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# A Case Study of Public Crisis Management Communication Failure Based on Image Recovery Theory-Based on the analysis of media reports on the public response at the time of the Itaewon disaster

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**Abstract:** Korean society, which endured three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, faced an unprecedented situation called the "Itaewon disaster" even before it tasted its liberation from masks. The October 29, 2022 disaster in Itaewon, Yongsan-gu, Seoul, was the first social disaster in which 159 people were killed and 197 were injured. However, the government, the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, the Seoul Metropolitan Government and Yongsan-gu Office, the National Police Agency and Yongsan Police Station were unable to prevent or respond to the disaster and the restoration work after the incident was not smooth. Therefore, this study aims to examine the status of public disaster management for the Itaewon disaster and to present problems and improvement measures. The theory used in the study is Benoit's "image recovery theory," and the research data combines media news that reported the Itaewon disaster by situation. However, it has been more than 200 days since the disaster occurred, but the exact cause of the disaster has not been identified, so no compensation has been made for the bereaved families. In this situation, the public presented and attempted various policies to restore its image, but it revealed limitations in various aspects, and the media's analysis report to criticize and improve it was suggested as an improvement measure.

**Keywords:** Itaewon disaster, image recovery, benite, disaster management, crisis management, communication

## 1. Introduction

Disasters that threaten the lives of mankind are history that has always been with humanity. Humanity has ruled itself as the top life on Earth, creating civilization, but has suffered tremendous pain and crisis due to the occurrence and damage of unpredictable disasters. However, as the saying goes, "Crisis is an opportunity," mankind has faced disasters through a crisis management system that prevents, prepares, responds, and recovers.

This study examined the proper communication of public institutions such as the government in the event of a disaster in the process of crisis management. Crisis management communication refers to a way to minimize a crisis in a crisis and communicate with the public for a proper recovery. In fact, if crisis management communication is not successful, it can lead to a more fatal failure of reputation and relationships than damage caused by the crisis itself. (Cho Jung-yeol, Advertising Studies 2004: 292-293) The main purpose of crisis management communication is image recovery, and most strategies for image recovery are announced and delivered through the media.

Accordingly, based on media reports during the "Itaewon Disaster," which killed 159 people in Itaewon, Yongsan-gu, Seoul on October 29, 2022. we would like to analyze the

crisis management communication implemented by the government by substituting Benoit's Image Recovery Strategy (Benoit, 1995) and present improvements.

## 2. Benoit's theory of image recovery

Benoit's image recovery strategies are divided into 'denial', 'evading of responsibility', 'reducing offensiveness', 'corrective action', and 'mortification'. Subsequently, 'denial' is divided into 'simple denial (denying the occurrence of the incident itself)' and 'shifting the blame (referring to another person who acted responsibly for the incident)'. 'Avoiding responsibility' is divided into 'provocation, handing over responsibility for an incident caused by another person/situation', 'defeasibility', 'accident, claiming it was an unintended simple accident', and 'good intentions, good intentions, good intentions were motivated'. 'Reduction of the aggression of events' means 'Bolstering (referring to previous good deeds), 'minimization (claiming that the incident itself was trivial), It is subdivided into "differentiation," "transcendence," "attack accuser," and "compensation," "compensate, compensate for damage." In "improvement behavior," it is "promising to correct behavior and prevent recurrence," and "apology" is subdivided into a total of 14 categories, including "apologizing and seeking forgiveness." (Benoit 1995)

Some point out that there is no series of process consistency in Benoit's "denial," "avoidance of responsibility," "reduction of aggression in events," "improvement behavior," and "apology," which were set as major categories for image recovery strategies. (Lee Jae-won 2015) However, Benoit's five image recovery theories seem unlikely to each process in the process of responding urgently after a disaster, but each step can be seen as related when considering the purpose of recovery.

"Crisis" is a compound word consisting of "danger" and "opportunity." (Lee Jae-won 2015) So every risk has opportunities, and every opportunity has risks. Therefore, the important point is not to avoid risks or crises, but how to manage them when faced with them. From this point of view, image recovery can be seen as the most important part of public crisis management communication.

