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Skincare Overclaim Crisis Communication in Restoring Cosmetic Manufacturer Image

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Keywords

Crisis Communication; Brand Image; Overclaim Skincare; Public Relations; Brand Owner.

Abstract

This study analyzes crisis communication management in the brand image recovery of cosmetics manufacturing companies after the skincare overclaim issue. The focus of the research is directed at the experiences of five brand owners as business customers affected by the perception crisis, as well as on the Public Relations function carried out by sales because the company does not have a formal PR department. The research used a qualitative approach of case studies with semi-structured interviews, documentation, and thematic analysis. The results of the study show that the issue of overclaims is not only understood as a problem of promotional claims, but also as a crisis of trust that shakes procedural credibility, information integrity, institutional responsibility, and brand owner security. Sales is considered responsive and empathetic, but the initial response is still too dependent on personal abilities so it is not fully supported by a documented crisis communication system. Image restoration begins to take shape through dialogue, follow-up, claims revision, and company openness, but long-term recovery requires claim approval workflow, claim substantiation file, crisis communication SOP, escalation flow, brand owner education, and sales training as crisis communication frontliners. This article confirms that the restoration of the brand image of cosmetics manufacturing in B2B relations must combine empathic communication with transparent, consistent, and accountable claims governance.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of overclaiming skincare has become an increasingly strategic marketing communication issue because product claims not only function as promotional messages, but also as symbolic promises regarding the benefits, safety, quality, and credibility of the parties involved in production. In the cosmetics industry, claims such as brightening, improving skin texture, whitening, or providing results within a given period can shape consumer expectations (Fernández et al., 2025; Jaouhari et al., 2025; Saari et al., 2024). When the claim is perceived as excessive, not supported by adequate data, or disproportionate to the cosmetic function, the issue can develop into a crisis of trust. Cosmetics regulations also affirm that cosmetic claims and advertisements must be objective, not misleading, and have a substantial basis that can be accounted for (Food and Drug Supervisory Agency of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022, 2024; Ferreira et al., 2022; Vieira et al., 2024).

In the context of cosmetics manufacturing companies, overclaims have a distinctive character. Manufacturing companies do not always appear as brands that deal directly with the end consumer, but are still perceived by brand owners as parties who have responsibility in the production, formulation, and claim control process. Therefore, when the issue of overclaim develops in the digital space, brand owners as B2B customers can reassess whether manufacturers have adequate competence, integrity, and communication readiness. Crises in the perspective of communication are not only present because of objective events, but also because of stakeholders' perceptions of threats that interfere with their expectations (Coombs, 2019; Wang, 2022).

Previous research has extensively examined crisis communication strategies in B2C contexts, particularly regarding organizational responses to product-harm crises. Studies have demonstrated that an organization's response must extend beyond defensive clarifications to include instructing information, adjusting information, verbal empathy, a humane communication tone, and verifiable corrective actions (Fannes & Claeys, 2022; Huang & Ki, 2023; Page, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). In the context of product-harm crises, trust restoration also requires clear governance signals, as the public and customers assess whether the organization is genuinely learning from the crisis (Li & Zhao, 2024). Cheng et al. (2022) highlighted that social-mediated crisis communication has become increasingly prominent, with organizations needing to manage multiple communication channels simultaneously. However, most of these studies focus on organizations that deal directly with the general public or discuss crises on social media platforms in general, with limited attention to B2B manufacturing contexts where the affected stakeholders are business customers rather than end consumers.

The novelty of this article lies in reading the skincare overclaim crisis from the perspective of cosmetics manufacturing companies as B2B manufacturers and brand owners as affected customers. Many crisis communication studies discuss organizations that deal directly with the general public or discuss crises on social media channels in general. However, the relationship between cosmetic manufacturing and brand owners has different dynamics because customer reputation is also at stake in the claims of the products produced. In addition, the company in the context of the study does not have a formal Public Relations department so that PR functions are carried out by sales who are directly related to the brand owner.

