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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Extinguishing a Fictional Fire: Responding to Emotional and Misinformed Audiences

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Abstract
Along with their benefits, social media platforms can present reputational challenges for organizations, including a channel to breed visible, online reputational threats known as paracrises. In 2018, an emotional television episode of *This Is Us* sparked social media chatter surrounding the popular slow cooker Crock-Pot. Distraught viewers angrily inundated social media with unfounded fears, proclaimed the appliances were unsafe, and vowed to discard them, circulating inaccurate information and creating a hybrid angry customer and misinformation paracrisis for the brand. Crock-Pot quickly transformed the threat into a public relations success and brand-building opportunity by using emotionally-driven messages, modified crisis response strategies, and strategic alliances. This study illustrates the limitations of current paracrisis response strategies for responding to misinformation and emotional audiences and demonstrates that adapting classic crisis responses (i.e., situational crisis communication theory) can be a more effective approach. The findings offer recommendations for how managers can adapt classic crisis responses and integrate communication style elements, including human voice and humor, to manage angry customers and misinformation paracrises effectively.

Keywords Social media · Paracrisis · Misinformation · Emotion · Humor · Human voice

Introduction

In 2018, the American fictional television drama *This Is Us* aired a highly-anticipated, emotional episode that led nearly 15 million viewers to believe that a faulty, generic slow cooker caused a beloved character's death (Joest 2018). In response, social media users blamed the popular Crock-Pot brand and flocked to Twitter and the brand's Facebook page to grieve publicly, falsely accuse the brand of posing a hazard, and threaten to discard their appliances because of misplaced outrage and safety fears. This spontaneous outpouring of grief and subsequent online spread of misinformation surrounding the popular appliance's safety generated a reputational threat, prompting Crock-Pot to initiate a weeks-long public relations response titled #CrockPotIsInnocent. By weaving an appropriate blend of response strategies, beginning with emotional recognition of loss and later transitioning into strategic collaborations and humor, Crock-Pot's adaptive campaign creatively and successfully consoled fans and reassured individuals of its product's safety, containing the threat and protecting its reputation.

Social media "can be used as a direct route to the corporate reputation" (Coombs 2018, p. 27), equipping users to spread damaging and disparaging information. Negative social media comments alone do not always constitute a crisis but can pose a reputational risk, known as a paracrisis. A paracrisis is a "publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (Coombs and Holladay 2012b, p. 409). Paracrises resemble crises due to social media amplification, but unlike crises, they do not disrupt operations (Etter et al. 2021). The paracrisis could manifest into a crisis if individuals devote significant, sustained attention to the concern but dissipates if managed appropriately (Selaković et al. 2020).

Because the organization's response largely dictates the lifespan and development of a paracrisis, the difficulty arises from determining if and how to respond publicly (Coombs and Holladay 2012b; Pang et al. 2014). Although paracrises are increasingly common (Lim 2017; Scholz and Smith 2019), little research examines how to resolve these threats

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effectively (Honisch and Manchón 2019), and the #Crock-PotIsInnocent campaign offers insight into addressing misinformation and angry customers specifically. Social media "can be an incubation space for misinformation" (Damayanti et al. 2018, p. 108), and social media users often struggle to distinguish between fact and fiction (Edelman 2018b). Yet, no known studies have examined misinformation paracrises. Similarly, despite the ability for social media users to ignite social media firestorms, research on communicating with emotional audiences amid an angry customer paracrisis is limited (e.g., Coombs and Holladay 2012a; Ott and Theunissen 2015).

Paracrisis research is still in its infancy, and more work is needed to continue refining knowledge and theory about paracrisis types and appropriate responses. This study analyzes how Crock-Pot infused classic crisis responses (i.e., Situational Crisis Communication Theory) with human voice and humor to match audience sentiment, establish a rapport, and transform the narrative surrounding its product. The study offers theoretical and practical implications for managing angry customer and misinformation paracrises, specifically noting that for some paracrises, classic crisis responses can be used more effectively than extant paracrisis-specific responses. Along with extending the current paracrisis response typology, this study provides suggestions for incorporating style elements, such as human voice and humor, during paracrises.

Literature Review

Paracrisis Typology and Responses

Initially, any form of a reputational threat that appeared on social media was labeled a "social media crisis" (Coombs 2014). However, this term was later deemed too "vague" as it "concentrates on the media in which the crisis transpires and not the nature of the crisis" (Coombs 2020, p. 131), making it difficult to theorize about responding to different situations. Thus, Coombs and Holladay (2012b) introduced the "paracrisis" as a construct to define visible, online reputational threats that could become crises. Scholars began theorizing about paracrises to better understand how to manage them, identify different types, and link each type to a response strategy. In their article introducing paracrises, Coombs and Holladay (2012b) identified the challenge, a situation where individuals question an organization's social responsibility and demand change. Since this original article, the typology has expanded (Table 1) with the additions of angry customers, collateral damage, faux pas, and misinformation (rumors) (Coombs 2018, 2020).

Paracrises must be managed publicly, and responding can be a balancing act as managers must combat the threat without overreacting and escalating the situation (e.g., Veil et al. 2012). To aid managers, scholars have identified six paracrisis-specific response strategies and prescribed which strategy to use depending on the paracrisis type (Table 1): refusal, refutation, repression, reform, recognition/reception, and revision. First, *refusal* occurs "when managers ignore the challenge and offer no response" (Coombs 2018, p. 31). Second, a manager may *refute* charges of immorality or irresponsibility to protect current organizational practices, as they "argue that the organization's actions or policies are responsible and appropriate" (Coombs 2019, p. 53), often escalating the conflict (Coombs and Holladay 2012b). Third, *repression* "involves efforts to stop the challenge from spreading" (Coombs 2018, p. 31), such as lawsuits. Fourth, managers may engage in *reform* by acknowledging the problem and collaborating with individuals to "meet public