## 3. Itaewon Disaster and Crisis Management Communication

### 3.1. Overview of the Itaewon disaster

On Saturday, October 29, 2022, 159 people were killed and 197 were injured in a crushing accident that occurred when a large crowd flocked to enjoy the Halloween festival in a narrow alley west of the Hamilton Hotel in Itaewon-dong, Yongsan-gu, Seoul. Although the alley where the accident occurred was narrow with a width of around 4m, more than 100,000 people gathered at the same time, causing enormous casualties. In particular, public opinion is that the scale of the accident has increased as crowds flocked to enjoy Halloween, which is celebrated with social distancing lifted three years after the spread of COVID-19.

Above all, it was pointed out that the Seoul Metropolitan Government, Yongsan-gu Office, and the police did not properly prepare for the accident, and that it was difficult for ambulances to enter the site due to crowds and congestion immediately after the accident. In other words, it is a disaster that has not been prevented, properly prepared for, and responded to disasters, and has not yet been properly restored, such as fact-finding at the national level and compensation for bereaved families. It is considered a representative case of crisis management failure after the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014.

### 3.2. Public crisis management status at the time of the Itaewon disaster

#### 3.2.1 Prevention Steps

Korea has enacted the "Framework Act on Disaster and Safety Management" to protect the country from disasters and protect the lives, bodies, and property of the people,

and establishes a disaster and safety management system for the state and local governments.

In the case of the Itaewon disaster, it is predicted that more than 100,000 people will flock to the Halloween festival, which will be held without masks for the first time in three years due to the COVID-19 incident. "Four days before the Itaewon disaster, it was confirmed that the need to come up with safety accident measures due to Halloween crowds was raised at an internal meeting of Yongsan-gu Office." (Cho Hanmoo, Voice of the people, 2022.11.08) Two weeks before the disaster, 1 million people participated in the "Itaewon Global Village Festival" led by the Yongsan-gu Office, but it ended safely with active safety management. Even though the Yongsan-gu Office knew that hundreds of thousands of people would gather on the weekend at the time of the disaster, it did not set up a safety management plan at all. On the actual day of the accident, safety guidance personnel were not deployed in Itaewon, including the scene of the disaster next to the Hamilton Hotel, let alone controlling roads and vehicles. There was also no uninterrupted operation at the subway station, which had been lowered when there were concerns about safety accidents due to large crowds. (Lee Seungwook, Hankyoreh, 2022.10.31) According to Hankyoreh's report, Yongsan-gu Office never asked fire authorities or police for administrative support such as road control or pedestrian route management, and did not hold a safety management committee and a public-private cooperation committee attended by related agencies. At an emergency meeting presided over by the deputy head of the district office on October 27, two days before the accident, it was found that only COVID-19 quarantine, facility inspection, and street cleanliness measures were discussed. On the day of the disaster, Yongsan-gu Office deployed only 30 personnel for quarantine, illegal parking control, and cleaning measures, and did not deploy safety management personnel to prepare for safety accidents. (Shin Joonmyung, YTN, 2022.10.31)

In addition, the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency said it deployed 137 police officers in Itaewon on the day of the accident, but it was confirmed that many were plainclothes police in charge of foreign affairs and criminal affairs to crack down on drugs and air pollution, and only 58 police officers were conquered. At the time of the disaster, Yongsan Fire Station was the only institution that set up safety measures. At least, it only established its own fire safety measures on Halloween Day, focusing on 48 volunteer firefighters (12 people on the day of the accident).

As such, safety management agencies such as the district office, police, and fire department failed to properly establish safety management measures because Halloween Day events held in Itaewon were not official events hosted or sponsored by local governments. In the end, there was a lack of sufficient and appropriate prevention and preparation, which led to a catastrophe.

### 3.2.2 Contrast Steps

In addition to preventing safety management, evidence that Yongsan-gu Office and others did not prepare for the Halloween festival was confirmed during the trial of Park Hee-young, head of Yongsan-gu District Office, who was arrested and indicted as the main person responsible for the disaster. (Kim Joonbeom, Edaily, 2023.05.15) On the afternoon of the 15th, the Seoul Western District Court's 11th Criminal Agreement Department (Judge Bae Sungjoong) testified that "there was no special order to prepare for the Halloween festival as the head of the Yongsan District Office." He also said, "I knew that if a disaster report came in, I had to deal with it accordingly, but I don't remember receiving education (related to the Yongsan-gu safety management plan)." Officials at Yongsan-gu District Office testified that there was no preparation from the head of the district office to remove flyers related to the Yoon Suk Yeol presidential rally near the presidential office without safety management measures related to the Halloween festival.