Theoretically, this phenomenon is important because Public Relations should not be understood solely as a departmental structure, but as a relational function of the organization. Cutlip et al. (2006) place PR as a management function that builds and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their public. In the organization-public relations approach, strong relationships are related to trust, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality, reputation, attitude, and behavioral intentions (Ma et al., 2023). So, when sales listen to complaints, clarify issues, calm customers, coordinate internal answers, and follow up, sales are performing their PR functions in a practical way.

Based on this background, this article aims to analyze how the issue of overclaim skincare impacts brand image and brand owner trust, how companies respond to crises through PR functions carried out by sales, and how trust restoration and post-crisis mitigation practices are formed to improve the brand image of cosmetic manufacturing companies in the eyes of brand owners. This research contributes to crisis communication literature by extending the understanding of overclaim crises to B2B manufacturing contexts, exploring the informal PR functions performed by non-PR personnel, and identifying governance mechanisms necessary for sustainable trust restoration.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study method. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on understanding the meaning, perception, and experience of brand owners in assessing overclaim crises and corporate communication responses. The case study was used to read the dynamics of crisis communication in a specific organizational context, namely a cosmetic manufacturing company disguised as PT XX. The identity of the company, brand, owner, and product is disguised to maintain research ethics and business confidentiality.

The research informants consisted of five brand owners who were customers of PT XX. The five informants represent different business characters, namely growing skincare brands, aggressive brands through TikTok Shop and live selling, science-based premium brands, community-based startup brands, and more established brands with national marketing teams and resellers. These differences in character allow the study to capture the variety of crisis experiences from small brands to brands with more complex organizational structures.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, limited documentation, and literature studies. Semi-structured interviews are used to keep the core questions the same for each informant, but researchers can still dig up follow-up answers according to the experience of each brand owner. Interview questions are directed to sources of knowledge regarding overclaim issues, changes in perception of PT XX's image, affected trust dimensions, business or communication decisions taken, assessment of sales responses, and post-crisis mitigation recommendations.

The data analysis technique uses thematic analysis with stages of data reduction, initial code, presentation of data in a thematic matrix, as well as drawing conclusions and verification. In the reduction stage, the informant's answers were selected based on their relevance to three research focuses: the impact of the crisis on image and trust, the crisis communication response through sales, and the recovery and mitigation of post-crisis. The initial code that emerged included procedural credibility, information integrity, customer concern, communication audit, claim revision, sales empathy, delay in technical answers, written document requirements, claim review protocol, escalation flow, and crisis communication SOPs.

The validity of the data was strengthened through triangulation of sources between five informants and comparison with crisis management and Public Relations theoretical frameworks. In qualitative research, the credibility of findings is not determined by the large number of informants, but by the depth of the data, consistency of patterns, and the relevance of the findings to the formulation of the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study show that the issue of overclaiming skincare is understood by brand owners as a crisis of trust that moves through three layers of communication. The first layer is a change in perception of the image of manufacturing. The second layer is the evaluation of sales response as the closest communication actor to the customer. The third layer is the need for a more formal recovery system so that trust is recovered not only personally, but also institutionally.

A summary of the findings is shown in Table 1 as a thematic mapping of the experiences of the five brand owners.

Table 1. Crisis communication findings matrix based on brand owner interviews

Dimensions of Findings	Main Pattern	Proof between Brand Owners	Communication Implications
Impact of the crisis	The image of manufacturing is compromised on credibility, responsibility, integrity, and a sense of security.	Brand A delays production; Brand B holds live content; Brand C conducts a communication audit; Brand D delays launching; Brand E conducts a risk review.	The overclaim crisis must be understood as a crisis of perception and trust repair, not just a revision of promotional wording.
Sales reply	Sales are responsive and empathetic, but the initial answer is not entirely technical and still depends on the individual.	Informants appreciate listening, calling, follow-up, and revision assistance; but demands FAQs, talking points, and official answers.	Sales performs informal PR functions, but requires system support and knowledge base.
Recovery and mitigation	The image began to partially recover through dialogue and claims revision, but full recovery requires written governance.	The informant asked for claim approval workflow, substantiation file, escalation flow, crisis SOPs, sales training, and owner education.	Image restoration requires the integration of empathetic communication and accountable claims governance.

