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Response strategies to maintain emotional resonant brand reputations when targeted by user-generated brand parodies

ABSTRACT

Mostly satirising top-of-mind brands, user-generated parody accounts are a phenomenon mostly associated with Twitter. As an emerging trend in South Africa, parody accounts using cleverly-written satire attract a large and loyal following as social media communities enjoy the shared pleasure of sharing funny content and the intense positive emotions felt when making fun of brands that they care about. Of particular concern is when audiences find parody accounts more honest, entertaining and authentic compared to the official social media brand account. Moreover, user-generated parody accounts often misappropriate brand identities, thereby not only confusing unsuspecting social media communities but also satirising brand meanings. Correspondingly, social media management teams are faced with a reputational risk or paracrisis, since the emotional resonance of brand reputations are being hijacked. Too often, official responses to parody accounts are knee-jerk responses to take back control, such as aggressive threats and litigation, easily escalating into angry viral social media backlashes. The purpose of the study was to establish suitable paracrisis response strategies for parodied brands to maintain emotionally resonant reputations. Using a synergistic approach to mixed methods in a triangulation design, this study collected and analysed data from a purposive and snowball sample of 207 social media experts. Findings suggested that humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter with user-generated parody accounts intended for harmless fun optimise emotionally resonant brand reputations in the age of parody.

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INTRODUCTION

In the rather antagonistic environment of many-to-many, peer-to-peer networks where social media management is constantly scrutinised, maintaining a brand reputation that resonates emotionally with social media communities is a challenge. A significant risk for maintaining emotionally resonant brand reputations is selecting an appropriate response strategy to a user-generated parody account targeting a brand. A phenomenon mostly associated with Twitter, user-generated parody accounts are defined, for the purpose of this study, as social media accounts created by non-professional satirists as ironic imitations of the official account's brand identities to satirise, ridicule or poke fun at a brand for comic effect on a social network.

Considering the extensive resources that complex social media management teams invest to maintain emotionally resonant brand reputations, being parodied is recognised as a reputational risk. The humorous content skilfully created by satirists are perceived to elicit positive emotions such as laughter, amusement, pleasure, fun and joy. Not only does satiric humour provide welcome comic relief, but it also elicits positive thoughts so that audiences tend to let down their guard and agree with the criticism expressed in parody, as concluded in related studies (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman & De Vreese, 2015:739; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé & Byrne, 2007:38,40). More concerning is the fact that consumers may relate more to the parodied brand image that undermines a brand's emotional branding message as confirmed in a study by Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel (2006:53,59).

The parodying of brands on social media is already an established trend (Kung, 2015; Trend Hunter, 2015) in developed countries to the extent that Fournier and Avery (2011:24) and Funnell (2015) describe the contemporary cultural zeitgeist as 'the age of parody'. In South Africa, the influence and popularity of social media accounts sharing humorous and entertaining parodies is recognised as an emerging trend (Legg, 2014; Robins, 2014:93; Trendwatching, 2015). Already, the YouTube parody account for the endearing and multiple award-winning (Channel24, 2014; Superbalist, 2015) persona Suzelle DIY (SuzelleDIY, 2015) has become a mainstream cultural phenomenon (Blaine, 2015; Du Plessis, 2015; Moodie, 2015; Pitamber, 2015; Roets, 2015; Sleet, 2015).

While some brand parodies are intended for harmless fun, others are rather malicious. Moreover, the proliferation of fake content on social networks, makes it difficult to distinguish between satire intended for harmless fun, malicious brand parodies and fake accounts. All things considered, the intentions of user-generated parody accounts are rather problematic, as the nature and intention of satire and parody as related expressions of humour, is often overlooked. Of concern, especially, is that parody accounts copy, mimic and satirise brand identities, typically evoking aggressive knee-jerk responses from brand managers such as litigation for intellectual property infringements. Since parody accounts look and sound like the official brand accounts, another concern is when unsuspecting social media communities engage with parody accounts. Likewise, when parody accounts are malicious, vulgar or hateful, emotionally resonant brand reputations are at risk of being tarnished by offensive content that consumers mistakenly confuse with and

