

Crisis Communication Strategies: A Qualitative Study about a Natural Medicine Controversy in Colombia

Estrategias de Comunicación de Crisis: Estudio Cualitativo sobre una Controversia en el campo de la Medicina Natural en Colombia

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Abstract: This study examines how businesses respond to reputational damage caused by reputation crises. Drawing on the qualitative analysis of a Colombian natural medicine company facing a disruptive event that threatened its flagship product and business, the case study explores the company's response to media suspicions of tampering with a phytotherapeutic product. The findings reveal significant inconsistencies in the firm's organizational responses and their repercussions on stakeholders and the industry. This study sheds light on the strategic use of responses detached from reality in crisis scenarios to protect reputation. In addition, the study highlights that the analyzed company deviated from established crisis management strategies outlined in theory. The company did not implement the 'steal the thunder' approach, as it failed to proactively disclose the crisis. Moreover, the company prioritized instrumental responses over normative or ethical considerations. The analysis of the identified deviations from established crisis management principles further emphasizes the importance of the work's findings and their theoretical and practical implications for developing more effective crisis communication strategies grounded in truth-seeking.

Keywords: Organizational reputation, organizational crisis, crisis communication, crisis response strategies, crisis management.

Resumen: El presente estudio examina la forma en que algunas empresas responden al daño reputacional causado por una crisis. A través del análisis cualitativo de una compañía colombiana de medicina natural enfrentando un evento disruptivo que amenazaba su producto insignia y negocio, el estudio de caso explora la respuesta de la empresa ante sospechas mediáticas de manipulación de un producto fitoterapéutico. Los hallazgos revelan inconsistencias significativas en las respuestas organizacionales de la empresa, así como las repercusiones de dichas inconsistencias en los stakeholders y la industria. Este estudio arroja luz sobre el uso estratégico de respuestas desvinculadas de la realidad en escenarios de crisis para proteger la reputación. Además, destaca que la empresa analizada se apartó de las estrategias establecidas en teoría para la gestión de crisis. La empresa no empleó la estrategia consistente en 'tomar la iniciativa' al no revelar proactivamente la crisis. Además, priorizó respuestas instrumentales sobre consideraciones normativas o éticas. El análisis de las desviaciones identificadas de los principios establecidos de gestión de crisis resalta aún más la importancia de los hallazgos de este trabajo y sus implicaciones teóricas y prácticas para el desarrollo de estrategias de comunicación de crisis más efectivas basadas en la búsqueda de la verdad.

Palabras clave: Reputación organizacional, crisis organizacional, comunicación de crisis, estrategias de respuesta a crisis, gerencia de crisis.

1. Introduction

Lately, natural products with medicinal properties have experienced significant commercial growth and have positioned themselves advantageously within the realm of future alternative medicines. The consumption of such products offers assurance, effectiveness, safety, and low costs as long as their potential uses are appropriately specified and their quality is guaranteed (Cadar *et al.*, 2021). Due to this comportment, various companies and entrepreneurs have identified both the need and opportunity to develop and market chemical-free alternatives to alleviate the population's ailments. Thus, phytotherapeutic medicines present an attractive business opportunity, generally marketed under the premise of being 100% natural. In this context, public trust in these value propositions becomes a pivotal factor in ensuring their sustained presence in the market (Rico-Alba, 2020).

Consequently, when a product is promoted as 'herbal in origin,' 'completely natural,' and certified by a governmental regulatory body, gaining a foothold in the market and subsequently being found to contain undeclared synthetic chemical compounds constitutes consumer fraud and a breach of legal agreements governing production and marketing. In such a scenario, consumer trust in natural therapeutic alternatives might be compromised, questioning the reputation of a brand and a manufacturing company and the reputation of other stakeholders involved in production, distribution, prescription, and the effectiveness of healthcare entities. During such crises, regaining consumer trust (and that of the general public) becomes imperative for all parties involved.

Dololed®, a seemingly natural product (and flagship brand of the Colombian company Pronabell S.A.S.), faced a critical situation when grappling with the media controversy sparked by the public disclosure of a specific research investigation (Noticias Caracol, 2021). In this investigation, the presence of an artificial anti-inflammatory corticosteroid known as Diclofenac was identified among the ingredients of the product mentioned above (Stashenko *et al.*, 2020b). As expected, this situation led to accusations of alleged fraudulent behavior (i.e., deceptive, unethical, or unfair actions aimed at an improper gain) on the part of the manufacturing company for endangering the health of consumers of the product.

