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Culture and Crisis Communication: Nestle India's Maggi Noodles Case

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ABSTRACT

Extant theoretical paradigms in the field of crisis communication are organization-centric and do not adequately recognize the role of culture. The purpose of this essay is to analyze a crisis faced by Nestle India using the framework of global public relations which defines culture broadly to include political, economic, media, societal, and activist cultures. Our analysis revealed that a multinational corporation with over a century of presence in the country struggled to align itself to the complexities of the cultures of the host country. In the case of Nestle India, whereas environmental variables such as political economy and Westernization of urban India boosted the growth of its instant noodles, the multinational also struggled to cope with the rise of media corporatization, activist pressure and the vagaries of regulatory enforcement not to speak of cultural nationalism. It is evident that Nestlé's crisis response was governed more by its traditional corporate culture than by an ability to keep pace with the changing demands of its environment, leading to the amplification of an issue into a crisis. The study concludes that multinationals that ignore culture will be forced to pay a heavy price both in terms of reputation and the bottom line.

1. Introduction

Crises involving multinational companies (MNCs) in home and host countries as well as in local and global contexts have been rampant. Recent examples include the consumer backlash to Starbucks' "Race Together" campaign in the United States, Petrobras' corruption scandal in Brazil, explosion of Samsung Note 7 phones worldwide and the emissions scam by Volkswagen in the United States and elsewhere. Each of these crises may have been set in one country but, owing to globalization, a hallmark of the 21st century, the ramifications go far beyond the boundaries of that one country. Many of the crises faced by multinationals also stem from the marginal attention they pay to aligning themselves with local cultures.

The world has seen other eras of globalization before the current one began in the final decade of the twentieth century (Sriramesh, 2010). Today, markets have emerged around the world and corporations of all sizes have extended their reaches beyond their home country - whether these corporations are based in the West or the East. The world is also witnessing a shift, or at least a diversification, of power centers as evident in the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) held in Beijing China in May 2017. Scholarship in the field of crisis communication, much of which has evolved in a few Western developed countries such as the USA, UK, and in Western Europe, has paid only minimal attention to the impact of cultures as *environments* for crisis communication despite their significance. Instead, crisis communication scholarship has focused almost exclusively on organization-centric approaches, a major lacuna that

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reduces the global applicability of crisis communication literature.

Current crisis communication scholarship has either totally ignored the impact of culture or has only given passing reference to this key variable. Meta-analytic reviews of literature on crisis communication (Avery et al., 2010; Ha and Boynton, 2014; Ha and Riffe, 2015; Coombs, *in press*) suggested that the theories most often used in crisis communication research are Benoit's (1995, 1997) Image Restoration Theory and Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

While lauding the significant contributions that these two conceptual frameworks have made to the field, we contend that it is important to recognize that Image Restoration Theory and SCCT are organization-centric theories whose focus is almost exclusively on organization-based concerns, actions, and outcomes while ignoring the impact of socio-economic environmental variables over which organizations may have little to no control.

The field can benefit from a holistic approach to crisis management and crisis communication where the importance of a broader set of cultural variables is recognized. The purpose of this essay is to extend the horizons of crisis communication literature explicating the role of the *cultural environment* in which an organization responds to a crisis and thereby highlighting the impact of *cultures* (going beyond the anthropological concept) on crisis communication. We analyze a crisis case set in India using the framework of global public relations discussed in Sriramesh and Vercic (2009), which defines culture broadly to include political, economic, media, societal, and activist cultures. In our view, isolating our focus to only one of these variables would ignore the innate interconnectivity among these key variables. For example, the economic system of a country is driven by the political ideology prevalent there and political economy in turn affects the level of development, media culture, and so on. We believe this framework offers a more comprehensive treatment of an organization's *environment* thereby helping us view crisis communication more holistically going beyond organization-centric approaches. Broadening the horizons of the field through this framework will enhance the global applicability of crisis communication scholarship, a vital need in this era of globalization.

Why India? We chose to study a crisis in India for multiple reasons. First, India has been, and continues to be, one of the fastest growing emerging economies in the world, projected to become the third largest in the world by 2030 (Smialek, 2013). India has had a long history of welcoming foreign traders and it is pertinent to note that the 200 years of British colonization of India began with the arrival in the country of the British East India Trading Company in 1608. Despite the welcome that MNCs have received since then, the country's relationship with multinationals has been testy and even hostile. For example, following economic liberalization in 1991, India witnessed a rapid influx of MNCs into the country. In spite of this, because of British colonization, the Indian psyche harbors a deep-rooted fear of exploitation by MNCs. This fear has led to nationalistic fervor vis-à-vis MNCs making it more important for MNCs to understand, and navigate, the country's complex political, social, economic and cultural environment.

Although for these reasons the presence of MNCs in India and the issues and crises they encounter should be studied, there is sparse scholarly literature on crisis communication in India. Most of the work is on disaster communication (e.g. Dhanesh and Sriramesh, 2016). Analyzing crisis communication in an emerging economy, even if it is a very complex environment such as India, broadens the body of knowledge thus helping make scholarship more holistic. We have chosen to examine one of the most recent crises faced by an MNC in India - Nestle India's Maggi instant noodles food scare crisis. Not only was the case listed as one of the top 12 crises globally in 2015 (Holmes Report, 2016) but is also ideal for illustrating the main theme of this essay as it showcases the impact of cultural variables in managing, and examining, crisis communication.

