, depending on the nature of the network in which it exists. For example, in the context of public crisis, a stakeholder is a node; the accused corporation is also a node. Jan van Dijk (2012) further defines that a network should contain at least three nodes and two links in between (p. 28). In general, their definition and description of network is broad and abstract. Some scholars criticize it as an “empty signifier” (Perkmann, 1999) or “one-dimensional” (van Dijk, 1999). I agree with Stalder (2006) to acknowledge the value of such a general definition.
Castells’ approach to network analysis is empirical, quasi-mathematical, and similar to the complexity theory in natural sciences. Because of this important characteristic, we can concretize network in different situations as a way of conceptualizing the world.

Applying the network logic to crisis communication will produce a prototype of crisis communication network, with key players as the nodes and their relations as the links. Most of the terms for crisis roles come from Palmlund’s (1992) six generic roles in the societal evaluation of risk. As mentioned in the introduction, public crises are different from regular corporate crises since the former is usually media-exposed, full of harsh accusations targeting a corporation’s unconfirmed misdeeds, and these accusations would quickly circulate among a wide body of agitated consumers who tend to easily believe the correctness of the accusations and then abandon the brand. To make the characteristics of public crisis communication network clearer, I firstly draw the network of traditional, corporation-centric crisis communication using Plamlund’s (1992) assigned crisis roles in Figure 1 and compare it with the public crisis communication network shown in Figure 2.
Figure 1 Traditional, corporate-centric crisis communication network
Compared with the closed, centrical system of corporate crisis communication network, the public crisis communication network has three distinct features:

First, it has no center. All nodes within the network can be the information “center” at a certain time if it has the largest information volume at that point. Yet, the center is not fixed. The constant flow of information in the network will keep shaping the form of the network.

Second, it is an open structure. According to Castells’ (2000) description of the network, openness means it must be “able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they
are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals)” (p. 501). The public crisis communication network can grow or shrink with the changing number of nodes (stakeholders of crisis) and the consequent changing links. In the context of global new media, consumers generally have easy access to connect with other consumers for the common goals in a crisis event, by which they expand the influence of their crisis rhetoric.

Third, some key nodes have different crisis roles. In a public crisis, media, MNCs, and consumers might take a new role that was originally assigned to another actor in the traditional crisis model. To show it clearer, I use Figure 3 to compare the traditional network with the new one:

![Diagram of Crisis Roles](image)

**Roles in Traditional Corporate Crisis**

**Roles in Public Crisis**

*Figure 3 The Transformation of Crisis Roles—Corporate Crisis versus Public Crisis*

In a public crisis, media is the exposers, trigger, or generator when news agencies post investigations about the corporations or when influencing social media users accuse corporations’ wrongdoings. Consumers actively participate in the discussions online and offline
about the corporations and become the crisis informers, which was originally the media’s role in
traditional model. The alleged corporations can then become the bearer, target, or even victim of
the public crisis. As the unproved allegations are instantly and widely circulated among
consumers, the corporations will likely suffer from significant financial or reputational loss
before any “wrongdoings” are proved to have truly happened. The shifting crisis roles among
these key actors is the pivotal characteristic that defines public crisis and critically differentiates
it from the traditional research paradigm of corporate crisis. The shift does not only reflect a
change in the nature and form of corporate crisis communication network, but more deeply
indicates the power transfer from capital to stakeholders in the global, new media era. It should
be noted this trend of transformation in form, nature, and power is not settled; it is still in the
making. Key players such as media, corporations, consumers do not necessarily become
complete generators, bearers, and informers. Influenced by complicated contextual elements, one
player might take on multiple roles. For example, media might work as both crisis exposers and
informers; consumers might be the crisis bearers, informers, or even exposers; corporations
could trigger a crisis due to actual misdeeds or be falsely or purposefully blamed. There is no
designated hat for an actor in the crisis communication to wear all the time during crisis. We
should view the transformation from the traditional to the new conceptualization as progressing
in a continuum or spectrum, with the clear, single roles in two ends and the mixture of roles in
between. The mechanism of the transformation lies in the relationships of all players in the
system, as well as the contexts on which the crisis network depends. These elements will become
the subjects of network analysis in this paper.

I also want to emphasize that the prototype is a very brief description of the actor network
of a public crisis accusing an MNC, only showing the key players and their basic links. A close
examination of any node in this network will find numerous clusters of individuals that constitute smaller networks. For example, within the node of media, there are traditional media such as TV, broadcast, newspaper, as well as new media like social media, official websites, etc. Each type of media is a collection of networks that are made up by smaller elements and detailed relations. There are links between nodes within the same network; there might also be links between one node and another node that belongs to a different network—for example, a news report originally from a newspaper was cited by one social media user and then shared by other users. In reality, the network of public crisis communication is a multi-dimensional architecture that include personal, group, intraorganizational, interorganizational, communal, national, transnational, and global levels. Relations could exist within a cluster of nodes in one level, between two clusters in two different levels or among all levels. Figure 4 from van Dijk (2012, p. 36) gives us a brief sense of the multilevel network of agents.

Figure 4 Network of clusters (van Dijk, 2012, p. 36)
3.4.2 Network Architecture I: Properties of Nodes and Participant Roles

As mentioned in the previous section about the basic characteristics of public crisis network, the forces that push the transformation from traditional model of corporate crisis communication to the new trend of public crisis communication are awaiting to be discovered. A close examination of the configuration and contexts of the dynamic crisis communication networks will help to achieve the goal. The investigation of nodes and their properties is the first step in the analysis of public crisis communication network. The prototype established in the last section—the brief visualization of public crisis communication network—provides a starting point of network analysis. Next, we need to apply this model to a specific case and architect a detailed communication network. The network analysis of nodes includes the following procedures: (1) further diagram the prime model to identify group or cluster members, (2) measure the properties (degree, closeness, betweenness etc.) of individual actors to statistically describe the centrality of clusters and empirically display the characteristics of different actors, (3) describe the roles or functions that key actors fulfill in the network (such as star, liaison/bridge, gatekeeper), and (4) represent the network using graphs with highlighted actors.

3.4.3 Network Architecture II: Properties of Ties and The Extent of Information Flow

The second step or component of network analysis in public crisis communication involves the treatment of ties to discover the relations of the crisis actors, as well as describe the network. Historically, linkages of crisis actors are merely measured by the presence or absence of a relation between actors in the network (see, for example, Castells 2000). This single, nominal criterion could only depict the basic qualitative characteristic of the relations between two actors, but it fails to study the quantitative features such as the extent or degree of
relationship constituting each linkage. To recover more valuable details about the forms of actors' relations, I borrow Brass (1995)'s terminology of social network and focus on the following measures of ties: direct and indirect links, strength, reciprocity, and multiplicity. The strength of a linkage refers to the amount of information changed, the amount of interaction that occurs, or the frequency of contact between two actors. The reciprocity means the “extent to which relationship is bidirectional” and the multiplicity of linkages refers to the “extent to which two actors are linked by more than one relationship” (as quoted in Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 31). These four measurements offer a statistical examination of the dynamic relations between major nodes and the constant information flow during the crisis. To describe the global form of the network, terms such as size, density, and centralization will be used.

3.4.4 Network Architecture III: Content of Linkages

The statistical descriptions of ties and network from the previous step reveals the extent of linkage among actors and the overall structure of network, which will contribute to the visualization of network. Next, it needs to locate statistically significant ties and analyze the contents—what information flows between people and how people influence each other via their constructed relations. Content analysis of linkages stems from Monge and Eisenberg’s (1987) advocacy to advance traditional network analysis by focusing on communication content, for example using the coorientation model to study “the degree to which communicators’ meanings have 'converged’” (p. 321-2). Tichy et al. (1979) summarize four major types of content analysis: exchange of information, exchange of goods and services, expression of affect such as liking and friendship or dislike and animosity, and attempts to influence and control. In the
context of transnational public crisis in digital media era, focusing on the content means a concern on the shared meaning rather on all the exchanged information, and on the implications of people’s messages rather than on the literal meanings of their messages. In this spirit, I adopt semantic network analysis as the method for decoding the content of linkages, which will be detailed in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I have explored the generation mechanism of corporate crises using Beck’s risk society theory and pointed out the increasing MNC-related public crises are products and expressions of the globalized (dis)order. The risk society theory inspires me to define a public crisis as a pressing rhetorical problem for the concerned parties who are in a networked relationship. A public crisis arises from the processes as the concerned or involved parties compete to define and evaluate the event, and consequently construct different rhetorics about the crisis. To study full complexities, I used Castells et al’s network society theory to establish a prototype of communication network for public crises. I also integrated the relational and cultural perspectives in traditional network analysis and designed three steps to examine configuration, information flow, and contexts of networked communication. Network in this study is a means of conceptualization and operationalization, as well as a way of visualization and presentation for the public crisis communication.

4 CHAPTER 4. SEMANTIC NETWORK ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

As an effective rational approach of text analysis for the social sciences, computational semantic network analysis originates in 1990s (with representative studies like Carley 1993,
1997; Danowski, 1982; Kaufer & Carley, 1993;). Semantical analysis is built on the theories of mental models, the construction of meaning, and knowledge presentation (Carley, 1993, 1997). Carley (1997) explains

“Language is a chronicle of social knowledge that is predicated on the society’s history, culture, and social structure…. Language can be represented as a network of concepts and the relationships among them. This network can be thought of as social structure of language or, equivalently, the representation of extant social knowledge” (p. 79).

Studying the “linguistic social structure” is a key to understand people’s societal choices (Carley, 1997, p. 79). Conceptualizing words or ideas as the nodes and meanings as relations among words, semantic network analysis is an empirical description of people’s cognitive structures (see Han, Kim & Kim, 2017; Kang et al, 2017; Yoo, Lee, & Ha, 2018) for example when building consensus and taking collective actions (see the studies from Guo & Vaugo 2015 and Eddington, 2018 on political issues). Semantic network analysis is also often used to identify and examine unique knowledge structures in different social groups (see Kim, 2012; Marvan et al., 2017; Yan & Yasseri, 2017).

Technically, the theoretical presupposition behind the semantic network model is the structuralism perspective of language analysis (Evans, 2005; Firth, 1957; Saussure, 2011). If reviewing natural language as a system of signs, the linear text structure of natural language can be transformed into a non-linear network of signs—that is, a spatial structure consists of vertexes (or nodes) and edges (or ties) arranged through network layout algorithms (Drieger, 2013, p. 6). In this way, words and their semantic relations are symbolized, represented, and visualized for empirical and intuitive exploration and analysis of textual data (Drieger, 2013, p. 7).
4.1 Research Subjects of Semantic Network Analysis

Krippendorff (2013) points out that communication networks “can be both associative and semantic” (p. 248). The associative research tries to answer questions like “how often people talk with each other” and focuses on the explicit textual characteristics of the network such as co-occurrences or proximities within a textual unit. The semantic analysis, in contrast, probes into the implied information or latent interrelations of a body of texts (e.g. tracing the flow of influence and affect) through “a systematic reading between the lines” (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1997) to draw probabilistic inferences or implications (Roberts, 1997, p. 2) from the network. The semantic analysis is based on associative results, such as the calculation of co-occurrences of word pairs. Semantic relations are built on a string of words with set numbers which Drieger calls the “k-next-neighborhood model with user-adjustable k” (2013, p. 6-7). Depending on the research subject of a specific study, the word string length varies (usually 3). The word string model also functions as the given slicing window in textual analysis. Quantitative measurements of the nodes, ties, and overall structure have been detailed in last chapter.

4.1.1 Semantic Grammar

Network analysis usually follows the semantic grammar to identify and encode the relations among themes in texts. Like syntax grammar in linguistics, semantic grammar is also comprised of syntactic components (speech acts). Popping and Roberts (1997) point out that the most commonly used syntax in network analysis is the Subject-Valence-Verb-Object (S-V-V-O) tuple. However, two distinct features mark the differences of semantic and syntax grammars. First, semantic grammar is fixed (a single semantic form with varying content). Second, unlike syntax grammar that excludes social context, semantic grammars require the coder to take
clauses’ social context into account (Robert, 1997, p.58, 60). Roberts (1997) differentiates
phenomenal and generic semantic grammar and designs a general generic semantic grammar to
fit common situations (see p. 68-70).

