



Southwestern Mass Communication Journal

A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication
ISSN 0891-9186 (Print); ISSN 2641-6743 (Online) | Vol. 40, No. 1

The Try Guys Try Cheating: Social Media Influencers in Crisis

Alicia Perez, Cindy Price Schultz,
University of Wyoming

& Kristen Landreville
North Carolina State University and University of Wyoming

The Try Guys are social media influencers who were in crisis when member Ned Fulmer cheated on his wife and affected their brand. The Try Guys' followers took to social media to express their thoughts and give advice about the Try Guys brand. This study explored the relationship between social media influencers and their followers, how those influencers talk about their personal brand during a crisis, and how followers aid in reputational repair. The theories were Parasocial Interaction and Situational Crisis Communication Theory. A content analysis of posts and comments on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube was conducted. The findings showed crisis frames in the Try Guys' posts were different from their followers' comments. The Try Guys focused on justification, ingratiation and victimage, whereas the followers scapegoated the woman involved in the affair instead of her married boss. Implications for public relations, social media, and parasocial interaction were offered.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Parasocial Interaction, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Social Media Influencers, The Try Guys

Billions of people around the world use social media every day as part of their daily routine (Dixon, 2022b). A subset of that is the social media influencers who try to persuade their followers to like them or use the products they showcase (Freberg et al., 2011). On Instagram alone, there are approximately 37 million active influencers (Campbell, 2022). Social media influencers gain fame by successfully branding themselves as experts on social media platforms and sharing self-generated content covering a myriad of topics like fitness, beauty, food, and entertainment (Schouten et al., 2019).

Previous research has demonstrated that businesses and organizations are increasingly partnering with social media influencers to promote and endorse brands because influencers actively connect intended target audiences with those brands while maintaining direct communication with their followers (Jimenez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). One of these influencers is the Try Guys. This group started under BuzzFeed, but now own and operate 2nd Try LLC, where the members created a company brand based on fun-loving guys who try various experiences (Porzenheim, 2022). But what happens when the brand of a company is broken and crisis occurs? That is what this article explores – how the Try Guys used their social media outlets to repair their brand after one of their members had an affair. This crisis was chosen as it highlights the intersection of when an influencer breaks a personal brand and how that damaged brand affects the larger company that influencer may represent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Branding

Social media is a blanket term used to describe various online platforms like blogs, microblogs (Twitter, now X), social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn), video-sharing sites (YouTube), and more (Rhee et al., 2021). While Rhee et al. (2021) suggested social media are an “online space for facilitating social interaction” (p. 2), not all activities on social media are social. For example, YouTube is a video-sharing platform, but little two-sided interaction happens on the site and users may not perceive their activity as social. Conversely, Instagram is a site that facilitates social interaction. It is a social networking app that allows users to take photos and videos, edit them with various filters and graphics and then share them with followers. There are more than 120 million active users in the United States alone (Dixon, 2022a).

Social media outlets are important to connect organizations to their audiences because the way that they are perceived is important for their continued existence. This perception is called branding. Aaker (1997) suggested that branding includes the human characteristics that a brand tries to connect to its consumers. The more positive experiences consumers have with a brand, the stronger their trust is in that brand (Kim et al., 2015). Recently, branding has adapted. Social media facilitates two-way communication that allows consumers to ask questions and have a truer perception of what the brand is. These opinions can influence the overall perception of the brand or tear down its reputation in the matter of minutes. Many companies do not realize how to

use social media during a crisis and do not respond to comments in a timely manner, which negatively affects the brand (Rowles, 2014).

Freberg et al. (2011) stated social media influencers are a “type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (p. 90). According to *Forbes*, there are 50 million social media influencers around the world with more than \$5 billion connected to their digital media content (Gagliese, 2022). These influencers gain fame through creating approachable profiles on multiple platforms. Because social media influencers can affect their followers’ behaviors, many have partnered with advertisers to endorse products or brands on their profiles (Hudders et al., 2021).

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Social media influencers invite their followers into their day-to-day lives, so followers feel as though they are pseudo-friends with the influencers. This phenomenon is called parasocial interaction, and it is an excellent foundation for studying social media influencers because that perceived relationship could explain why consumers feel like they can trust them. Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the idea of para-social interaction and defined it as “an illusioned face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (p. 215). Regarding social media influencers and followers, Breves et al. (2021a) suggested that these parasocial relationships described a mediated one-sided form of interaction. Although social media users can comment and send messages to influencers, the researchers argued that this interaction is not on even terms, thus creating parasocial interaction.

Jin and Ryu (2020) found that social media influencers are perceived as being more trustworthy and evoke strong feelings of envy that lead to closer parasocial interaction than mainstream celebrities. Hudders et al. (2020) stated that parasocial interaction was an important factor in women trusting social media influencers. Through showing sneak peaks into their personal lives, followers were more accepting of social media influencers’ endorsements and product reviews. Shan et al. (2019) discovered that parasocial interaction with influencers could be a vehicle for feelings of similarity, perceived high social attractiveness, and sharing similar values. Breves et al. (2021b) recognized how social media influencers have become popular brand endorsers and that previous research neglected looking at persuasion from a follower lens. An experimental study confirmed that followers of a social media influencer experienced higher levels of trust and lower levels of persuasive resistance because of the parasocial relationship, its association to character schemas, and the perception of a social media influencer as a trustworthy communicator. In a related study, Breves et al. (2021a) found that behavioral intentions were positively affected for followers with a parasocial relationship with a social media influencer in terms of evaluating a brand.

