



A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Discourse Between Chinese and American Companies under the Tariff War—A Case Study of Apple and Huawei

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Abstract— Against the deepening process of globalization, the United States launched global tariff wars and intensified its suppression of China's development. Trade disputes and tariff frictions between the two sides persisted from 2018 to 2025. Under such circumstance, policy-driven external crises have become a key research context for corporate crisis communication discourse. This study conducts a comparative analysis of Apple and Huawei based on Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. Since neither company issued official statements during the 2025 trade conflicts, this paper just analysis the text released in the initial phase of the tariff war from 2018 to 2020. The paper examines their crisis communication discourses. The research findings indicate that Huawei adopted a clear and confrontational discourse strategy, constructing an identification of "survival and development". Through emotional mobilization, historical narration and collective identity rhetoric, it linked corporate prospects to national industrial security. In contrast, Apple maintained a neutral, restrained and depoliticized stance and established an identification of "efficiency and win-win cooperation". It upheld shared interests via rational elaboration, interest balancing and data expression. The difference between the two companies stems from ownership nature, supply chain structure, market reliance and political and economic contexts. This research broadens the application of Critical Discourse Analysis in studies on crisis communication discourse triggered by policy-driven external crises, and provides references on discourse strategies for both multinational corporations and local enterprises to deal with international political risks.



Keywords— Trump Tariff War; Crisis Communication; Critical Discourse Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

With the development of globalization, trade frictions among countries have intensified. The problem of Policy-driven external crises, industry access restrictions, and new carbon emission regulations have assumed an increasingly important role in corporate crisis management.

For multinational enterprises and Chinese local enterprises, tariff wars and entity lists are not merely issues

of commercial costs. They pose severe challenges to reputation management, stakeholder communication, and legitimacy maintenance. How to articulate positions, assume responsibility, reassure the public, and mobilize support through crisis communication discourse has become an urgent task for enterprises.

From 2018 to 2020, the Trump administration imposed tariff policies, pushing China and the United States into a crisis of "tariff hike-countermeasure". This forced enterprises to upgrade from traditional market risk

management to policy-oriented risk management.

At this background, enterprises need to articulate stances and responsibilities to construct corporate images. And they need to engage in discursive struggles around relevant information. How to control situations, reconstruct corporate images and gain consumer trust through right crisis communication discourse has become a challenge for both multinational and local firms.

Current research on crisis communication focuses on strategy selection, public opinion response, and image repair. Few scholars conducted comparative studies of political crises from a micro-discursive perspective. In addition, the research applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to corporate crisis communication discourse remains insufficient.

As one of the largest U.S. technology companies, Apple relies heavily on Chinese manufacturing for its product supply chains. So tariff policies directly impact its competitiveness. Huawei, a leading Chinese technology firm, has been regarded by the U.S. as a “national security threat” and subjected to severe sanctions and technological blockades. Faced with common policy pressures, the two companies adopted different discursive strategies. This paper conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of these differences and their underlying causes. This research holds important theoretical and practical significance for understanding corporate communication behavior in policy-driven crises. Accordingly, this paper conducts a comparative study of crisis communication discourse between Apple (a U.S. firm in China) and Huawei (a Chinese local firm).

This study addresses three core research questions:

Against the tariff war, what differences exist between Apple’s and Huawei’s crisis communication discourse at the text, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions?

What are the underlying social and structural factors?

What practical implications can the findings provide for multinational and local firms in responding to policy-driven external crises?

Early Critical Discourse Analysis focused mainly on media and political discourse. This study integrates CDA with crisis communication discourse research and applies it to corporate crisis communication discourse in policy-driven external crises. It not only provides an integrated analytical framework but also expands the application of discourse analysis to corporate policy crisis contexts.

Furthermore, by selecting two firms from different national backgrounds, this study analyzes differences in

discursive strategies between multinationals and local firms under external pressure. It reveals how corporate ownership, supply chain structure, market dependence, and political-economic contexts shape crisis communication discourse. The findings offer actionable discursive insights for multinationals to balance home- and host-country interests. This research provides directions for discourse construction in corporate public relations, brand management, and international communication, enhancing capabilities and skills in crisis response.

1.2 Literature Review

Early crisis communication studies adopted diagnostic and linear organizational crisis models. The most representative theories include Benoit’s (1997) Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Coombs’s (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This research field has remained a major academic focus in recent years. Deng Youping (2023) employed Hu Baijing’s fact-value model and conducted a two-case study to compare the crisis communication discourses and strategies of Huawei and ZTE. He identified the similarities and differences between their strategies from three dimensions: issue management, relationship management and discourse power structure.