Table 1 Paracrisis typology and recommended responses

Paracrisis type	Definition	Recommended response strategy
Angry customer	Stakeholders become upset because a product or service violates their expectations; some may want to hurt the organization (Coombs 2018)	Recognition/reception or reform (Coombs 2014, 2018)
Challenge	Stakeholders question an organization's dedication to social responsibility and demand change (Coombs 2014, 2017; Coombs and Holladay 2012b, 2016)	Any of the six paracrisis responses, depending on situational nuances, including claim validity and stakeholder salience (Coombs 2018)
Collateral damage	A "negatively viewed actor mentions or is publicly associated with the organization, thereby creating the risk of guilt by association" (Coombs 2019, p. 59)	Not specified (Coombs 2019)
Faux pas	Organizations "take an action they think is positive or neutral but stakeholders view the action as negative" because they find it offensive or insensitive (Coombs 2019, p. 59)	Reform (Bogomoletc 2019; Coombs 2018; Veil et al. 2012)
Misinformation (rumor)	Individuals circulate "erroneous and damaging information" about an organization (Coombs 2020, p. 131)	"aggressively respond" and "act quickly to debunk and to deny" rumors (Coombs 2014, p. 6)

demands" (Kim et al. 2016, p. 905). Fifth, *recognition/reception* occurs when "managers acknowledge the concerns expressed by stakeholders and that a problem exists" but do not take action to resolve the concern (Coombs 2018, p. 31). Finally, *revision* occurs when managers make some, but not all, changes demanded by publics.

The #CrockPotIsInnocent case reflects both an angry customer and a misinformation paracrisis. An angry customer paracrisis occurs when a product or service violates expectations, leading individuals to air their grievances publicly (Coombs 2018). Although Crock-Pot had not actually produced a faulty product to violate these expectations, viewers mistakenly blamed the brand for the character's death and voiced their outrage. Individuals also expressed misguided concerns about Crock-Pot's safety as they disseminated inaccurate information that the popular appliance posed a danger, creating a misinformation paracrisis, which entails "erroneous and damaging information circulating about the organization" (Coombs 2020, p. 131). This paracrisis type was initially conceptualized as a rumor paracrisis, which involved individuals distributing false or misleading information "about an organization or its products in order to harm the organization" purposefully (Coombs 2019, p. 59). However, recognizing that not all individuals have malicious intent toward an organization when spreading inaccurate information (Coombs et al. 2021), it was reconceptualized in its present form as a "misinformation paracrisis."

Effectively responding to misinformation is integral given its ability to damage brands as 62 percent of the general population struggles to distinguish between "real news" and "fake news" (Edelman 2018b). However, the current paracrisis typology does not offer a paracrisis-specific response for misinformation paracrises (Coombs 2018). Thus, this type requires more attention to understand its relationship with both current paracrisis response strategies and classic crisis management theory, including Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Applying Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Organizational crisis response strategies aim to reduce crisis blame, restore reputations, and protect relationships, and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offers a framework for identifying appropriate strategies. Paracrisis research extended SCCT into the pre-crisis stage, and the theory shaped early guidance on paracrisis responses (e.g., Coombs and Holladay, 2012b). Because of limited paracrisis research, Coombs (2018) called for more studies to enhance our understanding of how paracrises "fit with SCCT" (p. 26). Relatedly, Honisch and Manchón (2019) added that given the infancy of paracrisis research, understanding how classic crisis management theories function in paracrises "can be highly relevant to both academia and professionals" by refining and extending paracrisis response options (p. 133).

Following an adverse event, publics are compelled to assign responsibility, and the level of perceived blame, along with an organization's prior reputation and crisis history, shapes how publics evaluate an organization (Coombs 2007; Weiner 1986). Publics hold organizations more responsible for crises that are caused by internal actors and are perceived as preventable, which produces more reputational damage (Coombs and Holladay 2002). SCCT offers a prescriptive framework to help managers identify an appropriate crisis response strategy, using the level of perceived crisis responsibility as the primary guide (Coombs 2007).

All crisis responses should begin with an ethical base response (Coombs 2019), which includes instructing information that helps individuals physically protect themselves (Coombs and Holladay 2001) and adjusting information that helps individuals cope psychologically (Coombs 2007). For example, communicators may show empathy and compassion, or if culpable, demonstrate remorse for the crisis (Holladay 2010). Next, the manager considers reputational strategies and begins by assessing the degree to which individuals hold the organization responsible, which "is *the* pivotal variable in SCCT" (Coombs 2018, p. 22). SCCT lists several strategies organized into four clusters: denial, diminishing, rebuilding, and bolstering. An organization facing little to no crisis attribution should adopt strategies from the denial cluster: deny, attack the accuser, scapegoat, or ignoring (Coombs 2007; Coombs and Holladay 2001; Jin and Liu 2010). Organizations with minimal attribution may use diminishing strategies (excuse, justification, separation) to reduce responsibility (Liu 2010). Finally, organizations with high responsibility must employ rebuilding strategies through apology, compensation, and transcendence (Coombs 2018; Jin and Liu 2010). Managers may also adopt bolstering strategies (endorsement, ingratiation, reminder, victimage) as supplements (Liu 2010).

Limited research applying SCCT in a paracrisis context yields some support for the theory's application in challenges and faux pas paracrises (Bogomoletc 2019; Ott and Theunissen 2015; Roh 2017). Accommodative SCCT strategies (e.g., apology, compensation, ingratiation) tend to be effective when addressing angry customers in response to an organizational mistake (Coombs and Holladay 2012a; Einwiller and Steilen 2015; Ott and Theunissen 2015). Yet, other cases suggest that audiences may perceive SCCT strategies as insincere or an overreaction to a paracrisis, intensifying adverse public reactions (Kim et al. 2016; Veil et al. 2012). Although no known studies have examined a misinformation paracrisis, SCCT suggests that "managers must aggressively respond" to rumors (Coombs 2014, p. 6). However, along with the crisis response strategy, managers must

consider the communication style, including the message tone, particularly when dealing with emotional audiences.