Crisis Communication and Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Branding, social media, and influencers can all be part of an organization’s identity. But that all may be affected when a crisis occurs. Coombs (2019) categorized these crisis types into paracrises or operational crises. Paracrises can include a faux pas or when crisis managers take action that is meant to be positive or neutral, but the stakeholders view as negative. Operational

crises include operational disruptions from disasters or a force outside of the organization's control, accidents related to the product or people involved in producing it and organizational misdeeds that place stakeholders at risk. A type of operational crisis is a scandal or a crisis that also becomes a scandal, which creates a sense of moral outrage (Austin et al., 2018).

After defining the type of crisis an organization is having, that organization needs to respond to its stakeholders in an appropriate manner. Crisis response is the communication and action an organization takes after a crisis hits. Traditionally, news media have been the first source with information pertaining to the crisis. Because of this, organizations need to respond early to position themselves as an information source and begin telling their side of the story. Once stakeholders hear of a crisis, they want as much information about what happened and how it can affect them. Attribution theory considers how people explain why or how an event happens. In general, stakeholders attribute the crisis to the organization, which harms its reputation and increases negative word-of-mouth (Coombs, 2007). Coombs (2007) linked attribution theory and crisis management and created Situation Crisis Communication Theory. SCCT suggests that the amount of crisis responsibility determines the route of crisis response most appropriate to minimize reputational damage and help people support an organization (Coombs, 2018).

To understand how to respond, crisis communicators need to evaluate the crisis types and intensifying factors that exist across stakeholders to see where they will attribute crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2018). Crisis types are categorized into three levels of responsibility. Victim crises are when stakeholders view an organization as the victim, so minimal responsibility is assigned to it. Accident crises related to the amount of responsibility attributed to an organization during a mishap. Preventable crises have a high level of organizational responsibility. If an organization could have prevented a crisis from happening and information comes out that it did not take these steps, responsibility is placed on the organization. These factors could change a low-level crisis responsibility to a high-level crisis responsibility, causing a shift in crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2018).

Coombs (2015) explained the crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT – deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce. Denial strategies are applied to absolve organizations of responsibility. Organizations use denial strategies to claim that there is no crisis, blame another for the crisis, confront the accuser, or scapegoat someone else. Diminish strategies recognize a crisis, but aim to minimize the organization's responsibility for it. These strategies include excusing the organization's actions, justifying what was done, or explaining how it was an accident. Rebuild strategies focus on the heart of public relations – relationship management. If an organization is responsible for a crisis, it must issue a public acknowledgement and accept responsibility. Apologizing is asking for forgiveness, but if it is not well received, it can have a boomerang effect and do more damage. Compensation is a repair strategy where an organization offers compensation to make amends. Reinforce strategies call for an organization to remind the public of all the good the organization has done (Kelleher, 2018).

Social Media and Crises

In recent years, there has been a growing need for crisis communicators because of the rapid spread of information on social media (Kelleher, 2018). While this speed may be seen positive, it is important to understand that social media can exaggerate the negative aspects of a crisis (Zhao, 2017). In most cases, an organization designates one person or small group of people to speak about a crisis to traditional media and control the flow of information. Now, there is the added layer of news breaking on social media as well. Using social media during a crisis can put the organization in direct contact with stakeholders and social media followers (Kelleher, 2018).

Because social media connects humans globally, Tu and Li (2022) said public attitudes can have a large impact on a human brand or social media influencer during and after a crisis. This general opinion can be negative or positive depending on whether users are supportive of the social media influencers. By partaking in their own crisis communication and reputational rebuilding that mirror strategies taken by a company or influencer, social media users and followers can take on an active role in crisis communication. Parasocial relationships can influence a crisis because followers who have a perceived relationship with an influencer will act accordingly through relational maintenance behaviors that can benefit the brand, such as two-way interaction, reassuring the influencers of a mutual relationship, showing support and affection, and offering advice (Sidelinger et al., 2008). This study examined how positively or negatively the Try Guys' followers accepted or rejected the reputational repair strategies employed by the Try Guys after the infidelity crisis.

BuzzFeed has been a launching point for many content creators such as The Try Guys. The group was founded by Keith Habersberger, Ned Fulmer, Zach Kornfeld, and Eugene Lee Yang with one goal – to be a group of people who tried things. In 2014, The Try Guys published their first YouTube video under BuzzFeed, “Guys Try On Ladies’ Underwear For The First Time” and it received over 22 million views. From 2014-2018, the Try Guys were part of BuzzFeed, where they were nominated for Show of the Year at the 2017 Streamy Awards and won the title in 2018. In 2018 the group members announced they were leaving BuzzFeed to create their own production company called 2nd Try LLC (Theil, 2022).

In 2019, the group released a video to explain their split from BuzzFeed, citing that they had a desire to grow the Try Guys brand and pursue individual projects. In their departure, the group gained rights to the Try Guys brand, but BuzzFeed held branded content rights. Later that year, the Try Guys released a book, “The Hidden Power of F*cking Up,” that made the *New York Times* bestseller list. In 2021, 2nd Try LLC grew to nearly 25 employees. The Try Guys had filmed a Food Network show called “No Recipe Road Trip with the Try Guys,” which was loosely based on a series on their YouTube channel, “Without a Recipe.” Initially, “No Recipe Road Trip” was meant to be a one-off special, but after ordering a six-episode season, the show premiered on August 31, 2022 (Theil, 2022).