Nevertheless, Dunn & Eble (2014) argued that traditional research on crisis communication discourse mainly explores how organizations use language to protect their reputation. Such studies overlook some critical factors such as power, social class and context. From the perspective of these conventional theories, a crisis is treated merely as an isolated emergency, ignoring the social status and power relations of relevant actors. For this reason, they proposed integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) into the theoretical framework of crisis communication. This helps prevent institutional discourse from being marginalized and stops other diverse voices from being suppressed. In their analysis of the crisis communication, they found that the company’s press releases presented a contradictory narrative: it claimed to care for employees and described the incident as an accident, while prioritizing business operations, downplaying fatalities and obscuring layoff arrangements. The local community accepted the company’s crisis framing due to its reliance on the enterprise for jobs. The lack of legal constraints and trade unions formed a silencing mechanism, which stifled the voices of injured workers.

Furthermore, an increasing number of scholars have approached crisis communication from the perspective of discourse analysis. Peng Xiubin (2020) applied Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework to examine

discursive conflicts in transnational consular crises, and found that multiple stakeholders demonstrated polyphonic features resulting from disparities in discourse power and ideology. Wang Yan (2015) adopted Critical Discourse Analysis to explore crisis communication on social media, and analyzed the linguistic, discursive and social practice characteristics reflected in the online discussions about "APEC Blue" on Weibo.

However, obvious research gaps still exist. First, although foreign scholars have pioneered the application of CDA to crisis communication (Dunn & Eble, 2014), relevant empirical studies remain inadequate, especially those targeting policy-driven crises. Second, most domestic studies focus on the framework of SCCT and the strategic classification of IRT, while few adopt Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model to analyze enterprises' official crisis statements. Third, there is a paucity of comparative CDA research on foreign-invested enterprises in China and domestic enterprises under the same policy-driven crisis.

To address these research gaps, this paper takes Apple and Huawei as comparative cases. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model and incorporating core analytical perspectives of SCCT and IRT, this study analyzes the discursive differences between the two companies in the early stage of the tariff war and explores the underlying causes.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationships between discourse events and social-political, cultural factors. This theory focuses on how discourse is shaped by social power, and in turn, how it influences power relations. It holds that discourse is not a neutral linguistic tool, but a representation of social structures, power relations and ideology (Fairclough, 1992). Restricted by social power, discourse also reacts upon it and participates in the construction of social status. It can legitimize certain behaviors while marginalizing particular voices. Such research focuses of CDA make it highly applicable to crisis contexts. In crisis situations, corporate discourse serves not merely as a means of information transmission, but also as a battlefield for meaning contestation, responsibility allocation and legitimacy maintenance (Dunn & Eble, 2014).

The three-dimensional analytical model proposed by Fairclough (1995, 2013) provides a practical analytical framework for CDA. The text dimension centers on the

surface structure and concrete manifestations of discourse, namely its linguistic features and content, including lexical choices, grammatical structures, rhetorical devices and sign systems. The discourse practice dimension acts as a bridge connecting texts with social-cultural practices. It investigates the production, distribution and consumption of discourse, exploring how discourse is generated and applied in specific social contexts, and how these processes shape its meaning and functions. This dimension also examines how discourse subjects construct and convey their identity, stance and viewpoints through language.

The social practice dimension explores the connections between discourse and power relations, social identity, cultural values, as well as how these connections govern the operation and development of society. It reveals the vital role of discourse in social transformation and cultural inheritance. The three dimensions form a progressive logical relationship: textual features are the products of discursive practices, while discursive practices are constrained by social structures.

2.2 Auxiliary Framework of Crisis Communication Theories

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was put forward by Coombs (2007). It argues that crisis communication strategies should be formulated according to specific crisis situations and the public's perception of an organization's accountability, rather than adopting one-size-fits-all communication approaches. Rooted in attribution theory, SCCT guides organizations to select optimal communication strategies across diverse crisis scenarios so as to protect organizational reputation to the fullest extent. It categorizes crises into victim crises, accidental crises and preventable crises, and matches them with corresponding strategies such as denial, diminishment and rebuilding. In this study, the tariff war and entity list sanctions are defined as victim crises driven by external policies, which serve as a reference for interpreting the strategic choices of Apple and Huawei.

