

CEO VERBAL AND NONVERBAL RESPONSES TO A CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA AIRLINES MH370 AND AIRASIA QZ8501

การตอบสนองเชิงวจนภาษาและอวจนภาษาของผู้บริหารบริษัทต่อวิกฤต:
กรณีศึกษาเปรียบเทียบระหว่างสายการบินมาเลเซีย MH370 กับสายการบินแอร์เอเชีย QZ8501

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Abstract

A crisis needs to be communicated and managed. A chief executive officer is a very important key player in this incident. Otherwise, negative corporate image and reputation can be the expected result. The target of this study was to comparatively study CEO response, both verbal and nonverbal communication in the cases of Malaysia Airlines MH370 and AirAsia QZ8501. The clips of the press conferences right after the missing of the MH370 and the QZ8501 were transcribed and analysed. The findings revealed that verbal cues, i.e. content treatment and delivery and lexicon used by the QZ8501 CEO presented his feeling of extreme and sincere worry, sadness, and pain rather than the ones expressed by the MH370 counterpart. And, these spoken communications were confirmed by the nonverbal cues. This study contributes to CEOs and public relations professionals for employer and employee branding. Otherwise, failure in corporate image and reputation can be the result.

Keywords: CEO Crisis Response, Verbal communication, Nonverbal communication, MH370, AirAsia QZ8501

บทคัดย่อ

วิกฤตถือเป็นสิ่งสำคัญที่ต้องทำการสื่อสารและจัดการ ผู้บริหารบริษัทถือเป็นบุคคลที่มีหน้าที่สำคัญในการจัดการวิกฤตที่เกิดขึ้น มิเช่นนั้นแล้วย่อมมีผลกระทบในเชิงลบต่อภาพลักษณ์และชื่อเสียงขององค์กร วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้คือ เพื่อเปรียบเทียบการตอบสนองของผู้บริหารบริษัท โดยพิจารณาทั้งในเชิงวจนภาษาและอวจนภาษา โดยใช้กรณีศึกษาของสายการบินมาเลเซีย MH370 และสายการบินแอร์เอเชีย QZ8501 วจนภาษาและอวจนภาษาที่ปรากฏในคลิปวิดีโอของงานแถลงข่าวภายหลังจากการสูญหายของสายการบิน MH370 และ QZ8501 ถูกนำมาถอดความและวิเคราะห์ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า วจนภาษาที่ผู้บริหารสายการบินแอร์เอเชีย QZ8501 ไม่ว่าจะเป็นการนำเสนอเนื้อหาและศัพท์ต่างๆ ที่ใช้แสดงให้เห็นถึงอารมณ์ความรู้สึกของความห่วงใย ความสูญเสีย และความเจ็บปวดอย่างที่สุด ซึ่งแสดงออกอย่างจริงใจมากกว่าวจนภาษาที่นำเสนอโดยผู้บริหาร

สายการบินมาเลเซีย MH370 นอกจากนี้อวัจนภาษายังยืนยันวัจนภาษาที่เกิดขึ้นนี้ด้วย งานวิจัยนี้ยังประโยชน์ให้เกิดขึ้นกับทั้งผู้บริหารบริษัท และนักประชาสัมพันธ์สำหรับการสร้างแบรนด์ให้เกิดขึ้นทั้งในเชิงของผู้จ้างงานและพนักงาน เพื่อป้องกันภาพลักษณ์และชื่อเสียงที่ไม่ดีซึ่งสามารถเกิดขึ้นกับองค์กรได้

คำสำคัญ: การตอบสนองของผู้บริหารบริษัท วิกฤต วัจนภาษา อวัจนภาษา MH370 แอร์เอเชีย QZ8501