Along with individual projects, the Try Guys invited their personal circle to appear in videos and start projects under 2nd Try. The Try Guys’ partners, affectionately known as “The

Try Wives” to their fans, include Ned Fulmer’s wife, Ariel Fulmer; Keith Habersberger’s wife, Becky Habersberger; Zach Kornfeld’s fiancé, Maggie Bustamente; and Eugene Lee Yang’s partner, Matthew McLean. The first three “wives” hosted a podcast under 2nd Try LLC called “You Can Sit With Us” in which McLean often made guest appearances (Theil, 2022). By including their partners, the Try Guys opened the door for their content to be more personal (Theil, 2022). Habersberger vlogged his November 2017 wedding, where the other members were groomsmen (BuzzFeedVideo, 2017). In June 2019, Lee Yang used the Try Guys’ YouTube channel to publish the video, “I’m Gay,” to share his struggles (The Try Guys, 2019). In June 2022, Kornfeld published the video, “Why Don’t We Care About Disabled People?” to share about his personal disabilities (The Try Guys, 2022f). Many people connected to these topics; in November 2022, the Try Guys had 8.04 million subscribers to their YouTube channel (The Try Guys, 2022a), 1.7 million Instagram followers (The Try Guys, 2022b), 4.1 million Facebook page likes (The Try Guys, 2022c), and 502,800 Twitter followers (The Try Guys, 2022d).

To put this in context, the Try Guys have built a cohesive overall brand while maintaining unique individual brands that set each member apart. For example, Habersberger is seen as the tall dorky one who is loud and musically gifted. With two other friends, he is also part of a comedic musical theater group called Lewberger. Lee Yang’s personal brand is focused more on artistic aspects, such as painting, sculpting, and makeup. He also is a comedian and is known to add large quantities of alcohol to any cooking or baking video the group published. Kornfeld built his personal brand on being the cute Try Guy. He is often clumsy and has self-deprecating humor. Kornfeld has talked about his baldness and many health problems that leave him in chronic pain (“The Try Guys,” 2022). Lastly, Fulmer’s personal brand focused on being a devoted husband and loving father. His unofficial tagline was created after fans made compilation videos of Fulmer saying, “my wife, Ariel” (“The Try Guys,” 2022, para. 11). The pair have two kids together and shared large parts of their life on social media (Nambiar, 2022).

This success comes with much scrutiny and on September 14, 2022, fans started noticing Fulmer was no longer in videos. During this time, a Reddit user shared photos in a now-deleted post that appeared to show Fulmer cheating on his wife by making out with an employee, Associate Producer Alexandria Herring. During Labor Day weekend, September 3-5, 2022, the other group members were told of Fulmer’s actions by their followers, so they initiated an internal review. During this review the remaining Try Guys found out it was an ongoing affair. Once the relationship was confirmed, Fulmer was removed from the group. Additionally, the other members removed Fulmer from videos or completely scrapped videos in which he could not be removed. By September 25, 2022, the Try Guys confirmed on social media that Fulmer was no longer part of the group (Mendez, 2022). On October 3, 2022, the remaining Try Guys released an emotional video, “what happened”¹ (The Try Guys, 2022e). This video reflected the pain, disappointment, and process that led to the decision to remove Fulmer from the group (Mendez, 2022). On October 6, 2022, the Try Guys released a podcast episode on their TryPod YouTube channel explaining how they initially processed feelings of trauma (Soliz, 2022).

¹ This is the correct spelling of the name of the video. It is lowercase in the YouTube link.

After analyzing the timeline, the Try Guys crisis for the purpose of this study is defined as a paracrisis. Paracrisis are emotional and involved a party having hurt feelings or being offended. Because Ned Fulmer was having an inappropriate affair with an employee, but the remaining Try Guys did not know about it, this study will analyze this as a victim crisis. This research focused on the Try Guys' social media posts directly after the cheating scandal, as well as their followers' responses, through a crisis communication and SCCT lens.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Because there are close to 5 billion social media users worldwide, social media platforms are key to organizations and their branding. As social media grew, advertisers started to use social media influencers, trusted opinion leaders who can affect their followers' decisions through endorsing products (Jin & Ryu, 2020). However, when the organization or social media influencer breaks followers' expectations of the brand, a crisis occurs (Nizri, 2022). The Try Guys, a company that posts videos on its social media platforms, had its brand broken by former Try Guy, Ned Fulmer. The remaining group members reacted immediately to repair their reputation. Because the Try Guys were social media influencers before they started their own business, they cultivated parasocial relationships with their followers. Because of their large following on social media, the perceived relationship with their followers, and the public nature of the cheating scandal, the Try Guys were an excellent case study for examining parasocial relationships and reputational repair strategies from a crisis communication lens. Coombs (2015) created crisis response strategies that have been used by professional communicators for years. Therefore, based on the review of literature, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: Which of Coombs' (2015) crisis response strategies are present in the Try Guys' posts pertaining to the cheating scandal?

RQ2: Which of Coombs' (2015) crisis response strategies are present in the Try Guys' followers' comments published under the posts pertaining to the cheating scandal?

RQ3: Are there differences among comments posted to the three social media platforms analyzed in the results of Coombs' crisis response strategy coding frames?

METHODS

Content Analysis

As noted earlier, the Try Guys amassed millions of followers among their Instagram (1.6 million), Twitter² (501,100), and YouTube (8.07 million) accounts. To answer the research questions, the time frame of the crisis was September 27, 2022, to October 6, 2022, as discussed in the literature review. The content analysis examined the Try Guys' Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube accounts and their followers' first 200 responses for Instagram and YouTube and the first 120 responses for Twitter directly under those posts, which totaled 520 comments.