Source: Researcher's processed results, 2026

The issue of overclaim as a crisis of brand owner trust

The main theme that emerged from the data was that the issue of overclaim was not understood by informants as a mere promotional language issue. For brand owners, product claims are a meeting point between marketing interests, regulatory compliance, brand reputation, and business relationships with manufacturers. When the public begins to question local skincare claims, brand owners not only think about whether products are safe, but also question whether manufacturing companies have systems in place to limit claims, provide supporting documents, and warn owners before communication risks occur.

Brand A and Brand C emphasize the procedural credibility dimension. They did not necessarily conclude that the quality of PT XX's products was poor, but they began to question whether any of the suggested claims had gone through R&D and regulatory checks. Brand E considers this issue to be a crisis readiness issue because a more established brand needs an official company position, written documents, and an escalation flow that can be forwarded to the marketing team and resellers. Meanwhile, Brand B and Brand D emphasize more social-digital risks: consumer comments, negative videos, customer questions, and the fear that the public thinks the brand has misled customers.

These findings reinforce the view that reputation crises can be formed through stakeholder perceptions of threats, not just through objective evidence that products are problematic (Coombs, 2019; Wang, 2022). In the case of overclaim, the perception of risk becomes strong because brand owners feel dependent on manufacturers to understand the limits of cosmetic claims. When there are claims that were previously considered safe but then recommended to be reduced after a crowded issue, the brand owner assesses the inconsistency. In the language of crisis communication, such inconsistencies undermine credibility and predictability as the basis of trust.

The impact of the crisis is seen in changes in business and communication decisions. Brand A delayed one batch of production by about three weeks and revised the claims that were too result-oriented. Brand B held back advertising and live selling content for about a week and turned claims like quick white into more moderate sentences. Brand C audited the communication materials and requested a claim substantiation file. Brand D postponed the launch of new variants, while Brand E conducted a risk review and included claim governance as a condition for vendor evaluation. These changes suggest that the manufacturing image crisis can have an impact on the brand owner's marketing communication rhythm even if production is not completely stopped.

Thus, the brand image of cosmetics manufacturing in B2B relations is not only shaped by the production capacity or legality of the product, but also by the company's ability to manage claims communication risks. These findings are in line with the study of brand trust which shows that negative publicity can damage trust through the dimensions of competence, predictability, benevolence, and integrity (Tong et al., 2023). For brand owners, manufacturing competence is not enough to be proven through the ability to make products, but also through the ability to control claim messages so that they do not become a burden on customer reputation.

The Role of Sales Public Relations in Crisis Communication Response

The second finding shows that sales is the most real crisis communication actor felt by brand owners. Since the company does not have a formal Public Relations department, sales plays the role of a boundary spanner who receives complaints, listens to customer concerns, conveys initial responses, requests clarification to internal teams, assists in complaint revisions, and conducts follow-ups. From a communication science perspective, the practice shows that PR functions can be functionally present even if they are not within the structure of a formal PR department.

In general, all informants rated sales as quite responsive and empathetic. Brand A appreciates sales who are quick to respond and offer calls. Brand B considers sales to be very responsive personally, even answering chats at night. Brand D felt that sales were not patronizing and wanted to explain in simple language. Brand C and Brand E consider sales professionals to be non-defensive and willing to admit that some questions need to be answered by the technical team. This pattern shows that listening and conversational human voice are the main strength of sales in reducing customer anxiety.

However, sales responses also have fundamental weaknesses. Sales' initial response is often reassuring, such as stating that the product is safe or that it will be helped, but not providing adequate technical information. Brand C noted that the waiting time of two to three days for an official answer can lead to speculation. Brand E considers that the response is still too dependent on individual sales and has not been supported by an official statement. Brand B even said that the initial response was still like a sales answer, not a crisis team answer. This means that interpersonal empathy is already underway, but institutional accountability is not yet fully visible.