2. Review of literature and theoretical framework

2.1. Crisis communication

Coombs (2007) defined crisis as “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (p. 164). Crisis management enables an organization to prepare for, and respond to, crisis situations to minimize its effect on stakeholders. Crisis communication, an integral part of crisis management, refers to the process of active communication with stakeholders to mitigate impact on affected parties and minimize damage to the organization's image or reputation.

One of the two dominant theories of crisis communication, Image Restoration Theory posits that any offensive act that undermines an organization's standing with its stakeholders should be addressed through image restoration discourse. The theory focuses on organizational crisis messages and proposes five response strategies: denying charges; evading responsibility; reducing the severity of offensiveness of a wrongful act; taking corrective actions, and; admitting wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness. In our view, these key actions are innately influenced by socio-cultural factors, a key nexus that has not been addressed by extant literature in crisis communication. It is pertinent to add here that even though organizations very much like to control their environment, they may have little control over socio-cultural factors.

SCCT also shares the belief in the power of communication and builds upon Image Restoration Theory and Attribution Theory to examine how attribution of crisis responsibility affects an organization's reputation with publics. SCCT further suggests that the affected organization match its response strategies with the level of attributed responsibility to manage the reputational threat to the organization, to reduce negative effects and to prevent negative behavioral intentions (Coombs, 2007). In addition to crisis responsibility, crisis history and prior reputation can intensify attributions of crisis responsibility, thereby affecting reputational threat (Coombs, 2007).

Offering evidence-based advice to practitioners, Coombs (2014) suggested that managers should focus on timing, the victims, and on handling misinformation. The author suggested that organizations must *steal the thunder*, or be the first to communicate about the crisis, before others such as news media, activists opposed to the organization, or affected stakeholders report it. He also suggested

adopting victim-focused strategies that communicate aggressively rather than passively and suggested that organizations can employ denial strategies when faced with a misinformation/challenge/rumour crisis.

As previously stated, in this essay we offer the global public relations framework (Sriramesh and Vercic, 2009) as a means of enhancing the global applicability of the extant body of knowledge on crisis communication by discussing the role of macro environmental variables because organizations do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in diverse political, economic, societal, and activist environments, all of which could potentially influence the shaping of a crisis and organizations' and publics' responses. We next offer a brief overview of this conceptual framework.

2.2. Global public relations framework

Crises are affected in every way by the environment in which an organization operates - whether it is in the onset of a crisis, the choices made in responding to it, or the way stakeholders affected by it relate to it. We refer to two recent books on crisis communication to illustrate our point that culture - as broadly defined here by us - has not been holistically addressed by crisis communication literature. Schwarz et al.'s (2016) *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* describes “disciplinary foundations for international crisis communication research” (p. 11) but does not discuss media systems or activism, while offering a broader overview of sociology, psychology, management and economics, and anthropology. Although we laud that effort, the framework we offer here is much more holistic. A second recent publication is Frandsen and Johansen's (2017) *Organizational Crisis Communication: A Multivocal Approach*, which only dedicates one chapter on what it terms “crisis communication across cultures” (p. 121) and another on news media and a third on social media. The political system and economic system are not distinctly represented in the book but are subsumed in their discussions. We believe the framework being offered here is more representative of the environment of an organization and therefore helps expand the body of knowledge of crisis communication.

2.2.1. Political system

It would not be an overstatement to say that in modern times, the political system of a society plays a role in every aspect of an individual's life. The Freedom House labeled the 20th century as *Democracy's Century* stating that whereas in 1900 not a single country of the world had adult suffrage, by 1999, more than 119 countries (62% of the world's population) had some form of democratic system (Sussman, 1999). The nexus between crises and the political system is evident in many ways. For example, the political/regulatory nature of an organization's environment is a key determinant in the choices corporations make to avoid crises or in responding to crises. Much of extant literature tells us that issues often are precursors to crises and therefore corporations engage in issues management to influence public policy. As logical as this may be, the seminal studies on issues management have assumed that all corporations face a pluralistic political environment where public policy is enacted after due public debate held in the *marketplace of ideas* (Cable and Vibbert, 1985; Heath and Causino, 1990; Jones and Chase, 1979; Regester and Larkin, 1997). Based on this assumption, this body of knowledge proposes lobbying as a key activity.

Evidence from other parts of the world suggests that there are political environments where lobbying is illegal. In 2012, Wal-Mart found itself amid bribery allegations when it routinely disclosed to US regulators that it had spent \$25 million over four years to lobby for increased market access in India. “It has been officially confirmed that Wal-Mart Company has indulged in lobbying in India, or in simple terms indulged in bribery,” said the spokesman of the then opposition party (BJP, which is now in power in India) in parliament, Mr. Ravi Shankar Prasad (Desai, 2015, para. 2). The legal system, the judiciary being one of the three Estates of governments, also is varied around the world but current models of crisis communication rarely take that into account. For example, most crisis communication discussions tend to contrast honesty and disclosure during a crisis as a potential legal liability. That may be true in highly litigious societies such as the US but not to the same degree in many other parts of the world. The legal system in India, for instance, is notorious for delays in adjudicating cases. Their aversion to litigating for years or even decades is the main reason behind people not venturing to seek justice in the Indian justice system.