associate with the official brand account. In fact, hating and trolling by Twitter users, including by parody accounts, has already reached alarming levels of concern and is said to diminish the value of social media (Cutler, 2015; Davis, 2015; Lange, 2014:53; McCosker, 2014:201; Pitts & Aylott, 2012:252). Already, the vast majority of social media users are passive lurkers, while another large fraction is dismissive of brands (Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2011:41; Elliott & Strohmenger, 2014; Trefis, 2015). Therefore, the constant scrutiny and hate directed at brands, coupled with the virality of social media, imply that being targeted by a parody account is a paracrisis whereby inappropriate brand responses may easily escalate into a full-blown crisis.

A paracrisis differs from traditional one-way crisis communication models that neglect the reputational risks inherent in an antagonistic, highly engaging many-to-many, peer-to-peer environment of social networking. Correspondingly, a paracrisis is defined as a reputational risk and early warning sign that may easily escalate into a full-blown crisis considering the virality of social media and the constant scrutiny of official brand responses (Coombs; 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2012:412). Notably, a paracrisis resembles a crisis and requires a strategic response; however, a paracrisis does not justify "convening the crisis team and operating in a crisis mode" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012:408).

Limited literature is available on appropriate paracrisis response strategies for social media management teams to maintain emotionally resonant brand reputations when targeted by user-generated parody accounts. Correspondingly, this study seeks to establish the most suitable paracrisis response strategies for social media management teams to maintain emotionally resonant reputations when user-generated parody accounts target brands. Considering that social media parody accounts are an emerging trend in South Africa, findings may provide valuable insights for scenario planning and emotional branding strategies. More specifically, a tangible contribution of this study is a revision of Coombs and Holladay's (2012:412) paracrisis response strategies.

1. THE EMOTIONAL RESONANCE OF HUMOUR IN POPULAR PARODY ACCOUNTS

Parody is an ancient genre that attacks prominent official messages. The word 'parody', as a specific genre of literature, was used for the first time in the fourth century BC by Greek philosopher Aristotle in *Poetics* (Dentith, 2002:6,10; Jean, 2011:19). Today, the self-publishing capabilities of social media make it possible for any amateur satirist to publish content that parodies a brand.

Parody is defined by Visser (2005:322) as "a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule". Similarly, Burgess (2011:122) defines parody as the use of double meanings to provide humorous commentary on familiar narratives with the purpose of confounding them through laughable and implausible conclusions. In the same way, Skågeby (2013:65) define parody as "an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect". As such, parody typically makes use of irony, which Ross (1998:50) defines as humorous sarcasm to express an oppositional meaning. Another related form of humour characterising parody is satire, which Berthon and Pitt

(2012:90) and Bal, Pitt, Berthon and DesAutels (2009:231) define as expressing sarcasm, irony and ridicule to lampoon someone or something.

Although parody has remained a popular form of humour throughout the ages, those being targeted as fodder for ridicule typically lash out in an attempt to silence the laughter. Essentially, satire is characterised by humorous exaggeration and irony and to take it seriously is to miss the point of parody (Blake, 2011:284). Another reason why parody tends to evoke the anger of its target is because audiences easily fail to recognise the codes and conventions that characterise parody as a genre (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2012:231). These include double meanings (Burgess, 2011:122), a spoof or a hoax (Cresswell, 2009), pastiche by borrowing from other texts (Hutcheon, 2000:38), travesty (Baldick, 2008) and burlesque (Dentith, 2002:123). Often then, offensive, distasteful or vulgar parodies succeed to draw attention their messages (Vanden Bergh, Lee, Quilliam & Hove, 2011:14). A case in point is the extensive public debate which surrounded the controversial satirical painting by artist Brett Murray, metaphorically titled 'The Spear' (Olivier, 2012), which depicts South African President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed. Similarly, attacks on French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo (Charlie Hebdo, 2016; Flood, 2016; Noorlander, 2015) occurred in 2015 when 12 people were killed by offended Islamic terrorists. Locally, the parody advertisements of fast food brand Nando's have been banned and criticised by offended stakeholders, as was the case with 'Last Dictator Standing' (BBC, 2011; Ferreira, 2012). The latter satirised Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and former South African President P.W. Botha.