A crisis is an unexpected event that creates uncertainty, disrupts organizational routines, and threatens business objectives (Seeger *et al.*, 1998). This idea implies that no organization is exempt from a crisis jeopardizing its financial dynamics and reputation among stakeholders. The methods by which managers identify crises and make decisions to address them are areas where more knowledge is needed (Bundy *et al.*, 2017). However, relevant literature has proposed theoretical-practical approaches to crisis communication (Coombs, 2007) that can guide decision-makers in anticipating potential impacts on an organization's reputation, stakeholder relations, and perception of the organization.

This paper aims to illustrate the concept of organizational crisis response through a qualitative analysis of the Dololed® case study. It investigates messages and behaviors emitted by the involved parties, emphasizing the company owning the questioned phytotherapeutic product. The study examines the implications of these behaviors in tandem with the theoretical context of crisis communication and practical response strategies, particularly concerning disseminating questionable organizational messages. It also acknowledges reputational protection as an incentive for employing reality-diverging responses in crises. In this light, the paper asserts that Colombia offers a suitable context for analyzing such events, where fully reliable information is limited (Maldonado-Pinzón & Pérez-Acosta, 2020).

Nevertheless, audience demands remain high due to information abundance and diverse value propositions. Additionally, it suggests that this specific incident's unfolding sequence of events holds significance within the organizational literature context and aligns with authors such as Balunas & Kinghorn (2005) and Dutra *et al.* (2016) for understanding the natural medicine market. This analysis delves into the assumed risks, motivations, and implications by the involved company and stakeholders under pressure, projecting potential effects on the broader market.

2. Stakeholders, Reputation, and Crisis Management

Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as those groups or individuals who can affect or be affected by the actions of a specific focal organization. For instance, stakeholders of a typical organization generally include customers, employees, owners or shareholders, suppliers, media, public entities, non-governmental organizations, civil collectives, and society at large. Among many tacitly performed roles, these groups often compare what they know about an organization against certain standards to verify whether it meets its expectations of operating and behaving (Coombs, 2007). In other words, stakeholders determine if the organization follows what is expected of it regarding social responsibility and ethical behavior in society.

In a different vein, the concept of reputation generally revolves around perceptions. While at the organizational level, reputation corresponds to an understanding of the organization as it exists in the minds of observers, at the level of a brand or product, reputation is defined as the set of judgments or perceptions formed by customers and consumers about its character, loyalty, position, and ability to deliver valuable outcomes (Ponzi et al., 2011). Considering this notion, the present work considers reputation as the set of judgments and recognition made by different stakeholders about an organization, brand, or product regarding its reality (of the respective organization, brand, or product), its behavior, and performance based on the degree of satisfaction of their expected interests as stakeholders.

Authors like Godfrey et al. (2009) and Sawalha (2019) suggest that organizational reputation is built through social judgments and public opinion, making it a valuable intangible asset of strategic importance for any entity. Thus, reputation also acts as a powerful mechanism to protect and preserve the trust and image of a company, brand, or individual when facing various adverse events (Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen, 2018). Disruptive events have the potential to create instability among stakeholders and the business itself through, for instance, triggering significant reputational damage. These events can be motivated by actions of the involved organization or its members, including fraudulent behavior, inappropriate conduct, or socially irresponsible acts (Iborra & Riera, 2023). In this context, these ‘events’ (from now on referred to as ‘crises’) can devastate the public perception of the company and the trust and loyalty of customers, suppliers, employees, and other key stakeholders.

Indeed, a company’s reputational capital, especially when built on its social orientation, acts as a solid protective shield, akin to an insurance policy, mitigating adverse effects in crises (Godfrey et al., 2009). When a company possesses a positive and well-established reputation, it is more likely to gain the trust of its stakeholders, leading to greater tolerance and understanding in challenging situations. Stakeholders might be more inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to a ‘socially responsible’ company and believe in its efforts to address and resolve the crisis appropriately. In contrast, a company with a weakened or tarnished reputation would face a much more challenging situation during a crisis. The prior negative perception can exacerbate stakeholder reactions, increasing the likelihood of severe criticism, boycotts, customer losses, and brand damage. This phenomenon could result in more serious economic and legal consequences, further prolonging recovery and impacting the company’s long-term survival.