2.2.2. Economic system

A country's economic system is closely linked with its political system, hence the term *political economy*. Pluralistic political systems encourage greater economic freedom and thereby more market-oriented economic tendencies. Political pluralism also tends to favor private entrepreneurship. Prior to the formation of the WTO, most developing countries, even those that had democratic political systems, tended to favor managed economies built around public sector enterprises (under government ownership) that were often monopolies. In such systems, there is a blurring of boundaries between the *government* and *corporation*. Much of the current discussion in crisis communication, obviously emanating from developed Western countries, tends to subsume a pluralistic political economy that fosters capitalism and where the boundaries between the two entities are clearly distinguishable.

Further, South Korea instituted the system of *Chaebols* in the 1970s to help propel the country toward economic prosperity. The three largest *Chaebols* - Samsung, Hyundai, and LG are household names around the world but are also typified by cronyism, personal influence peddling, and opaqueness. The offices of Samsung Electronics were raided on November 8, 2016 as part of the investigations into corruption that led to the impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

Given the variations in the nature of political economies, the impact of political and economic systems on crisis communication and management cannot be overstated. It behooves crisis communication scholars to not have only one conceptualization - steeped in Western democratic capitalistic traditions - of how crises may arise, be responded to, and affect both individual and corporate reputation. India's own economic system has undergone a seachange since economic liberalization in 1991, leading to changes in the media system as well as societal culture.

2.2.3. Culture

Communication and culture are two sides of a coin, each affecting, and being affected by, the other. Studying culture empirically has proven difficult because of the malleable nature of the term itself not least because defining the term itself has proven very challenging with anthropologists offering hundreds of definitions for the term. In trying to understand the nature of individual societal cultures, Hofstede's (1980, 2001) work has proven to be the most popular in organizational literature. He first identified four, then five, and then six *dimensions* of culture to understand and describe the differences one can discern in different societies: power distance, individualism (vs. collectivism), masculinity (vs. femininity), uncertainty avoidance, long-term (vs. short term) orientation, and indulgence (vs. restraint). Despite their popularity, it should be noted that Hofstede identified dimensions that are common across many countries whereas societies also possess many characteristics that are unique to them and these often are much more relevant for the purpose of linking them to communication activities.

Scholars have studied other dimensions of culture such as *high vs. low context* (Hall, 1976), *interpersonal trust* (Six, 2007; Tayeb, 1988), and *deference to authority* (Goffman, 1967; Kakar, 1971). Richard Lewis, a practitioner and cross-cultural consultant, used Edward T. Hall's concepts - monochronic vs. polychronic cultures - to identify three "ends" of a continuum along the sides of a triangle and then placed countries along those continua. His conceptualization captures more of the nuances of cultures but the challenge to researchers would be in trying to operationalize the variables along his continua for measuring them. When culture is studied in organizational contexts, it is rather difficult to isolate the impact of *societal* culture from that of *organizational* culture. As one of the oldest cultures in the world, India is a rich cultural tapestry that is equally complex to understand let alone manage. So, every organization, including multinationals, need to be cognizant of the pitfalls of not understanding and relating to Indian culture, which is often referred to as "unity in diversity."

2.2.4. Media system

The media, whether *traditional* (print and broadcast) or *new* (information and communication technologies - ICT - and social media), play a significant role in crisis communication. They can spawn a crisis, exacerbate the fallout from a crisis, and keep reminding stakeholders of the crisis long after it has ended - all causing reputational harm to a corporation or organization. This aspect of the relationship between crises and media has been well chronicled in extant literature. However, most of the discussions of the nexus between media and crises seem to assume that the media environment is constant across cultures or that the "recovery phase" from a crisis fallout is somehow predictable to happen immediately after the crisis ends. For that reason, little discussion is evident in crisis communication literature about the differences in media *environments* around the world. Peoples of different cultures have different perceptions of the role of media in a society. Among the many examples of this are the controversy surrounding the 12 cartoons that the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published in 2005 and the controversial trailer of the movie *Innocence of Muslims* in 2012. People in the Middle East and elsewhere could not fathom why the governments of Denmark and the US would not penalize the newspaper and You Tube (for publishing the film) respectively.

The normative theories of the mass media first discussed by Siebert et al. (1956) and later revised by a number of mass media scholars for almost a quarter of a century, discussed the different media environments around the world based on local perceptions of the role of mass media. Although the world has changed in many ways since these theories were first introduced, as the examples from Denmark and the US indicate to us, the basic principles of the media - society nexus remains. The body of crisis communication would be greatly enriched by including these theories to appreciate the different media environments in which crises are set. Local laws governing ICTs and social media also vary around the world and should be studied as well. In sum, we cannot treat media environments around the world as being the same or even benign.

2.2.5. Activism

Many a crisis may be created by activists. Activists may also fan the flames of crises to challenge corporations. Activists are a key stakeholder group and every crisis manager should seek better relationships with them. Activists may directly challenge corporations and also seek allies in the government as well as mass media, thereby exponentially increasing the fallout from a crisis. Activist stakeholders can redefine a corporation's practices as irresponsible, thereby triggering a CSR-based crisis that can damage reputational assets (Coombs and Holladay, 2015). Further, in a global economy, activists will have different cultural idiosyncrasies and therefore crisis managers would need to have the ability and knowledge base to manage relationships with activists.