4. 2 Semantic Network Analysis in Public Crisis Communication Studies

So far, semantic network analysis has limited application in the field of crisis
communication. The only exemplary studies to be found in social sciences are Philip Schrodt and
his colleagues’ work in political science when they use semantic network analysis to extract and
construct patterns of conflict and cooperation between international actors (Savaiano & Schrodt,
1997) and Yang and Veil’s (2017) semantic network analysis of value advocacy in corporate
crisis.

Monge and Eisenberg (1987) introduced semantic network into organizational
communication. Different from the traditional research that focuses on the textual structure and
interrelations, their semantic network analysis studies the “shared interpretations that people
have for message content” instead (2003, p. 187). Monge and Eisenberg’s perspective is
inspiring. Using Krippendorff’s (2013) <node_i – connection_j – node_k> triplet as the basic unit
(not grammar) of a semantic network, we can understand the network as a structure of system
based on shared meaning. In the time of a public crisis, having the shared meaning or not among
all involving sides decides the direction and severity of the crisis development. For example, if
the corporation under attack shares conceptions with its stakeholders about the crisis, it will be
much easier for them to solve the case together. If, in case, the corporation shares little
understanding of the crisis with its stakeholders, the crisis will likely take more time and effort to
be solved. In addition, if the shared meaning is nearly zero, it means that the corporation’s crisis

strategies are ineffective. In this way, semantic network analysis that focuses on the shared meanings among all parties is the principal index to reflect the effectiveness of corporate crisis strategies (something valued in the traditional research paradigm of crisis communication), as well as a reliable element to forecast the future development of crisis.

4.2.1 Rhetorical Network of Public Crisis: Rhetorical Grammar on the Hexad Model

A rhetorical perspective of a public crisis’ semantic network is a method to interpreting the semantic network of a public crisis. As stated in previous chapters, in the “world risk society,” I defined a public crisis as a rhetorical problem that triggers rhetorical struggles between different groups of people and their communication about the crisis constructs a semantic network. To understand this rhetorical problem through reading the semantic network requires a rhetorical principle. I adopt Burke’s pentad/hextad (1969a), the grammar for examining motivation, to understand the quantitative results of semantic network analysis toward a public crisis. In fact, the rhetorical model of \(<act\)-agent-agency-scene-purpose-attitude\> hexad is essentially a semantic network since it identifies the semantic connection within a defined unit of texts for revealing rhetors’ hidden motivations. The concept of ratio indicates that all elements are semantically entailed by the given texts.

In Chapter 3, I established the prototype of public crisis network with seven types of agents. Thus, agents can be treated as controlled variables. I anticipate some of other components in the hexad model also have limited variables after the initial processing of data. Because of this, I can apply Gu (2009)’s “selective (de)emphasis” principle—emphasizing or deemphasizing some aspects of the hexad and build a selective model consisting of some variables. The selective emphasis model of hexad will be used as the rhetorical grammar of a public crisis
communication network. A close examination of how these elements are structured in relation to one another will discover the implicit shared meanings of the communication network. I call such a network as “rhetorical network of public crisis.”

To sum up, the network constructed for studying public crisis addresses associative and semantic features. The application of semantic network analysis is rarely to be seen in crisis communication studies. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the network society requires a network thinking to study the full complexities in an intense situation like crisis communication, where using the traditional institution-centered paradigm is not only outdated in new social contexts but is also inappropriate to disregard the emerging influences of global stakeholders. Thus, constructing crisis in a network including all actors, this study is a pioneer endeavor to empirically measure the influence of stakeholders, systematically trace the information flow, and potentially unveil the contexts embedded in the texts and surrounding the crisis cases. Semantical network analysis has another advantage: textual linearity is folded into a non-linear structure arranged spatially through the network configuration algorithms (Drieger, 2013, p. 6). Concepts and rhetorical relations are mathematically mapped in a connected structure to record the dynamics and conflicts in crisis communication process. The exploration and analysis of semantic network “provides topological insights” (Drieger, 2013, p. 12) of a set of data. Such a visualization of the web of crisis perceptions helps more audiences to understand the situation and possibly enhance the success of crisis communication.

4.3 Textual Data Collection

A full perspective analysis of MNC-related public crisis about its communication network naturally includes multisets of data in different forms and from various sources, as
Table 1 shows based on the categories of public crisis communication participants, which has mentioned in the prototype model of communication network in Chapter 3.

Table 1 Crisis Communication Participants, Data Type, and Data Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Communication Participants</th>
<th>Data Type (Genre)</th>
<th>Original Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream media</td>
<td>TV programs, broadcast programs, newspaper articles, news agencies’ social media posts</td>
<td>Influential media (print and digital)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers, local communities, the public</td>
<td>Voices found in media in various forms, protests and legal actions</td>
<td>Social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multinational/transnational corporations</td>
<td>Press conference, statements, apology letters, announcements, policy updates</td>
<td>Official websites, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNC’s sales agents in local markets</td>
<td>statements, announcements, policy updates</td>
<td>Official websites, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers’ organization, labor union</td>
<td>Criticisms, advices, warnings</td>
<td>Official websites, print and social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals in public relations or scientists</td>
<td>Advices, warnings, analysis</td>
<td>Mainstream media, personal blogs or social media accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory agents, government department</td>
<td>Regulations, executive orders, court decisions</td>
<td>Official websites, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since this study focuses on one typical case that happened in China in recent years:

Apple’s after-sale services crisis in 2013, the details about data collection for each categories of crisis participants are listed in Table 2:
Table 2 Apple’s Case—Participants and Their Data Type, Source, and Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Chinese state media</td>
<td>news articles, editorials</td>
<td>China Core Newspapers Full-text Database(^1)</td>
<td>25 media outlets; 53 articles; 68515 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Apple Inc. (including its Chinese deputies)</td>
<td>Statements, apologies</td>
<td>Apple’s website</td>
<td>a brief statement: 140 words; a statement letter to consumers: 855 words; an apology letter: 1422 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Chinese consumers and general public</td>
<td>Weibo posts</td>
<td>Sina Weibo(^2)</td>
<td>7568 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Professionals (including scholars, lawyers, analysts in corporate crisis, business laws, and business practice)</td>
<td>responses, analysis, suggestions</td>
<td>China Core Newspapers Full-text Database</td>
<td>24472 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Chinese Consumer Association (NGO)</td>
<td>demands, letters</td>
<td>China Core Newspapers Full-text Database</td>
<td>7840 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Chinese governmental agencies</td>
<td>demands, regulations</td>
<td>China Core Newspapers Full-text Database</td>
<td>4280 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western news media</td>
<td>News articles</td>
<td>Lexis-Nexis Academic(^3)</td>
<td>22 news outlets; 26 articles; 12830 words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Apple after-sales service crisis, I identified seven groups of participants: Chinese state media, Chinese professionals in relevant areas, Chinese Consumer Association, Chinese governmental agencies, Chinese consumers and the general public, Apple, and Western mainstream media.

---

1 China Central Newspaper Database (CCND): It is a collection of the most 500 popular newspapers distributed in China.
2 Weibo (Sina Weibo), literally meaning “microblogging,” is one of the largest social media platforms in China. It was reported to have 462 million monthly active users as of December 2018 (“Weibo”, 2019).
3 Lexis-Nexis: this online, searchable database includes full-text archives of most popular newspapers and magazines.
The data for the first four groups of people comes from Chinese Core Newspapers Full-text Database. The data searching process began from using three key words “Apple,” “apology,” and “China.” Within the results, I then used two labels—state-run media and time frame (3/15/2013-4/30/2013) to filter irrelevant data and finally had 54 articles from 25 state media. This set of data includes words from media reporters, but also includes voices from professionals, NGOs, and government officials since citing authorities is a common rhetorical appeal in state media reports. Next, I dissected this set of data into four parts, with each group of people’s responses and comments on the crisis as one sub data set. The size of each sub data set can be found in Table 2, row 1 to 4. Details about the data change over time can be found in Figure 5. The total number of words for these four sub data sets is 105107.

The responses from Chinese consumers and the general public came from a social media platform Weibo, where people replied to CCTV (China Central TV, the biggest state-run TV in China) official Weibo account “CCTV News.” CCTV News leased seven posts respectively on 3/15, 3/23, 3/27, 3/29, and 4/1 to address the Apple crisis. I collected all of the comments from Weibo users who responded to these posts and the total number of pieces of comments is 7568. The specific data size for each day can be found in Figure 6.

The third part of the data comes from Apple’s responses to the media accusations. Since CCTV criticized Apple’s after-sales warranty policy and services on March 15, 2013, Apple only publicly replied three times through its official channel: a brief statement on 3/15 (140 words), a statement letter on 3/23 (855 words), and an apology letter from the CEO Tim Cook on 4/1 (1422 words). Figure 7 is a detailed representation of Apple’s words.

The last portion of data is how Western mainstream media view the Apple crisis. After searching the database of Lexis-Nexis from 3/15/2013 to 4/30/2013 using three keywords:
Apple, apology, and China, I had 40 news articles. I took the briefs, abstracts, identical news, and China-issued newspaper (such as China Daily, an English-language newspaper owned by the Communist Party of China) and had 26 full recovery and editorials about this event from 22 news outlets around the world. The total number of words for this part is 12,830. Details can be seen in Figure 5.

To summarize, through collecting the data of seven groups of crisis participants from four different sources and then cleaning and filtering out repetition and unnecessary data in each subset, I have a corpus for this Apple case with 120,354 words (from print media) and 7568 social media posts.
**Figure 5 Change of Data Size over Time—State Media, Professionals, NGO, GOV, and Western Media**
Figure 6 Social Media Data Size—Number of Weibo Posts from the General Public

Figure 7 Data Size of Apple’s Responses During Crisis
4.4 Analytic Framework and Variables

Data collection process clarifies the controlled variables in this study are agents (seven types of agents: including Chinese state media, professionals, NGO, consumers, Apple, government, and Western media) and agencies (four kinds: Chinese newspaper, social media, Apple’s website, and Western news outlets). Figure 5 clearly shows that five agencies have the same tendencies and patterns on date-word counts axis: section one from 3/16-3/25, section two from 3/26-4/5, and section three from 4/7-4/16. Social media data (shown in Figure 6) and Apple Inc.’s data (shown in Figure 7) can also fit into the division. Considering that state media newspaper usually takes a longer time to be published comparing with the instant new media, and Apple did apologize on April 1, I would set the second section as 3/26-4/1 for print media and 3/26-3/31 for new media, 4/2-4/16 as the third section for print media and 4/1 and after for the new media. Time becomes as the independent variable and differentiates the basic sessions of crisis development. Time is a key element in crisis and the scene in the hexad model. I have Scene 1, 2, and 3 as independent variables. With agent and agency as the controlled variables, scene as the independent variable, this study sets act, attitude, and purpose as dependent variables that will change as the independent variable—scene—is altered. Now, I can apply the rhetorical network grammar <act-attitude-purpose> to analyze the data for a specific agent and its corresponding agency within one scene. With this model, I can also compare any two agents’ rhetorical constructions within a scene or trace one agent’s rhetorical change across scenes. In other words, Scene (with its variables) and Agent-Agency (with their variables) construct the basic analytic framework to study the rhetoric network of public crisis. With each pair of scene-agent-agency, I study the specific act-attitude-purpose variables that contribute to different rhetoric network (shown in Table 3).
Table 3 The Analytic Framework and Variables for the Apple Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent 1-Agency</th>
<th>Scene 1 (3/15-3/25)</th>
<th>Scene 2 (3/26-3/31 for new media; 3/26-4/1 for print media)</th>
<th>Scene 3 (4/1 and after for new media; 4/2 and after for print media)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News reporters-State media</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-1</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-1</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 2-Agency Professionals-state media</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-2</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-2</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 3-Agency Chinese consumer association-state media</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-3</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-3</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 4-Agency Governmental agencies-state media</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-4</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-4</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 5-Agency Consumers-social media</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-5</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-5</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 6-Agency Apple-website</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-6</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-6</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 7-Agency Western media-mainstream print media</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 1-7</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 2-7</td>
<td>act-attitude-purpose 3-7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three variables of scene and seven variables of agent-agency could generate 3×7=21 <act-attitude-purpose> variables. I will explore questions like:

- Act: what acts led to the crisis? What kind of act is the crisis? What acts have been done or not at a certain stage of crisis development (this is, scenes)? What acts should have been done to prevent, mitigate, or correct the crisis, but the agent did not do?