In addition, it was found that the police did not deploy an intelligence officer in charge of the scene at the time of the Itaewon disaster. It is pointed out that (Kim Gayoon,

Hankyore, 2023.05.22). If the intelligence officer had been deployed, the police would have been quick to respond in the event of an emergency. On May 22, the Seoul Western District Court's Criminal Division 11 (Judge Bae Sungjoong) held its first trial date for Park Sung-min, former head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency's intelligence division, Kim Jin-ho, former head of the Yongsan Police Station's intelligence division, and employees. "Even after writing the 'Itaewon Risk Report', I was unable to take care of the Halloween festival site due to the atmosphere of focusing on managing the assembly," said A, an intelligence officer at Yongsan Police Station, who attended the trial. On October 26, three days before the Itaewon disaster, Yongsan Police Station informant B wrote a report called "Itaewon Halloween Festival Public Risk Analysis," but on the day of the disaster, there was an order from his superiors that "rally management is important." (Cho Hyeji, Ohmynews, 2023.05.23).

### 3.2.3. Response Steps

The Itaewon disaster, which took place in a state of lack of prevention and preparation, also exposed various problems in the response stage. At 6:31 p.m. on October 29, 2022, the Itaewon disaster said, "I'm so anxious. The 112th report, "Please control Exit 1 of Itaewon Station," was received.(Jeong Minseung, Hankookilbo, 2022.11.01) There was already a report of the danger four hours before 10:15 p.m. when the disaster occurred, but the police did not recognize the seriousness of the situation, considering it as a simple "uncomfortable report. Since then, the first time a rescue report was received to the fire authorities was 10:15 p.m., when the disaster began. Since then, 119 has received 87 reports (excluding 13 out of 100 cases of non-response). (Song Rakgyu, KBS, 2022.11.01)

By major institution, the chief of the Yongsan Police Station was aware of the disaster at 9:57 p.m., but arrived at the scene at 11:05 p.m. It was reported to the president at 11:21 p.m., and the head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency recognized it later at 11:36 p.m. and the head of the National Police Agency at 12:14 a.m. on Oct. 30. The chief of Yongsan Fire Station, who was in charge of first aid, recognized the disaster at 10:15 p.m. and arrived at the scene at 10:29 p.m. The Seoul Fire Department issued the third stage of fire response at 11:48 p.m. that day. According to a briefing by Seoul Yongsan Fire Station Chief Choi Sung-beom at 6:30 a.m. on Oct. 30, 507 firefighters, 800 ward offices, 1,100 police officers, 14 others and 2,421 personnel were mobilized to save lives. In addition, a total of 233 units were mobilized, including 184 firefighters, 10 ward offices, 30 police officers, and 9 others. 14 teams of the disaster medical support team (Seoul 7, Gyeonggi 7) were dispatched. In addition, 94 equipment and 222 personnel were supported by emergency services in other cities and provinces.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government sent a disaster text message at 11:56 p.m. that day, saying, "We are currently under traffic control due to an emergency in front of the Hamilton Hotel in Itaewon, Yongsan-gu, so please bypass the vehicle." It was sent 90 minutes after receiving the first report of the Itaewon disaster from the fire department, sparking controversy over slow response. It was after an hour and 41 minutes from 10:15 when the disaster occurred.(Son Jimin, Hankyore, 2022.11.06) In particular, Yongsan-gu sent the first disaster text message at 0:11 a.m. the next day. The Seoul Metropolitan Government requested Yongsan-gu to send disaster text messages on the same day, but it was delayed by 78 minutes. (Go Eunji, Yonhapnews, 2022.11.10) Seoul sent disaster text messages seven times from 11:56 p.m. on the 29th to 4:12 a.m. the next day, and Yongsan-gu sent disaster text messages two times at 0:11 a.m.m.m. and 1:37 a.m.m.m.m. the next day. According to the Ministry of Public Administration and Security's "Operation Guidelines for Sending Disaster Text," autonomous districts are required to send disaster text messages to their jurisdictions when there is a risk of a disaster or when a disaster occurs. The head of the Ministry of the Interior and Safety's Disaster and Safety Management Headquarters officially apologized for the delay in sending disaster text messages on the day of the disaster.