Crisis management largely focuses on defending the factors that influence judgments toward the organization amidst disruptive events that affect the total or partial continuity of the business (Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen, 2018). Thus, within relevant literature, it has been suggested that crisis management involves 70% or more emphasis on communication (Coombs et al., 2021). Evidence indicates that crisis management practice communication should be proactive, empathetic, and goal-oriented, as this translates into better perceptions of organizational reputation by stakeholders (Sawalha, 2019; Schoofs et al., 2022). Additionally, it underscores the importance of considering message timing (Claeys et al., 2016; Contreras-Pacheco et al., 2022) and carefully selecting communication sources to build credibility with audiences, particularly in a context dominated by social media (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

3. Situational Crisis Communication Theory

In general terms, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007) guides the responsible party in facing an organizational crisis, assessing the threat to the organization's reputation in the crisis at hand. According to this theory, the respective crisis is modeled, and a set of evidence-based guidelines are provided to facilitate selecting response strategies. Moreover, valuable communicative resources are acquired and employed to safeguard an organization's reputation amidst the events shaping the crisis. In its broadest sense, SCCT formulates two types of crisis responses. It presents how a company involved in a crisis scenario can communicate to its stakeholders from an instrumental or normative perspective. See Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Crisis Response

SCCT Crisis Response Strategies
<p>Instrumental/Strategic Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deny crisis response strategies: The crisis manager avoids responsibility in the crisis. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Simple Denial: The crisis manager claims no responsibility in the crisis. ✓ Crisis Denial: The crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis. • Scapegoat: A crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis. • Attack the accuser: The crisis manager confronts the person or group, claiming something is wrong with the organization. • Excuse: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis. • Justification: A crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis. • Ingratiation: The crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization. • Victimage: Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is also a victim of the crisis. <p>Normative or Ethical Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information: The crisis manager provides and adjusts relevant information about the crisis to its stakeholders. • Assistance: The crisis manager expresses sympathy or communicates the implementation of corrective actions for the damages caused. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Concern: The crisis manager expresses concern for the victims. ✓ Compensation/compassion: The crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims. ✓ Regret: The crisis manager indicates they feel bad about the crisis. ✓ Apology: The crisis manager indicates that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

Source: Adapted from Coombs (2007).

In either of the cases previously presented, in order to safeguard the image of both a brand and a company immersed in a crisis, the works of Claey's *et al.* (2016) and Coombs *et al.* (2021) recommend initially employing a normative/ethical response, followed by an evaluation of applying a convenient response (i.e., instrumental/strategic). Additionally, these authors propose response recommendations for preventable/avoidable crises attributed to human errors, product damage, and accidents involving the implicated company or its members. Generally, these recommendations include: (1) Being the first source of information to disclose the crisis (i.e., 'stealing thunder'); (2) Including an ethical foundation in the content of the initial message; (3) Expressing support, potentially adding a small component of responsibility to the message narrative; (4) Sometimes considering compensation to address crisis costs for victims (refunds or damages compensation); (5) Always incorporating an apology into the response. If the crisis was not accidental but a result of internal misconduct, further steps should be taken: (6) Acknowledging the moral violation that occurred and the actions taken to prevent its recurrence.

Within the framework of SCCT, it is recognized that every organization has the right (and the duty) to defend its strategic interests in a crisis scenario. However, evidence indicates that an organization with a questionable reputation is inclined to provide falsehoods to its stakeholders through its communication process (Contreras-Pacheco *et al.*, 2021). Relevant

literature suggests that this ‘decoupling’ phenomenon between narrative and fact can be considered a mechanism (either neglected or deliberate) resulting from institutional pressures (Crilly et al., 2012). In this spirit, Contreras-Pacheco and Claasen (2018) define a series of potential consequences for any company that does not respond honestly through truthful messages and completely disregards established crisis management parameters. The potential consequences include public exposure, misdirection, arming the adversary, a slippery slope, setting a false example, and loss of trust. These consequences involve the company and its stakeholders, as described in Table 2.

Table 2: Possible consequences of cover-up and deception in a crisis response.

Crisis Response: When Concealment and Deception Goes Wrong		
Possible Consequence	Explanation	Observations
Public Exposition	The company can be publicly exposed for undermining the truth.	<i>Immediate effect</i> ; can be enhanced by traditional and/or social media.
Misdirection	Instead of focusing on the real crisis, attention can be centered on how the company responds.	Depends on prior detection.
Arming the Adversary	Hostile stakeholders can be more empowered to attack the company’s reputation.	<i>Compounding effects, along with prior reputation</i> , depends on detection.
The Slippery Slope	Little lies can snowball into significant falsehoods.	Increases the risk of detection and being put in the spotlight.
Setting a False Example	Through precedent, employees can now claim the right of concealing and deceiving.	<i>Medium-term effect</i> ; can affect performance.
Loss of Trust	Stakeholders can assume the company frequently deceives.	<i>Long-term effect</i> (although it depends on detection and gravity).

Source: Adapted from Contreras-Pacheco and Claasen (2018).

When considering the potential implications of manipulating the truth through a false crisis response (or even the mere suspicion of doing so), it becomes clear that the involved company must fully embrace its role in handling the situation appropriately to protect its reputation. While its focus should be on minimizing the negative impact of the crisis on the organization and safeguarding stakeholders’ interests, maintaining trust and credibility internally and externally is equally vital (Bundy et al., 2017; Schoofs et al., 2022). However, it is no less important to understand that the exhaustive pursuit of truth should take priority, and transparency with stakeholders is essential for any crisis manager. If the company is responsible for the crisis, the management’s response should be normative, compassionate, and ethical (Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen, 2018).