4 1-1 refers to Scene1-Agent 1-Agency. It means the study on act-attitude-purpose for the state media crisis rhetoric during the first scene.
• Purpose: what purposes motivate the agents engaged in creating and responding to the crisis? What motives account for the crisis?

• Attitude: what are the attitudes of the agents toward the main target (Apple, in this case) and other prominent agents in a certain scene? What collective ideologies can be found through examining their attitudes?

Together, the rhetoric grammar of <scene-agent-agency-act-attitude-purpose> makes 21 rhetoric networks (or semantic networks). To probe into the communication pattern to answer the research questions in this study, these 21 rhetoric networks will be compared along horizontal and vertical lines. Along the vertical line means to compare rhetoric network of different agents and agencies in the same period to identify its unique rhetorical construct; following the horizontal line means to compare the rhetoric network in different scenes, S1 vs. S2 vs. S3, to trace the rhetorical change over time.

Synthesizing the data from different sources displayed in Figure 5, 6, and 7 and categorizing them into along agent-agency-scene framework (Table 4) generates an overview of data distribution as shown in Table 4. Since the data size has already been detailed in those graphs, this table only records the presence/absence of data in three scenes:

Table 4 Data Distribution in Scenes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent 1-Agency</th>
<th>Scene 1 (3/15-3/25)</th>
<th>Scene 2 (3/26-3/31 for new media; 3/26-4/1 for print media)</th>
<th>Scene 3 (4/1 and after for new media; 4/2 and after for print media)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News reporters-state media</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent 2-Agency</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals-state media</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 shows that some agents do not have data at certain scenes, including government at scene I, and western media at scene I and II. Seventeen semantic networks built on the rhetorical grammar of <scene-agent-agency-act-attitude-purpose> are waiting for individual and comparative analyses.

4.5 Measuring Tools

I use Wordij to construct the semantic network and Gephi to visualize the semantic network. Both tools are proved to be effective and powerful in semantic network analysis (see Yuan, Feng, & Danowski, 2013; Yan & Yasseri, 2018, etc.).

4.5.1 Wordij—Construct Semantic Networks

Wordij is a computer program that was designed by the communication researcher James A. Danowski in 1993 (with WordLink as the original name). The latest version is Wordij 3.0, which was built in 2013 with a variety of additional programs. The working principle of this tool
is moving the slicing window (the size of which can be set from 1 to the infinite, but usually 3) through text to count the occurrences and associations of word pairs. I have stated the research theory and subjects in the beginning of this chapter. To be specific, one core function, WordLink, processes the original text and generates statistics on occurrences through counting the number of vertices (nodes), arcs (edges) and the number, frequency, proportion of word pairs in the whole text; it also calculates the mutual information of one word pair to measure words association. These statistics about the cooccurrences and association of word pairs can then be used to construct the semantic network.

Besides WordLink, Wordij 3.0 also includes OptiComm to test the shortest path between the seed word and the target word within a string of words), QAPNet to compare the number of permutations in two networks, Utilities to divide the source text into time segmentations and compare the change of network structure over time, Z Utilities to conduct z-test toward the words or word pairs (Danowski, 2013). It also has a function called “ViSij” to visualize the semantic network based on the files generated by the other functions. Figure 8 demonstrates the user interface of Wordij. This study will only use the function of WordLink and a better and more powerful alternative, Gephi, for visualizing and interpreting semantic network.
4.5.2 Gephi—Visualize Semantic Networks

Gephi (Version 0.9.2) is an open source software for network analysis of large data, which can visualize, spatialize, filter, manipulate, and cluster all types of networks (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009). One of its most distinguishing features is to visualize how a network evolves over time and thus is especially helpful to intuitively portray the dynamic network of crisis communication along a timeline.

Importing the files generated by Wordij (in the format of .net) into Gephi will result in a semantic network composed of nodes (words) and edges (semantic association). I choose the Force Atlas 2 algorithm to display the layout since it presents the modularity (the cluster or community structure) of a network. Word pairs with higher association values (mutual
information) are attracted proportionally closer than others. Edges are set as directed to better see the information transfer. Edges are also measured by weight, which means the thickness of a wedge positively co-relates with the co-occurrence frequency of a word pair. Nodes are ranked according to their degree (the number of direct links with other nodes) in the text. Nodes (and their text labels) with high degrees appear bigger.

Besides visualization, Gephi also supports statistical measurement of node, edge, and network in many aspects as I have discussed in Chapter 3. Figure 9 features the overall structure of a data subset visualized by Gephi.

Figure 9 A Screenshot of Gephi 0.9.2
4.6 Data Analysis Procedures

The whole process of data treatment can be demonstrated in a flow chart in Figure 10.

**Figure 10 The Flow Chart of Data Analysis Process**
CHAPTER 5. SEMANTIC NETWORK OF PUBLIC CRISIS: CONTENT, STRUCTURE, AND TRANSFORMATION

Any crisis features several tipping points that dramatically change the course of crisis development. The following events marks the tipping moments in Apple’s after-sale policy crisis:

Table 5 The Tipping Points in Apple After-sale Crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>CCTV 3.15 “Consumer Rights Day Program” criticized Apple for its “double-standard” after-sale policy in China because of its differences from that in many other countries, such as retaining the original rear plate in exchange, shortening the warranty period after exchange, etc., all of which contradicted Chinese laws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>Apple issued a very short statement (27 words) to emphasize its user-centered philosophy and “incomparable service.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>Apple issued a second statement to defend its after-sale policy and practice. It denied the “double standard” criticism and claimed it had no difference with that in the U.S. Apple also said its service exceeded many Chinese counterparts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>The mouth of CCP, People’s Daily and other state media published several editorials that harshly criticized Apple’s self-defense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>Apple deleted some controversial languages in its “Repair Terms and Conditions” without updating with the consumers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>The State Administration for Industry and Commerce required local branches to enforce investigation toward Apple stores’ illegal behaviors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
China Consumers’ Association advised Apple to “completely correct wrongdoings and sincerely apologize to Chinese consumers.”

Apple’s CEO, Tim Cook issued an apology letter on Apple China website, announcing “significant adjustment to the after-sale policy” and promising to enhance service quality.

These tipping moments and their meanings for the crisis can be better visualized in Freytag’s (1863/1900) pyramid of dramatic structure:

*Figure 11 The Plot of Apple Case*

These stages of crisis development correspond with data distribution in scenes: exposition—scene I (3.15-3.25), rising—scene II (3.26-3.31 or 4.1 in print media), climax—scene III (4.1 in digital media or 4.2 in print media), falling—scene III (after 4.2), resolution—scene III (4.16, the last media response about this crisis). The variables in this study, the 18 semantic networks built on the <scene-agent-agency-act-attitude-purpose> hexad, are examined individually and comparatively within the same scenes or across scenes. The research results are framed into different phases of crisis development.
5.1 Crisis Exposition—"Why Apple Is So Arrogant and Biased?"

China Central Television (CCTV) is the national TV station, one of the most influential news media in China with over 1.2 billion in its audience (O’Leary, 2007). Belonging to the PRC State Council and the CPC Publicity Department, it identifies itself as “an important mouthpiece of the party, the government and the people…an important ideological and cultural front of China” (“Brief Intro,” 2017). CCTV’s initiated the campaign to defeat Apple on March 15, 2013, the Consumers’ Right Day, through a program called “3.15 In Action,” an annual program since 1991 that aims to “awaken consumers’ awareness of rights protection, regulate market order, and disseminate national laws and regulations” (“315 In Action Special Report,” 2012). In the live broadcast, CCTV usually targets a few domestic or international brands with quality or service issues, plays its pre-recorded investigation video, and invites authorities to be onset to talk with the audience. Before Apple, McDonald’s, LG, Sony, and Panasonic, among others, were on its list of investigations. It should be noted that this program is usually sponsored by governmental agencies such as the Supreme Court, the Supreme Procuratorate, the Ministry of Justice, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, etc. (“2013 CCTV 315 Program Text Record,” 2013).

CCTV argued that Apple discriminated against its Chinese “fans” (guǒ fěn, loyal consumers) by providing subpar after-sale service that differed from what Apple promised, what Apple conducted in other countries, and what Chinese laws stipulated. CCTV specified Apple’s three wrongdoings: first, the iPhone exchange policy claimed “complete phone exchange” but did not replace the old rear exterior; second, the exchanged item did not have a recalculated warranty period as it should have—instead, it only had the days that the old item had left or a standard 90 days warranty, depending on which period was longer; third, the main parts of iPads
only had a one-year warranty, not a two-year as the Chinese law of “Three Guarantees” for repair, replacement, and compensation set.

Apple’s reputation was at serious risk after being attacked by China’s most influential TV station who represented the state will. Unfortunately, Apple seemed not to realize the severity of having its name called by CCTV. Apple Inc. issued a brief response on the night of March 15 through a popular news portal Sina and below is the full text:

Apple is committed to producing world-class products and providing an unparalleled user experience for consumers in their markets. That’s why we offer face-to-face support that is loved by consumers at the Genius Bar genius at every Apple retail store. We also work closely with more than 500 authorized service points in more than 270 cities across the country. Our team has always strived to exceed consumer expectations and value the opinions and suggestions of each consumer (“Apple Responded to CCTV 315,” 2013).

Although Apple was quickly aware of its responsibility to repair the image, it used the wrong strategy. This short message itself does not carry too much desire to fight back. It is a message to an unclear audience. Using Benoit’s image restoration terms (1995), Apple bolsters its great products and “unparallel” service to reduce offensiveness. Instead of directly admitting and denying CCTV’s allegations, Apple hopes to offset the negative impacts by stressing its commitment to their consumers, what is an indirect strategy to dilute accusation and redirect the focus of audience.

After CCTV and Apple’s battle, many stakeholders joined this debate with different perspectives, attitudes, and purposes. Semantic network analyses within the period of crisis explosion generate the following results:
5.1.1 The State Media Reporters-Scene 1 Semantic Network

Figure 12 shows that Apple (degree=259), consumers (degree=227), and repair (degree=178) link to most other words directly in this network. A strong collocation exists among these three words, especially between Apple and repair. These three high degree words also have many overlapped co-occurrences with the rest of words in the network, such as with the cluster on the bottom (CCTV, program, expose, Apple Inc., expose, double-standard, reporter express, Apple fans, etc.), with the cluster on the right (cellphone, purchase, complain, after-sale service, etc.), with the cluster on the top (China, CCA, market, products, exchange, whole piece, complain, Apple, old rear exterior, etc.), and with the cluster on the left (Three Guarantees, warranties, provisions, laws, parts, accountable, loss, damage, terms, contract, revision, quality, etc.).

The sub-network of repair reveals what Apple is blamed for. The word repair has strong links with products, terms, contracts, and provisions. The day after CCTV fired the first shot at Apple, the state media took on the fight to continue warning more general audiences of Apple’s deceitful deeds in its after-sale service. The word deceit highly associates with clients, messages, consumers and lies between Apple and repair. Apple’s deceitful acts mainly reflects on its vague terms and unfair contracts on repair. These words collocate as a cluster under repair. The state media also criticize Apple’s arrogance and prejudice in Chinese market, something it dares not to show in global market. These words can be found along the edge that links Apple and Apple Inc, indicating they are highly frequently used to describe Apple (Inc.).

The state media also comment about Apple’s reply on 315, describing this official statement as a lie, not an apology as it should be. Apple’s actual deeds in exchange policy and
practice did not match its commitment of “paying high attentions to consumers’ opinions” in the statement.