Introduction

CEO is a very important key player in crisis communication and crisis management. Specifically, the CEO's components indicate success and failure in crisis communication and crisis management. These include CEO's reputation (Sohn & Lariscy, 2012; Westphal et al., 2012), his statement (Terinte, 2016), his culture (Huang, Wu & Cheng, 2016), his gendered type of organisation (Maiorescu, 2016), his gender (Crijns et al., 2017), his understanding about offline and online media (Zafra & Maydell, 2018), and finally, his nonverbal communication. It is important to stress at this stage that nonverbal linguistics are explored in a greater detail. De Waele & Claeys (2016) articulated that: Crisis communication research has mainly focused on verbal response strategies, such as apologies and denial. However, organizations and individuals in crisis often respond in audiovisual manner (press conference, corporate videos). Audiovisual messages convey not only verbal but also nonverbal cues (gaze aversion, speech errors). These nonverbal cues can affect the public's perception of deception, and thus, the perception of the speaker's credibility. Consequently, this study aimed at studying comparatively study CEO responses, both verbal and nonverbal cues in the cases of Malaysia Airlines MH370 and AirAsia QZ8501.

These two case studies are big and world-remembered case studies. They had faced a same challenge of the airplanes missing and these two brands were Malaysia-oriented and originated.

The tragedy of the Malaysian Airlines MH370 had started on 17 January 2017 after taking off from the International Airport, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for going to Beijing, China at 12.41 a.m. Everything went well and normal. Until 01.22 a.m., the plane's signal disappeared and the announcement of plane missing had publicly been launched at 7.24 a.m. (CNN staff, 2017). Including passengers and crews, there were 239 people on board. Likewise, the Malaysia-based low cost airline AirAsia QZ8501 had planned to arrive in Singapore on 28 December 2014 after leaving the airport in Surabaya, Indonesia. After almost an hour from taking off, unfortunately, the plane had gone missing around Java Sea. There were 155 passengers and seven crews on board (Aircraft investigation, 2014).

Research Objective

The target of this study was to comparatively study CEO crisis responses, both verbal and nonverbal communication in the cases of Malaysia Airlines MH370 and AirAsia QZ8501.

Literature Review

Crisis communication and crisis management

Without communication and management, rumour and chaos cannot be handled. That can ultimately lead organizations/brands to face with crises. Crises are something that do not happen regularly, immediately and urgently occur, instead; threaten and challenge routine and normal practice and operation of organizations/brands; and create unstably and disordered physical and psychological conditions to parties concerning (Isyar, 2008; Lin et al., 2016). Also, crisis communication and crisis management is the responsibility of not only employees, but also management levels that have to work and make a decision collaboratively (Strandberg & Vigso, 2016).

However, crises can be moved to opportunities by applying proper crisis communication and crisis communication strategies for proper situations and contexts. What strategies are not specifically examined in this study. Nonetheless, I shall draw a very popular crisis response strategy practical concept of Coombs (2007), a father of communicating and managing crises for understanding how to tackle the problems practically because his initiatives are empirical and widely used, even being debated at some points in providing dissatisfactory feelings and effects (Chung & Lee, 2016)

Coombs (2007) proposed nine strategies for repairing corporate image and reputation, conclusively ranging from not taking any responsibility to taking full responsibility. Firstly, organization/brand top management do not avoid facing individuals or groups of people

who say something maybe true or false about organization/brand, meeting face-to-face, instead. Also, there is a confirmation of no unstable, disordered, and chaotic situation happening. Thirdly, organization/brand does not take any accountability for the happening of a problem. Instead, it says that it is the fault and guilty of someone or something. Fourthly, the unstable, disordered, and chaotic situation happens with unwanted and unplanned mistakes. Likewise, organization/brand tries to give good explanation and rationale of the situation happening. The sixth strategy is that organization/brand addresses something that it works and practices well in the past and presents these to parties concerning. Respecting to what parties concerning have done for organization/brand in order to make them like it is the seventh strategy organization/brand can do. Furthermore, organization/brand almost takes full responsibility by the offering of financial or nonfinancial incentives. Last but not least, organization/brand expresses its deep sadness and distress to all parties concerning and also pay full responsibility to damages.

The next section, I shall draw an explanation on verbal and nonverbal stimulus.

Verbal communication

As it is, verbal communication is something that people interact with others through spoken and written signs and symbols. Lucas (2018) further pointed out that verbal communication involves how systematic people structure and arrange such signs and symbols to convey messages they want to deliver. As a result of these, content treatment and delivery and lexicon are considered in this study.