Even though we have described the five environmental (cultural) variables separately, it should be already evident to readers that all of these variables are interlinked and therefore affect, and are affected by each other. Based on the above review of crisis communication literature and the global public relations framework adopted from Sriramesh and Vercic (2009), the following research question guided this study:

RQ: How do the macro environmental (cultural) variables of (a) political and legal systems, (b) level of economic development, (c) societal and organizational cultures (d) media system and (e) activism influence crisis communication?

We framed a research design that sought to link the five environmental variables of global public relations with a crisis communication case faced by Nestle India.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case study research

To examine the influence of macro environmental (cultural) variables on crisis communication, this study used case study

methodology because the naturalistic style of case study research is most appropriate to examining the role of contextual variables. Emphasizing the importance of examining contexts, Gillham (2010) defined a case as “a unit of human activity embedded in the real world; which can only be studied or understood in context; which exists in the here and now; that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw” (p. 1). International business research and crisis communication research have been dominated by quantitative research methods, and scholars have called for more research using qualitative methodologies (Avery et al., 2010; Tsang, 2013) and the case study has been one of the most widely used methods of qualitative research in international business (Pauwels and Matthyssens, 2004) and in crisis communication research in business journals (Ha and Riffe, 2015).

However, a review of recent case study research in crisis communication revealed that most case studies examined how organizations and/or publics applied crisis response strategies according to SCCT (e.g., Johansen et al., 2016; Ngai and Falkheimer, 2017; Ott and Theunissen, 2015; Richards Jr. et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2017). As already stated, such case studies are mostly organization-centric and have a micro focus, examining either the organization's or publics' responses to a crisis. This study goes beyond the organization-centric perspective and offers a more macro view of a multitude of contextual factors that could influence crisis communication. Further, although some of these case studies (e.g., Zhu et al., 2017) and books on crisis communication that include case studies (Fearn-Banks, 2017; Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Schwarz et al., 2016) have examined culture, culture has been equated mostly with Hofstede's dimensions of culture. This study goes beyond just an analysis of societal culture, but also examines the influence of political and legal systems, level of economic development, media systems and activism, on crisis communication.

3.2. Data generation and analysis

Data were gathered through archival research using publicly available data including official documents from the state such as government orders and reports; official documents from private sources such as annual reports, press releases, corporate and brand webpages, advertisements and social media sites, and; mass-media outputs such as newspapers and television programs.

The analysis was carried out using the five environmental (cultural) variables of global public relations reviewed earlier. Through the analysis of the data we aimed to generate a contextualized explanation of the research question. While offering contextualized explanations, researchers examine the environment in which the phenomenon under study is situated and aim to provide an explanation of the phenomenon employing relevant factors, often drawing on existing theories to strengthen explanation of the case (Tsang, 2013; Welch et al., 2011). The following sections present the specifics of the case, followed by an analysis of the case employing the global public relations framework.

4. Nestlé India's Maggi noodles crisis

Nestlé India faced a major food scare crisis in 2015 after a government laboratory found monosodium glutamate (MSG) in one of its flagship products in India - Maggi noodles. Although MSG is not banned, Indian regulations stipulate that foods with MSG be labeled accordingly, with a warning that the product is not recommended for infants under 12 months. Maggi's package not only did not carry the warning, but its label stated that the product had “No Added MSG.”

Nestlé India denied adding MSG, contested the finding, and requested a retest. The lab found not only MSG but also seven times more lead than the permissible limit in the second sample, which was past its “Best Before” date. Nestlé India responded with its own tests as well as tests by independent accredited laboratories, which showed lead levels to be within safety limits. The company stated that although it does not add MSG to Maggi noodles, the product contains glutamate from naturally occurring sources. The company said that it would remove the “No added MSG” claim, although it was “factually correct and not in violation of regulations.”

The story broke out in local media followed by national coverage. Soon after, comments about contaminated noodles surfaced on Maggi's Facebook page and Twitter. The hashtag #MaggiBan started trending. While Maggi was caught in a media storm, Nestlé India continued to engage with food regulators. Two weeks after the news broke, Nestlé India issued a statement that the product was “safe to eat.” In May 2015, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) instructed Commissioners of Food Safety across India to test Maggi samples at authorized laboratories.

On June 03, 2015 Nestlé's CEO, Paul Bulcke arrived in India just as Delhi's health minister announced that he was banning Maggi for 15 days in Delhi. The evening news showed protestors burning Maggi packets and the photos of Maggi's celebrity ambassadors. The following day, Bulcke announced a voluntary recall of Maggi, while Commissioners of Food Safety in five Indian states banned Maggi. The company stated in a press release: “In spite of MAGGI Noodles being safe, Nestlé India decides to take the products off the shelves” (www.Nestle.in). Bulcke's main message was: Maggi is safe; however, there's consumer confusion; the company is working with authorities; we are committed to India. FSSAI issued an order directing the company to withdraw and recall all the approved variants of Maggi Instant Noodles (ten flavors) from the market and stop further production, processing, distribution and sale of the product. The media reporting was largely negative. Most print and broadcast media carried stories of worried parents and experts. *The Economic Times* (June 06, 2015) reported that Nestlé India had contracted the public relations agency APCO Worldwide to help with the crisis. Nestlé held its first media conference and created a Maggi information hub on its website, which included lab reports and information on MSG. The company publicized its recall efforts and invited journalists to tour its Quality Assurance Center. It replaced its managing director, Etienne Benet, with Suresh Narayanan, who had started his career with Nestlé India. Narayanan declared that his mission was to bring Maggi back. Nestlé destroyed all the recalled products amounting to about 30,000 tons in seven incinerators around the country. Interestingly, this was viewed in the country as an admission by the company that the product was indeed unsafe for human consumption.