In the event of such a disaster, the police, who are at the forefront of the disaster, were not aware of the crisis even after receiving 112 reports, and fire and rescue teams were already unable to access the site at a time when the disaster was underway. Above all, Yongsan-gu, an autonomous district, failed to save lives as state agencies missed the golden time, sending disaster text messages 78 minutes after the disaster, and people were helplessly killed or injured due to such loopholes.

#### 3.2.4. Recovery Steps

The government opened the Central Safety Countermeasures Headquarters to deal with the accident. It has also been designated as a period of national mourning from October 30 to November 5. "It's really disastrous," President Yoon Suk Yeol said in a public statement on the morning of October 30. "Tragedy and tragedy that should not have happened have occurred," he said. Due to the nationwide memorial atmosphere, most of the festivals and events across the country have been canceled or postponed. The Seoul Metropolitan Government set up a joint memorial altar for victims of the Itaewon disaster at Seoul Plaza on October 31. Since then, joint memorial altars have been set up across the country.

The National Police Agency launched the "Itaewon Accident Special Investigation Headquarters" to determine the cause of the accident. The special headquarters investigated officials from Yongsan-gu Office, Yongsan Police Station, Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency, and Yongsan Fire Station, which are in charge of Itaewon-dong, Yongsan-gu, Seoul, where 501 investigators occurred on November 1. The Special Headquarters booked 24 officials, including the police, fire department, Yongsan-gu Office, and Seoul Transportation Corporation, on charges of professional negligence. Six people, including former Yongsan Police Station Chief Lee Im-jae and Yongsan-gu District Chief Park Hee-young, were arrested and sent, and 17 others, including Seoul Police Agency Chief Kim Kwang-ho, were sent without detention. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety, the Seoul Metropolitan Government, and the National Police Agency closed the investigation without charge on the grounds that "it is difficult to say that there is a violation of specific duty of care." As the investigation ended without progress on the "upper line" investigation, criticism that the investigation was insufficient is inevitable. (Choi Heejin, SBS, 2023.01.13) This led to criticism of the special headquarters' announcement of the investigation. Controversy arose over the "gazing investigation" as the Special Headquarters judged that it was difficult to hold higher-level agencies such as the National Police Agency, the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, and the Seoul Metropolitan Government legally responsible.

On February 8, the National Assembly passed an impeachment motion against Minister of Public Administration and Security Lee Sang-min, holding him responsible for the Itaewon Halloween disaster. The reason for impeachment is a violation of the Constitution, the National Public Officials Act, and the Disaster Safety Act, and it is the first time in the constitutional history that a State Council member has been impeached. (Jo Mi-dub, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 2023.02.08.) However, Minister Lee denied the responsibility for the Itaewon disaster, saying, "Did any of them predict the disaster?" (Lee Sanghyun, *MK*, 2023.05.09) The National Assembly jointly proposed a "special bill to guarantee the rights of victims of the October 29 Itaewon disaster, find out the truth, and prevent recurrence" on April 20. (Jeon Min, *News 1*, 2023.04.20)

After the Itaewon disaster, various measures at the government and the National Assembly were proposed, but the anger of the bereaved families could not be resolved. The bereaved families began a sit-in in front of the National Assembly on June 7, calling for the enactment of a special law to find out the truth. "On April 20, 183 members of the 21st National Assembly jointly proposed a special law on the October 29 Itaewon disaster, but it has not even been submitted to the Public Administration and Security Committee, a standing committee in charge," they said. (2023.06.07)

As a result, the Itaewon disaster lacked preparation and preparation to prevent accidents, and it was not appropriate to respond to the sudden situation of "compression." This situation is clearly revealed in the recovery process and is analyzed as a case of total crisis management failure.

#### **4. Application and analysis of image recovery theory**

In the event of any type of disaster, the government-centered responsible agency implements various policies to restore the image caused by the disaster as well as restore the disaster. This study compares Benoit's five theories to various attempts by the government to restore its image after the Itaewon disaster.