The unit of analysis was each published post from the Try Guys' three selected social media accounts during the study's time frame. These posts specifically talked about the Fulmer

² At the time of this study, X was called Twitter, so it will be called that throughout this article.

cheating scandal, how the remaining Try Guys chose to move on from the scandal, and the Try Guys' followers' comments directly under those posts. Therefore, three posts and followers' comments were examined. Memes, GIFs, and images were not included in this analysis. Emojis with text used to comment on posts were coded, but emojis that stood alone as comments on posts were not included because the full intent of a singular emoji is not easily understood.

In this study, a post on Instagram was operationally defined as a photo or video that @tryguys shared on the platform. A tweet was defined as a post of a maximum of 280 characters published by @tryguys. Only the initial tweet starting a Twitter thread was analyzed. A YouTube post was operationally defined as a video created and published by The Try Guys' YouTube channel. Replies from followers on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube were defined as published comments that appeared directly under the initial published post from @tryguys (Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter). The Try Guys' brand was damaged by the former manager when he had an affair with an employee; therefore, in this situation the Try Guys were defined as the victim and Fulmer as the perpetrator.

In addition to seeing how the remaining Try Guys communicated through their social media outlets, the responses of followers were important to determine what the public attitude was concerning the Try Guys during and post crisis and whether followers supported or rejected the Try Guys based on an already-established parasocial relationship. The response number was limited to the first 200 comments on Instagram and YouTube and the first 120 comments on Twitter to gauge the initial reaction to the Try Guys' posts. Therefore, replies to comments and replies to those replies were not considered part of the study.

Coding Themes/Categories

Reputational defense responses listed below were coded based on Coombs's (2015) crisis response strategies. Posts and comments could have been present in multiple categories.

Denial strategies: 1. **Attack the accuser:** The company or social media followers confront the person or group claiming something is wrong with the company. Any post or comment that suggests verbal, physical, or emotional harm on the accuser fits into this category.

2. **Denial:** Posts or comments that assert that there is no crisis or claiming that it never happened.

3. **Scapegoat:** Posts or comments that blame some person or group for the crisis. Posts or comments in this category have a second mark about who blame was placed on: 1 = Ned Fulmer, 2 = Ariel Fulmer, or 3 = Alexandria Herring.

Diminish strategies: 1. **Excuse:** Posts or comments that minimize company responsibility by denying intent to do harm or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

2. **Justification:** Posts or comments that minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis or take responsibility for a crisis but do not express regret. The response can state that there were no serious damages or injuries or claim that Ned Fulmer deserved what he received.

Rebuild strategy: 1. **Apology:** Posts or comments that indicate the company takes any degree of responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. Followers using this strategy could apologize for Fulmer's actions, for example.

Bolstering strategies: 1. **Reminder:** Posts or comments that tell stakeholders about the past good works of the company.

2. **Ingratiation:** Posts or comments that praise stakeholders for their actions.

3. **Victimage:** Posts or comments that indicate the organization or followers are also a victim in the crisis. Any expressed feelings of hurt, loss, and pain would be coded into this category.

Intercoder Reliability

To establish intercoder reliability, one coder analyzed all of the data and a second trained coder analyzed 23% of the data (3 posts and 120 comments). The agreement for each theme was: Denial: .01; Excuse: .24; Justification: .65; Apology: 1; Reminder: .67; Ingratiation: 0; Victimage: .85; Scapegoat (presence): .41; and Scapegoat (who was blamed?): .41. Values varied from 0 (not reliable) to 1 (completely reliable). Frames that had a Krippendorff’s Alpha higher than 0.65 were justification, apology, reminder, and victimage. Frames that did not meet the minimum 0.65 value for Krippendorffs’s Alpha were still coded for but should be interpreted with caution because reliability was not achieved.³

RESULTS

Three Try Guys posts and 520 followers’ comments were analyzed for this study. To answer RQ1, which of Coombs’ crisis response strategy frames were present in the Try Guys’ posts pertaining to the cheating scandal?, three Try Guys posts were coded – one on Instagram, one on YouTube, and one on Twitter. The Coombs’ crisis response strategy coding frames were: denial, attack the accuser, scapegoat, excuse, justification, apology, reminder, ingratiation, and

Table 1
Frequency Results for Coombs Frames for Try Guys’ Posts

Frame	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter	Frequency in Posts
Denial	0	0	0	0
Scapegoat	0	0	0	0
Excuse	0	1	0	1
Justification	0	1	0	1
Apology	0	0	0	0
Reminder	0	0	0	0
Ingratiation	1	0	1	2
Victimage	0	1	0	1

³ Some reasons why reliability was not met for some frames were low occurrence in the data, so if one comment showed disagreement between coders, this disagreement lowered the reliability results. Another reason that some frames were not present in the Try Guys’ posts or their followers comments.

victimage. Due to the low number of posts, only the frequencies were reported in the table. (See Table 1).

For the Try Guys’ posts, ingratiation, excuse, justification, and victimage were the top recorded frames, although the overall numbers were low.

To answer RQ2, which of Coombs’ crisis response strategy frames are present in the Try Guys’ followers’ comments published under the posts pertaining to the cheating scandal?, 520 comments from Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter were analyzed. (See Table 2 for results).