Crisis is an obvious concept in the network, which connects to Apple (Inc.), important, program, reporters, explain, smart phones, global. The state media identifies this event as Apple’s business crisis that would threaten its global smart phone market if it loses Chinese consumers.
Figure 12 The State Media Reporter-Scene 1 Semantic Network
5.1.2 The Consumers-Scene 1 Semantic Network

To better manage the tremendous data from consumer responses on Weibo, I set the Wordij threshold of “dropping words appearing less often than” as 10, so any word that appeared below 10 times in the dataset was dropped. I also filtered out word pairs with low frequencies (f<3). The results include 266 nodes and 684 edges.

Big data also pose challenge for visualization. Unlike the former semantic network that has a layout of ranking nodes and edges to different size and width, I built the network of consumers’ online discourses based on modularity to identify and colorize communities/clusters. The results are shown in Figure 13. Words that belong to the same community have the same color. Nine partitions exist in the network.

The biggest community that locates in the center in black features Apple (degree=88, betweenness centrality=2444) and China (d=37, betweenness centrality=769.17), two words that have the largest degree in the network. Words paired with Apple are are arrogant, bossy, disgusting, disappointed, despicable, rotten, black, bully, disobey, refuse, etc. Words associated with China are biggest market, discriminate, criticize, acts, government, punish, measures, combat, complete, laws, regulatory departments, respect, etc. These words show a large group of people stand with the state interests to condemn Apple’s unlawful and unethical deeds toward Chinese users.

The second largest community (in red), however, targets CCTV 315 program and includes words such as expose, domestic, companies, food safety, milk powder, quality, the general public, citizens, care, ads, ignore, etc. Many Weibo users criticize CCTV for blurring the focus that the general public really care about, such as food safety. They argue that instead of investigating Apple, CCTV should have paid more attention to more emergent and influential
social problems (e.g. fake milk powder). Some Weibo users joke that CCTV offered Apple a free ad and great promotion to national audience.

The third cluster in green focuses on iPhone’s after-sale policy, in which the Weibo users discussed the legitimacy of Apple’s “one-year warranty” compared with other famous brands like Nokia and Huawei. The fourth cluster in blue centers on nation, in which the social media users wish government to wield more power on law enforcement to regulate the cellphone business. The next significant cluster surrounds the concept of consumer rights, in which people ask for equal treatment just like other consumers around the world, in addition to other ethical/moral request on foreign brands.
Figure 13 The Consumers-Scene 1 Semantic Network (two layouts)
5.1.3. The Professionals-Scene 1 Semantic Network

Lawyers, professors, and former governmental employees on business management were invited by news reporters of state media to talk about the Apple case. The semantic network of professional discourses (nodes=241, edges=2146) centers on consumers (degree=209), which is different from previous networks that target Apple. The words of repair (d=111), Apple (d=97), products (d=75), China (=75), and exchange (d=75), Apple Inc.(d=67), cellphone (d=67), service (d=58), business operator (d=58), laws (d=54), think (d=52), and problems (d=49) are among the second tier of centrality. The concept of consumer has the strongest link with China, and relatively strong connections with all other words of high degree.

Professionals define Apple’ controversial practice in repair and exchange as a fraud that breaks the contract between the seller and consumers. Apple retaining replaced parts also infringes consumers’ proprietary rights. Professionals deem Apple’s double standards in China versus in other countries reflect its disrespect of Chinese consumers. However, facing these problems, consumers usually find it hard to defend their rights. Besides consumers’ blind enthusiasm for foreign brands, the fundamental reasons can be traced to the defective business laws that fail to rule enough punishment to deter unlawful acts like what Apple conducted.

Like the state media, professionals also label Apple an arrogant foreign brand who refused to cooperate with local government agencies and NGOs or align with Chinese regulations on after-sale service. Professionals urge sellers in general, including Apple, to fulfill their social responsibility, respect consumers, and protect their rights with their best efforts.
Figure 14 The Professionals-Scene 1 Semantic Network
5.1.4 The NGO-Scene 1 Semantic Network

The most well-known organization to protect consumers’ interests in China is the China Consumers Association (CCA). The nature of CCA is mysterious: although registered as an NGO, this labor-protection organization with 16,351 sub-associations in 2015 (“About Us,” 2015) was established upon the approval of the State Council. CCA affiliates with China’s State Council and receives funds from it (“About Us, 2014). Wearing the hat of NGO and social group that aims to protect consumers’ rights and interests, CCA serves as the business watchdog of the Chinese government to “supervise commodities and services…and to promote a healthy development of the socialist market economy” (“CCA”). Representing the will of the country, CCA resolves consumer complaints and disputes. It also plays an important role in legislating consumer protection laws and regulations. For example, the current version of the Law on Protection of consumer Rights has CCA’s work in its amendments. CCA also annually sponsors CCTV 315 program (“About Us,” 2015).

This representative of both government and consumers has influential right of speech, if not administrative power, when handling consumer complaint cases, especially in a case where consumers are framed as powerless encountering a big foreign brand. CCA’s power can be clearly seen in its semantic network below (Figure 15).

This network is highly clustered with a modularity of 0.608, consisting of four clusters that respectively surround Apple, repair, consumers, and laws. These four words are connected. Words that co-occur with Apple include products, CCA, complaint, repair service, blacklist, correct, unfair clauses; words connect with repair are broken, parts, transportation, perfunctory, data, lose, arbitrarily, exchange, old, etc. Consumers frequently co-occur with rights protection, individual, weak, powerless, government agencies, powerful, shield, co-work, society, etc. The
cluster of laws is unique for this network that does not exist in other networks. Besides strongly linking to the three key words in the network, laws also attacks regulations, low, level, departments, enforce, perfect, system, lawsuit, etc. Within this sub-network of laws, a minor center is punishment, which collocates with strength, insufficient, and deterrence, among other words. We can see through this network that CCA thinks the current law does not have sufficient power to deter MNCs’ misdeeds: it is too easy to play with consumers but too hard to get punished. CCA proposed three methods to fighting again Apple’s “unfair” terms using the power of law: first, enhance the administrative level of business and commerce department to grant it larger power in law enforcement when encountering with MNCs; second, perfect the law system and make specific rules for MNCs’ local practices; third, increase the severity of punishment for MNC’s illegal acts.
Figure 15 The NGO-Scene 1 Semantic Network
5.1.5 The Apple-Scene 1 Semantic Network

Apple issued a second response on March 23, 2013, which was in fact its first formal response posted in the official website. It was a letter (word count=861) to its Chinese consumers, titled “Apple’s Statement to Consumers about Our After-Sale Service.” The semantic network analysis of this statement (Figure 16) shows that consumers has the highest degree (d=13) and weighed degree (wd=22), repair has the biggest betweenness closeness (23.066667), and service tops the harmonic closeness (0.730769). These three important nodes are the global hubs that indicate frequently referred core issues in the network. Apple mentioned its customers 16 times in this letter to address their concern about repair policy and service. Apple has two arguments in this letter: first, Apple offers “world-class,” “unparallel,” and the highest standard consumer service in China; second, Apple’s policy is “in full compliance with local laws and regulations” (Apple Inc., 2013). Additionally, Apple also defends its warranty policy as “roughly the same as in the United States and around the world”; “in some repair methods, specific practices are adjusted according to Chinese laws and regulations” (Apple Inc., 2013). Apple uses its “whole phone replacement”—a much more efficient repair method for consumers—to support its first points. It also mentions its 90-day warranty exceeds many of its Chinese counterparts who only grant a 30-day warranty for the exchanged item.
Figure 16 The Apple-Scene 1 Semantic Network
Comparing the semantic networks of the state media, the professionals, the NGO, the consumers, and Apple in the period of Scene 1-crisis explosion will generate the following results:

Apple’s semantic network and its stakeholders’ semantic networks share common high-degree nodes such as China, consumers, repair, exchange, and policy that serve as the global hubs in their networks and indicate frequently refereed core issues. These common important nodes in different semantic networks show that this case has a single central issue—Apple’s repair and exchange policy—at least during the first stage of crisis communication. Most of the crisis communication participators pay attention to the same core issue, with only different focuses from social media users who question the legitimacy and necessity of CCTV’s attack on Apple’s after-sale problem compared with many other more emergent and significant product issues.

Digging into the cluster surrounding these important nodes helps to discover how each side views the same case differently. The most obvious divergences between Apple and its stakeholders are on two issues: the way to treat consumers and the nature of exchange policy. In Apple’s semantic network, Chinese, consumers, and offer constitute a sub network with strong co-occurrences. Whereas, in Apple stakeholders’ networks, consumers link deceit, differentiate, hurt, damage, violate, rights and interests, etc. The different word collocations of consumers showcase two distinctive perceptions of how Apple treats its consumers: Apple thinks it offers the best products and services to its Chinese consumers but the state media, consumer organizations, even some consumers do not agree—but the opposite, they think Apple offers discrimination that hurt consumers’ rights. To understand where these opposing views come from, we can examine the subset network of repair. In Apple’s statement, repair associates with
means; however, in the stakeholders’ networks, repair highly associates with terms, regulations, whole-phone exchange, unfair, not grant, inform, fee, etc. This difference indicates that Apple views the “whole-phone” exchange policy as an advantaged repair method compared with the regular repair of the broken part; while its stakeholders generally criticize that the “whole-phone” exchange is deceitful as in fact, Apple does not replace the whole thing.

The fundamental issue that Apple and its stakeholders disagree about is the nature the repair policy—the so-called “whole phone” exchange within the one-year warranty: Apple defines it as a business protocol that benefits consumers the most while its significant stakeholders in China define it as an illegal issue against consumer rights.

5.2 Rising Action—“Defeating Apple’s Unparallel Arrogance”

Apple’s second statement, a self-defense of its after-sale policy, ignited its stakeholders’ anger. Among the sensational participants were the state media, who bombarded Apple using the rhetoric of war—obtrusive languages like the title (from the People’s Daily) exemplifies above, and thus, propelled the public crisis to greater extent. Other stakeholders also joined in the battle with various attitudes and purposes, together shaping the rhetorical struggles in this period.

5.2.1 The State Media Reporters-Scene 2 Semantic Network

Compared to 1-1 network of state media in scene 1, the 1-2 network of state media in scene 2 has the same high-degree words that top the list of data statistics in degree and centrality, including Apple, consumers, Apple Inc., China, repair, products, reporters, problem, and provisions. One big difference is on the word of law, which listed 48/240 in scene 1 (degree=36, weighted degree=75, betweenness centrality=344.82467, hub=0.065475) but is among the top 10 words in degree in scene 2 (degree=111, weighted degree=107, betweenness
centrality=5502.47733). Policy, terms, and double standard also have significant increase in terms of degree and closeness. The co-occurrences of law include after-sale service, digital products, disobey, weapon, infringement, inviting suspicion, and so forth. These words about consumer rights and business behaviors indicate the change of the definition of Apple’s wrongdoings: from a regular brand crisis (a business problem) in scene I to a heavy offense that infringes consumer rights (an illegal act). Around the word of law lies ethics, a concept that does not exist in the network of state media in scene 1.

Targeting Apple’s second statement that claims it “completely comply to Chinese laws and regulations,” the state media explains to the general audience which laws Apple failed to follow and to what extent it actually infringed customers’ interests. The state media also criticizes Apple’s deeds are unethical especially to its millions of fans. Apple’s boast of its “unparallel user experience” cannot stand when confronted by the state media’s reproach from both legal and ethical perspectives. The People’s Daily imitates Apple’s language and titles its editorial as “Defeating Apple’s Unparallel Arrogance.” This article pushed the momentum of the Apple crisis to its full swing that engaged more players (e.g. the Chinese government) and generated more rhetorical struggles in the process toward its climax.
Figure 17 The State Media-Scene 2 Semantic Network
5.2.2 The Professional-Scene 2 Semantic Network

The semantic network of professionals’ responses on the Apple case in Scene 2 features consumers (degree=102), China (degree=65), Apple (degree=65), terms (degree=59), laws (degree=48), media (degree=48), repair (degree=48) as important nodes with high centrality, which refer to the topics of professional discourses. Compared with the network of professionals in Scene 1, the current network still emphasizes the function of laws in dealing with MNC problems in the local market. Surrounding the word of law are make into, regulate, clarify, revise, use, terms, etc. One prominent change in this period is the appearance of media as one of the global hubs of the network, which co-occurs with criticize, famous brands, goods, USA, and domestic. It shows that law experts wish the media can play important part in supervising MNCs and criticizing foreign brands’ wrongdoings in China. These professionals also propose a new concept of “public interest litigation,” arguing that it will be an effective and workable method to protecting consumers’ rights if consumer’s individual action against the big MNC fails. They also support the CCA to be the representative of individual or group consumers in fighting against MNCs.