4. Methodology

Relying on Yin (2017) and following the recommendations of Gibbert et al. (2008) and Tsang (2014), this work employs a case study approach, as it offers depth and detail of a specific theoretical-practical phenomenon within a real-world context. In the relevant literature, this approach is considered a valuable and versatile tool for obtaining a comprehensive and detailed understanding of complex situations across various disciplines, from social sciences to business and medicine. In this regard, a case study is defined as an empirical inquiry that examines a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context where boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly delineated (Yin, 2017).

The study conducted a thorough information review from various public domain sources, including corporate and institutional websites, press releases, interviews, and media statements by representatives of the involved entities. The consulted journalistic sources hold recognized prestige in Colombia, and the obtained information is publicly accessible, eliminating the need for permissions for academic use. This review was conducted within the relevant timeframe for the case (i.e., between 2018 and 2020). Following Schreier's guidelines (2012), data processing encompassed a detailed analysis of collected textual content to understand the presentation of events, message narratives, variations in versions among involved parties, the evolution of outcomes, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Subsequently, a qualitative content analysis of messages emitted by key entities in the case (the producing company, the Colombian pharmaceutical sector's governmental control body, and the research group that discovered the irregularity in the product) was conducted. These data were used to construct a timeline and contextualize the results concerning existing knowledge, connecting crisis events and response messages with crisis management and communication literature.

4.1. The Case: Dololed® - A Natural Product That Turned Out to Be "Not So Natural"

As previously mentioned, the case in question falls within the domain of phytotherapeutic medicines in Colombia, specifically concerning the scandal involving Dololed®. This product was successfully marketed as completely natural but ultimately proved not to be entirely so. The crisis was triggered by media exposure of the discovery of a significant amount of synthetic medicine in the composition of several product units. This revelation led to suspicions that the producing company had engaged in fraudulent practices during manufacturing and commercialization processes.

4.1.1. Study Context

Phytopharmaceuticals are known for their efficacy and near absence of adverse effects resulting from consumption. These products have experienced remarkable growth in the health and natural medicine industry in recent years, leading to increased usage due to their capacity to offer less invasive therapeutic options (Dutra *et al.*, 2016). Despite the initial positive impact, this sector faces significant challenges, with a key focus on building trust with stakeholders. Challenges encompass process and product standardization, expansion of active components, rigorous scientific research to ensure long-term efficacy and safety, and regulation (Balunas & Kinghorn, 2005).

Implementing regulatory measures and supervision tools supported by global quality analyses becomes imperative in this business context to combat low quality and product counterfeiting (Rico-Alba, 2020). For this purpose, a thorough diagnosis of national health surveillance and response systems is required. Control entities responsible for these functions must evaluate the capabilities of companies integrated within the pharmaceutical supply chain, considering the country's legal and administrative framework (Díaz, 2023). Additionally, they must be able to detect, assess, and communicate risk situations and possess the capacity to investigate, intervene, and report international health risks based on internationally validated results (Quirós *et al.*, 2011). In Colombia, this responsibility falls under a government-controlled regulatory entity, the National Institute for Food and Medicines Surveillance (*Instituto Nacional de Vigilancia de Medicamentos y Alimentos*, hereinafter referred to as Invima).

Furthermore, there is an additional regulatory body responsible for conducting inspection, surveillance, and control functions—the Colombian regulatory bureau for commercial practices, known as SuperIndustria (*Superintendencia de*

Industria y Comercio). This entity functions as the national authority for competition protection. Beyond ensuring consumer rights, SuperIndustria actively manages the National Industrial Property System by carrying out both administrative and jurisdictional duties.

4.1.2 Background

Pronabell is a Colombian company dedicated to researching, developing, and commercializing pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and nutritional products based on natural active complexes. This company owns the brand Dololed®, a pain reliever with a natural origin that was promoted and marketed as a 100% natural medication. Since its registration in 2012, this phytopharmaceutical has maintained its official health registration after meeting the regulatory requirements for its commercialization in the country, including regular component verification ([El Tiempo, 2020a](#)). This product operated within the market of natural medicines, which at the time of the study had generated approximately USD 258.7 million/year in revenues. Within this market, the company reported around USD 64.6 million/year in revenues, of which Dololed® was its flagship brand. The sales of this single item represented 5% of the entire Colombian natural medicine market ([El Tiempo, 2020b](#)).