Table 2
Frequencies and Proportions of Crisis Response Strategy Frames for Comments

Theme	n	Instagram Occurrences	YouTube Occurrences	Twitter Occurrences	X²	p-value	Cramer’s V
Denial	56	7, 3.5% ^a	44 ^b , 22.0% ^b	5, 4.2% ^a	42.693	.001*	.287
Excuse	10	8, 4.0% ^b	2, 1.0% ^a	0, 0.0% ^a	7.831	.020*	.123
Justification	23	10, 5.0% ^a	10, 5.0% ^a	3, 2.5% ^a	1.365	.505	.051
Apology	14	1, 0.5% ^a	9, 4.5% ^b	4, 3.3% ^b	6.352	.042*	.111
Reminder	8	3, 1.5% ^a	3, 1.5% ^a	2, 1.7% ^a	.017	.992	.006
Ingratiation	22	5, 2.5% ^a	15, 7.5% ^a	2, 1.7% ^a	8.701	.130	.129
Victimage	13	3, 1.5% ^a	6, 3.0% ^a	4, 3.3% ^a	1.368	.505	.051
Scapegoat – Ned	48	16, 8.0% ^a	14, 7.0% ^a	18, 15.0% ^b	6.316	.043*	.110
Scapegoat - Alex	103	77, 38.5% ^a	14, 7.0% ^b	12, 10.0% ^b	71.915	.001*	.372

Note. Subscript letters that differ denote a subset of social media platform categories whose column proportions are significantly different from one another at the .05 level. Cramer’s V varies from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating more correlation between the two variables. Frames that showed lower reliability were denial, excuse, ingratiation, and the scapegoat frames. For all categories, *df* = 2. (*Attack the accuser and scapegoat–Ariel had no data and were not included*)

The top three most frequently discussed frames were scapegoat-Alex (*N*=103), denial (*N*=56), and scapegoat-Ned (*N*=48). The coding frames excuse, justification, apology, reminder, ingratiation, and victimage were also present in followers’ comments.

To answer RQ3, are there differences among comments posted to the three social media platforms analyzed in the results of Coombs’ crisis response strategy coding frames?, 520 comments across Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter were analyzed. (See Table 2 for analysis).

The largest *X*² was for the scapegoat-Alex frame. Instagram comments showed the highest proportion of this frame compared to the other platforms. The next largest *X*² was for the

denial frame with YouTube showing the highest proportion. The other statistically significant frames were excuse, with Instagram showing the highest proportion; apology, with YouTube showing the highest proportion, and scapegoat–Ned, with Twitter have a higher proportion.

DISCUSSION

Previous research has shown that social media influencers do affect their followers' feelings and behaviors toward a company or product (Coombs 2018), but the role that social media influencers play in crisis management and reputation repair has had little research, so this study aimed to fill those gaps. Additionally, due to parasocial interaction, followers of social media influencers inserted themselves into the reputational repair crisis communication process by commenting on posts. The results showed that many of Coombs' (2015) crisis response strategies were present within the Try Guys' social media posts concerning the cheating scandal and their followers' comments under those posts.

In the Try Guys posts, only excuse, justification, ingratiation, and victimage were present. More specifically, ingratiation was used in two social media outlets while the other frames were only used in one. The Try Guys, therefore, framed the scandal in a way that diminished any responsibility the remaining Try Guys may have had. The excuse and justification frames both come from the diminish strategies offered by Coombs and are the best responses for accidental crises. The Try Guys cheating scandal could be defined as an accidental crisis because Ned Fulmer having an affair with an employee of his own company would be defined as inappropriate action. It was easy for the remaining Try Guys to claim that they did not know that the inappropriate workplace behavior was taking place, which makes the amount of responsibility placed on those Try Guys relatively low.

An example of the excuse frame was: "All of that information was just as shocking to us as all of this has been for you this week." An example of the justification frame was: "From the jump, we were acutely aware just how contrary this was to the values of the company we've built and those of everyone who works here." The ingratiation and victimage coding frames were Coombs' bolstering strategies. Zhao et al. (2020) stated that bolstering strategies should be used as a secondary strategy and only if the company has a positive relationship with its publics, like the Try Guys did. An example of the ingratiation frame was: "We thank you for your support." An example of the victimage frame was: "We were obviously incredibly shocked and deeply hurt by all of this. This is someone who we'd built a brand and company with for eight years. We feel saddened." The Try Guys successfully used these strategies while communicating about the scandal because they have had eight years to build a positive relationship with their followers through parasocial interaction. The use of these strategies allowed the Try Guys to shift the focus away from their company and the crisis and reinforce follower support.

RQ2 looked at the top three frames used by followers commenting on the Try Guys posts: scapegoat–Alex ($n=103$), denial ($n=56$), and scapegoat–Ned ($n=48$). Because Situational Crisis Communication Theory argues that negative events lead people to attribute crisis responsibility of the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2018) and it was determined that the

remaining Try Guys have very low responsibility for this crisis, followers needed to attribute responsibility. The scapegoat frame, with the modifications made for this study, showed that Herring was primarily blamed for the crisis. The scapegoat–Alex frame also had the highest X^2 and Instagram comments had the highest proportion of this frame compared to other platforms.

While the Try Guys discussed the process that led to them removing Fulmer from the group, they did not speak about any action taken against Herring, the employee. Many comments called for the same actions taken against Fulmer to be taken against Herring. Some examples were: “I hope Alex is also let go. This was a girl that knew exactly what she was doing to both Ariel and her own fiancée”, “Please don’t let Alexandria get away with all the damage and devastation that she has caused as a part of this as well”, and “Just please get rid of Alex. It’s her fault as much as Ned’s. She messed with a married man while being in a long term relationship.” Instagram likely had a higher proportion of scapegoat–Alex frames because it is a visual platform and women have often been criticized for their appearance. In the video analyzed for this study, Try Guy Eugene Lee Yang said that the internet is inherently harsher on women, so the high proportion of scapegoat–Alex frame on Instagram only supports this claim. Kennedy et al. (2016) found that women are more harshly punished when they find themselves in the middle of moral dilemmas. In fact, the researchers found that women are held to a higher ethical standard and suffer disproportionate punishment when they violate those standards. These ideas are upheld in the current study because while Fulmer cheated on his wife, Herring was overwhelmingly blamed by followers. Many comments discussed how she knew what she was doing and how it was her fault. These comments failed to recognize that Fulmer was the one that was married and he was also her boss, which is another level of responsibility.