On the internet, however, the control or removal of information damaging to a reputation is not that easy. Often at the receiving end of anger and social media backlashes, the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI, 2012:12) observes that some brands continue their attempts to censor critical opinions on the social web. For this reason, the Streisand effect illustrates how management attempts to silence satire and criticism escalate into a viral social media backlash, whereas the embarrassing content would otherwise have gone unnoticed (Jansen & Martin, 2015:656; Marton, Wilk & Rogal, 2010:62). Named after an incident involving celebrity Barbara Streisand, the Streisand effect demonstrates internet users' retaliation against attempts to control information that is harmful to someone's reputation by deliberately sharing such information widely online (Masnick, 2005; Louw, 2013; Zamani, Kasimati & Giaglis, 2012). For example, the ANC Youth League threatened to shut down the entire Twitter (Boshomane, 2015; Mallinson, 2010) in reaction to 12 Twitter parody accounts targeting former leader Julius Malema. In reaction, the number of parody accounts criticizing the decision increased to 22 and the parody meme #JujuFriday became a global trending topic on Twitter (Bremmen, 2010; Pillay, 2010).

Aggressive threats, including litigation and cease-and-desist letters by parties claiming to be defamed (Marton et al., 2010:62) typically escalate into a viral social media backlash, thereby attracting unprecedented publicity for and awareness of a parody account (Hoult, 2012; Mortimer, 2008:15; Veil, Petrun & Roberts, 2012:319). Despite court cases and other attempts to remove parody and brand spoofs, parodied content remains infinitely discoverable on the internet (Gillin & Gianforte, 2012:19). As soon as one parody account is closed down, many more are created in its place, typically to satirise management censorship (Bremmen, 2010; Davis, 2013; Pillay, 2010).

In this sense, it is fair to say that "parody has the paradoxical effect of preserving the very text that it seeks to destroy" (Dentith, 2002:36). Stated differently, parody creates a new form out of the old without effectively destroying the old (Hutcheon, 2000:35). With this in mind, it becomes clear why parody, as a complex genre, presents a paracrisis to emotionally resonant brand reputations owing to the engaging principles of social media.

Said to be unique to the legacy (Knoblauch, 2014) and finding culture of Twitter that encourages freedom of expression (Chu, 2016), the social network is a favourite for parody accounts. Therefore, Twitter's (2017) terms and conditions accommodate parody accounts, provided that the account name is different from the official brand name and the biography clearly states that it is a parody account. Correspondingly, such an account is generally referred to as a social media parody account (Szany, 2013), a brand spoof (Earle, 2002:1), a parody account (Milne, 2013:207; Twitter, 2017) or a user-generated parody (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). As such, Sadleir and De Beer (2014) define social media parody accounts as "accounts set up in the name of public (and sometimes private) figures providing updates in an often tongue-in-cheek, satirical humorous manner".

Skilfully created, compelling and popular user-generated parody accounts are said to enjoy a committed following and are appreciated for their satirical criticism (Cutler, 2015; Kantrowitz, 2012; Manning; 2013). Therefore, popular parodies attract significant attention, visibility and influence (Valinsky, 2012), share funny content that is highly credible and humorous (Sabri & Michel, 2014:243), mimic the brand personality (Jones, 2012; Mann, 2012) and use sarcasm as confirmed in a related study (Parguel, Lunardo & Chebat, 2012). Other reasons why skilfully written parody accounts are appreciated, include having a distinct voice (Colebrook, 2005:181), providing comedy that is fun and entertaining (Bal et al., 2009:231; Hutcheon, 2000:32; Jiramonai, 2012:37; Mikkonen & Bajde, 2013:315; Neacsu, 2011:89; Skågeby, 2013:65) and challenging orthodox seriousness by offering comic relief (Haomin & Xin, 2010:16). In addition, parody accounts that resonate emotionally with social media communities are enjoyed for their quirky comments (Lopez, 2016), sardonic wit, silly humour (Manning, 2013), irreverence (Knoblauch, 2014) and snarky remarks (Mills, 2016).