5.2.3. The NGO-Scene 2 Semantic Network

In response to Apple’s actions since the crisis explosion, the Chinese Consumers Association (CCA) issued a letter of admonition on March 29, 2013, in which CCA raised four points that require Apple to respect the legitimate rights and interests of consumers, to completely correct problems, and to sincerely apologize to Chinese consumers. The semantic network analysis of CCA’s letter to Apple finds that consumers, repair, Apple Inc., regulations, problem, exchange, and Three Guarantees top the list of hub and thus depict the tenet of the text.
Around the concept of consumers are legal terms such as Consumer Protection Law, Property Law, ownership, the right of choice, property right, among other words. CCA clearly and specifically explains what consumer rights that Apple violates. It consists with one of CCA’s key nodes in Scene 1, laws, but more specific and direct in Scene 2 with the actual terms of consumer rights and laws. CCA also focuses on one of the directly relevant regulations “The Three Guarantees” to explain how Apple’s terms on product (including iPhone, iPad, and Mac) repair and exchange contradict the regulations. For example, CCA points out Apple’s “whole phone” exchange policy to repair broken parts seems benefit to consumers but in fact confuses the distinction between exchange with the new and repair with new parts—a tricky policy that goes against China’s warranty regulations. Besides urging Apple to correct its repair terms, CCA also wants to see Apple change its attitude, for example, to respect consumers and diminish discrimination in the local market.
Figure 18 The Professionals-Scene 2 Semantic Network
Figure 19 The NGO-Scene 2 Semantic Network
5.2.4. The Government-Scene 2 Semantic Network

After keeping silent during the period of crisis explosion, governmental agencies started to talk about the Apple case publicly and announce its administrative measures to solve the problem. The semantic network of governmental discourses during the second stage of crisis communication has a few important nodes—problem, Apple, SAIC (State Administration for Industry and Commerce), terms, Apple Inc. state, revise, consumers, strengthen (descending in hub index)—that convey the core issues in text.

By the Registration Regulations for Permanent Representative Offices of Foreign Enterprises (2010), SAIC and its authorized local administration are the registration and management agencies of MNCs. SAIC and its local branch in Shanghai co-occur with Apple, <problem, after-sale, repair policy>, terms, revise, <strengthen, digital products, supervision>, <require, issue, notice, specially, market>, supplier etc. SAIC expresses its attitude as pay high attention and situates Apple in the context of receiving repeated criticism before. It defines Apple’s standard terms of contract and warranty policy as “illegal and against the state regulations.” It also requires local branches to talk to local Apple stores, issue notification and order immediate rectification, or investigate and punish according to law. SAIC emphasizes these moves are to protect consumers’ rights.
Figure 20 The Government-Scene 2 Semantic Network
5.2.5. The Consumers-Scene 2 Semantic Network

Like the consumer-social media network in Scene 1, given the linguistic diversity of consumers’ discourses on social media, for Scene 2 I also partition nodes according to the modularity class—that is, nodes labels that belong to the same cluster have the same color.

This network features five major clusters. The biggest cluster (in violet) is centered on Apple. Words that consist of this sub-network are boycott, abandon, prosecute, blow, despise, disgusting, arrogant, annoying, shameless, et. The second largest cluster (in green) has CCTV as the hub, which include words like useless and some swear words. The third cluster (in blue) has China in the center and other words like despise, bully, ignore, apologize, grieve, and so on. It also has a minor center of the U.S. surrounded by Chinese brands, such as Huawei, ZTC, and words like sanction, Chinese government, double-standard, foreign, etc. The cluster in orange about problem include words of supervision, air pollution, poisonous milk powder, gutter oil, etc. The fifth cluster (in red) is made up by words of must, punish, unconscious, media, illegal, incite, hostility, disobey, law, regulations, etc.

This network resembles the consumers’ network in scene 1 in the following aspects: first, the biggest and core cluster in both networks is about Apple, where people argue against Apple and many decide not to buy Apple products; second, in both stages, people did not buy CCTV’s investigation and coverage on Apple in the context of other existing emergent quality issues on food and environment. However, in scene 2, the cluster of CCTV consists of more emotional swear words and few rational words, indicating people’s contempt about CCTV reporters’ failed secret videotaping, an unprofessional and unethical news report. Another difference is in Scene 2, a new cluster emerges—the cluster of the U.S within the word community of China. It shows that people try to explain the cause of CCTV’s blast of Apple and view it as China’s revenge on
the sanctions the U.S. federal government imposed on some Chinese brands, such as Huawei and ZTC.

To summarize, Apple’s first official statement published on its website (Apple.com.cn), a letter to its consumers to defend its warranty policy and practice, intensified its crisis in the following ways:

First, Apple and its stakeholders have fundamentally different interpretations about the “whole phone” repair policy, which essentially becomes the core issue in the crisis. Such a difference in key term interpretations between the MNC and its stakeholders can be explained by the extent to which its networks are structurally equivalent or have similar patterns of communication. Semantic analysis of the term “whole-phone exchange” in Apple’s letter and the responses from the state media, professionals, GNO, government agencies, and the consumers reveals that the term have similar structures among stakeholders’ individual networks but distinct structures between Apple and its stakeholders. As the stakeholders generally situate the “whole-phone exchange” closely related to words of illegal, tricky, deceitful, or against the Three Guarantees, in Apple’s text, it directly connects the word means, which suggests that Apple regards the whole-phone exchange policy as a unique means of repair that differs from the conventional practice of other brands. Through different definitions, Apple’s stakeholders rebut Apple’s argument on the legitimacy of its “whole-phone exchange” with the facts of partial exchange and limited warranty.

Second, the crisis gains weight as more stakeholders, especially the most powerful one—SAIC, the government executive department that supervises Apple Inc., involved in the
Figure 21 The Consumers-Scene 2 Semantic Network
process of crisis communication. Terms, contract, and format are important nodes with high intensity in the network, indicating the topics of its text network. SAIC officially identifies Apple’s whole-phone exchange policy as having serious flaws (e.g. unfair standard contract in iPhone Repair Terms and Conditions) against the governmental regulations that in fact caused severe damage to consumers’ rights and interests. Another important hub that has high centrality in the SAIC network is administrative acts, including words of strengthen, revise, supervise, investigate, etc. Each of these words is surrounded by a few content words indicating the measures to actions. SAIC’s network is concrete with clear definition of the questionable terms, detailed future actions, and specific purposes, all of which suggest its firm attitude of dealing with Apple’s case.

Third, in the social media platform Weibo, users continue holding various understandings of Apple’s “wrongdoings.” Like their opinions in Scene 1, people have the following divergent arguments: Apple discriminates against Chinese consumers so boycott it; Apple is wrong but not serious compared with what other domestic brands did; Apple was criticized as China’s political revenge on the U.S. for Huawei’s case. Compared with its network in Scene 1, consumers’ semantic network in Scene 2 does not have much variation in content: the central network is still featuring criticism of Apple, with words closely connected in short paths from different directions. The most obvious difference in two periods is people’s increased negative sentiments with CCTV’s serial investigations toward Apple stores after 3.15. Weibo users have significant employment of swear words (with different representatives instead of the actual words, such as characters with the same pronunciations or chopped characters of the original words) to describe CCTV’s intensity to attack Apple but ignoring other quality issues that happened simultaneously such as food safety.
5.3 Crisis Climax, Falling, and Resolution— “If Apple Could Have Apologized Earlier”

Facing tremendous pressures from its stakeholders on its after-sale policy, Apple issued another letter to its Chinese consumers—an apology letter that Apple clearly stated in the title—from its CEO Tim Cook and published in its official website, Apple China. This letter pushed the crisis development to the climax, as it attracted global attention and unexpectedly new criticisms about its content and ways of delivery. Although Apple failed to gracefully settle the crisis, the letter did work as fewer and fewer discussions about this case emerged in the days after Cook’s apology, just as the data shows in Scene 3.

5.3.1 The Apple-Scene 3 Semantic Network

As Figure 21 displays, Apple (hub=0.363), consumer (hub=0.291), iPhone (hub=0.216), policy (hub=0.200), repair (hub=0.193), China (hub=0.185), service (hub=0.181), provide (hub=0.176), authorized (hub=0.159), warranty (hub=0.158), exchange (hub=0.153), service (hub=0.144), ensure (hub=0.141), and problem (hub=0.132) are among the top tier of high centrality. As hubs represent important nodes in a network with high degree and correspond to highly connected nodes, they are quantitative measurements of the importance of a node in a network (besides, hub, betweenness, closeness, or eigenvalue centrality also measure centrality, according to Wassermann & Faust, 1994; Brandes & Erlebach, 2005). These hubs coincide with the important hubs that the stakeholders’ networks generally shared in Scene 1 and Scene 2, which are Apple, consumer, repair, China, service, problem, exchange, etc. This coincidence suggests that Apple’s apology letter targets the common concerns its stakeholders had since the crisis explosion. In addition, words clustered around these hubs, for example, re-calculate, refund, and effective day adjacent to warranty, show specific actions that Apple would take to
address the issue being examined. Comparing Apple’s network in Scene 1 (Figure 16) and 3 (Figure 21), we can find differences in three aspects: the complexity of global structure, the number and size of word community, and the node coincidence level (in content) with that of stakeholders’ networks. Apple-Scene 1 network is significantly lower than Apple-Scene 2 network in all three dimensions. This result can explain why Apple’s first statement in Scene 1 failed while the apology letter worked, to a large extent if not perfectly.
Figure 22 The Apple-Scene 3 Semantic Network
5.3.2. The State Media Reporters-Scene 3 Semantic Network

The state media reporters responded to Apple’s apology letter positively as the semantic network of state media reporters-scene 3 has significantly more nodes and edges than that in Scene 1 and 2 (threshold for dropping words=3). Words that have high degree in this network are Apple (degree=620), consumers (degree=398), China (degree=377), Apple Inc. (degree=310), market (degree=199), terms (degree=148), products (degree=146), problem (degree=140), repair (degree=132), apology (degree=127), companies (degree=125), media (degree=119), after-sale service (degree=115), regulations (degree=113), and laws (degree=105). The global structure of this network is discrete with few word-communities around the hubs of the network.

Most of the important nodes bear resemblance with those in the previous periods. One new emerged central node is market surrounded by the words of share, take, lose, gradually, billion dollars, global, name brands, competitor, advantage, etc. It suggests that state media reports identify the business pressure as one of the important reasons that made Apple apologize on the case. Besides the business reason, the state media also credit the People’s Daily and SAIC, from whom Apple received tremendous political pressure to apologize for its after-sale policy. This can be seen from the words around media and Apple Inc.

The state media defines Cook’s letter merely as a strategy of crisis management, which fails to reveal sufficient sincerity to apologize and remorse for what it had done before to the consumers because it was late, still boosting its great service, and did not correct all the wrongdoings. The state media still complains about Apple’s arrogance and argues it as the common problem among many MNCs. In addition, the state media urges all companies to take concrete measures to protect public rights and interests and to be grateful for their popularity among consumers.
Figure 23 The State Media-Scene 3 Semantic Network
5.3.3. The Professional-Scene 3 Semantic Network

Consumers is still at the center of network like it is in the networks of Scene 1 and 2. It has the highest degree of 100 and connects with all other hubs and many ordinary concepts. Words of high degree include Apple (degree=63), China (degree=62), terms (degree=56), laws (degree=47), media (degree=46), and Apple Inc. (degree=41). The nodes are also central hubs in the semantic networks of professional texts in scene 1 and 2, except one node—media. Media, for the first time, emerges as an important node and one of the central topics in the semantic network. The word of media has a cluster consisting of name brand, products, criticize, US, Chinese, business, national, protect, supervise, pay attention, etc.—co-occurrences that are close to it; it also connects with social, department, accept, administer, benefits, CCA, interview, and all major nodes at the periphery.