The denial frame was the second highest present in the followers’ comments and had the next highest X^2 with YouTube showing the highest proportion. Many commenters expressed denial because Fulmer having an affair was a personal issue and not the concern on the company. Some examples of the denial frame on YouTube were: “Ned is quite literally the LAST guy you would expect to do something like this”, “Let the guy f*uck who he wants and mind your business lol. This is ridiculous”, and “The type of stuff doesn’t deserve this much light who f*cking cares if he cheated on someone idc (I don’t care) I’m not in their relationship f*ck him and f*ck her lol idc abt (about) either of them. Make videos. That’s what ur here to do. Leave out the bs.” Most comments in this category refused to acknowledge the inappropriate power imbalance between Fulmer, a founder and part owner of the Try Guys, and Herring, a producer and longtime employee of the Try Guys. If they were to fire Herring when they fired Fulmer, this could open the Try Guys up for wrongful termination lawsuits because of his supervisory role. Because the Try Guys started on BuzzFeed, a YouTube media entertainment channel, the population of YouTube is likely more familiar with the Try Guys than other social media platforms. Because of this knowledge, YouTube users were less likely to acknowledge that the cheating scandal had larger implication than just an extramarital affair. Like one of the examples showed, many YouTube users did not want the Try Guys to “waste their time” by acknowledging the affair, but instead should stick to making videos.

Lastly, the scapegoat–Ned frame was the third highest used by the followers and had a higher proportion of comments appearing on Twitter. Because Fulmer was removed from the group, followers assumed that he did something wrong. Many comments placed more blame on him because he was the one who had an established marriage and children whereas Herring was engaged and had no children. Some examples of the scapegoat–Ned frame were: “I am truly saddened by the actions of Ned”, “What he did was disgusting and should be punished”, and “It makes me incredibly sad that a man who seemed to dedicate everything he did on Try Guys to his wife and kids could then turn around and cheat on her!” This finding supports the premise of SCCT that followers must blame someone if the organization itself is not to blame in the crisis. Conciseness and speed are important on Twitter, so the obvious person to blame in this crisis was Fulmer. Therefore, followers on Twitter blamed Fulmer quickly and moved on.

The excuse frame also had higher proportions of comments appearing on Instagram. The presence of the excuse frame makes sense because followers made excuses that the remaining Try Guys could not know what Fulmer was doing in his personal time. Many followers made satirical comments like, “This was not on my 2023 bingo card.” (This comment stems from a meme meaning that followers did not see this coming and would not have guessed that the Try Guys would gain negative attention from Fulmer having an affair). Some other examples were: “this is like literally the last thing we were expecting to happen”, and “Wow would’ve never saw that coming.” While followers did not deny that a crisis occurred, they supported the idea that the Try Guys cannot be held completely accountable because not even the followers, people devoted to paying attention to the Try Guys and their personal lives, picked up on Fulmer having an affair. Fulmer and Herring obviously would not want information about the affair being published to Instagram, so devoted followers of the Try Guys would not find any information about the affair on that platform. Thus, it was easier for followers to make excuses about how they would have never seen this affair coming.

Lastly, the apology frame was also statistically different on YouTube within followers’ comments. Some examples of the apology frame were: “This makes me uncomfortable, also sorry about the situation” and “Sorry Try Guys, that was hard to watch.” Many commentors on YouTube expressed apologies, but not in terms of taking responsibility for the crisis. They used the apology frame in a way that sympathized with the Try Guys.

A large difference between the frames intentionally chosen by the Try Guys and the frames selected by the Try Guys’ followers is that the top three frames used by the followers, scapegoat–Alex, denial, and scapegoat–Ned, were not used by the Try Guys at all. This may be because at the time that the posts were initially made by the Try Guys, they were still in the middle of legal meetings pertaining to what they could and could not say do in the situation. Meanwhile, the Try Guys’ followers could blame whoever they want because they are not bound to any legal agreements. Also, because the Try Guys did a good job showing that the group was minimally responsible for the crisis, followers needed to place blame somewhere. Fulmer and Herring were the easiest options as they were directly involved in the affair.

Eugene Lee Yang also mentioned in his video that the Try Guys could not deny or “sweep anything under the rug” because those actions do not align with the values of 2nd Try LLC. This explained why the Try Guys did not use the denial frame at all during their communications pertaining to the cheating scandal. Followers could deny that a crisis was taking place because while followers have parasocial relationships with the Try Guys, they were not directly impacted by the crisis in the way that the Try Guys were.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study has several interesting findings, there are also limitations. It only looked at three Try Guys posts, so there is a generalizability limitation. Analyzing the personal social media accounts of the Try Guys would have created a larger sample and made conclusions about the Try Guys posts pertaining to the cheating scandal more concrete. Future research could focus on the relationship between specific social media platforms and what crisis response strategy coding frames are used. Because the scapegoat–Alex category is statistically different on Instagram compared to YouTube and Twitter, future research could investigate why media are harsher on women and why Instagram was much more willing to place the blame on Herring in this cheating crisis. Because this study did not look at posts from Fulmer, future research could investigate how parasocial interaction between Fulmer and his followers played a role in how followers defended him. This could close gaps within parasocial interaction and social support.