Communication Style Elements: Humor and Human Voice

Social media enables individuals to shape the public narrative (Austin et al. 2012), and an audience's emotions, including anger, can impact the "amplitude" of a paracrisis (Lambret and Barki 2018, p. 295). Upset individuals are more likely to voice their concerns on social media (Lu and Huang 2018; Roh 2017), and emotionally-charged tweets tend to be retweeted more frequently and more quickly than neutral tweets (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). Engaging with emotional audiences can escalate a situation for a brand if done improperly (Ott and Theunissen 2015), requiring managers to reevaluate how to interact amid tumultuous circumstances.

Recognizing that reputational threats and crises can have emotional elements, scholars recommended using human voice when engaging online audiences (Ott and Theunissen 2015; Park and Cameron 2014). Noting that organizations faced challenges when interacting with individuals online, Kelleher (2009) explained that human voice could foster a "psychological closeness" between organizations and publics through the use of "an engaging and natural style of organizational communication" (p. 177). Because of its ability to generate positive relational outcomes, human voice is integral during crises as such events produce uncertainty and anxiety, and may require organizations to show compassion (Park and Cameron 2014). Human voice can also cultivate positive attitudes toward an organization during and after a crisis, increasing satisfaction and reputation (Javornik et al. 2020; Park and Cameron 2014; Sweetser and Metzgar 2007) while reducing responsibility (Yang et al. 2010). However, the concept of human voice has received scant attention in paracrisis research (Kim et al. 2016), although Ott and Theunissen (2015) offered that organizational sincerity helped soothe angry customers.

A specific form of human voice explored in limited paracrisis research is humor. Scholars have claimed that in non-serious situations, social media users "seem to expect organizations to have a sense of humor" (Veil et al. 2012, p. 326). Still, research suggests humor's effectiveness varies by paracrisis type. Honisch and Manchón (2019) reported humor was ineffective in protecting an organization's reputation amid a challenge and recommended that managers avoid the strategy because it may arouse "negative emotions." Yet, Kim et al. (2016) found support for self-deprecating humor during a faux pas paracrisis, noting the approach was more effective than classic crisis strategies and proposed that humor "fits better with the informal communication styles of social media" (p. 905). Given the limited examinations of humor's effectiveness in paracrises, more research is needed to understand better *when* and *how* managers can use humor appropriately to combat reputational threats, such as when tackling misinformation.

Research Questions

Paracrisis management literature is limited (Honisch and Manchón 2019; Scholz and Smith 2019). No known research examines an organization's response to a misinformation paracrisis, despite calls from scholars to understand how to address inaccurate claims circulating online (e.g., Damayanti et al. 2018; Liu et al. 2021). To date, research on angry customer paracrises has examined self-inflicted situations rather than paracrises with external origins (e.g., Coombs and Holladay 2012a; Ott and Theunissen 2015). To help address this gap and expand knowledge of paracrisis management, including the effectiveness of paracrisis-specific response strategies and SCCT strategies, along with human voice and humor, this case study examines how Crock-Pot quelled fears and defended its reputation against erroneous claims that its product could spontaneously combust. Guided by the following research questions, this study explores how Crock-Pot handled the paracrisis and created an engaging social media campaign:

> RQ1: What SCCT and paracrisis-specific response strategies did Crock-Pot employ in its social media responses?
> RQ2: How did social media users react to Crock-Pot's response strategies, as seen in user comments?

Methods

Data collected for this study included social media content and an organizational document. Social media content analyzed included Crock-Pot's official Facebook posts ($n = 3$) and comments ($n = 285$), and tweets ($n = 49$). Facebook comments ($n = 2{,}381$) and publicly available tweets ($n = 243$) from social media users in response to Crock-Pot's posts and tweets were also collected and analyzed. Content collection began when Crock-Pot first responded via social media (January 24, 2018) and ended with its last post on the topic (February 8, 2018).

Content analysis was used to analyze social media posts and social media user comments. Each post served as the unit of analysis, and videos published by Crock-Pot with social media posts were coded as part of the post. Emojis were captured and included. A codebook was constructed using strategies from SCCT (Coombs 2007; Jin and Liu 2010; Liu 2010) and the current paracrisis typology

(Coombs 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020; Coombs and Holladay 2012b, 2016), along with human voice and humor (Kelleher and Miller 2006; Kim et al. 2016). Only the user sentiment category was mutually exclusive. Two coders independently coded a random sample of 10 percent of posts (Lombard et al. 2002). During this initial coding round, the coders took notes of emergent categories in social media users' responses. Some of these responses reflected existing concepts in persuasion and risk communication, and these concepts were used to label these responses (risk perception; behavioral intentions). After this round, the coders discussed the emergent categories and added the new categories to the codebook. The coders then re-coded a randomly selected sample of 10 percent of the posts. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha and ranged from 0.87 to 1.00 (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). Because of the high intercoder reliability, one coder coded the remaining data.

To provide insights into Crock-Pot's strategy, a member of Crock-Pot's communication team was invited to participate in an interview but had to decline, explaining that "we aren't able to provide interviews or participate in research" (personal communication). However, the individual did provide a copy of Crock-Pot's Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) award submission to lend insight potentially (Crock-Pot 2018). This document was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify the broader themes in the data and provide contextual information about the case (Patton 2002). The analysis yielded three final themes: (1) background information, (2) the brand's general response, and (3) campaign outcomes.

Case Background

Created by Dan Fogelman, the American television drama *This Is Us* follows the lives of the fictional Pearson siblings and their parents, Jack and Rebecca. While most of the storylines occur in the present day, the show employs flashbacks and flash-forwards to follow past and future narratives. Early on, the audience learned that Jack dies, though the details remained unknown. For two years, fans tuned in, anxiously wondering if tonight was when they would learn how Jack died (Table 2 for a timeline). Finally, on January 23, 2018, the pivotal moment came. Following a Super Bowl party, Jack switches off a slow cooker and leaves the room. Soon after, the appliance's switch sparks, catching an ill-placed dishtowel on fire before engulfing the kitchen in flames. The fire spreads without warning as the family failed to replace batteries in the smoke detector. A flashback shows a neighbor gifting Jack and Rebecca a hand-me-down, generic slow cooker, cautioning them that they may need to "fiddle with the switch." The subsequent episode, "Super Bowl Sunday," revealed Jack died from smoke inhalation.