The movement of media from ordinary concept to hub is a movement from having general purpose to having specific aim highly related to the task at hand—for professionals that is to analyze what make(s) Apple to apologize. Professionals, including professors and experts in law studies or former officials in government agencies, commonly value media’s (especially state media’s) supervision over MNCs’ social behaviors. They identify (state) media’s intense report of the Apple case and its profound influence on other types of media and eventually on the general public put considerable weight on the course of crisis development, finally contributing to Apple’s apology. Another reason the professionals attribute to Apple’s apology is consumers’ discussions on Apple’s after-sale policy. In the network, the node of consumers has a direct tie to the word of public opinions. It suggests that professionals commonly believe that public opinion is an important factor to influence MNC crisis management.
Figure 24 The Professionals-Scene 3 Semantic Network
5.3.4 The NGO-Scene 3 Semantic Network

Consumers, Apple, China, laws, enterprise, MNC, problem, terms are among the words with highest degree in the semantic network of NGO-Scene 3. CCA has always upheld consumers in the center of its semantic network in all periods of crisis development as protecting consumers’ rights and interests is CCA’s primary duty. A few interesting words with relatively high degree appear in CCA’s network in Scene 3 and they are enterprise, MNC, the weak, and grateful. The strongest tie of the word enterprise connects consumers and between these two words lies the verb bully. On the extension of consumers, enterprise link to the weak in one direct and grateful on the other. It is easy to see that the CCA frames enterprise as the powerful and consumers as the weak for the matter of after-sale services. The concept of MNC, an important node in the network, ties with the word of responsibility, China, laws, double standard, etc. CCA repeatedly mentions that MNC must obey Chinese laws but should also bear strong ethical concerns toward consumers and be grateful for their purchase choice. CCA also argues that the purpose of MNC should include realizing public interests. It suggests establishing an equal relationship with consumers and conducting fair business behaviors. Figure 24 shows more details.

5.3.5 The Government-Scene 3 Semantic Network

Governmental agencies—SAIC and its local branches views Apple’s apology as a short-term achievement and a result of the administrative hard-hit. SAIC urges supervision agencies form all levels to strengthen regulation over MNCs and pay close attention to the standard format contract. Nation becomes a new hub in this network, which is surrounded by words of keep, high pressure, attitude, hard blow, reach out hands, SAIC, market, etc. This suggests that
governmental regulators start to use its national power to interfere or correct MNC’s business in local market when other stakeholders fail in such an effort.

“By law” is a word connected to both Apple Inc. and SAIC. While SAIC requires Apple and other companies of digital products to obey Chinese laws and regulations, it also instructs its local branches to use administrative power by law.
Figure 25 The NGO-Scene 3 Semantic Network
Figure 26 The Gov-Scene 3 Semantic Network
5.3.6 The Consumers-Scene 3 Semantic Network

Apple (degree=382), CCTV (degree=247), and China (degree=205) are the top three nodes of high degree, following by April Fools’ Day, consumers, and apology. Apple, CCTV, China and consumers connect with each other and with most of the words in the network. Their high centralities make them the topics of this text—same situation in Scene 1 and 2. Although Apple apologized for its problematic after-sale policy, Weibo users generally thought that Cook’s apology came too late. They argue that Apple should have apologized earlier using a Chinese idiom of “if you have had known it would come to this, you shouldn’t have refused to apologize in the beginning.” Weibo users identify three forces that pushed Apple to apologize: the Chinese government, CCTV and other media, and the general public. Some people still boycott Apple products simply because it is a foreign brand or because it discriminates against Chinese consumers with its double standards and people believe this prejudice would not change. Words surround China are such as foreign country, respect, brands, laws, insufficient, regulations, rights, fight, victory, etc., all of which together suggest Weibo users’ agreement of using national administrative power to regulate MNCs’ local practice. CCTV, like it was in Scene 1 and 2, is still criticized by its enthusiasm on non-emergent product quality cases like the Apple event, but this tendency significantly drops compared with previous periods.

One buzzword in the network is April Fools’ Day—the day that Apple CEO, Tim Cook released his apology letter to Chinese consumers. This word connects to apology letter, joke, compromise, interesting, surrender, and so on. The word community of apology letter indicates that social media users criticize Apple’s apology with its bad timing and the connotation makes the apology a joke rather than a sincere regret.
Figure 27 The Consumers-Scene 3 Semantic Network
5.3.7 The Western Media-Scene 3 Semantic Network

Apple (degree=368), China (degree=274), Chinese (degree=265), Apple’s (degree=185), consumers (degree=166), warranty (degree=136), media (degree=123) are nodes of high centrality in the network and in other semantic networks too. Besides these common centers, Cook (degree=114) and market (degree=112) are two unique words of high degree only in this semantic network. Common central words in all semantic networks have different co-occurrences in this network, for example, Apple with lambaste, global firms, communist, party’s, television, editorial, flagship, alleged, target, forced, rein, etc., Apple’s with merit and frenzy, Chinese with unusual and shoddy, media with communist.

From this semantic network (Figure 27), we can see that the Western media in this study generally identify the economic factor—Apple products take larger shares than that of Chinese brands such as Huawei in local market—as the reason of causing the Apple crisis. To decrease Apple and other growing foreign brands’ profitability in Chinese market, the communist party and its mouthpieces (the state media) launch the war using the excuse of the warranty period.
Figure 28 The Western Media-Scene 3 Semantic Network
To summarize, the semantic networks in this period—climax, falling, and resolution of crisis—have some unique characteristics and significant differences compared with previous periods:

First, all networks in this period of crisis development are more complex than what they are in previous periods. The global features are more nodes (more diverse words), more edges between nodes (more frequent word-pair occurrences), smaller graph density, and smaller modularity (shown in Table 6). The trend suggests that crisis participants’ semantic networks have more language variables in both the global and local level. On one hand, people generate new understandings about the crisis (nature, direction, reason, etc.) based on the messages they received from other parties and make a more diverse semantic network. On the other hand, new thoughts and arguments do not concentrate on singular network centers but spread out and cross-connect with other nodes within the network. The increasing semantic diversity in the form of decreasing centrality of network structure is a linguistic characteristic along with the crisis development.

Table 6 Semantic Network Statistics of All Periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Networks</th>
<th>Network diameter</th>
<th>Graph density</th>
<th>Modularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>state media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consumers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>0.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.259</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Network diameter: the longest graph distance between two nodes in the network connected nodes have graph distance 1.
Density: measures how close the network is to complete. A complete graph has all possible edges and density equal to 1.
Modularity: the modular extent of the network with the highest level of 1.

Second, although nodes such as Apple, China, consumers, repair, terms, etc. are still important concepts in this period, new cluster centers, market and media, appear. Except for the network of government, all other stakeholders’ networks (which are the state media, professionals, NGO, consumers, and western media) have these two words as hubs in local community. Nation and SAIC are new centers of word community in the government-scene 3 network. These new word community centers emerged as the products when stakeholders analyze the major forces of pushing Apple to apology. While the government identifies administrative power by law as the important reason, other stakeholders add the business pressure, media influence, and public opinions as the main reasons for Apple’s apology.

6 CHAPTER 6. RHETORICAL NETWORK OF PUBLIC CRISIS: PATTERN, CONTEXTS, AND DYNAMICS

6.1 Constructing the Rhetorical Network of Public Crisis

In Chapter 4, I suggest using Burke’s pentad/hextad (1969a), the grammar for examining motivation, to understand quantitative results of semantic network analysis toward a public crisis. The reasons behind this suggestion are first, a public crisis is essentially an rhetorical
problem in the world risk society so a rhetorical theory is imperative; second, the rhetorical model of <act-agent-agency-scene-purpose-attitude> hexad is essentially a semantic network since it identifies the semantic connection of all elements within a defined unit of texts to reveal rhetor’s hidden motivation; in addition, the concept of ratio indicates that all elements are semantically entailed by the given texts.

Public crises, especially MNC-related cases, usually involve seven types of agents: media, consumers, MNC, agencies in local market, government, NGOs, and professionals. The connections between crisis agents help to establish the prototype of public crisis network as Figure 2 shows. Through the initial treatment of the corpus in this study, I segmented the data into three time periods and identified three scenes accordingly. Scenes were then labeled as the phases in the plot structure of crisis exposition, rising, and climax-falling-resolution. Since agents and scenes are treated as controlled variables, I applied Gu (2009)’s “selective (de)emphasis” principle—emphasizing or deemphasizing some aspects of the hexad to build a selective model consisting of 17 <agent-agency-scene-act-attitude-purpose> variables, among which the first three elements<agent-agency-scene> are independent variables, and the last three elements <act-attitude-purpose> are dependent variables. Based on the results of the semantic networks demonstrated in Chapter 5, I summarize and construct the rhetorical network of the Apple case in Table 7.

To make better visualization of the dynamics in the process of crisis communication in every rhetorical situation (scene), in Figure 27, 28, and 29, I symbolize crisis participants as round shapes (in different colors) and their rhetorical moves as square (that have the same color with their rhetor). Arrows point to the rhetor’s audience.
### Table 7 The Rhetorical Network of the Apple Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent 1-Agency 1</th>
<th>Scene 1 exposition</th>
<th>Scene 2 Rising</th>
<th>Scene 3 Climax, falling, and resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>news reporters-state media</strong></td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: report CCTV 3.15 special program on investigation on Apple; identify the problems in Apple’s after-sale policy and practice; describe Apple’s repair policy as “deceitful”; assert Apple’s initial statement as a “lie”; criticize Apple’s arrogance and prejudice toward Chinese consumers; ask Apple fans to stop shielding Apple from criticism; <strong>define</strong> Apple case as a business crisis</td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: attack Apple’s brief response and arrogant, heartless, ungrateful, selfish attitude; redefine the Apple case an illegal act; detail the laws and regulations that Apple failed to obey; <strong>portray</strong> Apple as “unethical”</td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: <strong>identify</strong> market and the political pressure as significant reasons for Apple’s apology; <strong>urge</strong> MNCs to protect public rights and be grateful for their popularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: frustrated, confused</td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: ask Apple to explain its after-sale policy</td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: accusatory, provocative, indignant, bitter, judgmental</td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agent 2-Agency 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: <strong>identify</strong> Apple’s after-sale policy as a “fraud”; <strong>suggest</strong> enforcing administrative power over foreign brands</td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: <strong>encourage</strong> public supervision (from media and consumers) over MNCs; <strong>propose</strong> new concept of “public interest litigation” to protect consumer rights; <strong>support</strong> CCA to represent consumers when fight against MNCs</td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: <strong>attribute</strong> to administrative and legal means as the reason for Apple’s apology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>professionals-state media</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: concerned</td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: concerned</td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: hope MNCs to fulfill their social responsibility, respect consumers, and protect consumer’s right</td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: call for wider concerns from the whole society on the issue of MNCs’ illegal behaviors</td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: reflect what could be effective ways to protect consumers in similar cases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agent 3-Agency 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: expose ten problems in Apple product repair; explain relevant Chinese laws and regulations; <strong>point out</strong> the defects in law system</td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: issue the admonition letter to Apple</td>
<td><strong>Act</strong>: require MNCs to bear ethical concerns toward consumers; <strong>define</strong> MNCs’ social responsibility—realizing public interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>consumer association-state media</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: concerned</td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: condescending, solemn</td>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong>: authoritative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: propose to have stricter law enforcement to MNCs, perfect the law system, and increase punishment; ask gov to grant it more power to help consumers</td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: ask Apple to protect consumers various rights, stop discrimination, and treat them fairly</td>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>: call for more equal relationship between MNCs and consumers, and fair treatment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued on the next page)
| Agent 4-Agency 1 | Governmental agencies-state media | Act: define Apple’s contract and warranty policy illegal; issue notification to local branches to strengthen supervision on the enterprises that produce digital products; offer administrative guide; increase punishment  
Attitude: condescending, solemn  
Purpose: require Apple to rectify wrongdoings | Act: define Apple’s apology as a short-term achievement and a result of administrative heavy-blow  
Attitude: authoritative, optimistic  
Purpose: instruct MNCs to do business by law and supervision agencies to wield power by law |
| Agent 5-Agency 2 | Consumers-social media | Act: accuse Apple’s unethical behaviors; complain CCTV’s ignorance of more emergent quality issues;  
Attitude: angry, disappointed, indifferent, sympathetic, sad, pleading  
Purpose: hope the supervision department to punish Apple; ask for fair treatment from Apple; hope CCTV pay more attention on more important civic issues | Act: boycott Apple; support Chinese brands; criticize CCTV for not attending to other social issues; analyze the political reason that might trigger the case; criticize Apple’s arrogant attitude; urge Apple to correct policy;  
Attitude: accusatory, patronizing, sarcastic, apathetic,  
Purpose: ask Apple to apologize, treat consumers with respect and conscience |
| Agent 6-Agency 3 | Apple-website | Act: defend its after-after policy; claim its commitment to protect consumer rights;  
Attitude: proud  
Purpose: maintain good image | Act: apologize to Chinese consumers; address the common concerns; revise repair and warranty policy according to Chinese laws and regulations; ensure consumers’ easy access to Apple to give feedback  
Attitude: sincere, reverent, proactive  
Purpose: express apology, save image; cease the crisis |
| Agent 7-Agency 4 | Western media-mainstream print media | Act: report Apple’s crisis case in China and Cook’s apology; identify two contributing factors—state media and market;  
Attitude: both objective and opinionated  
Purpose: alert other MNCs about the Communist Party’s regulations |
Figure 29 The Rhetorical Network of Crisis Exposition
Figure 30 The Rhetorical Network of Crisis