Its presence in the media was significant. During prime time, the product was advertised on mass media channels such as television and radio through programs by media giants like Caracol TV, RCN, Antena 2, and Radio 1. It was promoted as a natural medication based on the natural component called *Calendula Officinalis*, claiming to alleviate muscular, circulatory, and joint pain ([Díaz, 2023](#)). Its high-volume sales enabled it to officially sponsor the “El Clásico RCN” in 2018, a renowned professional cycling competition in Colombia. Moreover, it had billboard advertisements at a women’s pre-Olympic volleyball tournament for multiple consecutive years ([El Espectador, 2020a](#)). Its growth projections were promising and ambitious, as it had gained relative success in Ecuador and was starting to become known among the Hispanic population in the United States.

5. Results

Considering the methodological nature of this study, its outcome focuses on the reconstruction of the respective case and its interpretation in light of the relevant literature. In that vein, the case will address the different episodes surrounding the Dololed® crisis. Thus, the various components of the particular case are unfolded, from the description of the study’s context to the chronological narration of the most significant events.

5.1. Chronology – The Case of the Dololed® Crisis.

In order to facilitate the understanding of the events related to the discussed case, the following description presents each event in sequential order, focusing on Pronabell’s behavior (the company in crisis) during the respective crisis. Sixteen relevant events are presented for situational analysis, labeled from t0 to t15.

- **February 22, 2018 (t0):** A box of Dololed® is submitted for analysis to the chromatography research center of a renowned university, hereafter referred to as Crom-Mass. Five days later, the research center confirmed the presence of 40 to 42 milligrams of Diclofenac per tablet in the provided sample ([El Espectador, 2020b](#)). This finding prompts the question: Is the sample brought to the research center an isolated case, or is there also the presence of the synthetic medicine in regular product samples? Considering the latter, researchers decided to expand the study, which yielded positive results for presence of Diclofenac ([Stashenko et al., 2020a](#)).
- **January 2019 (t1):** Official investigations initiate. Invima conducts inspections and sampling at establishments where the questioned medication was sold. Random samples from different batches are taken for analysis. Follow-up visits and sampling are also conducted at the manufacturer of the phytopharmaceutical, Pronabell. There is no media reporting on these visits around this time.
- **June 2019 (t2):** Invima's analyses indicate that there are "no substantial differences in results between the samples analyzed from the manufacturing company, which were negative for Diclofenac, and those found in the market" ([Invima, 2020a](#); paragraph 7). Based on these results, Invima does not take action against the company. No media are reporting on these results around this time.
- **December 2019 (t3):** New visits are conducted. Invima schedules visits and sampling at both the manufacturer and commercial establishments. Meanwhile, a second sampling is conducted at Crom-Mass throughout the year. The results of this new study confirm the findings of the initial 2018 sampling: "These analyses identified traces of Calendula Officinalis compounds, but the major compound in the phytopharmaceutical was Diclofenac and its derivatives at concentrations close to ten percent" ([Stashenko et al., 2020b](#); p. 6). There is no media reporting on this visit or the results obtained.
- **January 18, 2020 (t4):** The research results conducted by the Crom-Mass are made public. From this point onward, the media controversy related to the Dololed® case is activated ([El Espectador, 2020c](#); [Vanguardia, 2020a](#); [Semana, 2020a](#)).
- **January 21, 2020 (t5):** Pronabell's manager grants media interviews, affirming that Dololed® is composed solely of Calendula Officinalis and relying on the consistent inspections of Invima, where no irregularities were reported. The manager justifies the discrepancies in findings between pills taken directly from Crom-Mass and samples directly taken from the market, blaming mass product counterfeiting in the market. On the same day, during an interview, Invima's Director stated that no elements other than those accepted in the respective phytopharmaceutical composition had been found in previous inspections. He declares that in the case that the samples taken between late 2019 and 2020 do not align with the results obtained by Crom-Mass, Invima cannot impose sanctions on the company ([El Espectador, 2020d](#)).
- **January 24, 2020 (t6):** Invima issues a health alert after finding traces of the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicine Diclofenac in five batches of Dololed®. In an immediate response, the company's lawyers released a statement clarifying that only five batches of the phytopharmaceutical were contaminated by Diclofenac and that the company faces this situation as victims of intentional counterfeiting and plagiarism by malicious third parties ([El Tiempo, 2020c](#)).
- **January 28, 2020 (t7):** Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS), the university behind Crom-Mass issues a statement supporting the scientific work of its researcher and research team. Simultaneously, the Colombian National Attorney instructs Invima to oversee the manufacture of the Dololed® phytopharmaceutical ([El Tiempo, 2020d](#); [Blu Radio, 2020a](#)).
- **January 29, 2020 (t8):** As the start of a legal battle, Pronabell submits a formal request to the UIS for information about the conducted research and the equipment used in the study by the research center. The university refrains

from responding to the entirety of the inquiries, prompting the company to initiate a legal action demanding complete information through a constitutional mechanism in Colombia for the protection of fundamental rights, called acción de tutela (Blu Radio, 2020b).