The slow cooker in the episode was generic, but Crock-Pot is a leading brand, making it synonymous with the appliance. Given fans' parasocial relationships (Foss 2019), and that the appliance was "implicated in the death of the family's beloved patriarch" (Pallotta and Horowitz 2018) on America's most-watched drama of the 2017–18 season (Rice 2018), Crock-Pot "became a natural target for people's ire and tears" (Krystal 2018). After the episode, distraught viewers blitzed social media with their fears over fire hazards, and individuals conducted Google searches for "Crock-Pot death" (Hafner 2018). After the episode, Crock-Pot's team at Edelman considered suing NBC, the network on which *This Is Us* airs (Wohl 2018). Ultimately, the team "decided not to fight fire with fire" (Crock-Pot 2018, p. 1). Instead, the brand focused on social media "as online conversation was the lead driver," creating Crock-Pot's first-ever Twitter account "to address concerns and questions on the platform head-on" (Edelman 2018a, para. 4) and "assure fans their slow-cookers are indeed safe, and innocent" (Crock-Pot 2018, p. 1).

Table 2 Timeline of events

Date	Event
January 23, 2018	*This Is Us'* "That'll Be the Day" episode airs on NBC, and social media users claim to throw Crock-Pots away because they are upset with the brand and claim it poses a safety threat
January 24, 2018	Crock-Pot creates and posts on its first Twitter account (Edelman 2018a) *This Is Us* creator and executive producer Dan Fogelman tweets support for Crock-Pot
January 25, 2018	Crock-Pot responds via Facebook
February 3, 2018	Crock-Pot posts a teaser video of actor Milo Ventimiglia defending the appliance, which goes viral (Crock-Pot 2018)
February 4, 2018	*This Is Us'* "Super Bowl Sunday" episode airs on NBC
February 7, 2018	Ventimiglia appears on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show,* and the show distributes free Crock-Pots

Findings

RQ1: Crock-Pot's Communication Strategies

Crock-Pot used social media to respond from January 24, 2018, to February 8, 2018, but its strategies took place in two waves, with the initial stage running through February 2.

Phase One (January 24–February 2)

Facebook The brand embraced infusing SCCT strategies with communication style elements early on. Crock-Pot opened with *adjusting information* and *victimage* by emphasizing with and connecting to users, "We're still trying to mend our [broken heart emoji] after watching 'This Is Us' on Tuesday night. America's favorite dad and husband deserved a better exit and Crock-Pot® shares in your devastation." Consistently maintaining human voice, the post invited fans to trust the appliance, requesting that they "Don't further add to this tragedy by throwing your Crock-Pot slow cooker away." Embracing the premise of *This Is Us*, the brand invoked the theme of family by suggesting Crock-Pots are family heirlooms and "grandma won't be too happy" if fans discard the appliance. The brand also used *transcendence,* encouraging users to enjoy "comfort food" with family to honor Jack's memory as "Spending time with family while enjoying comfort food from his Crock-Pot was one of his favorite things to do. Let's all do our part and honor his legacy in the kitchen with Crock-Pot." The brand signed off with a charming closing, "XOXO, Crock-Pot, Forever in Your Heart & Forever in Your Home."

Crock-Pot responded to 279 user comments on the post. The brand heavily used *ingratiation* to react during this stage. Its individual replies to users often mentioned them by name before thanking them for defending the product ($n = 204$, 72.9%) with responses such as "We love you too Cris and thank you for your support!" The brand also incorporated human voice ($n = 136$, 48.6%), regularly tailoring comments to offer a personal connection, such as "A Crock-Pot for a white elephant gift? WOW! That's amazing!". The brand did not use any paracrisis-specific response strategies in the first phase.

Twitter Crock-Pot also issued multiple tweets, beginning on January 24. Initially, the brand focused on responding directly to users through individual responses. These first responses invoked *adjusting information* ($n = 12$, 50%) and used *victimage* ($n = 10$, 41.7%) to engage with followers empathetically and establish a sense of shared loss while distancing itself from the incident by portraying itself as a grieving fan (Table 3). For example, the brand reassured one user, "Jack Pearson was our Valentine so we equally understand your pain with his loss. We love him and we love you too." The brand also gently reminded users of the product's safety record and popularity, invoking denial in a non-accusatory manner ($n = 5$, 20.8%): "Don't further add to our heartbreak by no longer using Crock-Pot Slow Cookers, rest assured our products have been generationally tested by your family and friends." Crock-Pot embraced human voice in all tweets except one and continued tailoring its responses. When one user threatened to remove the appliance from her wedding registry, the brand swooped in, "Congrats on your upcoming nuptials! Let us be a part of your special moment. Check your DM for a surprise treat…".

Crock-Pot also quickly began engaging with media personalities, including television hosts Stephen Colbert and Carson Daly, and social media influencers. For example,

Table 3 Crock-pot's response strategies

Response strategies	Facebook			Twitter		
	Phase 1 (%)	Phase 2 (%)	Total (%)	Phase 1 (%)	Phase 2 (%)	Total (%)
Instructing Information	0, 0	1, 12.5	1, < 1	0, 0	1, 2	1, 2
Adjusting information	11, 3.9	0, 0	11, 3.8	12, 50	2, 8	14, 28.6
Deny	1, < 1	2, 25	3, 1	5, 20.8	13, 52	18, 36.7
Compensation	0, 0	1, 12.5	1, < 1	3, 12.5	2, 8	5, 10.2
Apology	1, < 1	0, 0	1, < 1	0, 100	1, 4	1, 2
Transcendence	1, < 1	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	1, 4	1, 2
Ingratiation	204, 72.9	6, 75	210, 73	1, 4.2	6, 24	7, 14.3
Reminder	1, < 1	0, 0	1, < 1	1, 4.2	1, 4	2, 4.1
Victimage	4, 1.4	0, 0	4, 1.4	10, 41.7	2, 8	12, 24.5
Endorsement	0, 0	2, 25	2, < 1	3, 12.5	7, 28	10, 20.4
Recognition/reception	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	1, 2	1, 2
Humor	0, 0	2, 25	2, < 1	3, 12.5	10, 40	13, 26.5
Human voice	136, 48.6	3, 37.5	139, 48.1	23, 95.8	24, 96	47, 95.9
Total	280	8	288	24	25	49

Crock-Pot thanked *This Is Us* series creator and executive producer Dan Fogelman after he *endorsed* the brand "to remind everyone that it was a 20 year old fictional crockpot with an already funky switch." The brand also offered to send him a slow cooker.