##### *4.1. Denial*

###### *4.1.1. Introduction*

The first step to recover the image, "denial," is literally the step of avoiding responsibility for the incident. This stage is divided into "simple denial" and "shifting the blame (referred to as someone else who acted responsibly for the incident). In the case of denying the case itself, there can be cases in which those who are pointed out as responsible for the accident deny their responsibility or those who have been put on trial deny it during the trial process.

###### *4.1.2 Denial Case*

Public Administration and Security Minister Lee Sang-min, who was put on trial for impeachment due to the Itaewon disaster, strongly denied seeking responsibility even though he was the minister of the responsible department, clearly showing a lack of awareness of the current administration's disaster. In the first hearing of the impeachment trial held at the Constitutional Court's grand judgment in Jongno-gu, Seoul on May 9, Minister Lee denied the theory of responsibility, saying, "Did anyone predict the (Itaewon) disaster?" (Jeong Hyemin, Hankyore, 2023.05.09) The National Assembly flatly denies the theory of responsibility even though Minister Lee was impeached for violating the National Public Officials Act's duty to maintain integrity and dignity by neglecting pre-disaster prevention measures and post-disaster responses. In particular, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety denied the claim of responsibility by issuing a press rebuttal to the fact that "the new police department has nothing to do with security, and the enactment of police command rules are not related to the Itaewon disaster. (Kye Seunghyun, Yonhap news, 2022.11.21) Lee Im-jae, former chief of the Yongsan Police Station in Seoul, and Park Hee-young, head of the Yongsan-gu District Office, who are in charge of the Itaewon disaster, all denied the charges at the first trial. They are accused of neglecting their duty to respond in advance in accordance with their duty of care, such as laws and manuals, ahead of Halloween Day last year, and causing casualties due to insufficient measures on the same day. In particular, former chief Lee was arrested in January on charges of neglecting his command (professional negligence resulting in death) by not taking precautions despite reports of safety measures that his career should be devoted to the Halloween festival. It is also suspected that he was involved in writing a false police situation report that he arrived at 10:17 p.m., 48 minutes ago, even though he arrived at the Itaewon police box at around 11:05 p.m. on the day of the disaster. The prosecution believes that the former chief Lee did not manage the crowd even though he was aware of the dangerous situation two hours before the accident. In addition, former chief Lee's claim that he asked the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency to provide support for the security maneuver team to prepare for Halloween crowds is also judged to be false. Former chief Song, who was accused of professional negligence, former head of the women's and youth department in Yongsan-gu, Chung Hyun-woo, who is accused of writing and exercising false official documents, all denied the charges. (Park Heeyoung, Nocutnews. 2023.03.17)

In response, the bereaved families protested at a civic memorial meeting on May 20, saying, "Establish a special law on the Itaewon disaster," "People's power should join the enactment of a special law," and "Dismissal the Minister of the Interior and Safety." (Park Jiyong, Hankyore, 2023.05.20)

#### 4.1.3. Issues

A massive disaster occurred, but government agencies that had to protect the lives of the people from the disaster were busy denying it. Such denial continued to be revealed during the trial of those accused of being responsible for the disaster, drawing public outrage, including the bereaved families of the victims.

### 4.2. 'evading of responsibility'

#### 4.2.1. Introduction

'Evading responsibility' is divided into 'provocation, handing over responsibility for an incident caused by another person/situation', 'defeasibility', 'accident, claiming it was an unintended simple accident', and 'good intentions, good intentions, good intentions were motivated'. The first step, "wife," is to blame others for various reasons after failing to form a social consensus.

#### 4.2.2. Evading responsibility Case

A representative avoidance of responsibility in the Itaewon disaster can be found in the words and actions of Commissioner Yoon Hee-geun, the head of the police. Director Yoon was not in Seoul on the same day, and above all, he avoided responsibility enough to conclude that there were no charges during the special investigation, although he was the head of the police who did not play his role at the forefront of the situation. Regarding the police command responsibility raised over the Itaewon disaster on December 12 last year, Director Yoon avoided responsibility, saying, "First of all, it is urgent to deal with the situation and restore public trust so that the organization is not shaken." (Nam Soyeon, Voice of the people, 2022.12.12).