Recommendations

Social media influencers who find themselves, or companies that they are attached to, in crisis should use their social media accounts to communicate and respond to their followers to rebuild their reputation. While blame is often placed on someone or on the company, crisis managers need to be mindful about how they do or do not speak about those involved in the crisis. Even though the Try Guys never mentioned Herring’s name in their posts, followers were still quick to place blame on her. This may be because the Try Guys never mentioned any actions taken against Herring, so the Try Guys’ followers assumed that no action was taken against her. Followers of the Try Guys knew that she was the “other woman” involved, so they also blamed her for the crisis. Because of this, crisis managers need to be aware of how much followers know about the situation and speak to all points of the crisis as much as legally possible.

Public relations professionals should follow the Try Guy’s example by obtaining all the facts about the crisis and taking steps to solve it in a way that aligns with company values. While dispersing information can be tricky when legal aspects are involved, it is the company’s responsibility to communicate what it can as quickly as appropriate. The Try Guys knew that they would not be able to keep the crisis as quiet, so they made the decision to address it and share as much information as they legally could. The Try Guys also made it known that they were following legal obligations, which is why they could not offer many details.

CONCLUSION

As social media develops and consumers turn to it to gather information on products or brands, influencer marketing is only going to grow. Social media influencers and their accounts

are quickly becoming a go-to for advertising because their followers place a large amount of trust within what they share about a specific company, product, or brand. Social media influencers are expected to be honest and personal in their posts compared to their traditional celebrity counterparts because social media influencers are seen as more in touch with their target audience. From the initial Try Guys posts, Zach Kornfeld stated that the current Try Guys needed to speak about the crisis on their official social media, so they could be transparent about their decision to remove Fulmer from the group. The Try Guys have been producing content for millions on social media for years, so they are social media influencers. They branded themselves as a group of guys who like to have fun and try new things. Fulmer's personal brand in the Try Guys was the "Wife Guy," a man devoted to loving his wife and family. But when this brand was affected by Fulmer's affair and it threatened the trust that their followers had for the Try Guys, the remaining members took to their social media channels to share information about the crisis and attempt to rebuild their reputation.

This study added more information on social media influencers' reputational repair process in the age of where information – true or false – spreads rapidly across these platforms. The results showed that followers of social media influencers also partake in the reputational repair process, especially if they feel like the influencer or organization is not responsible for it. This moves SCCT in a new direction as crisis response managers need to be aware that followers want to be part of the discussion, whether managers recruit them or not. The Try Guys purposefully did not blame or even mention Herring in their initial response to the crisis, but the group's followers still heavily blamed her for the crisis because of information available on social media. As more research is conducted regarding social support frames and crisis response strategies being more successful on various social media platforms, crisis managers will be better equipped to handle the reputational damage of a crisis. This was especially important when it seemed like social media users were harsher on Herring, a woman involved in the crisis, when the responsibility was placed on Fulmer by the remaining members of the Try Guys.

Ultimately, this study provides insight for crisis managers and an interested public about how crisis response discourse through social media plays a crucial role in reputational repair and, therefore, potential influence on followers and their behaviors. It is the first formal content analysis studying the Try Guys, parasocial interaction theory, and how followers take it upon themselves to become crisis responders and assist in reputational repair. It is up to the crisis manager to know which crisis response strategy to employ on which social media platform that they are using to inform their public while minimizing crisis responsibility of the organization.

REFERENCES

- Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347–356. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3151897>.
- Austin, L. L., Jin, Y., & Coombs, W. T. (2018). Revising Situational Crisis Communication Theory. In *Social Media and Crisis Communication* (pp. 21–35). Routledge.

- BuzzFeedVideo. (2017, November 4). *The Try Guys become groomsmen for Keith's wedding • The Try Vlog* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3eaO38a-Eo>
- Campbell, S. (2022, August 14). *How many influencers are there on Instagram in 2022?* The Small Business Blog. Retrieved August 26, 2022, from <https://thesmallbusinessblog.net/how-many-influencers-are-there-on-instagram/>
- Ceci, L. (2022, October 12). *U.S. users who have a YouTube account by age 2022*. Statista. Retrieved December 1, 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1338818/us-users-having-a-youtube-account-by-age/>.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007, October 30). Crisis management and communications. *Institute of Public Relations*. Retrieved from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/>
- Coombs, W. T. (2015). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Coombs, W. T. (2018). Revising Situational Crisis Communication Theory: The influences of social media on crisis communication theory and practice. In L. Austin, & Y. Jin (Eds.), *Social Media and Crisis Communication* (pp. 21-37). New York: Routledge.
- Coombs, W. T. (2019). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. (5th Ed.). SAGE.
- Dixon, S. (2022a, February 2). *Topic: Instagram*. Statista. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/topics/1882/instagram/#topicHeader__wrapper.
- Dixon, S. (2022b, June 21). *Topic: Social media*. Statista. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/topics/1164/social-networks/#topicHeader__wrapper.
- Enke, N., & Borchers, N. S. (2019). Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2019.1620234>
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, 37, 90–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>.
- Gagliese, J. (2022, July 8). *The rise of the influencer: Predictions for ways they'll change the world*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2022/07/08/the-rise-of-the-influencer-predictions-for-ways-theyll-change-the-world/?sh=111790cf43a7>
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>.
- Jiménez-Castillo, D., & Sánchez-Fernández, R. (2019). The role of digital influencers in brand recommendation: Examining their impact on engagement, expected value and purchase intention. *International Journal of Information Management*, 49, 366–376. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.07.009>.
- Jin, S. V., & Ryu, E. (2020). “I'll buy what she's #wearing”: The roles of envy toward and parasocial interaction with influencers in Instagram celebrity-based brand endorsement