In addition to trying to assuage user concerns about safety ("We get it…but you can still make your favorite comfort foods in your #CrockPot with confidence [face savoring food emoji]"), Crock-Pot tiptoed into lighter responses by issuing three humorous tweets. After a user tweeted, "Your honor, the prosecution would like to call @CrockPotCares to the stand, please," the brand jested, "We plead innocent! #crockpotisinnocent." The brand even subtly mocked those who claimed to throw out their appliances in a tweet to Stephen Colbert by joking, "throwing it out the window definitely sounds like it's a recipe for disaster."

Phase 2 (February 3–8, 2018)

Once the initial threat passed and negative emotions subsided, Crock-Pot moved into a new phase driven by partnerships and light-hearted humor. On February 3, the day before the Super Bowl, it partnered with "Jack Pearson," played by Milo Ventimiglia, who defended and *endorsed* the appliance in a one-minute teaser video on Twitter. Crock-Pot (2018) explained that "If Milo Ventimiglia (Jack) would publicly forgive Crock-Pot®, perhaps the public would listen and forgive as well" (p. 2). Ventimiglia stands by a craft service table in the tongue-in-cheek clip, explains the country "is divided," and pleads for Super Bowl harmony. He invokes *transcendence* by asking viewers to "take a breath, find the ability to forgive, and remind ourselves that there is no difference so great that we can't overcome it" before spooning out chili from a Crock-Pot. The screen fades, and Crock-Pot's logo and #CrockPotIsInnocent display.

Ventimiglia also appeared in a segment on *The Ellen Show,* which Crock-Pot published on Facebook and Twitter. Ventimiglia shared *instructing information* ("check your batteries in your smoke detectors, unplug your devices"), *denied* Crock-Pot's involvement in Jack's death ("There was a lot of misdirected hate at Crock-Pot…Crock-Pot is innocent"), and *endorsed* the product while infusing humor ("I own a Crock-Pot. I love Crock-Pot"). Crock-Pot partnered with host Ellen DeGeneres for another segment shared on both platforms. DeGeneres *denied* claims that the appliance could catch on fire by claiming it is "always safe," *reminded* users of the brand's history of safety, and applied *compensation* by distributing Crock-Pots to her audience.

Although Crock-Pot used #CrockPotIsInnocent in three tweets before February 3, the brand fully embraced the hashtag in its tweets in the second phase to playfully *deny* allegations. The hashtag became a vital component of the brand's partnership with Ventimiglia, and Crock-Pot heavily used the hashtag on Super Bowl Sunday, sharing messages such as ".@jtimberlake brought the house down. We didn't. #CrockPotIsInnocent," referencing halftime performer Justin Timberlake. The timing was strategic because many Americans hold Super Bowl viewing parties at their homes and use the appliance. *This Is Us* also aired its follow-up episode after the Super Bowl, and proactive posting enabled Crock-Pot to play offense. Crock-Pot regularly used *denial* ($n = 13$, 52%) with the hashtag on Twitter in the remaining days. All denial tweets included human voice, and 10 of these tweets infused humor. In addition to increasing its use of denial and endorsement, Crock-Pot's Twitter account increased its use of humor ($n = 10$, 40%) and invoked *ingratiation* ($n = 6$, 24%). The brand used one paracrisis-specific response strategy, *recognition/reception,* responding to an upset customer who posted a photo of a broken lid.

The brand reduced its Facebook activity following its initial response, producing only eight messages during the second phase. Its two posts featured the Ventimiglia clips, which incorporated humor and human voice, and the remaining six were responses to user comments. These responses primarily included *ingratiation* ($n = 6$, 75%) as Crock-Pot continued thanking users for their support. It did not use any paracrisis-specific strategies on Facebook.

RQ2: Social Media Users' Reactions

This study also analyzed user responses to Crock-Pot's posts and tweets to gauge public reaction. This section outlines how individuals responded to Crock-Pot's communication strategies, including a discussion of themes emerging from user comments.

Reaction to Crock-Pot's Crisis Communication Strategies

When addressing situations where the organization is not responsible, SCCT recommends using a denial posture to distance the organization from the event. Coombs (2007, 2019) warned against mixing denial strategies with rebuilding strategies, such as *compensation*. However, Crock-Pot combined *denial* and *compensation* in several messages as the brand declared its innocence and gifted appliances to social media users and DeGeneres' audience. Ventimiglia also combined *denial* and *transcendence,* a rebuilding strategy, in his media clip.

User sentiment analysis found users responded comparably to both the recommended and discouraged combinations of SCCT strategies on Twitter (see Table 4). One SCCT guideline is that inconsistent use of crisis response strategies, including mixing deny responses with rebuild strategies, will "erode the effectiveness of the overall response" (Coombs 2007, p. 173). Yet, Crock-Pot's approach and user reactions suggest a minor divergence may be permissible in

Table 4 User sentiment based on crock-pot's response strategies

	Facebook Comments					Tweets				
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Unrelated (%)	*N*	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Unrelated (%)	*N*
Crock-Pot's Response										
Recommended crisis strategy	1360, 63	53, 2	675, 31	76, 4	*2164*	122, 64	19, 10	50, 26	1, 1	*192*
Discouraged crisis strategy	62, 82	3, 4	11, 14	0, 0	*76*	56, 68	9, 11	16, 20	1, 1	*82*
Humor	83, 61	4, 2.9	35, 25.7	14, 10.3	*136*	55, 72.4	9, 11.8	11, 14.5	1, 13	*76*
Human voice	1417, 63.6	54, 2.4	686, 30.8	70, 3.1	2227	179, 64.6	30, 10.8	66, 23.8	2, < 1	277
Mocking the accuser	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	*0*	1, 100	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	*1*
Recognition/reception	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	*0*	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	*0*
Overall user sentiment	1518, 64	57, 2	710, 30	96, 4	*2381*	161, 66	24, 10	56, 23	2, 1	*243*

a paracrisis context. On Facebook, users responded more positively to posts containing discouraged combinations than those employing recommended combinations. Specifically, users responded more favorably to the brand's third Facebook post when DeGeneres used the contradictory denial and rebuilding postures than they did to its first two posts, which used recommended combinations of ethical bases, the denial posture, and the bolstering posture.