Image Repair Theory (IRT), proposed by Benoit (1997), helps organizations and individuals conduct targeted communication after crises to safeguard reputation, regain public trust and rebuild public image. The theory summarizes five major image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. This study adopts IRT as a classification tool to identify image repair practices embedded in the two companies' discourse.

This research primarily draws on SCCT and IRT to categorize crisis communication discourse strategies. Nevertheless, these two theories only focus on superficial

content and neglect the power relations and ideology behind discourse (Dunn & Eble, 2014). For this reason, the present study integrates Critical Discourse Analysis with crisis communication research to achieve dual objectives: strategy identification and critical interpretation.

The analytical framework of this study is structured as follows. First, it identifies linguistic features and classifies the communicative functions of crisis discourse. Second, it examines the production, dissemination, audiences and intentions of discourse from the perspective of discursive practice. Finally, it explores the underlying social causes of discursive differences at the social practice level. With this integrated framework, the study not only analyzes the micro-linguistic differences in the crisis communication discourse of Apple and Huawei, but also uncovers the profound social factors leading to such differences.

III. METHOD

This study mainly collects public statements, open letters, internal letters, and media interviews issued by Apple and Huawei between 2018 and 2020, establishing a small corpus consisting of 13 texts in total. The tariff war began in 2018, eased in 2020, and in 2025, the Trump administration again provoked trade disputes under the pretext of tariffs, triggering short-term accelerated turmoil in global financial markets. However, both companies adopted a silent strategy toward the 2025 trade war, which bears no value for discourse analysis. Therefore, this study focuses on the core outbreak period of the Trump tariff war and entity list sanctions from 2018 to 2020, when the two companies released the most intensive crisis statements. After 2020, the frequency of discourse from both sides declined significantly and strategies stabilized, justifying the focus on the critical period of crisis outbreak and response.

This study adopts a two-case comparative research design, selecting Apple and Huawei as comparative cases. Both are leading global technology firms with high degrees of globalization. They have similar global supply chain layouts and direct exposure to the 2018–2020 Trump tariff policies and entity list sanctions—thus sharing identical crisis contexts. As a U.S. multinational and a Chinese local enterprise respectively, they clearly illustrate discursive strategy differences under different ownership regimes. Both also possess abundant publicly available, authoritative crisis response texts suitable for discourse analysis.

The basic analytical procedures are as follows:

This research carries out analysis along three

dimensions with matched theoretical tools. At the Text Dimension, the analytical content includes high-frequency words, modal verbs, personal reference, transitivity structures, metaphors and rhetorical devices. The theoretical tools adopted CDA textual analysis combined with IRT strategy classification. At the Discursive Practice Dimension, the analytical content covers production modes, communication channels, audience positioning, and release intentions. This dimension draws on CDA discursive practice analysis and SCCT audience strategy. At the Social Practice Dimension, the analytical content involves corporate ownership nature, supply chain structure, market dependence, and political and economic contexts. The theoretical tools applied consist of CDA social practice analysis as well as power and ideology analysis.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter adopts Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model to systematically compare and analyze the crisis communication discourse of Apple and Huawei in the early stage of the 2018–2020 tariff war from three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. Through detailed discourse analysis, this chapter aims to reveal the typological differences in discursive strategies between the two enterprises and their underlying social motivations.

4.1 Textual Dimension: Linguistic Strategies and Crisis Response Functions

4.1.1 High-frequency Word Analysis

Word frequency statistics were conducted on the 13 corpus texts of the two companies, from which the most frequently used core content words were extracted.

Apple frequently uses words such as "US", "tariffs", "consumers", "economy" and "jobs", framing the tariff crisis as an economic issue and deliberately avoiding references to political actors and confrontational expressions. This approach abstracts and depoliticizes crisis attribution: the crisis is presented as an objective economic consequence of tariff policies, rather than a deliberate act by any party.

The term “美国” appears repeatedly in Huawei's corpus, directly identifying the U.S. as the responsible party. Meanwhile, Huawei adopts confrontational terms like “反对” and “政治驱动”, establishing a clear external attribution framework. In addition, expressions including “影响有限” and “继续” are consistently used to convey the company's resilience and confidence in sustained operation, so as to reassure stakeholders.

Overall, Apple abstracts crisis attribution through lexical choices to mitigate direct confrontation risks, which falls into the responsibility avoidance strategy defined by SCCT. Huawei explicitly constructs a "victim-perpetrator" framework for attribution, thereby justifying its subsequent corrective actions.