The court then cited bail applications from Park Hee-young, head of Yongsan-gu District Office, and Choi Won-joon, former head of the Yongsan-gu District Office's safety and disaster department, who were arrested and indicted on charges of "poor response to the Itaewon disaster." In response, the Itaewon Disaster Family Council said, "Park and others avoided their responsibilities and even requested bail from the court, citing mental and physical reasons. If they are released, there is a concern that they will externally create the impression that they are innocent," he said, urging the dismissal of the bail request. (Kim Gayoon, Hankyore, 2023.06.07) They were handed over to trial as responsible for the situation, but it is pointed out that they are avoiding responsibility following the denial of responsibility.

The bereaved families also criticized the intelligence police, including Park Sung-min, former Seoul Metropolitan Police Department's public safety information director, Kim Jin-ho, and a junior Yongsan Police Department employee, saying, "The reason for deleting the report is only to avoid responsibility."

Officials from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, who attended the impeachment hearing of Minister of Public Administration and Security Lee Sang-min, expressed their opinion that they took the maximum response to government agencies' relief measures during the Itaewon disaster. The bereaved families repeatedly called for Minister Lee's impeachment, saying, "We avoided the predicted responsibility for the disaster." (Lee Jungwon, Hankookilbo, 2023.05.23)

#### 4.2.3. Issues

Government agencies and some of the people in charge of the disaster were indicted, but they consistently avoided responsibility. After the "denial" strategy, which was taken in the chaotic stage at the beginning of the disaster, was pointed out as "avoidance of responsibility" and clearly revealed the insolvency of the disaster management control tower.

#### 4.3. 'reducing offensiveness'

##### 4.3.1 Introduction

'Reduction of aggression' refers to 'bolstering', 'minimization', 'differentiation, emphasis on what is to be blamed and this case is discriminatory', 'transcendence', 'compensation', 'compensation', etc. for 'compensation' for committing this case for a greater cause'. Following denial and avoidance of responsibility for the incident, it can be seen as a step to find new excuses and turn around by pouring them into the media.

##### 4.3.2. Reducing offensiveness Case

A typical excuse is Shin Hyun-young of the Democratic Party of Korea, who is suspected of delaying the arrival of DMAT at Myongji Hospital in the early morning of October 30 last year, in the DMAT (Disaster Medical Support Team) where he worked. "I thought it was my duty to run to the disaster site as a doctor and medical person before I was a member of the National Assembly," he said, expressing regret that the police handed over the case to the prosecution.(Lee Youngwan, Newsis, 2023.06.01)

It has been confirmed that the Ministry of Public Administration and Security has decided not to conduct a "disaster cause investigation" of the Itaewon disaster that killed 159 people. It is not difficult to guess why the Ministry of Public Administration and Security decided not to conduct a disaster cause investigation. The investigation will be burdensome as Minister Lee Sang-min, the head of the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, who is responsible for the Itaewon disaster, has consistently kept his position with lame excuses. (Hankyore Editorial 2023.01.25)

After the Itaewon disaster, the excuses of the Ministry of the Interior and Safety and the National Police Agency followed in the testimony of the bereaved families, lawyers for a democratic society, and civil society. The bereaved families of the victims of the Itaewon disaster demanded that President Yoon Suk Yeol dismiss Lee Sang-min, Minister of the Interior and Safety. The National Police Agency's Special Investigation Headquarters (Special Headquarters) urged a strict investigation into Minister of Public Administration and Security Lee Sang-min, National Police Agency Commissioner Yoon Hee-geun, and Seoul Police Agency Commissioner Kim Kwang-General Kim Kwang-ho. Lawyers for a Democratic Society and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy held a press conference in front of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency's Mapo office, where the Itaewon disaster is held, and delivered a letter of call for an investigation. Minister Lee Sang-min, National Police Agency Commissioner Yoon Hee-geun, and Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Commissioner Kim Kwang-ho should be investigated for professional negligence, occupational negligence, and dereliction of duty. (Lee Sanghyun, Presian, 2022.12.01) The bereaved families said, "The more we wait, the more evidence destruction, documents, and lies to protect ourselves."