- **January 31, 2020 (t9):** The owner of the producing company announces the complete cessation of the manufacturing process for Dololed®. However, he emphasizes that this decision does not imply the company's acceptance of the accusations. Instead, he seeks to avoid repercussions on more than 400 employees and their other production lines. On the same day, Invima initiated punitive administrative proceedings against the product (El Tiempo, 2020e).
- **February 5, 2020 (t10):** In an interview, the Director of Invima references the entity's role in the Dololed® case. He reveals that the product's manufacturing was suspended in December 2019 due to Invima's intervention. At that time, good sanitary practices within Pronabell's production facilities could not be demonstrated. He explains the stages the company must undergo after initiating punitive processes (Blu Radio, 2020c).
- **May 14, 2020 (t11):** The acción de tutela initiated by Pronabell is declared unfounded. The verdict favors the UIS (El Espectador, 2020e).
- **May 23, 2020 (t12):** Despite the verdict and the university's response to the formal request, the producing company filed a second acción de tutela against the lead researcher of Crom-Mass, accusing her of violating the company's fundamental rights (El Espectador, 2020e).
- **June 18, 2020 (t13):** The court, again, rules against the company (this is, in favor of the researcher), denying the manufacturing company's attempt to obtain specifications about the research funding and the equipment used, among other requested information (Vanguardia, 2020b).
- **March 26, 2021 (t14):** SuperIndustria officially initiates an administrative investigation and formulates charges against the manufacturing company of the phytopharmaceutical. The official document states that the company "apparently failed to provide clear, complete, truthful, sufficient, timely, verifiable, and accurate information regarding the composition, characteristics, specifications, and uses of the product Dololed®, a circumstance that could have led to uninformed consumption of a synthetically derived component, potentially causing adverse health events for consumers due to the alleged deceptive information that compromised the safe use of the product" (SuperIndustria, 2021, p. 28).
- **July 12, 2022 (t15):** Invima decides to close the investigation into the case, considering the inability to prove the company's responsibility in producing the altered medication. The company's lawyers regard this decision as a legal victory (El Tiempo, 2022). However, the regulatory entity also warns that Dololed® remains an illegal product that cannot be manufactured or commercialized (RTVC, 2022).

Based on the sequence of events in the timeline, the Dololed® case can be recognized as an organizational crisis. While the case's nature remains neutral in the eyes of the authors, it gravitates between accidental and intentional. The process by which Pronabell attempts to react to the constantly evolving media information represents a good example illustrating various crisis communication strategies. The company addresses the crisis reactively and seeks to contain damage to its reputation by emitting defensive and offensive messages, sometimes involving its legal team as intermediaries (Díaz, 2023). Analyzing the case through the lens of prescriptive theory, this company's crisis management communication can be understood by considering the type of response issued (Coombs, 2007), recommendations for crisis communication (Claeys et al., 2016; Coombs et al., 2021) and the consequences of issuing potentially untruthful messages during a crisis (Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen, 2018). Refer to Table 3 for further analysis.

Table 3: Analysis at moments of crisis response (or potential response) – The case of Dololed®

Timeline	Type of crisis response	Response recommendations for preventable/avoidable crises	Consequence
t0-t3	No response	‘Steal the thunder’	Loss of trust
t5	<i>Instrumental/Strategic:</i> Simple Denial, scapegoating.	To include some ethical foundations in the response.	Public exposure, arming the adversary.
t8	<i>Instrumental/Strategic:</i> Attack the accuser.	(a) To express signs of support/backing to affected stakeholders; (b) To provide some form of compensation, information, or assistance to those affected; (c) To include an apology in the messages issued (even if it is a ‘non-apology’ where there is not necessarily an acceptance of responsibility; something like “we regret what happened”)	Public exposure
t9	<i>Instrumental/Strategic:</i> Simple Denial.		Public exposure, loss of trust
t12	<i>Instrumental/Strategic:</i> Attack the accuser.		Public exposure, arming the adversary
t15	<i>Instrumental/Strategic:</i> Simple and Crisis Denial.		Loss of trust