A series of court battles ensued. In June 2015, Nestlé filed a suit against the FSSAI in the Bombay High Court. Soon after, High

Court of Bombay allowed the company to resume manufacturing Maggi for export. Then, the government sued Nestlé India alleging that the company had sold unsafe products and used misleading advertising. The next day, the Bombay High Court revoked the ban order and ordered Nestlé to undertake fresh tests in three accredited labs. Two weeks later, Nestlé India launched the #WeMissYouToo ad campaign on social media to engage Maggi's young and loyal consumer fan base. Maggi cleared the tests at the mandated laboratories. Nestlé relaunched the product line in November 2015. "Our commitment to goodness you can always trust" had replaced the "No Added MSG" label. Narayanan reiterated a key message in multiple interviews: Maggi is safe, was safe, and always will be safe. By April 2016, Maggi had regained status as India's leading noodle brand, with 50% market share.

5. Case analysis

The Maggi noodles crisis in India illustrates the reputational harm that can befall companies that fail to understand and align their activities with the culture of the host country. A confluence of a cultural factors - a political economy that wants to be a world player despite lax laws and poor enforcement of regulation, a westernizing urban and semi-urban culture, corporatization of the media, an activist judiciary and consumer activism - all colluded to create a crisis for the globally profitable Nestle corporation. These same factors also make it a near perfect case study for displaying the utility of the global public relations framework to crisis communication.

5.1. Political system

An MNC operating in India has to take into consideration four key aspects of India's political environment: the country's ambition to be a world player resulting in its effort to court Foreign Direct Investment (FDI); its struggle to reconcile the bitter memories of British colonialism; a pluralistic democratic system that encourages a vibrant public sphere; and finally, the wide disparities in governance across its 29 states and seven union territories resulting from a federal political economy.

Immediately after independence, India had adopted a socialistic system of political economy inspired by the Soviet model of five-year plans to drive economic development. In 1991, in no small measure due to the fall of the Soviet Union, India began to adopt a more liberal economic policy welcoming foreign investment. Since then, among other changes, the country has permitted foreign investors to own more than 50% stake in a company. In 1984, Union Carbide had successfully argued in court that it was not the majority stakeholder and therefore not culpable in the chemical release that led to thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of permanent injuries near its plant in Bhopal. Nestle has had a checkered past in India most notoriously for its dubious tactics in marketing of baby formula in India and other developing countries that led to its products being boycotted in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, etc. (Sethi, 1994). It is in this context that Nestle India's Maggi crisis should be viewed.

Even though almost seven decades have passed since India attained independence, there exists an aversion among many segments of society to potential exploitation by MNCs. In the Nestlé case, the colonial hangover and fear of exploitation could have been one of the drivers that helped drive a case of inappropriate labeling into becoming a national crisis of health and food safety. Nestlé India appeared to be oblivious to historical political sensitivities, merely treating the issue as a technical one to be sorted out with local government regulators, until much later when they issued messages that were aimed to reinforce their commitment to India.

Nestle India underestimated the extent of negative public opinion following media reports of the issue. Although the company issued messages stating that Maggi was safe to eat and denied the accusations, the messages were issued rather late and got lost among media, activist and regulatory voices, a typical situation that reflected the multi-vocal approach of the rhetorical arena (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). A pluralistic communicative environment demands more aggressive approaches to crisis communication, which Nestle India failed to do, especially in the initial phases. It adopted a relatively passive communication approach, especially with the media and customer stakeholder groups, instead choosing to engage in the tactic of attacking the accuser.

Further, India has a federal system of governance with power distributed between the central and state governments. However, extreme disparities exist among the different states in terms of infrastructure, social services, fiscal performance, justice, law and order and quality of governance (Ghatak and Roy, 2015; Mundle et al., 2016). An MNC with a national presence in India would have to take into consideration these extreme disparities in governance systems. Nestle India was unable to manage, and contain, an issue identified in one economically backward state, which later exploded into a national crisis.

5.1.1. Legal system

Closely connected with the political system is the legal/regulatory framework. MNCs and legal wrangles have a long history in India. Coca-Cola was forced to leave India in the late 1970s by an activist government (Panchal, 2014). The name Union Carbide still conjures up highly negative sentiments about MNCs in India after the 1984 gas tragedy. Naveen M.V., group managing director at First Agro, India's first commercial grower organization with zero-pesticide produce stated, "Multinationals typically follow the law of the land. If it is inadequate, they do not bother to adhere to the standards that they do in their own home countries or in other developed nations" (Wharton, 2015, para. 17).