4.1.2 Modality System Analysis

Linguistic differences lead to varied uses of modal verbs. In conventional modal verb analysis, researchers usually exclude idiomatic uses of words such as "will" and "would". However, in Critical Discourse Analysis, modals reflect speakers' certainty about propositions and claims over corporate controllability, serving as vital linguistic resources for building credibility in crisis communication. Therefore, this study includes modal verbs in the analysis.

Apple extensively employs modals including "will", "would", "could" and "may". While "will" and "would" are common collocations in English, the company alternates them with "could" and "may", and rarely uses "must" or "can", showing a preference for conditional and predictive tones. For instance: "Tariffs would affect prices of Apple products" and "Higher tariffs would weigh on its global competitiveness". Such expressions demonstrate Apple's objective and prudent stance toward the impacts of the tariff war, leaving gaps for potential policy changes. It adopts a rational persuasion strategy to maintain its corporate image.

In contrast, Huawei delivers highly definite statements and seldom uses vague modals. Examples include "华为经营受到的实质性影响有限". This high degree of certainty boosts internal morale and external trust, corresponding to the corrective action strategy in Image Repair Theory, which indicates the enterprise is fully prepared and capable of overcoming difficulties.

To conclude, Apple presents a neutral image by adopting an objective and cautious attitude and avoiding explicit commitments. Huawei, by contrast, relies heavily on high-certainty modals to forge a positive image of actively resisting improper practices and safeguarding stakeholders' interests.

4.1.3 Personal Reference and Identity Construction

In English, apart from modal verbs, modal adjectives and modal adverbs, modal meanings can also be conveyed through personal pronouns, main verbs, tenses, direct and indirect speech (Xin, 2005). The choice of personal pronouns reflects power relations and solidarity between parties.

Apple frequently uses "we" and "our" to refer to itself in official announcements, and repeatedly mentions "U.S. consumers" and "American jobs". This blurs the dividing

line between Apple and U.S. interests and links the two closely together. For example: "Our concern is that the U.S. will be hardest hit." This is a strategy to build a community of interests. Through such words, Apple conveys to the U.S. government that tariffs harm American consumers as a whole rather than just the company itself, and that its remarks are intended to safeguard U.S. interests.

Huawei uses terms such as "华为" and "我们" in public statements released on its official website. In internal letters, it adopts expressions like "海思儿女" and "我们", integrating readers into the same interest group and fostering a sense of community. Meanwhile, it explicitly names external actors behind the crisis with terms such as "超级大国" and "美国", clearly identifying the responsible party. This strategy shapes an identity of resistance and strengthens employees' sense of belonging and shared destiny.

In summary, Apple equates its own interests with those of the United States via personal pronouns. Targeting the U.S. government as its audience, it positions itself as a defender of American interests. By contrast, Huawei addresses its internal community through pronoun choices and defines the enterprise as a collective united in the fight against external pressures.

4.1.4 Transitivity and Responsibility Attribution

Halliday's transitivity system categorizes human experiences of the real world into six types of processes via grammatical structures. Even when describing the same event, adjusting the position of participants or adopting different process types can produce distinct rhetorical effects. To a large extent, the selection of process types and the arrangement of participants are determined by the speaker's ideology (Cai, 2008).

A material process refers to the process of performing an action. It mainly consists of an actor, the action itself and a goal. The actor and goal are generally nouns or pronouns, while the action is realized by dynamic verbs (Wang, 2008).

The analysis reveals that Apple mostly takes tariffs or policy as the actor in clauses, such as "Tariffs would affect prices..." and "Higher tariffs would weigh on global competitiveness". With policies acting as the agent, Apple presents itself as the affected party. This structure deflects accountability: it only illustrates the consequences of policies without assigning blame to any party, which corresponds to the responsibility evasion strategy in Image Repair Theory.

Huawei adopts two major transitivity patterns. The first is material processes with "美国" or "美国政府" as

the actor, as seen in the example: “美国选择在这个时间点做出这个决定”. The second features material process with “华为” as the actor, for instance: “华为反对这一决定”. The alternating subjects construct three roles: perpetrator, victim and resister. Huawei directly attributes the crisis to the United States, which reflects external crisis responsibility attribution in SCCT.

To sum up, Apple relies on material processes and uses transitivity choices to mitigate confrontation. By contrast, Huawei uses transitivity to defend itself and take corrective actions, so as to maintain a favorable public image.