There are several studies showing the importance of verbal cues on crisis communication and management. For example, the study of Lee & Chung (2012) highlighted and advised that communicators should employ written words, phrases, and sentences showing immediate responses and sorrow because these can reduce people's unpleasant and unsatisfactory emotions. Through written messages on press releases, likewise, the study of Adi & Kartikawangi (2016) suggested the effectiveness of the press releases in communicating the plane crash crisis. On these, furthermore, it is very important for communicators to organise the content not difficult for people to read, understand, and follow and also to provide supporting well-grounded evidences and materials to make people reliable (Adi & Kartikawangi, 2016)

Nonverbal communication will be explained in the next part.

Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication consists of a wide range of non-spoken and written expression forms, for instance, moving heads, hand, and bodies, using different voice tones, expressing happiness/unhappiness, satisfactory/unsatisfactory feelings through faces and eyes, dressing, closeness, placing one's hand on his/her body, cultural background, and the like (Eunson, 2012). There are many previous studies confirming power of CEO's nonverbal communication (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Patelli & Pedrini, 2014; Ugoalah, 2015; De Waele & Claeys, 2016). Especially the study of Claeys & Cauberghe (2014) portrayed the necessity of nonverbal cues, i.e. avoiding high voice pitch and insincere manner practiced by spokespersons

in all stages of a crisis, i.e. during and after the crisis on corporate image and reputation.

Eunson (2012) elaborated the characteristics of such nonverbal linguistics through five sentimental expressions, i.e. respect, liking, hostility, distress, and deceit. I shall draw Eunson (2012)'s perspectives on nonverbal communication in this study because the characteristics proposed can be applied in a global crisis communication context. However, nonverbal cues that Eunson (2012) has provided, i.e. closeness and environmental and cultural backgrounds are excluded in this study because these are difficult to analyse. The explanations are as follow. According to Eunson's (2012) nonverbal communication, there are five levels of nonverbal emotion including respect, liking, hostility, distress, and deceit. Follows explain the details.

Level 1: Not telling the truth

The nonverbal communication for deceit can conclusively be said that "actions as opposed to speech" because he is lying to someone. Basically, he avoids eye contact with others, expresses shaking voice, and is holding himself because he is doing something wrong and does not want to tell the truth. He also dresses up whatever he wants, with having not specific dressing style.

Level 2: Feeling sad, worried, and concerned

If someone feels sad, worried, and concerned about something, his nonverbal cues are shown off as follows:

1) shaking his head slowly as if there is no way to go and nothing that can be relieved and solved,

2) speaking nervously, worriedly, and stressfully and feeling thirstily and sadly,

3) avoiding eye contacts and staring blankly,

4) having speech tone's swing, saying something many times and not continuously,

5) moving from side to side and up and down quickly but shortly,

6) being likely to hug himself as if this situation unbelievably happens,

7) being disappointed,

8) being not concerned about what he should dress up.

Level 3: Being against someone or something

When someone feels unhappy and opposed with something or someone, he will act like:

1) biting his lip and teeth and shaking his head for not approving with what have been communicated,

2) having long, strong, and aggressive look,

3) being annoyed, stressful, seriously, and not easy to accept something,

4) not caring anything,

5) speaking sharply, loudly, and impolitely and stressing his speech tones,

6) not opening himself for what have been communicated and pointing his fingers sharply and specifically,

7) being ready and easy to fight and make argument forcefully,

8) concerning power distance.

Level 4: Being satisfied with someone or something

If someone likes something, he will exhibit his nonverbal stimulus as follows:

1) bending his head forward for liking frequently,

2) smiling and being impressed and satisfied through opening and widening eyes,

3) using a variety of speech tones to show in extent to which he is impressed and satisfied with something,

4) being warm, kind, attractive, and good-looking, but down-to-earth,

5) and kissing someone or something in a warm, kind, caring, and gentle manner,

6) Getting well-dressed, but showing sexual appeals sometimes.

Level 5: Giving deep admiration to someone or something

One's respect can be seen through these nonverbal cues including:

1) bending his head forward for agreement,

2) smiling softly,

3) being open-mind, straightforward, and easy to access and communicate with,

4) looking around and preventing facing bad situations,

5) being polite, quiet, and concentrating to what have been communicated,

6) showing the inside of his hand to express how open-mind he is,

7) Getting well-dressed and formally.