- **Act**: boycott Apple; support Chinese brands; analyze the political reasons behind the case; criticize Apple's arrogant attitude; urge Apple to correct its policy; **Attitude**: accusatory, patronizing, sarcastic, apathetic; **Purpose**: let Apple to apologize and treat consumers with respect and conscience.

- **Act**: propose new concept of “public interest litigation” to protect consumer rights; **Attitude**: sarcastical; **Purpose**: strengthen supervision over Apple and other MNCs; complete laws and regulations to protect consumers.

- **Act**: redefine the Apple case an illegal act; detail the laws and regulations that Apple failed to obey; issue the admonition letter to Apple; strengthen supervision; offer administrative guide; increase punishment; **Attitude**: condescending, solemn; **Purpose**: require Apple to rectify wrongdoings.

- **Act**: encourage public supervision (from media and consumers) over MNCs; support CCA to represent consumers when fight against MNCs; **Attitude**: concerned; **Purpose**: call for wider concerns from the whole society on the issue of MNCs' illegal behaviors.
Figure 31 The Rhetorical Network of Crisis’ Climax, Falling, and Resolution
6.2 Rhetoric of Identification: Failure, Success, and Significance

The dynamics in the whole process of crisis development demonstrated through the rhetorical networks in Figure 27-29 reveal the direct reason of crisis aggravation—Apple fails to fully recognize the “conditions of identification” on the matter of accusation. These conditions include accusers and their attitudes, the subject of accusation, and the purpose of accusation. The concept of “rhetoric of identification” comes from Kenneth Burke (1969b) in his *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke argues that fostering or restoring identification is the prerequisite for successful persuasion:

You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, images, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his. Persuasion by flattery is but a special case of persuasion in general. But flattery can safely serve as our paradigm if we systematically widen its meaning, to see behind it the conditions of identification or consubstantiality in general. And you give the “sign” of such consubstantiality by deference to an audience’s “opinions.” For the orator, following Aristotle and Cicero, will seek to display the appropriate “signs” of character needed to earn the audience’s good will (1969b, p. 56)

In the situation of corporation-related crisis, the corporation needs to establish, repair, or maintain relationship with the affected parties, including consumers, publics, markets, regulatory agencies, and all other stakeholders. Burke calls this relationship a form of courtship (1969b, p. 56). The identification between the corporation and all of its stakeholders in the time of crisis is a bond of mutual trust, a demonstration that the corporation is committed to solve the problem quickly, is willing to work with authorities, experts, and publics, because the stakeholders deserve no less.
In the Apple case, Apple failed to identify the conditions of accusation since it did not display any sign of such identification or consubstantiality by deference to any stakeholder’s request. It also failed to deny or subvert the accusation with persuasive devices.

To be specific, in the first stage of crisis (see Figure 27), the authorities accuse Apple’s repair and warranty policy—CCA even detailed ten major problems in Apple products’ after-sale service that contradict local laws and regulations. The authorities’ allegation is very strong by calling Apple “deceitful”, its repair terms as “fraud”, and this case as a “business crisis.” The authorities ask Apple to explain the “legitimacy” of its policy and practice, with an unspoken suggestion for Apple to acknowledge and correct its wrongdoings quickly. In social media, the voice of supporting authorities’ investigation of Apple far outweighed the defense that Apple is innocent. Facing such a highly consistent attitude among its stakeholders, Apple failed to identify the conditions of accusation in the following aspects: (1) the accusers: Apple only replied to its consumers (an official statement on its website), not to the authorities; (2) the accusers’ attitude: all stakeholders are very concerned and hope Apple issues an immediate response, but Apple gave first official response eight days later after the authorities’ first accusation; (3) the subject of accusation: Apple ignored the main accusation from the authorities, which is about its controversial “whole phone” exchange as repair; it was in fact not a complete “whole phone” replacement like Apple claimed, but Apple did not explain why it did not replace the back plate on iPhones, nor did it answer any other concerns such as why not recalculate the warranty period after exchange; (4) the purpose of accusation: to correct but not to excuse, to truly protect consumer rights but not to boast.

Apple’ failure of the matter of accusation condition identification irritated stakeholders. In the second stage (see Figure 28) when the authorities attack Apple with more intense
firepower, Apple keeps silent for the entire time. A significant change in this stage is the appearance of the most powerful stakeholder—governmental agencies, whose rhetorical acts include issuing notification to local SAIC branches to strengthen supervision, offering administrative guide and interruption, raising punishment. The most significant rhetorical move in this period is government officially affirms Apple’s after-sale policy illegal, which transforms the nature of the Apple case from a regular business crisis to a major social/legal issue that transgressed consumer rights.

Apple finally comprehended the tough rhetoric and the implications from Chinese authorities, apologized, and stopped the crisis from aggravating. Apple’s apology letter shows its successful identification of stakeholder accusation. Although the message is still for consumers, not for the authorities—a failure to respond to all accusers in rhetoric—it does not agitate the authorities in practice. Apple’s attitude is proactive and sincere, a good comfort of the frustrated, indignant, and provocative stakeholders. The four improvements that Apple put forward in the letter are concrete measures to fix the main problems the stakeholders accused. At last, Apple aligns with the stakeholders on the purpose of protecting consumer rights and interests with full heart and best effort.

The failure and success on rhetorical identification prove the (in)effectiveness of crisis communication. Thus, rhetorical identification of all related conditions to the rhetorical problem under examination (that is, crisis) can work as an approach to testing the effectiveness of an organization’s or individual’s crisis management. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, in crisis studies, Benoit’s Image Repair Theory and Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) are classic and popular and both aim to offer effective crisis response strategies for crisis managers to repair or protect organizational reputation. However, these two theories have
fundamental limitations themselves, such as excluding audience/stakeholders and external/social contexts from crisis analysis. These limitations become more serious and critical in the current context of Web 3.0 (network society) with enlarging online consumers, broadening public sphere, changing power dynamics in public relations, market globalization, and increasing conflicts and risks in number and in kind. Thus, rhetorical identification based on quantitative results of semantic network analysis has higher validity and reliability than the traditional paradigm.

6.3 Contextual Elements in Rhetorical Network

Burke uses scene to refer to the setting or background of the act (1952, p. x, p. 3). In previous chapters, I used scene to mark the phases of crisis development. In the case of crisis communication, what scene translates into is not only when the act was done, but also where it was done, and possibly why it was done in this way. Data shows that all crisis participant groups agree that business, political, and public pressures are the major factors to decide the course of crisis development. Data also shows some interesting cultural factors played on individual, group, and national levels throughout the time of crisis.

6.3.1 Apple as Symbol of Historical and Modern Western Culture

A very common word that nearly all stakeholders used to describe Apple is arrogant. Their complaint of Apple being arrogant prevails even after Apple apologized. The rhetorical network analysis in this study offers some obvious answers—slow response to stakeholders, wrong defensive strategy that boasts its service. Besides these, people’s symbolization of Apple also plays an important role in the creation and persistence of the accusation. Like many other
western MNCs to Chinese people, Apple is not only a business brand, but a cultural concept, a symbol of both historical and modern Western culture.

In the modern context, Apple is a successful and the most profitable smartphone brand in the world (Jiao, 2018). With its trendy, innovative, and superior design, Apple harvested numerous fans in China who admired the brand as part of their enthusiasm for the Western culture. True stories such as a poor high-schooler who sold his kidney to the black market for the newest type of iPhone and iPad (“A 17-year-old Sold Kidney for Apple Products, 2012) showcase the craving that many Chinese young people possess to this brand. Apple’s Great China market was the second largest/profitable one in 2013. In that year, Apple’s total sale in China was $ 40.98 billion with the highest net rate of 36.7% among all cellphone brands—Xiaomi, one of the popular Chinese cellphone brands, only had 6.7% net rate (“Apple’s Financial Report,” 2018). With the wild popularity and highest price in the digital products market at that time, it was not hard to understand why people were so frustrated to know about Apple’ tricky after-sale service. In text, people frequently use words such as arrogant, powerful, greedy, bossy, shameless, no conscience, not humble, bad-mannered, etc.to portray Apple and express their disappointment of being fooled.

In historical context, Apple’s “crazy chase of profit” in China and “unethical treatment” towards Chinese consumers (which was accused by CCTV but subverted by Apple) resemble what the western powers and invaders (such as the Eight-Nation Alliance that includes America) did to China in the 19th century. State media writers and Weibo users generally use war and imperial rhetoric to describe Apple before and after its apology. For example, the People’s Daily’s editorial on March 27 is titled “Defeating Apple’s Unparallel Arrogance” questions why
Apple is humble in other countries but “unparallelly” pride just like “riding a high horse” to “trample on the Chinese land” and “abuse Chinese consumers”; the Guangming Daily published on April 1 vows to let Apple pay the cost for its arrogance. After the apology, people acclaim that Apple finally “was beaten,” “surrender,” and “kowtow,” “kneel down,” “bow,” “beg for acceptance,” etc. to Chinese people. These examples verify that people demonize Apple as a high-tech bully who harms Chinese consumers and threatens the whole Chinese market.

**6.3.2 Nationalism as Protection against Transnational Competition**

Grunig (1997) notes that globalization makes corporations more likely to be affected by political and economic elements in multiple countries. Globalization thrusts all nations into a common course but with uneven development, which might prick some people’s nerves or move their cheese. In this context, nationalism may play a profound role over transnational corporate communication that has yet to be fully tapped in the literature. This study documented a case where state media reporters and editors incite nationalism to cast accusation to an MNC and trigger a public crisis. The evidence is clear in the semantic network analysis of consumers’ rhetoric all three scenes. Below are examples of different kinds:

**Appeal to Chinese government and Chinese people**

“Apple is arrogant. China should the door upon Apple’s face, forever! Our government must protect our people!”

“(Apple) Must revise terms. Severely punish arrogant terms. We Chinese should tie together to boycott discrimination.”

Despise Apple fans

Those who use Apple products: are you able to stand up (and speak for it)?

Apple fans, your hearts must be broken now. Support reliable Chinese brands!

Despise MNCs

Haha, as expected, an MNC is targeted! [now go to sheep]

Our MNCs were repeatedly hurt by the U.S. government. Surely, we need to restrict the business of foreign MNCs in China.

Next step, deport Apple, just like what we did on Google.