For parody to be appreciated and effective, it mostly succeeds when targeting top-of-mind brands. This is because audiences primarily laugh at the satire and catch the irony of a joke when they are familiar with a topic and can relate to it (Neacsu, 2011:278). This enables audiences to enjoy the allusions to relevant issues and topics being mocked (Blake, 2011:287; Dentith, 2002:5). Interestingly, audiences prefer parody as opposed to overtly didactic messages, because parody does not impose its message (Gray, 2005:234; Neacsu, 2011:89). Several studies confirm that social media communities seek out parody and are more likely to share humorous Tweets as a means to gain attention and increase their influence (Jiramonai, 2012:112; Parguel et al., 2012:2; Smith & Duggan, 2012:2). Correspondingly, the virality of social media is demonstrated when followers repeatedly share parody that they regard as truthful and funny (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011:15). As several studies have found, the positive emotions and pleasure derived from funny content has the ability to diffuse anger, attract attention, enhance social capital, increase

engagement and provide welcome comic relief (McGraw, Warren & Kan, 2015:1153; Nabi et al., 2007:38; Wills & Fecteau, 2016:33).

2. USING METRICS AND ANALYTICS TO ESTABLISH THE DIFFERENT INTENTIONS OF PARODY ACCOUNTS

Milne (2013:210) and Ramsey (2010) recognise the somewhat complex and wide-ranging intentions of user-generated parody accounts as a form of brand-jacking that requires risk assessment and mitigation (Macnamara & Sakinofsky, 2012:8). Therefore, continuous monitoring, analytics, measurement and reporting are key requirements of social governance frameworks to mitigate reputation risk (Hootsuite & Nexgate, 2013:3; Owyang, 2012; Owyang, Jones, Tran & Nguyen, 2011:14). In so doing, social media management teams gain valuable insights (Ernst & Young, 2012:9,15) in order to implement the most effective online reputation management strategies (Jones, Temperley & Lima, 2009:929). When analysing metrics such as resonance – the culmination of influence, reach and relevance (Solis & Webber, 2012:10) mentions, sentiment (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006:61) and engagement (Sabri & Michel, 2014:243), the frequency, intensity and extent of reputational risk of a parody is established. Likewise, related studies confirm the necessity for using online reputation management systems to establish the intent of a parody account (Gillin & Gianforte, 2012:19; Sabri & Michel, 2014:243; Wan, Koh, Ong & Pang, 2015:384). Before choosing an appropriate response strategy, insights from metrics and analytics make it possible to differentiate an isolated complaint from legitimate grievances, constructive criticism or parodies that may escalate into a full-blown viral social media crisis (Alexander & Atkins, 2015:2).

A notable paracrisis presents itself when parody accounts have malicious intentions and interject brand conversations with hate and trolling towards a brand and its customers. Typically, a parodist hides anonymously behind the mask of a moniker to freely express criticism without the fear of personal attacks (Cutler, 2015; Dentith, 2002:23; McLean & Wallace, 2013:1522; Ross, 1998:49). As such, malicious parody accounts push their own agenda and may be rather vicious, offensive, sensational and in bad taste (Gillin & Gianforte, 2012:19-25). Also causing concern, are parodies that are rude towards customers, prank or troll customers for fun (Conradie, 2015; Louw, 2015; Williams, 2015), thereby hijacking the brand's official engagements (Wan et al., 2015:383). Especially damaging to reputation is parody that attacks a brand's values and core positioning (Fournier & Avery, 2011:26).