Source: The authors

6. Discussion

The body of knowledge developed from the evolution of contributions by authors such as Seeger et al. (1998), which achieved a significant milestone with Coombs’ proposal (2007), allows this work to understand the case’s nature described above from the crisis communication perspective. In this sense, crises are understood as disruptive events that not only threaten to interrupt the conventional continuity of the business itself but also represent impacts on the stakeholders of the involved company (Contreras-Pacheco, et al., 2021; Seeger et al., 1998). The analysis of the specific situation presented in this paper shows that when truth about the composition of the studied product, the brand, and the producing company was publicly revealed, the reputation and good name of others involved in the plot were compromised. One of the most affected parties by the triggered media pressure was the Invima, the official regulatory entity responsible for controlling the sanitary conditions for medicines production. Likewise, this crisis also involved prescribers and distributors, who were affected by the mistrust created among consumers of the product in question upon learning its true composition or the suggestion of falsification made by the producing company. Finally, the research center that disclosed the controversial results and the university to which the center is affiliated personally suffered narrative and legal attacks from both the producing company and its legal representative in an attempt to defend the involved company’s reputation.

Initially, it became evident that the company missed an opportunity to address the crisis through anticipation and early disclosure of the facts to the public. The literature supports that, paradoxically, communicative anticipation is often an effective strategy for facing crises (e.g., Contreras-Pacheco, et al., 2022). The benefits of doing so encompass control of the crisis narrative, building credibility, reducing speculations, generating empathy with those involved, mitigating media impact, and preventing future uncertainties (Claeys et al., 2016). Unfortunately, despite having up to four opportunities to do so (as in t0, t1, t2, and t3), the company chose silence until the case gained widespread attention. From then on, the media took control of the narrative, allowing social media (along with its skepticism) to actively participate in the controversy.

Likewise, drawing parallels with Coombs’ propositions (2007), the involved company primarily responded with various instrumental/strategic nature responses to the event. Initially, the entity’s reaction was ‘simple denial.’ They firmly denied the possibility of the synthetic compound being present in their product, a fact that was gradually disproven over time through investigations and interventions by the regulatory body. Later, the company reiterated such responses, attempting to ‘scapegoat’ and invoking the notion of falsification to explain the presence of some pills of their brand with ingredients

different from those announced. This move could have led to tensions with authorized distributors since the initial investigation was based on officially acquired samples.

Ultimately, as a last resort, after the public exposure of the chemical analysis results of the tablets' medicine content, the company chose to 'attack the accuser' (i.e., the research center that uncovered the irregularity). They argued that the tests performed on the product had been poorly executed due to the alleged mishandling of instruments by the center, trying to cast doubts on the professionalism and capability of the personnel involved in the study. In this aspect, the company came out worse. Throughout this case, public opinion was highly critical and skeptical of the company's response. Even the supervisory bodies, initially lenient, began making decisions against the company's interests. Moreover, the justice system progressively sided with the university research team in each direct counterattack launched by the company. Despite the final closure of the investigative process, presented by the message sender as a 'victory' for the company, the accumulated negative consequences up to that point, combined with the irreversible loss of the brand's reputation, unequivocally demonstrated a defeat for the involved company.

Regarding the normative responses proposed by [Coombs \(2007\)](#), it is evident that the producing company initially did not resort to them. By not accepting or acknowledging that their product contained non-natural components, they did not create room for issuing such responses, as this might lead to a contradiction (and this is speculative here). Hence, it was evident that the involved company needed to provide clear information about the crisis it was going through and offer assistance-based responses to address and follow cases of people affected by its potential wrongdoing. Similarly, by not accepting the accusations affecting their reputation, it did not seem coherent for them to express concern for potential victims of drug consumption or even consider compensating them. There was no hint of compassionate contingency action, like apologizing to consumers for potential harm caused or simply expressing regret (Coombs refers to this latter behavior as a 'non-apology apology').

Furthermore, if assuming the existence and manipulation of information in response to a direct threat to the organizational reputation in crisis, alignment with relevant literature is also evident. According to [Contreras-Pacheco and Claasen \(2018\)](#), some possible consequences of such a response to the crisis in question are, in order: (1) Public exposure, as the producing company was in the eye of the storm at the mercy of the narrative of various involved actors (including the media, whose purpose, beyond informing, is also to create controversy); (2) Arming the enemy, as with each attack carried out by the company against third parties, the public opinion (influenced, of course, by the media) continuously contrasted the company's version with that of other actors involved in the crisis, often showing visible indulgence toward the research center and the university; and (3) Loss of trust, given the media impact of the case, which led to a strong questioning of the producing company and the medicine by its recommending clients (doctors and medical associations), distributors (pharmacies), and consumers. Concerning this last point, it is interesting to observe how the loss of trust affected the involved company and presumably generated a 'drag effect' on the entire phytopharmaceutical industry due to the market's characteristics. A deeper analysis of this phenomenon could appeal from a research perspective to gain an alternative view of such situations.