- and Social Commerce. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 55, 102121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102121>
- Kelleher, T. (2018). *Public Relations* (pp. 316-327). Oxford University Press.
- Kennedy, J., McDonnell, M. H., & Stephens, N. (2016, April 25). *Does gender raise the ethical bar? Exploring the punishment of ethical violations at work?* Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management Research Paper No. 2770012, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2770012> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2770012>
- Kim, H., Hur, W. M., & Yeo, J. (2015). Corporate brand trust as a mediator in the relationship between consumer perception of CSR, corporate hypocrisy, and corporate reputation. *Sustainability*, 7(4), 3683–3694. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su7043683>
- Mendez, M. (2022, October 5). *Who are the Try Guys and what happened?* Time. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://time.com/6219728/try-guys-what-happened-ned-fulmer/>.
- Nambiar, P. (2022, September 27). *How many kids does Ned Fulmer from Try Guys have?* HITC. Retrieved November 13, 2022, from <https://www.hitc.com/en-gb/2022/09/27/how-many-kids-does-ned-fulmer-from-try-guys-have/>.
- Nizri, E. (2022, March 2). *Council post: Macro-influencers vs. micro-influencers: The great social media debate.* Forbes. Retrieved November 23, 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2022/03/01/macro-influencers-vs-micro-influencers-the-great-social-media-debate/?sh=a87823e5286f>.
- Porzenheim, M. J. (2022, November 7). *Brand strategy example: The Try Guys scandal.* Insight To Action. Retrieved December 8, 2022, from <https://itoaction.com/brand-strategy-example-the-try-guys-scandal/>.
- Rhee, L., Bayer, J. B., Lee, D. S., & Kuru, O. (2021). Social by definition: How users define social platforms and why it matters. *Telematics and Informatics*, 59, 101538. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2020.101538>
- Rowles, D. (2014) *Digital branding: A complete step-by-step guide to strategy, tactics, and measurement.* Kogan (ProQuest ebrary).
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2019). Celebrity vs. influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and product-endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(2), 258–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898>
- Sidelinger, R. J., Ayash, G., Godarazy, A., & Tibbles, D. (2008). Couples go online: Relational maintenance behaviors and relational characteristics use in dating relationships. *Human Communication*, 11, 333-348.
- Soliz, V. (2022, October 7). *Video suggests Ned Fulmer's wife was told about his affair months before 'The Try Guys' found out.* YourTango. Retrieved December 1, 2022, from <https://www.yourtango.com/entertainment/try-guys-ned-fulmers-cheating-scandal-timeline>
- The Try Guys: Who they are and why everyone is talking about them lately.* (2022, October 6). The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com. Retrieved November 13, 2022, from <https://www.jpost.com/j-spot/article-719078>.

- The Try Guys. (2019, June 15). *I'm gay - Eugene Lee Yang* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpipLfMiaYU>
- The Try Guys. (2022a). Official YouTube Account. Retrieved on November 13, 2022.
- The Try Guys. (2022b). Official Instagram Account. Retrieved on November 13, 2022.
- The Try Guys. (2022c). Official Facebook Account. Retrieved on November 13, 2022.
- The Try Guys. (2022d). Official Twitter Account. Retrieved on November 13, 2022.
- The Try Guys. (2022e, October 4). *what happened.* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6flp7mMJ90>
- The Try Guys. (2022f, June 4). *Why don't we care about disabled people?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8QmBmcXetg>
- Theil, M. (2022, October 7). *The Try Guys built a hugely successful YouTube channel as uncontroversial nice guys. Then explosive cheating rumors changed everything.* Insider. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.insider.com/history-the-try-guys-buzzfeed-ned-fulmers-departure-cheating-2022-9#youtube-comedy-collective-the-try-guys-has-become-gossip-fodder-over-a-cheating-scandal-1>
- Tu, C., & Li, X. (2022). Social support and reputational defense strategies of Chinese social networking site users in Sun Yang's controversy. *Public Relations Review*, 48(2), 102181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102181>
- Zhao, H. (2017). The impacts of contextual factors on social media crises: Implications for crisis communication strategy selection. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 11(1), 42–60. <https://doi-org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/10.1080/1553118X.2016.1244061>
- Zhao, X., Zhan, M., & Ma, L. (2020). How publics react to situational and renewing organizational responses across crises: Examining SCCT and DOR in social-mediated crises. *Public Relations Review*, 46(4), 101944. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101944>.

Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Alicia Perez was a graduate student in communication and journalism at the University of Wyoming and is now the program coordinator for 7220 Entertainment at UW.

Cindy Price Schultz, Ph.D. is associate professor and chair of the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of Wyoming. She teaches advertising and public relations and studies media management and issues in journalism.

Kristen Landreville, Ph.D. is a senior research fellow at North Carolina State University and the University of Wyoming who leads communication and social science elements on multidisciplinary science and engineering research teams. She studies how people understand, discuss, and participate in issues surrounding science, the environment, politics, and health.

Online Connections

To follow these authors in social media:

Alicia Perez: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alicia-perez-486672185/>

Cindy Price Schultz: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/cindy-price-schultz-b5767382/>

Kristen Landreville: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/klandreville/>