When analysing the intention of a parody, it may become clear that some spoofs are not aimed at embarrassing the brand, but are harmlessly poking fun at brands (Gillin & Gianforte, 2012:19-25). Not all parodies harshly criticize their targets, but some are also rather playful (Hutcheon, 2000:32; Ross, 1998:49), inconsequential, irreverent and silly (Dentith, 2002:37). Other parodies may be created purely for entertainment purposes (MarkMonitor, 2012:2) or to pay homage to favourite and much loved brands (Berthon & Pitt, 2012:88), popular texts (Ross,1998:49) or celebrating the iconic status of the most talked about, visible brands (Sutherland, 2004; Thompson et al., 2006:63). Nevertheless, choosing an appropriate paracrisis response remains problematic.

3. MAINTAINING EMOTIONAL RESONANCE IN VOLATILE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Most at risk of being parodied are prominent, top-of-mind and distinct brand reputations. Stated differently, emotionally resonant brands are most likely to become fodder for brand parodies. As defined by Diamond, Sherry, Muñiz, McGrath, Kozinets and Borghini (2009:119), powerful, emotionally resonant brands are produced by "multiple creators authoring multiple representations in multiple venues". In another approach, Fombrun and Van Riel's (2004:97) Expressiveness Quotient (EQ) measures the extent of emotionally resonant brand reputations according to five constructs, namely: (i) visibility, (ii) transparency, (iii) authenticity, (iv) consistency and (v) distinction, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

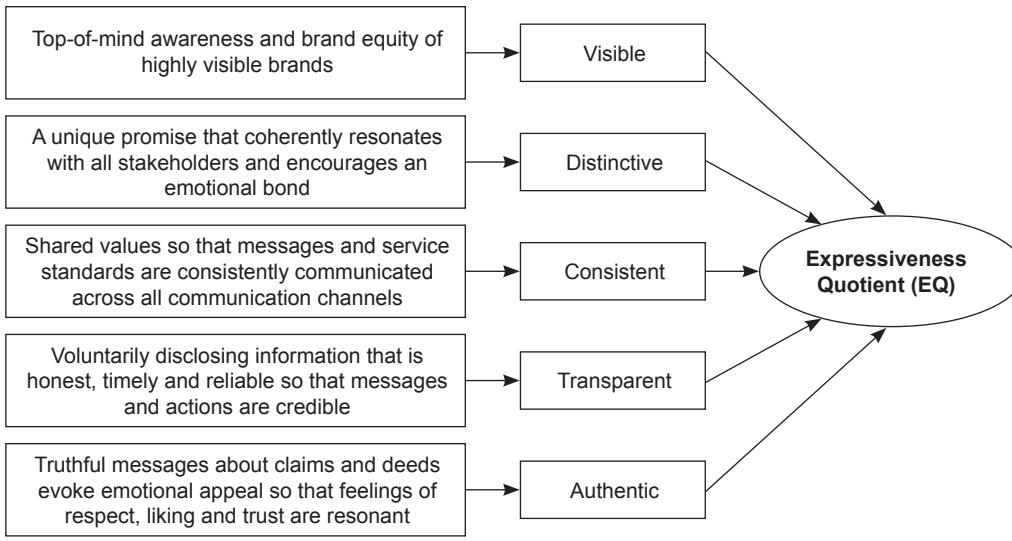

Figure 1: Constructs of the expressiveness quotient as a measure of emotionally resonant brand reputations
Adapted from Fombrun and Van Riel (2004:96)

As illustrated in Figure 1 above, expressiveness (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004:86,96) is the ability to communicate strong emotional associations and sentimental attachments that are indicative of brand reputations that resonate with stakeholders in complex, antagonistic environments. To elaborate, brand reputation is defined by Harris and De Chernatony (2001:445) as "a collective representation of a brand's past actions and results that describes the brand's ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders''. Likewise, brand reputation is defined as the aggregate composite of engagements that consumers have with a brand over time (Herbig & Milewicz, 1993:18; 1995:24; Milewicz & Herbig, 1994:41). As such, credibility and consistency to deliver brand promises are prerequisites for a strong brand reputation.