Reaction to Human Voice and Humor

Overall, social media users reacted positively to Crock-Pot's Facebook posts ($n = 1518$, 64%) and tweets ($n = 161$, 66%), including the brand's use of human voice and humor (see Table 4). The brand incorporated human voice into most responses, and a majority of users offered positive feedback for the brand's posts and tweets on Facebook ($n = 1415$, 63.6%) and Twitter ($n = 179$, 64.6%). When Crock-Pot posted messages empathizing with users while also guaranteeing product safety, many users offered supportive messages. Several emphasized their long-standing trust in the appliance, "I love my #crockpot #MomSaver. I had mine for over 12 years without any issues!!! And the one before that was over 20 years." Others recounted the brand's safety history, "The company that makes Crockpots has sold over 100 million of these and hasn't had any major safety issues in 30 years…".

Nearly 73 percent ($n = 55$) of Twitter users and 61 percent of Facebook users ($n = 84$) applauded Crock-Pot's humorous messages. Individuals were particularly pleased when Crock-Pot partnered with Ventimiglia and DeGeneres. The brand's Facebook post ($n = 30$, 81%) and tweets ($n = 83$, 61%) involving the celebrities yielded a high percentage of positive reactions. Individual reactions included, "I love this! I'm taking all my crock pots out now getting ready for the big game," and "I've always known the truth! Thanks for making me chuckle." Some individuals tagged other users and included emojis, such as a laughing face or hearts, to indicate their approval. Crock-Pot's humorous tweets produced limited negative feedback on Facebook ($n = 4$, 2.9%) and Twitter ($n = 9$, 11.8%). Only three comments directly commented on the humorous content; others discussed safety concerns or chided Crock-Pot for overreacting. When Crock-Pot tweeted during the Super Bowl, "That game was lit., but NOT Crock-Pot! #CrockPotIsInnocent", one fan remarked that the joke was "#toosoon."

User Response Categories

Five emergent themes from user reactions were also recorded: Crock-Pot's PR strategy, risk perception, behavioral intentions, instructing information, and mocking the accuser (Table 5).

Table 5 User response categories

Category	Facebook				Twitter			
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	*N*	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	*N*
Crock-Pot's PR strategy	93, 91.2	7, 6.9	2, 2	102	26, 86.7	1, 3.3	3, 10	30
Risk perception	404, 89.9	11, 2.4	34, 7.6	450	35, 54.7	6, 9.4	23, 35.9	64
Behavioral intent	191, 99.5	1, < 1	0, 0	192	40, 90.9	3, 6.8	1, 3.3	44
Instructing information	65, 81.3	0, 0	15, 18.8	80	6, 50	0, 0	6, 50	12
Mocking the accuser	112, 84.8	1, < 1	19, 14.4	132	17, 50	1, 2.9	16, 47.1	34

Crock-Pot's PR Strategy Users praised the brand for its public relations response. Facebook comments ($n = 93$, 91.2%) and tweets ($n = 26$, 86.7%) discussing Crock-Pot's strategy were overwhelmingly positive. One individual exclaimed,

> Brilliant Crock Pot! You could have fought this, but instead you've embraced the moment (and our favorite show) This hashtag is a wonderful lighthearted moment in a lead up to an episode we dread…

Only eight responses involving *Crock-Pot's PR strategy* incorporated negative feedback. One individual criticized the brand's initial reaction that attempted to empathize with upset viewers, "Please stop apologizing or trying to do damage control for something that is so ridiculous…".

Risk perception Comments also highlighted users' *risk perceptions*, reflecting their opinions that events like those seen in the episode could occur (e.g., Slovic and Peters 2006). For example, some individuals admitted the plot had an element of believability that made them feel uneasy about using their appliances. One user divulged, "I have to admit something. I went straight to my kitchen after the preview to make sure it was unplugged!". Many posts were positive toward Crock-Pot on Facebook ($n = 404$, 89.9%) and Twitter ($n = 35$, 54.7%).

Users invoked four approaches to manage their risk perceptions and reassure themselves and other social media users that Crock-Pots were safe. First, some emphasized that the plot was set in the 1990s and attributed the safety risk to an earlier era (e.g., "I think the crock pots back then were a lot less safer. But now, i think we are safe"). Second, users suggested the blame was misplaced and argued that the greater safety risk was the lack of functional batteries in the smoke detectors (e.g., "Crock pots are the best. I think the take away should be to always check your smoke detectors!"). Third, others acknowledged that using all electrical appliances invites risk (e.g., "…ANY appliance that is plugged into an outlet has some degree of danger…"). Finally, some distinguished between fiction and reality (e.g., "I still go in the water after watching JAWS and I'll still use my crockpot after watching that This Is Us episode. [smiley face emoji]."

A handful of users indicated that while the show is fictional, the plotline bred safety concerns on Facebook ($n = 11$, 2.4%) and Twitter ($n = 6$, 9.4%). For example, one claimed, "I have my grandmother's very old burnt orange crock and now I'm scared to use it."