4.1.5 Rhetorical Strategies

In Critical Discourse Analysis, metaphor is more than a rhetorical device. It is closely linked to cognitive mechanisms and reveals the underlying attitudes, intentions and emotions of discourse communities. Apple favors metaphors related to “economic chains” and “weight”. For example: “The burden of the proposed tariffs will fall much more heavily on the United States than on China.” Here, abstract economic costs are materialized as a tangible burden for easier comprehension. Another example: “U.S. tariffs would also weigh on Apple’s global competitiveness.” This compares intangible negative impacts to physical weight, creating a vivid sense of pressure. By framing the hardships caused by tariffs as physical obstacles, Apple reduces the issue to a matter of economic efficiency rather than political confrontation, further consolidating its depoliticized stance.

In contrast, Huawei mainly employs “war”, “disaster” and “legal” metaphors to shape its corporate image. Its internal letters contain expressions such as “极限生存”, “长征” and “备胎芯片全部转正”. A typical example reads: “多年前, 还是云淡风轻的季节, 公司做出了极限生存的假设, 预计有一天, 所有美国的先进芯片和技术将不可获得, 而华为仍将持续为客户服务。为了这个以为永远不会发生的假设, 数千海思儿女, 走上了科技史上最为悲壮的长征, 为公司的生存打造 ‘备胎’.”

“长征” symbolizes a great journey from the verge of defeat to ultimate victory, marked by setbacks, sacrifices and internal struggles. By drawing on this metaphor to describe technological difficulties amid the tariff war, Huawei evokes people’s perception of hardship associated with “长征” and stirs national sentiment. It elevates a commercial crisis to a national narrative and facilitates emotional mobilization.

To conclude, Huawei uses metaphors for emotional mobilization and historical narration to foster collective identity. Apple, on the other hand, adopts a rational

approach and simplifies political disputes by presenting factual implications.

4.2 Discursive Practice Dimension: Production, Communication and Intentions

4.2.1 Communication Channels and Audiences

Apple’s crisis statements are primarily released via its official website. Drafted jointly by its government affairs and legal teams, these documents include formal letters from CEO to the USTR and press releases published on the corporate news page. Such a highly institutionalized and professional production process features elite lobbying. All statements go through strict reviews by the legal department before release to avert potential legal risks.

Huawei adopts diversified discourse production approaches, with strategic information leakage as its most prominent feature. The internal letter issued by He Tingbo, president of HiSilicon, was originally intended for employees only, yet it was fully republished by mainstream media including People’s Daily and Xinhua News Agency shortly after release, becoming a landmark event for emotional mobilization. Internal speeches by Ren Zhengfei are also widely spread to the public via the company’s internal community. This strategy of publicizing internal documents creates an impression of sincerity, facilitating emotional mobilization and corporate image repair.

4.2.2 Communication Channels and Audiences

Apple targets U.S. policymakers, investors and premium business media through channels including its official newsroom, USTR public letter repository and CNBC, adopting a narrowcasting strategy. It aims to precisely influence key decision-makers and avoid widespread controversies on social media.

By contrast, Huawei builds a multi-dimensional communication network covering official websites, internal communities, mainstream media and social platforms. It reaches out to the domestic public, employees, partners and international audiences simultaneously, fulfilling the dual functions of uniting internal members and voicing opposition externally.

4.2.3 Release Intentions

The core audiences targeted by Apple and Huawei in their crisis communication are completely different, and their communication intentions also differ significantly. As an American multinational enterprise, Apple’s crisis statements are mainly released to the US government, investors, and American consumers. The main communication intentions include seeking tariff exemptions, avoiding excessive cost transmission,

maintaining long-term global competitiveness and a politically neutral stance in the tariff dispute.

In contrast, Huawei's communication audience includes domestic public, internal employees, international public opinion, and global supply chain partners. Correspondingly, Huawei's crisis communication aims to boost the morale of the internal enterprise, demonstrate its independent technological research and development capabilities, obtain extensive moral support from both domestic and international parties, and expose the inherent political nature of the US sanctions.

4.3 Social Practice Dimension: Structural Root Causes

Corporate public discourse in response to political risks is constrained by the global political and economic system. This section analyzes the disparities in corporate discursive strategies and their underlying logic from three perspectives: ownership identity, supply chain structure and market dependence.