This condition is important to read through the theory of Public Relations. Cutlip et al. (2006) stated that PR is a management function to build and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and its public. In the case of PT XX, the brand owner is a strategic public because their decision determines the sustainability of production cooperation. Sales performs PR functions when listening, clarification, reassurance, coordination, and follow-up. However, this function is not ideal if sales are not equipped with a knowledge base, official FAQs, talking points, escalation flows, and communication authority limits.

These findings are also in line with the organization-public relations literature that places trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality as important elements of organizational relations with the public (Ma et al., 2023). Empathetic sales can strengthen trust and satisfaction at the level of personal relationships, but control mutuality has not been achieved if the brand owner does not know who has the authority to approve the claim, what documents can be used as a basis, and when technical answers should be provided. Therefore, the PR function through sales needs to be institutionalized so that image restoration does not depend on the personal quality of one salesperson alone.

From a crisis communication perspective, data shows that brand owners need three types of information. First, legal-regulatory information such as notification number, composition, and claim limits. Second, scientific information in the form of the function of active ingredients, supporting references, test results when available, and rationalization of claims. Third, crisis communication information in the form of the company's official position, PIC, timeline, and escalation flow. This need is in line with the idea of instructing information and adjusting information, which is information that helps stakeholders understand the actions that must be taken while reducing psychological uncertainty during a crisis (Page, 2022).

Image restoration through claims governance and post-crisis mitigation

The third theme shows that the restoration of PT XX's image is starting to occur, but it is still partial. Brand owners acknowledge the existence of positive indicators such as follow-up sales, more open dialogue, assistance in revising claims, and a change in the company's attitude that is more cautious on the next project. However, almost all informants emphasized that a full recovery has not occurred as long as the company has not shown written SOPs and a consistent approval system. In other words, image restoration is not enough achieved through good interpersonal communication; Recovery must be supported by governance changes.

The most dominant need is the claim approval workflow. Informants want every claim that comes in packaging, advertising, marketplace, influencer content, live selling, and affiliate scripts to be vetted through a flow involving sales, R&D, regulatory, legal when available, and brand owners. Brand C proposes to classify claims into acceptable, needs substantiation, revise, and reject. Brand E added that every claim needs to have a process owner, reviewer, supporting evidence, approval date, and version control. This proposal suggests that overclaiming is not only a risk of external communication, but also a risk of internal coordination across functions.

In addition to the workflow, the informant needs a claim substantiation file. Premium and established brands require a technical document containing the final composition, active ingredient functions, claim limitations, supporting references, test results if any, and regulatory records. Instead, beginner brands need easy-to-understand summaries, launching checklists, safe claims lists, risky claims, and sentence alternatives. These differences in needs show the importance of crisis communication segmentation. Companies cannot provide the same information format to all customers because the level of regulatory literacy, team structure, and risk management capacity of each brand owner is different.

Image restoration also requires crisis communication SOPs specifically for brand owners. The SOP needs to contain an issue classification, initial response deadline, PIC, initial message template, periodic updates, and escalation mechanism to the technical team. Sales need to be trained to understand the basic regulations of claims, reputational risks, how to convey information without overpromise, and when to refer questions to the R&D team or regulators. In this context, sales do not have to be regulatory experts, but must be communication frontliners who understand the limits of authority and are able to maintain the consistency of messages.

The crisis communication literature confirms that post-crisis reputation is influenced by an organization's ability to demonstrate empathy, responsibility, and trustworthy corrective action (Fannes & Claeys, 2022; Georgiadou, 2023; Ndone & Park, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). The findings of this study expand that understanding in the context of B2B cosmetics manufacturing: corrective action that customers request is not just an apology, but a documented claims system. Brand owners are not sufficiently convinced by the sentence that the product is safe; They require proof that communication risks have been controlled before claims are published.