The distinctiveness of emotionally resonating brand reputations is evident in unique brand identities. Highly effective brand identities – brand names, logos and symbols – are distinctive and easy to understand or remember (Keller, 1993:9; 2009:140,143). As such, effective brand identities enhance brand awareness, the linkage of brand associations and, ultimately, brand equity (Keller, 1993:9; 2009:140,143). Correspondingly, parody is particularly effective when imitating popular texts that are well-known (Burgess, 2011:122), as the intended intertextual meaning thereof is then easier to understand (Gray, 2005:223; O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2012:145). In other words, audiences will more likely understand the subtleness of irony and find a parody funny if they are already familiar with the topic being ridiculed (Blake, 2011:287; Colebrook, 2005:19; Reyes, Rosso & Veale, 2013:241; Ross, 1998:37, 47). For this reason, distinctly successful texts inspire parodies (Ross, 1998:49). A study by Berthon and Pitt (2012) confirmed that brands with strong distinct attributes that differentiate themselves either ideologically or physically, are more likely to be parodied.

Some of the most popular and influential parody accounts are those targeting endearing brands that audiences have empathy for and can relate to emotionally (Berthon & Pitt, 2012:88). Therefore, expression of emotions such as love for a brand manifests when consumers publish fan content online, accelerate word-of-mouth, and actively engage with brands online (Roberts, 2005:105). Moreover, strong attitudinal attachments and active engagements to establish a sense of community, form the foundation for brand resonance (Keller, 2001:15; 2009:144; 2012:186; 2016:5). Brand resonance is defined by Keller (2001; 2009) as the brand equity of strong brands that engage in close social media relationships with consumers who love and feel 'in synch' with a brand.

Emotions such as love and passion are the foundation of committed relationships that will outlast adverse circumstances (Fournier, 1998:365; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012:177) so that brand advocates will defend endearing brands online when facing criticism (Roberts, 2005:105). In the process, brands are actively co-created by consumers and management (Arvidsson, 2005:244; Christodoulides, Jevons & Bonhomme, 2012:57; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012:179; Hatch & Schultz, 2010:592; Ind, Iglesias & Schultz, 2013:9; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In the process, brands attain cultural resonance when they listen to conversations, cede control and seamlessly adhere to the governing principles of social media in the age of parody (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Similarly, Muñiz and Schau (2007:35) prefer the term vigilante marketing, which is defined as unpaid advertising and marketing tactics in user-generated content by loyal brand community members on behalf of the brand.

Brands most talked about become embedded in popular culture, hence being parodied is indicative of love for a favourite brands (Sutherland, 2004). Correspondingly, brand parodies are indicative of brands that have attained cultural resonance (Fournier & Avery, 2011) and are often welcomed as an indicator of brand resonance (CMPA, 2013:19; Mikkonen & Bajde, 2013:331).

4. SELECTING APPROPRIATE PARACRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN EMOTIONALLY RESONANT BRAND REPUTATIONS

Brand parodies that pose a risk to brand reputation are scorned as new media snipers (Gaines-Ross, 2010:73), brand terrorists (Mortimer, 2008:15), brand hijackers (Williams, 2015) or internet vigilantes (Vanden Bergh, et al., 2011:4). Correspondingly, when being targeted by a user-generated parody account, brands are faced with a paracrisis.