Nationalism is a powerful sentiment in the era of globalization. In this case, the use of nationalism is an effective rhetorical move to trigger public sentiment toward Apple. The provocative language on state media to portray Apple as an evil, as I analyzed in last section, profoundly influences people’s attitude, opinions, and perceptions. As consumers and the general audience have the highest stake for Apple’s business in the short and long run, their responses decide, to large extent, the nature, direction, and even duration of a crisis. When numerous citizens participate in crisis communication for a common purpose, and their voices are heard and considered, then a public crisis emerges. Since China has a mysterious eastern culture unfamiliar to many western people and even to crisis managers, it is imperative for crisis
resolution professionals to be aware of the salience of nationalism and closely examine the nationalism values before taking strategic response.

**6.3.3 Political Environment as a Hidden Factor for Crisis**

Rhetorical network analysis in this study finds that an interesting theme recurring across periods of time: people complain that CCTV only focused on attacking Apple but neglected many serious quality issues, such as poisonous food, deadly medicine, polluted air and water, etc. all of which were vital to people’s livelihood yet overdue for long time. These people argue that compared with a back plate in iPhone—the subject of debate in the controversial “whole-phone” repair policy, the above issues are the real concerns for common people and also should be the target of investigation for a state media who claimed to serve the people. Thus, CCTV’s wrong focus on Apple’s service, a non-emergent issue, and its procrastination on reporting significant social problems prove that CCTV abused its power of speech. Here are some examples in which people attack CCTV for not paying attention to serious social problems:

“Compared to poisonous rice, gutter oil, dead pork meat, poisonous air, tainted milk powder, pesticide-contaminated food, high petroleum prices, who cares a back cover?”

“When you start taking care of the issues—poisonous milk powder, problematic medicine, polluted air, then I will believe what you say.”

“Why don’t you attack China Petroleum (note: a Chinese state enterprise that has rumor of corruption) just like the way you attacked Apple? Why don’t you investigate food safety using the extreme carefulness in censoring publications? Why didn’t you clean the Yangtze River like
how you cleaned up petitioners and protestors? CCTV’s mission is never to service people, but
to earn money by protecting black enterprises.”

“CCTV is so sick to blackmail companies. Who knows how many companies bribe
CCTV—buying ads as buying protection fee? CCTV is the umbrella of the dark society.”

“CCAV (note: a swear word for CCTV) is used to rape public opinions, but nowadays the
public is not that ease to get fooled.”

“There are numerous Chinese brands with horrible quality and service. Why only
attacking Apple? CCAV, can you be more shameless?”

CCTV labels itself as “an important mouthpiece of the party, the government and the
people…an important ideological and cultural front of China” (“Brief Intro,” 2017). Indeed, on
the one hand, CCTV acts as watchdog to protect public interest against malpractice and create
public awareness in the case of Apple. On the other hand, it is essentially a propaganda tool of
the Communist Party of China who closely follows the party’s instruction, “fully embody the
party’s will and reflect the party's ideas” (Zeng, 2016). As Xi Jinping, the chair of CPC said, “the
media sponsored by the party and the government…should have the surname of the party”
(Zeng, 2016). It is hard to confirm that attacking Apple is a political retaliation from China to the
U.S. as some Weibo users guess, but it is a political move that alarms Apple and other MNCs to
cooperate with the regulators in the Chinese market.
7 CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION: STUDYING AN INTRICATE COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM OF PUBLIC CRISES

7.1 Rethinking “Public Crisis”

After a systematic analysis of Apple’s after-sale policy crisis based on the network model, I am ready to conceptualize “publics,” redefine public crisis, and summarize its characteristics in current context of world risk and social network.

The network model complicates the references of publics. Publics are not only relevant to business, but also attach to media, non-profits, and government organizations. Every crisis participant in the network has publics; any public may itself have one or more publics. Although different participants have various degrees of knowledge, awareness, or involvement of crisis, bear diverse attitudes or preferences, or make distinct choices or acts, they all can affect others with rhetorical moves, profoundly or slightly, through physical, digital, or mixed communication network. Publics are not only stakeholders, but also stakeholders who need something back from the focal organization, group, or individual, as the exchange of giving. For example, in the Apple case, consumers want promised legal rights in exchange for brand loyalty, state media reporters seek audiences’ support of their arguments in exchange for sharing information, and even a regular Weibo user hopes to have more likes in exchange for taking part in the discussion. The popular dual-identify of stakeholders and stakeholders among crisis participants is another characteristic of a digital communication network.

It should be noted that stakeholder/stakeholders might share some common purposes while carrying diverse attitudes—they can be critics, supporters, double-dealers, rubbernecker, etc. depending on how well their interests are aligned with those of the focal agent. The dominant public attitude in the society decides the impact of crisis. In the Apple case, the
reporters from state media became the opinion leaders and set the tone for popular public opinions since this agency was where the crisis began. However, the state-media’s agenda-setting role is weakening with the advent of social media networking. As the research results show, throughout the whole process of crisis, a considerable amount of Weibo users suspected CCTV’s justification on investigating Apple and not all these people were Apple fans. The bifurcation of the public opinions into accusing Apple and accusing CCTV exemplifies diverging attitudes and continuing rhetorical struggles among participating publics on social media along with crisis development; it also declares social media’s integration into the crisis communication network would counteract traditional media’s influence over the public opinion.

Such a holistic view of publics that emphasizes element mutuality and multiple identity in a network will guide us to study the crisis ecosystem and explore the most complexities played out in different dimensions of crisis communication. Zhao (2013) defines public crisis as a non-routine, media-exposed events accusing an MNC regardless of its misdeeds. Now we can expand the definition as specific publics exposed, other publics quickly responded, unconfirmed accusation toward an organization that circulated online and offline, globally and locally through communication network. This type of exigency asks crisis managers to take in publics’ attitude first and analyze their motivation before taking other rhetorical moves. Defensive acts such as denial or boast prove to be ineffective and detrimental strategies for public crises.

I have argued in Chapter 3 that compared with traditional corporate crises, participants in public crises have their roles changed or in the process of change. In the Apple case, Chinese state media initiated the war toward Apple; consumers and the general public informed each other online, responded to state media, requested government support, and take various attitudes toward Apple; Apple ultimately bore all responsibilities and apologized. This case study supports
my assertion that in a public crisis, the targeted organization is a crisis bearer; mainstream media becomes a crisis generator; consumers play the role of crisis informers. The mechanism contributing this transformation can be traced to Beck’s postmodern, world risk society, and Castells’ network society, which have been discussed in Chapter 3.

In a few words, this study concludes that the rhetorical network of public crisis is an intricate ecosystem during which participants pluralize their identities, increase their dependence and mutuality, and transform crisis roles while contesting for and collectively architecting the meaning of crisis and finally negotiating solutions for the crisis.

7.2 Contributions

This study makes considerable achievement toward narrowing the theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps in crisis communication scholarship, the research goal as stated in the beginning. It deals with the exigency of a popular problem that many multinational/transnational corporations face in a global social media era or Web 3.0, that is, increasing public crises in global markets where stakeholders usually accuse these corporations without solid evidence. Through a typical and significant case of Apple’s after-sale service crisis in China, this study takes a (con)textual approach to examine both the content and situation of the crisis communication network in the whole life of crisis.

A core concept in this project, “network,” serves as a means of conceptualization, operationalization, visualization, and presentation for public crisis communication.

Acknowledging the rise of a risk society in postmodernity, I define crisis as rhetorical contest among participants as they persuade each other about their definition and perception
about the case. Both the process and results of such a rhetorical contest generate a dynamic communication network, which is largely embodied in virtual space (digital communication network).

With this rhetorical conceptualization of crisis as network, I adopt contemporary sociologist Manuel Castells’ network society theory to build the communication network of public crisis and propose the prototype for such a network. The prototype is a model meant to depict and apply to most of public crises related to multinational/transnational corporations. It features all major crisis participants in an MNC/TNC public crisis as nodes and their relations as ties. In addition, in this open, acentric, and dynamic structure, participants play different roles compared with their traditional roles in a corporate crisis. Such a difference is fundamental to distinguish public and corporate crisis.

Semantic network analysis, a computational method relatively young in social science, is used to construct and visualize every major crisis participant’s (or groups’) sub communication network in different stages of crisis development. Network configurations provide statistical inference regarding the semantic themes, flow of information, and information transformation across time and agencies, which guides the realization of rhetorical network in the next step.

Applying Burke’s hexad as rhetorical grammar to interpret the statistical results from semantic network analysis, I identify the elements of act, agent, agency, attitude, purpose, and scene, construct the rhetorical networks for different crisis periods, and finally compare and put together into a big, complete picture of crisis development. Contextual elements are also discussed in the end for the roots of crisis exploration and aggravation.
To sum up, this study conceptualizes, theorizes, operationalize, and visualize public crisis communication to an extent that includes the most complexities—elements, relations, content, structure, pattern, process, transformation, influence, context, dynamics etc. about this research problem. It moves away from the institution-centered paradigm in crisis communication that had dominated this field for decades and toward an empirical study of the whole ecosystem of crisis that includes agents, messages, flows, context, and draws connections with larger social contexts. The significance of this approach does not only lie in the improved validity of examining many complexities, but also in the implication of casting a new direction for technical and professional communication studies that connects scientific methods such as mathematical representation, statistical measurement, and graphic visualization with rhetorical explanation. Doing so could help to renovate the rhetorical analysis tradition that heavily relies on textual description and narrative interpretation into a new paradigm of meaningful integration of rhetoric, science, and technology in social studies to support the study of digital humanities and/or scientific studies with human values.

7.3 Limitations

Limitations of this study mainly exist on the following aspects. First, the treatment of consumers’ discourses: I only chose a single social media source, Weibo, to collect consumers’ responses to the crisis event. Doing so excludes the consumers who do not use Weibo. Future studies can investigate one or more popular social media platforms (such as Wechat, Zhihu, Douban, etc.) for more diverse public opinions. Second, some scholars are concerned that the ambiguity of natural language, for example, synonymy and polysemy, and semantic complexity are major problems of analyzing unstructured text data (Loebner, 2002). In the process of semantic network analysis, I did find same problem. Wordij, the network construction tool, treats
the same word with different forms (for example, Chinese, English translation, different forms of abbreviations in Chinese and English) differently and thus generates multiple nodes for the same word, which in turn affects the structure of the whole dataset, especially when the word has a high centrality. Wordij cannot correct the problem. This problem slightly reduces the general accuracy of interpreting the semantic structure in the next step. Besides, applying a threshold to get rid of insignificant words and word pairs also reduces the richness of semantic network to some extent.

7.4 Practitioner’s Takeaway

Crisis communication practitioners should differentiate the emerging public crises form traditional corporate crises and be fully aware the characteristics of public crises as the conclusion discussed above. Facing more active publics in the digital age of the prevalent social media, it is pivotal to identify and segment publics based on the prototype of public crisis communication in order to increase the possibility of achieving communication goals with these publics.

Corporate actors, managers, and executives should acknowledge that publics approach corporations hoping to get organizational awareness of their concerns and proactive corrections to the problem. More and more cases happened globally prove the classic crisis management strategies (such as a refusal, rebuttal, bolstering, etc. illustrated in Benoit’ theory) would worsen the situation and trigger more counteractions from publics. Corporations should also explore the changing power relations and power dynamics with publics in daily practice to prevent the occurrence of public crises. Last but not least, corporations should update its crisis management team with experts with linguistics, technical communication, and computational science
backgrounds and develop a crisis response system focusing on public discourse and rhetorical situation analysis through the communication network model.

For crisis communication and management scholars and educators, it is high time to move from an organization standpoint to a networking vision about crisis conceptualization and theorization. With this networking vision, scholars and educators can then design more valid research and pedagogy that respond to the changing landscape of public relations, train practitioners on the methods to fully examine the many complexities in the process and aftermath of crisis, and educate students in relevant majors a “public awareness” that always considers publics and their needs.

In Chinese language, crisis (wēi jī, 危机) is a concept of both risk and opportunity. It is an expression of classic philosophy about how things are interdependent and mutually transform. Crisis brings the kairos for making right decisions and changing for the better in business, personal life, and social development. The wisdom for making this happen is to closely examine the intricacies in crisis ecosystem and then take responsible moves.
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