Regulation in the food sector was tightened with the establishment of the FSSAI in 2006, which consolidated acts and orders that had earlier handled food related issues in various ministries and departments. The creation of a single reference point for all matters relating to food safety and standards in the country meant that there was now one unified authority that would oversee food safety and standards in the country.

When FSSAI took issue with Maggi's labeling and accused it of flouting food safety standards, it could be classified as a preventable crisis due to perceived organizational misconduct that posed a challenge to Nestle India (Coombs, 2007). Although Nestle

India denied the accusations and attacked the accuser by alleging poor testing standards at government laboratories, its technocratic responses appeared bereft of an appreciation of extant nationalistic perceptions of MNCs as evading their full range of responsibilities in host countries.

Such a response is surprising given that Nestle India has been in the country since 1912 and has been successful in building brands that have come to be seen as Indian (Millward Brown, 2015). However, the Maggi crisis highlighted the multinational's insensitivity to political aspects and its inability to manage its relationship with the main regulator of food in the country.

5.2. Level of economic development

Following economic liberalization in the 1990s, India has emerged as the eighth-largest economy in the world, predicted to become the third largest by 2030. The Indian food and grocery sector is the world's sixth largest, and the Indian food retail market is expected to reach US\$ 894.98 billion by 2020. In 2015, dried and instant noodles was the largest category in the Indian pasta and noodles market, accounting for 87.78% of the total market (Canadean, 2017). In 2015, when the company relaunched Maggi after a five-month ban, it had 10.9% of the market share, which climbed to 35.2% in December. In March 2016, it had 51% market share and by Jan 2017 it had risen to 60% (TOI, 2017).

One of the key drivers of the high rate of growth of the processed food sector has been a burgeoning middle class that wants to adopt a Western life-style including in its choice of cuisine (Stigler et al., 2012). Other drivers are a growing middle class, rapid urbanization, the emergence of nuclear families and dual income households, a young population and increasing media penetration and related lifestyle changes and food habits (IBEF, 2016a). Maggi could capitalize on these trends to become India's third staple after rice and wheat (Majumder, 2015) and garnered 70% of the market share before the crisis hit.

Further, economic liberalization spawns greater interest among investors and thereby leads to greater competition (Sriramesh and Vercic, 2009). This was certainly the case with the Indian instant noodles market with multiple brands competing for a slice of the lucrative and rapidly growing market. In addition to Nestle India, the market has some aggressive players including Hindustan Unilever and GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare. Some other competitors include Ching's Secret of Capital Foods, Wai Wai by CG Foods and Top Ramen by Nissin Foods. This competitive scenario has led to aggressive communication campaigns aimed at garnering consumer trust and forging strong relationships with stakeholders. Although Nestle India had built strong brand-customer relationships through aggressive marketing and advertising campaigns, once the crisis erupted they were largely silent, especially with their customer base. This relatively passive approach to crisis communication, especially when faced with a challenge from an aggressor went against advice of SCCT as well.

While Nestle India's silence created a communicative vacuum that was filled with news stories challenging it and spreading rumors against the company, in the post-crisis recovery phase, the company was able to bank on its strong relationships with customers to mitigate damage from the crisis. Although competitors attempted to take away market share, the consumer trends that enabled Maggi to become the market leader before the crisis enabled Nestle to regain market share.

5.3. Activism

India has had a long history of social activism, beginning with the successful struggle for independence from the British. With economic liberalization and the advent of ICTs and social media, India has been witnessing the rise of new forms of protest. Often referred to as citizen activism, or activism of the urban middle class, such activism consists of individual citizens who emerge in the public/cyber spaces in protest but who define themselves as non-aligned with any political ideology (Singh, 2014).

In the case of the Maggi crisis, there were sporadic instances of protestors burning packets of Maggi and even directing their anger at celebrity endorsers of the product. However, the protest organized by the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) in Kolkata where packets of Maggi noodles were burned while children held up banners of protest, received wide coverage across national and foreign media.

5.4. Societal and organizational culture

When Indian culture is viewed through Hofstede's cultural dimensions, one discerns a country with high power distance (77), a balanced individualistic-collectivistic orientation (48), slightly elevated levels of masculinity (56), low uncertainty avoidance (40) a moderate long term orientation (51) and low indulgence (26) (Hofstede, n.d.).

Perhaps of most relevance to the Nestle Maggi crisis are the dimensions of power distance, masculinity, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance. High power distance, which indicates preference for hierarchy and a top-down structure in society and organizations matched fairly well with Nestlé's own corporate culture, which has been termed hierarchical (Sethi, 1994). Implications of this aspect will be discussed later under corporate culture.

Perhaps the dimension of culture that most enabled Maggi's success in India was the perceived role of women as the primary caretakers of the well-being of the family. During the late colonial period and well into the post-Independence era, the notion of motherhood underpinned a culturally conscious domesticity, portraying mothers as nurturers, a trend that continues even post liberalization and the increasing incidence of women entering formal workplaces. Maggi capitalized on this evolving image of the modern, caring mother, who prepares healthy meals herself, but faster and more efficiently, in two minutes. With the slogan, "Mummy, I'm hungry" targeted at busy mothers, Maggi soon rose in popularity as a snack for children whose mothers wanted to serve healthy food but were too busy to make traditional Indian fare.