Because crises can happen unexpectedly, it is very crucial for the CEOs to play an important role to convey both verbal and nonverbal cues and messages creatively, wisely, and effectively. Negative outcomes including misunderstanding of, bad feelings and negative attitudes towards, and reverse actions on organizations/brands can, consequently, be avoided.

Methodology

The clips of the press conferences right after the missing of the MH370 and the QZ8501 were transcribed and analysed. The MH370 made by Malaysian Airlines CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya while the speech of Air Asia CEO Tony Fernandes on the QZ8501 was scrutinised. The sources of the clips were from the MAS press conference on the missing MH370 KL-Beijing Flight by Astro (Awani, 2014) for the MH370 and from the LIVE Konferensi Pers Official dari CEO Air Asia Tony Fernandez (Pere, 2015)

Some of transcription notations given (Azam, 2015) were specifically and apparently addressed and utilised in this study so that some nonverbal cues could be understood and interpreted. These included as follows:

- 1) (.) indicated a slight pause that was smaller than 0.2 seconds
- 2) ↓↑ indicated a falling or rising tone of speech
- 3) word indicated where was highlighted.
- 4) >faster< indicated where the speaker spoke outstandingly very fast.

The CEOs' verbal analysis directly considered the content treatment and delivery and word uses. Likewise, the CEOs' nonverbal cues were, once again, scrutinised, based upon the study (Eunson, 2012)

Results

Both verbal and nonverbal arousals made by Air Asia CEO Tony Fernandes were more likely to be hearted, mind-oriented, worried, and concerned than that presented by Malaysian Airlines CEO Ahmad Jauhari

Yahya. The explanations were exhibited as follows:

Verbal cues

As for illustrating how the CEOs responded and expressed about the crises, the two sections of 1) content treatment and delivery and 2) lexicon should be exhibited.

1) Content treatment and delivery

I should show the content treatment and delivery made by the MH370 and QZ8501 CEOs as follows:

MH 370

- Feeling
- Confirmation
- Investigation
- Flight information
- Search and rescue
- Pilot information
- Concern and promise
- Contact information

QZ 8501

- No confirmation
- Investigation
- Concern and promise
- Search and rescue for confirmation
- Concern and promise
- Flight information
- Search and rescue for confirmation
- Flight information
- Search and rescue for confirmation
- Concern and promise
- Pilot information

Both of the airlines leaders, similarly, started their statements with the three elements of feeling expression, (no) confirmation about the crisis, and investigation. As for the MH370 statement, rational involvement, i.e. flight information, search and rescue, and pilot

information was taken into account prior to emotional involvement. It was, nonetheless, the other way round for the QZ8501 conversation when emotional expression, i.e. concern and promise was prioritised and placed in the lines of rational details, i.e. search and rescue for confirmation, flight information, and pilot information.

2) Lexicon

Both CEOs expressed their emotional, hearted, and unhappy feelings towards the situations that happened. However, the QZ8501 CEO was likely to express their feeling and sympathy deeper and more profoundly (sub/un) conscious as well as distressed and upset than the MH370 CEO. While the MH370 CEO used the phrase “deeply sadden” [= to make someone strongly sad], that was to say, the QZ8501 CEO employed the phrases including “massive shock” [= the very large emotional or physical reaction to this unexpected situation], “very devastated” [= extremely, completely unable to stand on and exist], and “unbelievable” [= very and very shocked]. The repetition of the words used by the QZ8501 leader could, likewise, show how worried, unhappy, and painful he was.

Stronger heart and words could, likewise, be found in the speech of MH370 CEO than that of QZ8501. One dimension that can noticeably be observed from the statement of QZ8501 was that the CEO had said about search and rescue and concern and promise repeatedly, several times and he did not want to confirm anything, the situation was under investigation, though. In contrast, the CEO of MH370 fell into a more serious situation, i.e. giving information and fact, straightforwardly,

not much sad feelings and emotion were shared while reading the speech.