Regarding the disclosure of the list of bereaved families, the police attempted to turn the direction of the case by conducting a search and seizure of related media. Internet media "Dandelion" and "Citizen Media The Exploration" have released the list of victims of the Itaewon disaster. At that time, only the name was listed on the list without a face photo, age, or personal information. However, the People's Power and Mrs. Kim Gun-hee's fan cafe "Gun Sarang" and the conservative group "New Hope Association" filed a complaint with the police on charges of violating the Personal Information Protection Act, saying they disclosed the list without the consent of the bereaved family. "The disclosure



of the list of victims of the Itaewon disaster was an emergency report on the government's incompetence, insolvency, and further concealment in the process of responding to the disaster," Dandelion said.(Wi Yong-sung, Newsis, 2023.01.26.) In addition, the police seized and searched Seoul City Hall after detecting the unauthorized leakage of the list of victims of the "Itaewon disaster" in Seoul. Police are investigating whether a Seoul official was involved in the process of obtaining and disclosing the list of victims by online media "Dandelion" and "The Exploration" last year.(Hwang Kihyun, Dailyan, 2023.01,03)

#### 4.3.3. Issues

Following denial and avoidance of responsibility, the government and responsible agencies have entered the stage of excuses by reducing the aggressiveness of the case. In particular, in the process of disclosing the list of victims, the police raided related media and attempted to blur the nature of the disaster.

#### 4.4. 'Corrective action'

##### 4.4.1. Introduction

'Improvement behavior' is 'promising to correct behavior and prevent recurrence'. However, the anger of the bereaved families is growing day by day as the Itaewon disaster did not manage the disaster itself, the response was poor, and only excuses were made. As a result, no special improvement was noticed.

##### 4.4.2. Corrective action Case

It has been more than 200 days since the Itaewon disaster, but no special improvement has been made without a detailed fact-finding. However, many media outlets demanded improvements to the government's poor control tower in response to disasters. The Itaewon disaster was a combination of disrespect for multi-personal risks, discipline in officialdom, and a broken disaster response system. Political circles, which abandon safety values that protect human dignity and insensitivity to safety, have also played a part in reciting public safety whenever they open their mouths. After major disasters such as the collapse of Sampoong Department Store, Daegu Subway Fire, and Sewol ferry sinking in the past, the government came up with measures to find out the truth and prevent a recurrence, but there are few results and disasters are repeated. The current government also launched a "pan-government disaster management reform TF," and the ruling and opposition parties also agreed to a parliamentary investigation. Citizens do not seem to have high expectations, perhaps because of the learning effect.(Jeong Chankwon, Fann-mike, 2022.11.28)

After the unprecedented disaster of 300 people, voices for improvement in the disaster emergency medical system also increased. Experts stress that the disaster emergency medical system should be improved in the future through the Itaewon disaster. If the head of the health center, who has no experience in dealing with disasters at large disaster sites, takes the position of the head of the field emergency medical center, he is likely to continue to be confused in disaster situations. Therefore, it is necessary for a doctor with a lot of disaster experience to play a role as the head of the field emergency medical center in the DMAT dispatched to the scene. It is a realistic way for the head of the public health center to take charge of on-site disaster emergency medical support and administrative affairs.(Lee Jinhan, Dongallbo, 2022.11.11)

At least, the first place to improve after the Itaewon disaster can be seen as subway safety management. Since the Itaewon disaster in October last year, more thorough safety management has begun to take place within subway stations. Central separators were installed in the transfer passageway at some stations, and safety guidance for employees was also carried out within the busy station. However, the fundamental problem of the subway on the way to and from work seems to have not been solved yet. (Cho Jinseok,

Ohmynews, 2023.04.25) However, OhmyNews pointed out that it is difficult to solve the safety problem in subway stations only with the internal efforts of the Seoul Metro.

#### 4.4.3. Issues

After 200 days of the disaster, the government has not been able to determine the cause of the disaster, and has not been able to do any improvement. After the disaster, the media strongly insisted on improving the government's disaster response control tower and the disaster emergency medical system.

### 4.5. '사과(mortification)'

#### 4.5.1. Introduction

Apology is literally an act of apologizing and asking for forgiveness. However, after the Itaewon disaster, the government focused only on avoiding responsibility and did not apologize in detail. This led to the anger and public resentment of the bereaved families, and as a result, it can be seen that it showed the bare face of a state organization that could not properly cope with a major disaster.

#### 4.5.2. Mortification Case

Minister of Public Administration and Security Lee Sang-min, who should protect the lives of the people after the Itaewon disaster, apologized three days later and President Yoon Suk Yeol apologized six days later. After the disaster, he had to apologize immediately and deal with the disaster, but the victims and the people were put on the back burner to the minister who was immersed in "Who will be responsible?" and the president who protects the minister. Therefore, public opinion is that no real apology has been made.