The cultural dimension of collectivism vs. individualism was also relevant in the Maggi case. Collectivist traits mean that there is a high preference for belonging to a larger social framework, evident in how Maggi became a brand that cut across social divisions, evolving into mainstream comfort food. “Maggi points”—where food vendors cooked Maggi noodles to order—became eating hot-spots for office-goers and college students across India. At the same time, appealing to notions of individualism, Maggi also positioned itself as a quick meal that can be fixed by anyone. An entire generation of Indians who grew up on Maggi became independent cooks when they stepped out on their own (Bhattacharya, 2015).

Finally, low uncertainty avoidance scores indicate a patient country with a high tolerance for ambiguity and the unexpected. Rules are often seen to be obstacles that need to be circumvented and a word used most commonly - “adjust” - refers to multiple things including turning a blind eye to flouting rules and creating innovative ways to solve problems (Hofstede, n.d.). Tolerance for ambiguity undoubtedly played a key role in most of the loyal consumers maintaining their support of Maggi throughout the food crisis.

In addition to Hofstede's dimensions, another cultural aspect that aided Nestle India was changing food cultures. Although traditional foods still hold sway in most parts of India, the influx of new food products and the large-scale commodification of food production has challenged conventional ways in which food is understood, prepared and consumed. Maxfield et al. (2016) found that adolescents in India overwhelmingly believed nontraditional foods to be more prestigious than traditional fare. In other words, there is an onslaught on thousands of years of traditional Indian culture by Western multinationals.

Indeed, this fiercely loyal fan base was angered at the withdrawal of Maggi from the market (Majumder, 2015). Initially, the public vented their emotions - mostly, confusion and anger - on social media asking for clarity from Nestle India. Although slow in doing so, Nestle India responded with messages of public welfare insisting that Maggi was safe to eat. They then, engaged in both denial and corrective action strategies. Because the situation and the attendant attribution of crisis responsibility were ambiguous, and because the company seemed confident of its quality assurance processes, they were aggressive in denying the accusations, as prescribed by SCCT. Much later, Nestle India also adopted active stakeholder engagement strategies such as plant visits. In summary, the strong brand relationships and relational reputation that Nestle India had built with its customer stakeholder base not only enabled it to become one of the leading noodle brands in India but also enabled it to stage a strong post-crisis comeback.

Although it is influenced by societal culture, organizational culture is distinct from it (Sriramesh and White, 1992). Nestlé's corporate culture has been characterized as exceptionally Swiss and exceptionally international (Jacob, 2003; Sethi, 1994). In a detailed case study examining Nestlé's response to the infant formula controversy the company encountered from 1974 to 1984, Sethi (1994) noted the strong Swiss personality of the company underpinned by pride in the history and accomplishments of its founders. Examining Nestlé's response to the infant formula controversy Sethi (1994) concluded that although Nestlé claimed to have made changes in its corporate culture to make it nimbler and more responsive to changes in societal expectations, Nestlé reverted to its traditional culture after that controversy had passed.

Interestingly, a striking similarity in response can be drawn between the infant formula crisis of 1974–1984 and the Maggi crisis in India almost 40 years later. In the infant formula case, Nestlé adopted the stance that the company had only employed accepted advertising methods used by manufacturers of similar products globally and that it had full confidence in the ethicality of its actions. Sethi (1994) noted that Nestlé's inability or unwillingness to acknowledge any fault on its side turned into a rallying call among activists who waged a successful campaign against the company.

In the Maggi case also, Nestlé India took great pride in its technical competence and superiority of product quality and testing infrastructure, choosing to engage only with local government regulators. In the process, it failed to understand the negativity that had built up in India's media and regulatory environment. Aris Protonotarios, in charge of quality and safety for the MNC verbalized this pride: “To anyone at Nestlé, being told your product is unsafe and hazardous is an insult ... to me it felt personal” (as cited in Fry, 2016, para.34). These low levels of environmental awareness and the lack of a comprehensive issues management approach tied back to Nestlé's traditional corporate culture could have been one of the key drivers that escalated the issue from a relatively minor issue of mislabeling to a full-blown food scare crisis.

5.5. Media

India is estimated to be the second largest television market in the world, with 181 million television households in 2016 and one of the largest broadcasting industries in the world with approximately 847 private satellite television channels, 243 FM radio channels and 190 operational community radio networks. Television penetration in India touched 64% in 2016 (IBEF, 2016b). Although there were more than 460 million Internet users in 2016 representing 34.8% of the population (InternetLiveStats.com), the growth in online media has largely evaded rural India. Facebook is the country's leading social network, with tens of millions of users. Integrating digital strategies as part of a repertoire of communication channels is important for organizations as India's educated, technology savvy, largely youthful population leapfrogs the digital divide (over 65% of Indians are below the age of 35) and organizations will have to engage with them digitally (Patwardhan and Bardhan, 2014). The private media in India are vigorous and diverse, and exposes of corporations and the rich and powerful are common. Nevertheless, revelations of close relationships between politicians, business executives, and lobbyists and some leading media personalities and owners of media outlets have dented public confidence in the press in recent years (Freedom House, 2016). The oversaturated media scene and the emergence of 24-h news cycles competing for selective audience attention often engage in sensationalism to attract audiences (Rodrigues and Ranganathan, 2015).