Nonverbal cues

Considering nonverbal cues given by Eunson (2012), no matter through kinesics, haptics, and proxemics, the QZ8501 completely express his extreme worry, sadness, and pain to the incident. The QZ8501 CEO was likely to still be shocked with the incident happened and could not have found out a way to solve the crisis yet and no hope was thought off now. Emptiness resulting from physical and mental unhappiness and suffering could be noticed in his facial expression and eyes. Repetition of words and phrases and having nothing to say that he paused some times, especially and repeatedly when he was saying about flight investigation and concern about relatives also expressed through his voice showed how painful and hurt he was. He hardly moved his body and hands and looked stressful. He held his hand and touched himself all the time. His grooming clearly presented how not care and not interested to being good looking he was. He just wore a white shirt and a pair of jeans only.

In contrast, the MH370 CEO showed a much more negative nonverbal cue to the situation than his counterpart. He did not share his deep feeling of sorrow and sufferings through his physical and mental appearance. Rather, he just gave information and fact. In other words, he was likely to be a more rational-perceived person rather than emotional-involved individual.

Discussion

To fill the knowledge and research gap found, this study targeted to examining not only verbal, but also nonverbal messages presented and given by the MH370 and QZ8501 CEO responses. The spoken content delivered in the MH370 and QZ8501 missing press conferences and by Malaysian Airlines CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya and by Air Asia CEO. Tony Fernandes was scrutinised. As for understanding what the meanings of the nonverbal expressions communicated by the two case studies, the Eunson's (2012) conceptual framework including moving heads, hand, and bodies, using different voice tones, expressing happiness/unhappiness, satisfactory/unsatisfactory feelings through faces and eyes, and dressing, and placing one's hand on his/her body was addressed.

The findings revealed that verbal cues, i.e. content treatment and delivery and lexicon used by the QZ8501 CEO presented his feeling of extreme and sincere worry, sadness, and pain rather than the ones expressed by the MH370 counterpart. In details, the QZ8501 CEO used stronger and deeper words and phrases for his emotional expression. Also, some of the words and phrases used were repeated several times. And, these spoken communications were confirmed by the nonverbal cues including moving heads, hand, and bodies, using different voice tones, expressing happiness/unhappiness, satisfactory/unsatisfactory feelings through faces and eyes, dressing, and placing one's hand on his/her body employed. As the study of Yao & Lai (2018) suggested, what CEOs delivered and conveyed through spoken and written

communication and what they nonverbally expressed should go together and in the same direction so that crises could be handled effectively.

In terms of content treatment and delivery, in details, both of the airlines leaders had made an agreement on conveying messages by starting with feeling expression, (no) confirmation, and investigation, respectively. In contrast, the QZ8501 CEO prioritised emotional message framing rather than rational one whereas the MH370 CEO response gave more concern on cognition. This could cause failure in handling the crisis of the MH370 since the stakeholders would like to be exposed to emotional content framing rather than rational one. It would, therefore, be wise for brands and companies if the use cognitive message cues were lessened and that of affective message cues were employed in a greater extent (Ahmad, Ashari & Samani, 2017; Wonink, 2017). Building understanding and caring about brands and companies could be the results (Wonink, 2017)

One limitation is about the nature of the press conferences happened. In the case of MH370, its press conference was formally organised and the CEO statement was neatly written and structured. On the contrary, a table for the QZ8501 crisis was set up informally right after the incident and in place and the CEO interaction and communication was delivered with instinct and two-way form. On the contrary, such natural versus non-natural settings could also provide a good practical suggestion that a non-natural press conference and media-briefing event could give a better consequence because of emotional involvement

presented by CEOs. Referring to the British Midland crash at Kegworth, a press conference had been done while the CEO was coming to the incident, James Brooke, MD of Rooster PR Agency said (Tilley, 2014)

Future study should focus on S-R responses by comparing between CEO responses and different levels of emotional intensity when the higher level of emotion the stakeholders have, the higher level of information processing and evaluation they make (Paz-Soldan, 2018)

Conclusion

In handling crises, CEOs have to be ready in both of their verbal and nonverbal cues. Not only eyes, but all nonverbal arousals are the window of the soul, especially in the airplane crashes when emotional expressions must be shared and perceived by those who are affected and by publics. This emotional sense should also be applied in other crises, especially at the beginning of the crises. Otherwise, loss of corporate image and reputation can happen.

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