Furthermore, considering [Contreras-Pacheco et al.'s work \(2021\)](#), the analyzed company's actions and aftermath suggest that the veracity of crisis response messages was questioned, though intent remains uncertain. The regulatory body, [SuperIndustria \(2021\)](#), similarly implies this doubt. Moreover, an information asymmetry exists at the company level, with unclear and fragmented information about the crisis event, a strategic move potentially aligned with protecting its interests ([Crilly et al., 2012](#)).

This work highlights a case where a company's allegedly non-transparent behavior was exposed in a crisis with potential reputational damage. However, more important than that, it demonstrated inadequate crisis management that began with a silence that sought to obscure the crisis and continued with an insufficient response to the scandal. Amid these circumstances, an ethical response (informational or assistance-based) towards stakeholders would have been minimally

expected from the company, especially considering that they were defending themselves against a serious accusation (engaging in fraudulent and deceptive behavior) (Coombs *et al.*, 2021). Thus, it is presumed that this behavior exacerbated the respective situation, leading to the withdrawal of the product from the market (effective until the date of the submission of this article) and, according to Rico-Alba's proposition (2020), generating a negative effect that could have affected consumer trust in other similar products in the same sector or market.

Using a particular case study, this work contributes to the theoretical framework of crisis management and communications by exposing and applying a series of useful practices to deal with crisis moments (e.g., Claeys *et al.*, 2016; Sawalha, 2019; Schoofs *et al.*, 2022; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015), with a special emphasis on SCCT (Coombs, 2007; Coombs *et al.*, 2021). Thus, it provides perspectives on possible strategies, types of crisis response, and subsequent recommendations for preventable crises. Moreover, the work also contributes from a practical perspective, as the investigated topics (crisis communication and organizational reputation) focus on developed economies and have little impact in Latin America (Contreras-Pacheco *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, this research serves as a managerial contribution that illustrates how a real company perceives and strategically reacts to a situation threatening its reputation and the implications of decisions made while dealing with high-profile media events.

From a methodological point of view, case studies within the management and business arena constitute a tool that has effectively illustrated theoretical concepts and contributed to the inductive generation of new knowledge (Yin, 2017). However, it must be accompanied by rigorous data collection and a high internal and construct validity level (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, while the study acknowledges certain limitations, such as the potential challenge of generalizing findings (Tsang, 2014) and the specific context of a developing economy, it is important to emphasize the rigorous approach employed in the research process. These limitations are inherent in many qualitative studies and do not diminish the significance of the insights gained from the analysis. The detailed exploration of the case and the in-depth examination of the relevant literature provide valuable insights that contribute to the broader understanding of crisis communications. The findings remain relevant and insightful for practitioners and researchers, offering valuable lessons that can be applied across different contexts.

Future research could focus on analyzing crisis scenarios in a theoretical context that, in addition to reputation, addresses other types of social judgments and formed perceptions, such as identity, status, reliability, respect, and organizational legitimacy. Similarly, using various methodological strategies to verify the behavior of companies in crisis and stakeholders affected by such circumstances could be an effective vehicle to complement the knowledge produced so far from a qualitative perspective to obtain more and better conclusions. Finally, it is justifiable to project a line of study where the phenomenon of crisis management can be analyzed based on changes experienced in organizational reputation as relevant events unfold in the crisis context. Moreover, the opportunities for this particular topic in the Latin American environment are vast due to its embryonic condition and institutional exposure in such societies.

7. Conclusion

After analyzing a specific case within the framework of crisis communication literature and considering the characteristics of the described events, this work serves as methodological and practical support for any manager or organization facing a crisis provoked by their own decisions, actions, or omissions. In light of the studied case, the situational analysis of specific circumstances highlights different opportunities for adopting methods and strategies to address various crises while foreseeing communicational implications that can cushion the reputational impact of such management. Given the behaviors of an organization seeking to mitigate a crisis, it could be deduced that, in a purely defensive effort, there is a high susceptibility for the organization to end up (deliberately or inadvertently) deviating from the pursuit of the truth

about the crisis itself. This study suggests that, in such a scenario, companies could engage in an information decoupling caused by the pressure exerted by their stakeholders, leading them to manage their communication process opaquely. Even though their intention behind such a response mechanism may be to demonstrate organizational strength both externally and internally, thereby consistently safeguarding their reputational capital, the problem lies in the fact that such narratives do not rely on concrete evidence, tend to blame other actors, and rarely express compassion or remorse towards the public. The case study of Dololed® clearly illustrates this. Despite the future being unwritten, the results to date seem unfavorable. Therefore, this work suggests that companies in crisis should first focus on issuing an ethically grounded response and then seek consistency, coherence, and clarity regarding the messages they emit during and after the event in question.

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