The Maggi controversy also became grist for the mill engaging TV commentators with hours of lively, sensationalist discussions. Given the dynamic media environment in India, it was nearly suicidal for Nestle India to have remained silent for a week after the

national media picked up on the story. The organization did not steal the thunder as advised by Coombs (2014) and thus seize the initiative. Instead, the company was concentrated on gathering facts and sorting out technical aspects of the case with local regulators while at the same time losing control of the story in the national media.

Supriyo Gupta, CSEO of Indian PR firm Torque Communications, attributes the slowness in Nestlé's media relations response to its traditionally conservative approach to media. According to Gupta, Nestlé did not have strong relations with the media, much needed to air their version of the story (Fry, 2016). Traditionally, Nestlé hasn't engaged actively with the world, except through its marketing activities. It has a relatively small communications team, which hasn't courted much media attention. Nestlé did not even have a centralized public relations team in the U.S., its largest market until a few years ago (Fry, 2016).

To Nestlé India's credit, while they lost control of the narrative in the news media, they maintained contact with their customer base through social media, reinforcing their key messages: thank you for your support; here are the test results; please share the facts. While it waited for the courts to announce the verdict, Nestlé India used creative advertising that reflected their loyal fan base's longing for Maggi noodles. When the product was relaunched, it was accompanied by an aggressive marketing campaign including #WeMissYouToo.

6. Conclusion

The above analysis of the crisis faced by a Swiss company in India highlights the importance of studying the impact of *culture* - as broadly defined here - to crisis communication. While key contextual variables such as drivers of economic growth, changing societal mores toward the role of women in contemporary society, high tolerance for ambiguity and transforming food cultures encouraged brand growth and post-crisis recovery, other environmental variables such as the regulatory system, the rise of activist media, varying governance standards across states, and the company's own organizational culture exerted tremendous pressure on the company in this crisis case.

Although Nestlé has had decades of experience in India, and includes brands that are seen as indigenous by Indians, it failed to leverage on this institutional knowledge. Instead, its response was strikingly similar to its response to the baby killer controversy in the USA. Its traditional corporate culture that defended its actions as being right and diminished the importance of media relations, reasserted itself. Further, although the company engaged in denial strategies, by continuing to engage with only regulators in the initial days of the crisis, Nestlé appeared to foreground behavioral relationships over communicative.

Although Nestlé had faltered in its initial crisis response, it was finally able to stage a comeback leveraging on its core strengths: deeply entrenched customer-brand relationships and aggressive marketing campaigns that drew upon these strong relational histories. Caught between accusations of lead contamination in one of their favourite brands, and deep emotional connections with the brand posed a dialectical situation for consumers: deep trust in, almost fandom toward, the brand they loved and doubts whether they had been lulled into a false sense of confidence. However, although belatedly - and some would say grudgingly, Nestlé India listened to its consumers' concerns and responded with its core strength - marketing campaigns that assuaged fears and relied on strong brand loyalty.

The core thesis of this study is that crisis communication literature would be greatly enhanced by integrating culture in all its forms - political, legal, economic, activist, societal and organizational and media - of an organization into crisis communication discussions. Extant literature on crisis communication has focused predominantly on matching crisis response strategies to the level of attributed responsibility, a deficiency highlighted by this study. In democratic societies characterized by high levels of political pluralism and multiple media outlets, crisis communication should be swift and strategic. Coombs (2014) also suggested that crisis communication must be more aggressive than passive. Nestlé India engaged in aggressive denial strategies but were not aggressive enough from a customer point of view, especially considering that the pluralistic political environment demanded such aggressive behavior.

As for the level of economic development, when there is high economic freedom and consequently high levels of competition, organizations must invest heavily in communication campaigns to establish strong relationships with consumers. When faced with a crisis, organizations can leverage on these strong relationships and incorporate their relational and reputational strengths into post-crisis recovery strategies, an aspect addressed by the notion of prior reputation in SCCT.

As for societal and organizational culture, cultural dimensions that are relevant to the specific context must be considered in crisis response strategies. In this case, while multiple elements of societal culture such as changing lifestyle and food cultures and high tolerance of ambiguity helped to fuel the growth of Maggi and aid in its post-crisis recovery, aspects of a traditional, hierarchical organizational culture impeded Nestlé's ability to manage the crisis.

Finally, crisis response strategies must reflect the media systems of the host country. MNCs cannot continue to engage in traditional media relations as was done until the turn of the new millennium and expect not to pay a price for it. Today's media relations has much more of a "global" focus than in the past. This means, crisis communication strategies will need to be adjusted depending on whether the organization is dealing with a corporatized media system, a developmental media system, an activist media system or a more authoritarian one, to name a few.

Organizational managers have so far been relying predominantly on anecdotal evidence to help them manage crises in different parts of the world. They often seem to rely on trial and error to effectively manage relationships in new markets whose political system, economic system, media system, culture, and activist system may be unfamiliar to them. So, by including these environmental variables in crisis communication literature, we will be making the body of knowledge more holistic, thereby enhancing its utility to the practice of crisis communication as well in helping prepare effective crisis communication managers. In spite of having native Indians as senior managers, Nestlé India did not manage these environmental variables well in the case of the company's

flagship brand Maggi. This only proves that unless managers are consciously trained about the impact of these variables, they will not be able to deftly manage the economic and societal culture in which they operate.

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