Behavioral intentions Several user responses linked their risk perceptions to *behavioral intentions* (e.g., Ajzen 1991), indicating a shift in their risk perceptions altered their current or future behaviors. One user shared, "Used my crockpot the day after this episode. THe only thing I will always do now and I didnt always do was unplug when not using…" Nearly all comments were positive on Facebook ($n = 191$, 99.5%) and Twitter ($n = 40$, 90.9%) as individuals indicated they would continue using the appliance. Some exchanged recipes and photos of Crock-Pot creations. One said, "When I get the family together, I have 3 crockpots going simultaneously. I have no plans to do any differently, unless I add more crockpots for a growing family". Only one Facebook user and three Twitter users expressed negative behavioral intentions, questioning the safety of the appliance (e.g., "I actually have a really old crock pot hand me down. I'm sure 20 + years old. So…I'm not sure I can ever use it again").

Instructing information Users also supplied *instructing information,* offering suggestions for how individuals could manage concerns, such as unplugging devices (e.g., "…If you are worried just unplug after use. I always unplug mine after I use it. I do that with all my appliances"). Other users recommended maintenance and replacement (e.g., "Take care of your small appliances and replace when they have a faulty switch or worn cord"). A few posts supplied additional safety steps, "Anything can start a fire. But it helps us to be aware and make precautions. Batteries in smoke detector. Carbon monoxide detector. Escape plan…". All posts related to instructing information were positive or neutral.

Mocking the accuser Several social media users *mocked the accuser* (e.g., Kim et al. 2016), jeering at social media users who threatened to discard their appliances. One user subtly mocked fans who seemingly could not distinguish fact from fiction, "You don't need to assure me. I understand dra-

matic license and I wouldn't dream of blaming my Crock-Pot…". Some users focused on the perceptions of those who claimed to be distraught by the plotline (e.g., "Just like idiots to watch a fictional show and freak out over nothing…").

Discussion

Despite the increase of inaccurate information and the propensity for emotionally charged messages to travel rapidly across social media, current paracrisis literature does not account for misinformation paracrises, and few studies examine angry customer paracrises. This study examined how Crock-Pot deployed empathetic recognition, playful denial, lighthearted humor, and strategic alliances to contain the reputational threat, join the discussion, and craft a new narrative. Crock-Pot's adaptive and clever response helped build its brand as individuals applauded its response, defended it against critics, and pledged their trust and devotion. This case offers implications for paracrisis management theory and practice by illustrating the importance of emotionally-driven responses when addressing upset audiences, demonstrating how SCCT strategies can be more effective than extant paracrisis-response strategies in misinformation paracrises, and offering suggestions regarding the appropriate use of humor amid paracrises.

First, this study illustrates that brands should lead by acknowledging emotions when addressing upset publics. Crock-Pot's initial challenge was to manage the emotional component of the paracrisis and soothe upset fans, who publicly engaged in parasocial grief (Foss 2019) while also expressing and spreading unfounded concerns about the product's safety. Because emotion can be a "critical stimulus" that clouds individuals' abilities to reason and shapes their perceptions of an event and reactions toward a brand (Ayotte et al. 2009; Yeo et al. 2020, p. 196), scholars have called for managers to consider publics' emotional involvement when devising responses (e.g., Kim and Jin 2016). A sterile response that only corrected the misinformation using logic and a corporate tone would appear callous to invested and genuinely distraught fans. Some may disregard or ignore the delivery of the corrective information, or the perceived brand apathy could intensify the situation, making these individuals less likely to attend to corrective information regarding the appliance's safety record.

Crock-Pot's response offers a model for how other brands may respond to upset audiences by employing "emotional intelligence," the ability to recognize and address publics' emotions (Coombs 2019, p. 64). The brand responded to emotions, leading with a heartfelt message acknowledging individuals' emotions and concerns, then connected with them *before* addressing their criticism and countering the misinformation. When engaging with an upset audience amid a paracrisis, a brand should adjust its tone to complement the audience's temperament and demonstrate that the brand is aware of and recognizes the audience's concerns. Specifically, Crock-Pot's social media response strategy recognized and embraced the episode's emotional impacts by providing adjusting information and invoking the victimage strategy infused with human voice to exhibit empathy and shared grief rather than issuing a detached or stern rebuttal filled with technical explanations about the appliance's safety features.

Second, this study highlights the limited applicability of current paracrisis-specific management strategies in misinformation paracrises and paracrises involving highly emotional audiences. Scholars have taken an informed approach to theorizing about paracrisis management, but most extant paracrisis response strategies would have been a poor fit in this case. Reform and revision require acknowledging a shortcoming, which would be ineffective in a misinformation paracrisis as no 'real' problem exists. The refusal strategy was a risk for Crock-Pot. The paracrisis may have blown over when social media users moved on to the next trend, but leaving unchecked claims could have also fueled the circulating misinformation. Additionally, the subsequent episode focused on Jack's death and could have reignited the audience's negative emotions, unleashing a new wave of anger and misinformation. Other paracrisis responses (repression, refutation) embrace defensive strategies. But if a brand is innocent and can quickly discredit the misinformation source, individuals may perceive a strongly worded, defensive response as too aggressive (Veil et al. 2012). Avoiding an overly assertive response is also crucial when misinformation entails risk perceptions. Such responses could produce unintended, adverse outcomes as "Discounting or denying the validity of personal and cultural experiences of risk enhances the probability that positions will be entrenched" (Sellnow et al. 2009, p. 25). This defensive approach could also upset emotional audiences further. Thus, Crock-Pot used none of the extant paracrisis responses but invoked SCCT strategies to extinguish the reputational threat.

Third, SCCT strategies were more appropriate for managing the situation than those outlined in the developing but still limited paracrisis typology (e.g., Coombs 2018, 2019), particularly when intertwined with communication style elements. After providing adjusting information and invoking victimage infused with human voice, Crock-Pot adapted endorsement, instructing information, and denial to dispel individuals' misplaced qualms. Had the brand experienced an unprecedented appliance combustion, it would likely seek endorsement from a formal organization such as the Consumer Product Safety Alliance to rebuild credibility and customer confidence (e.g., Veil et al. 2011). Given the circumstances, Crock-Pot used an actor and television host to

endorse and defend its product. Although celebrity credibility is an established strategy for many brand efforts (Halder et al. 2021), the effectiveness of celebrities as spokespersons for brands under siege is largely unknown (Abu-Akel et al. 2021). The strategy proved effective for Crock-Pot's paracrisis, and social media users responded positively to the collaboration, commending the brand for its approach. The brand also never relayed instructing information directly to audiences but routed it through Ventimiglia or DeGeneres. It is unknown why the brand did not share instructing messages directly, but some individuals may have perceived this strategy as confirmation that the appliance posed a risk.