The day Minister Lee Sang-min publicly bowed and apologized was November 1, three days after the Itaewon disaster. Until then, on October 29, Yongsan-gu Mayor Park Hee-young, who said that Halloween in Itaewon was a "phenomenon," not a "festival," and that "the district office played a role in it," also issued a statement on the same day. "As the head of the district office, I am very sorry to Yongsan-gu residents and the people for the disastrous accident in the jurisdiction." Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon and National Police Agency Commissioner Yoon Hee-geun also issued an apology. On November 4, the sixth day of the Itaewon disaster, President Yoon Suk Yeol said at the Memorial Law for the Victims of the Itaewon Disaster held at Jogye Temple in Jongno-gu, Seoul, "As a president who is responsible for the lives and safety of the people, I am very sad and sorry." (Kim Eunji, Sisain, 2022.11.05)

In addition, as a proper apology and the truth of the disaster were not found, the bereaved families repeatedly demanded an official apology from the president. Lee Jung-min, acting representative of the Itaewon Disaster Family Council, demanded an official apology from the president at a press conference on June 7 calling for the enactment of a special law on the Itaewon disaster. (Nam So-yeon, Oh My News, 2023.06.07. (Song Eunah, Segyeilbo, 2023.06.08)

The four opposition parties, including the Itaewon Family Council, Citizens' Countermeasures Meeting, Participatory Solidarity, the Democratic Party, the Progressive Party, and the Basic Income Party, held a press conference on the stairs in front of the National Assembly building on June 7 and urged the enactment of a special law. The bereaved families began a tent sit-in in front of the main gate of the National Assembly, demanding the enactment of a special law to find out the truth about the disaster. (Kim Seunghoon, Polynews, 2023.06.08)

#### 4.5.3. Issues

Media reports that "Minister Lee Sang-min of the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, who should protect the lives of the people after the Itaewon disaster, apologized in three days and President Yoon Suk Yeol in six days," clearly show the status of the government and institutions responding to the disaster. The government and institutions, consistent with denial and avoidance of responsibility, did not apologize sincerely, and in the end, only the legitimacy of enacting a special law to find out the truth pushed by the bereaved families and opposition parties has grown.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of examining media reports related to the Itaewon disaster were disastrous. Although there was a major disaster that was hard to find in history, the government, which should protect the lives of the people, only showed efforts to avoid responsibility and failed to properly determine the cause of the disaster.

This study incorporated Benoit's theory into efforts to restore the public's image after a major disaster. The public, including the government, was active in the early stages of denial, avoidance of responsibility, and reducing aggression, but was stingy with important improvement actions and apologies. As a result, it can be seen that efforts for image recovery were insufficient. The government's lack of efforts to restore its image revealed the weakness of the system and will, and it is expected to have a significant impact on the resilience of the social safety net, including the bereaved families, after the Itaewon disaster.

In response, the media continued to criticize the government's role and organization in responding to disasters. The Itaewon disaster revealed the bare face of the national disaster response system. The manual designed to prevent disasters did not work. Local governments (local governments) were letting go of their hands, and cooperation between police and fire fighting was not smooth immediately after the disaster. The communication system, which was built with 1.5 trillion won to cope with disasters, only used 195 seconds. The control tower to oversee and direct the response was unclear. (Moon Sanghyun, Sisain, 2022.11.21) Looking back on the police response process on the day of the October 29 disaster, high "kanmak" is identified by police, fire, Yongsan-gu, Seoul Metropolitan Government, and the Ministry of Public Administration and Security. These are traces of a system disaster in which information sharing and communication on emergency situations have not been carried out properly. The poor cooperation caused confusion in the rescue of casualties and transportation to hospitals. After the disaster, it also served as a means of pushing responsibility or a truth battle between some institutions. (Moon Sanghyun, Sisain, 2022.11.21)

However, this study was conducted based on media reports that began at the time of the disaster, so it may be different from the announcement containing specific policies of the government or institution. However, we were able to examine the problems of the government and institutions through continuous media coverage and coverage of the disaster and subsequent responses, and we expect the government and institutions to take a forward-looking stance while continuing to report various issues necessary for our society to recover from the disaster.

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