Thus, the restoration of PT XX's brand image must be understood as a transformation process from a production vendor to a strategic manufacturing partner. Brand owners hope that manufacturers will take part in maintaining reputational risks, not just accepting orders and handing over the responsibility of claims to the brand. The position as a strategic partner requires the company to provide regular education, regulatory updates, a list of recommended claims, an issue escalation path, and transparency if there are claims that cannot be supported. In the long run, this kind of openness is more valuable to customer trust than strong but risky promotional promises.

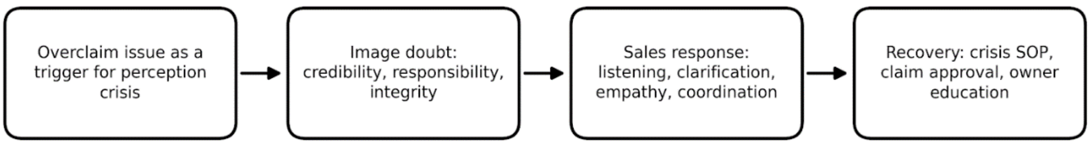

Figure 1. Brand image recovery model after the overclaim crisis
Source: Researcher's processed results, 2026.

Discussion synthesis

In summary, this study found that the skincare overclaim crisis moved from a claim issue to an image crisis because brand owners reassessed the ability of manufacturers to maintain the boundaries of product communication. The crisis did not necessarily destroy business relationships, but gave rise to new cautions. Brand owners who have longer relationships tend to continue production, but demand a more formal system. Beginner brands tend to need simpler and more personalized mentoring. Meanwhile, brands that are aggressive in digital channels emphasize the risk of consumer comments, live selling, and social media virality.

These findings show that image restoration in the B2B cosmetics industry must be relational and systemic at the same time. Relational means that the company needs to listen, show empathy, and provide space for dialogue. Systemic means that the company must prove the existence of SOPs, supporting documents, approval flows, and organizational learning. If only relational, recovery depends on personal sales; If it's just systemic without empathy, brand owners can feel unheard. The combination of the two is at the core of crisis communication management that is relevant for cosmetics manufacturing companies after the overclaim issue.

From a communication science perspective, this article shows that PR functions are not always present in the name of the department. PR functions can be carried out by other organizational actors when they become relationship managers, issue interpreters, communication bridges, and strategic public trust guards. However, PR functions that are carried out informally need to be supported by organizational mechanisms so that the message conveyed is fast, accurate, consistent, empathetic, and accountable.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the issue of overclaiming skincare has an impact on brand image and brand owner trust in cosmetic manufacturing companies. The impact mainly appears in the dimensions of procedural credibility, information integrity, institutional responsibility, predictability, and customer security. Brand owners do not always stop production cooperation, but carry out delays, claims revisions, communication audits, risk reviews, and claims governance evaluations. This finding answers that the overclaim crisis must be understood as a crisis of perception and trust, not just a product promotion issue. PT XX's response is carried out through the Public Relations function carried out by sales as a crisis communication frontliner. Sales are considered fast, empathetic, and help reduce anxiety, but still require formal system support such as official FAQs, talking points, escalation flow, and crisis communication SOPs. Trust restoration needs to be formed through claim approval workflow, claim substantiation file, brand owner education, digital issue monitoring, sales training, and division of claim responsibility between brand owners and manufacturers. The practical implication is that cosmetics manufacturing companies need to move from just a production vendor to a strategic manufacturing partner that maintains customer reputation through empathetic, transparent, consistent, and accountable crisis communication. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed. For cosmetics manufacturing companies, it is essential to establish a formal crisis communication system, including claim approval workflows, substantiation files, escalation flows, and crisis communication SOPs, as well as providing training for sales personnel as crisis communication frontliners. For brand owners, it is advisable to conduct regular communication audits, maintain open dialogue with manufacturers, and develop internal claim verification mechanisms to anticipate potential overclaim risks. For regulators, strengthening oversight of cosmetic claims and providing clear guidelines on claim substantiation would support industry compliance and consumer protection. For future research, quantitative studies are recommended to measure the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in B2B manufacturing contexts, as well as comparative studies across different types of manufacturing industries to understand sector-specific crisis dynamics.

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