In addition to adapting the delivery of instructing information and the endorsement strategy, the brand used humor to deny claims about product safety in a creative and nonaccusatory manner. Crock-Pot effectively fused denial with humor to refute allegations without appearing too defensive or aggressive in fighting the misinformation, reducing the potential for a backlash. Risk communication research indicates that humor can reduce anxiety, thereby diminishing perceived risk severity (Nabi 2016). Thus, a humorous paracrisis response may signal to publics that the situation is not severe. Because less severe crises can generate lower levels of responsibility (Claeys et al. 2010), humor may also offer a brand a mechanism through which it can reduce perceived responsibility, exonerating itself from wrongdoing.

Managers should use humor judiciously and consider both the timing and the context before injecting humor into a paracrisis response. Humor would be ineffective at the onset of an angry customer paracrisis by signaling that the brand does not take individuals' concerns seriously, which could escalate the situation. Crock-Pot did not make light of the situation when individuals were emotionally involved but waited until they were receptive to lighthearted messages before deploying humor or seeking tongue-in-cheek endorsements from media personalities. When invoking humor in a misinformation paracrisis, a brand should engage in social media listening to evaluate the public's disposition and use contextual characteristics, including the severity and nature of the allegations, as indicators of whether humor is appropriate. Brands should only consider humor if the audience is agreeable, and the issue is or can easily be neutralized. Brands should never use humor in misinformation paracrises regarding highly sensitive and serious topics, such as racial, ethnic, and gender concerns or ethical issues. Generally, brands would be ill-advised to jest about contested social and political issues, although exceptions may apply to brands that are outspoken on these topics (e.g., Patagonia). Finally, managers should consider if humor is consistent with the brand's social media personality (e.g., Kim 2016).

Fourth, along with illustrating how SCCT strategies can be adapted for a paracrisis, this study demonstrates that managers have some flexibility in combining different strategies in a paracrisis context. For example, SCCT recommends not mixing denial strategies with rebuilding strategies to maintain consistency (Coombs 2007). Almost all of Crock-Pot's responses followed the recommendations for the crisis response selection advanced by SCCT. However, the brand deviated from this recommendation in a few messages, such as combining denial with compensation. The mismatches proved useful for Crock-Pot as audiences responded similarly or more favorably to these combinations than those using SCCT as prescribed. For example, Crock-Pot had to deny its responsibility and rebuild confidence. Because the brand was fighting misinformation regarding its product's safety, offering free appliances with messages such as "so you can test it yourself" enabled the brand to publicly reassert confidence in its product. However, managers should note that combining some strategies, such as denial strategies and apology, victimage, or any diminishing strategies, is still ill-advised for any paracrisis.

Finally, given the current paracrisis typology's lack of applicability in this case, this study recommends considering two additional strategies for managing paracrises and extending the typology to address misinformation paracrises more adequately. The first recommended strategy for misinformation paracrises, *rectify,* reflects a need for communication managers to dispel misinformation but does not advance a highly defensive stance by involving litigation (repression) or aggressively contesting public claims (refutation). Instead, the manager seeks to dispel misinformation by explaining that the perceived concern is unsubstantiated and offering evidence as warranted to contain the threat, similar to SCCT's deny response strategy (Coombs 2007). *Rectify* is recommended for misinformation paracrises involving mild to moderate threats. However, managers may need to consider more defensive responses (i.e., refutation) when countering weighty or controversial allegations, such as when Starbucks had to counter a viral post containing false, racially loaded information (Gross 2018).

The second strategy, *reassurance,* reflects SCCT's ethical base (i.e., instructing and adjusting information) and seeks to alleviate individuals' fears or doubts by offering information to help them manage uncertainty or anxiety. This strategy could apply in misinformation or angry customer paracrises that arise in response to a health or safety concern, even if the concern is unfounded. Current recommended angry customer paracrisis management strategies (i.e., recognition/reception) require acknowledging that a problem exists, yielding them ineffective when individuals are upset or uneasy over a nonexistent problem. *Reassurance* permits brands to address individuals' psychological needs without legitimizing the allegation and can also assist in restoring trust in a brand, its products, and its services.

Limitations and Conclusion

A few limitations should be noted. First, this study reflects an analysis of a single case. Although lessons may be drawn from case studies, this approach also reduces some aspects of the study's generalizability to other paracrises. Second, this study relies on publicly available information. If permitted, an interview with a member of the campaign's public relations team would have offered additional insight into the decision-making process. Third, this study only focuses on the responses of users who engaged with Crock-Pot's social media posts and is not representative of all followers or *This Is Us* viewers. Finally, this study did not utilize statistical analysis. Future research should use experiments to manipulate scenarios and understand how audiences perceive and respond to different response strategies and communication style elements in angry customer, misinformation, and other paracrisis types.

Through intertwining classic crisis responses with human voice and humor, Crock-Pot constructed a distinctive, emotion-driven campaign that enabled it to connect with social media users, eradicate the reputational threat, transform the narrative, and build its brand, converting a threat into an opportunity. This study underscored limitations of the current paracrisis response options for responding to misinformation and emotional audiences, explained how SCCT strategies were more effective for managing the threat than identified paracrisis strategies, and provided recommendations for expanding response strategies regarding angry customers and misinformation paracrises, including the application of human voice and humor. Although classic crisis management theories, such as SCCT, should not be "blindly" applied in paracrises (Kim et al. 2016), this study contributes to a growing body of research (e.g., Honisch and Manchón 2019; Roh 2017) that underscores the need to consider these theories and their applicability in a paracrisis context as we continue to theorize about identifying, classifying, and responding to these increasing reputational threats.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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