4.3.1 Ownership Nature and Corporate Identity

As a publicly listed company in the United States, Apple is subject to domestic securities regulation. Adopting a depoliticized and economically rational stance is a reasonable and necessary choice. Open opposition to the U.S. government would trigger regulatory risks, while full alignment with official policies would contradict its positioning as a global brand. Accordingly, Apple tries to affect policy decisions by private, off-public lobbying. Its public statements mainly elaborate business operations amid tariffs so as to uphold corporate image.

Though a private enterprise, Huawei has been regarded as a symbol of China's technological company. While this identity brings extra political risks in the global market, it also legitimizes the company and helps it win public support domestically.

4.3.2 Supply Chain Structure

As a leader in the consumer electronics and technology sector, Apple operates a highly globalized supply chain. Core design work is conducted in the U.S., components are sourced worldwide, and final assembly takes place in China. The tariff war directly drove up its manufacturing costs and hurt sales. For this reason, Apple's discourse conveys to the U.S. government that harming the company equals harming American interests. This serves as its core appeal for tariff exemptions.

To offset rising global costs and technological risks caused by tariffs, Huawei replaced imported chips with self-developed alternatives. The Entity List primarily cut off its access to advanced technologies, including chip manufacturing services, 5G chips and the Android

operating system. Its backup plan was launched specifically to tackle such crises. Therefore, Huawei frames the situation as an existential challenge and centers its discourse on technological independence and breakthroughs.

4.3.3 Market Dependence and Political Context

With a globally distributed supply chain, Apple relies on China for production and the U.S. as its largest consumer market. This split operational model requires it to balance the interests of its home country and host economies. So its public statements focus on seeking favourable policies and reconciling different interests. It avoids aggressive, confrontational language so that it does not upset either side.

After being added to the Entity List, Huawei largely lost access to the U.S. market and no longer needs to cater to American consumers. It therefore adopts a victim narrative to seek international moral support. Its discourse is shaped by the context of technological blockades and survival security, aiming to rally internal support and expose unfair treatment externally.

V. DISCUSSION

This chapter systematically compares the crisis communication discourse of Apple and Huawei from three dimensions: text, discursive practice and social practice. At the textual level, Apple establishes a rational and restrained framework centered on "efficiency and mutual benefit" by adopting ambiguous attribution, conditional modal verbs, impersonal subjects and metaphors related to economic chains. In contrast, Huawei builds an emotional and confrontational framework focusing on "survival and development" through definite attribution, high-certainty statements, alternating subjects, as well as war and crisis metaphors. In terms of discursive practice, Apple applies institutionalized lobbying and narrowcasting strategies to target U.S. policymakers precisely. Huawei, however, uses the strategy of publicizing internal documents and a multi-layered communication network to unite internal members and voice opposition externally. From the perspective of social practice, ownership nature, supply chain structure, market dependence and the overall political and economic context collectively define the scope of discursive choices for both companies.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the analytical method, integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration

Theory, to systematically compare and analyze the crisis communication discourses of Apple and Huawei during the early stage of the Trump tariff war (2018–2020). The main findings are as follows:

First, Huawei constructs a “survival and development” discourse frame through crisis rhetoric, directly attributing the crisis to external political suppression. It employs a “perpetrator–victim–resister” transitivity structure, reinforcing a confrontational stance via high-certainty modal verbs and war metaphors. In contrast, Apple builds an “efficiency and mutual benefit” frame, blurring crisis attribution, omitting responsible agents, using conditional modality and economic-chain metaphors, and framing issues as matters of economic efficiency rather than political confrontation.

Second, regarding image restoration, Huawei prioritizes “corrective action” and “justification”, while mobilizing emotions and historical narratives to gain public recognition. Apple, however, mainly adopts “responsibility evasion” and “reducing aggressiveness” to avoid open confrontation.

Third, Apple engages with the government through institutionalized, elite dialogue and narrowcasting: all statements are drafted by government affairs and legal teams, submitted as formal letters to policymakers, precisely targeting U.S. decision-makers and avoiding unnecessary social media controversies. Huawei, by contrast, publicly releases internal letters and relies on a multi-layered mass communication network. Mainstream media republish internal letters from Huawei executives to arouse public empathy. Meanwhile, its official website and social-media platforms consolidate staff morale, foster a strong community identity and deliver unified opposition externally.

Fourth, the differences in crisis discourse choices stem from differences in ownership nature, supply chain structure, market dependence, and political-economic context. As a U.S. company, Apple must maintain stable relations with its home government, making depoliticization the most rational strategy. As a leading Chinese tech firm, Huawei enjoys domestic legitimacy; its confrontational discourse consolidates internal consensus and secures moral support.

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