Considering that social media management teams' official responses to user-generated parody accounts are constantly scrutinised, especially considering the highly antagonistic environment of Twitter where inappropriate responses quickly escalate into social media backlashes, trending topics and memes, selecting an appropriate paracrisis response strategy is a challenge. As such, four paracrisis response strategies are classified by Coombs and Holladay (2012:412), namely, (i) refute, (ii) implicitly admit wrongdoing, (iii) explicitly admit wrongdoing and (iv) ignore. These are explained below:

- **Refute:** Conflict with disgruntled social media stakeholders who make challenging claims of irresponsible or unethical behaviour. The challenge increases as management fights back. In the process, management base their defence on the core values shared with important stakeholders. When defending the brand's practises, it is believed that many social media users who notice the conflict will defend the brand.
- **Implicitly admit wrongdoing:** Wrongdoing is not directly expressed. Incorporate stakeholder demands when changing behaviour.
- **Explicitly admit wrongdoing:** Admission of wrongdoing or repentance as the foundation for change to repair violated expectations.
- **Ignore:** Management refuses to acknowledge the challenge and ignores the paracrisis. Management believes that the criticism is not worth their attention and does not publically respond to the paracrisis or rumours.

Management is advised not to hastily shut down parody accounts but to first establish whether the intent of the parody account is malicious and offensive, as opposed to being non-confrontational, playful spoofs (Gillin & Gianforte, 2012:19) as confirmed in a related study (Wan et al., 2015:384). In other words, the benefits of a chosen response strategy need to outweigh the potential reputational risks seeing that an inappropriate response may further cause injury to a reputation already compromised by a parody during a paracrisis (Berthon & Pitt, 2012:96; Coombs, 2014:9; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Sabri & Michel, 2014:243; Wan et al., 2015:384).

When a large corporation is seen to use its extensive resources against a parodist to silence criticism, a David and Goliath-type battle typically ensues (Accone, 2005:19; Merten, 2004), creating the perception of the corporation being a bully (Berthon & Pitt, 2012:96). Moreover, legal procedures are expensive, complicated, drawn-out and may lead to negative public opinion (Accone, 2005; Ginsburg, 2005; Petty, 2009:64; Visser, 2005).

It is recommended that showing respect when engaging with critics, may make them more willing to accept a response by a brand (Mortimer, 2008:15). Another way to diffuse anger may be humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter with a parody account. Using parody in an official response when replying to a parody, may also be considered as an effective way to engage critics (Mortimer, 2008:15). Locally, documented instances when prominent brands effectively used humorous banter by means of parody advertisements of parodied advertisements, they were commended for increased top-of-mind, authenticity, recall, entertainment and goodwill (Fisher, 2012; Granger, 2013; Nicolson, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Vermeulen, 2010). Similarly, a study of humour and political satire used in Nando's advertisements by Botha (2014:372), concluded that the higher the creativity and intensity of the positive emotions felt in political satire, the greater the likelihood of content being virally shared. As such, when satire makes fun of issues that hit closer to home, the emotional-intensity felt by audiences tend to increase.

The most effective response strategy to light-hearted, playful spoofs without malicious intent is to laugh with consumers, as confirmed in a related study (Berthon & Pitt, 2012). Such popular and skilfully created parodies expose a brand to large potential new audiences (Gillin & Gianforte, 2012:19-25). When brand stories are co-created with user-generated parodies, consumers are more likely to defend the brand against hating, flaming and ranting (Jeppesen & Pettersson, 2010:85). Mutually beneficial collaborations to co-create value include curating influencer content, publically commending and welcoming skilfully created user-generated parodies as a form of flattery, and quoting influencer opinions in brand content (Act-On, 2013:3; Birmingham Mail, 2012; Edgar, 2013:9; SAPeople, 2015). Such responses increase sentiment, reach and authenticity for both parties. Likewise, strategic reputation management engage in collaborative dialogues (Aula & Mantere, 2008:210; 2013). When relinquishing some measure of control and collaborating with critics to repair reputation, brand advocates are provided with the opportunity to defend the brand during a crisis as confirmed in a related study by Ott and Theunissen, (2015:100).

Considering the popularity and viral tendencies of user-generated parodies, it is advised that advertising campaigns are purposively designed to invite parodies of its resonating imagery, themes or catchphrases (Fournier & Avery, 2011:24; Vanden Bergh et al., 2011:15). In the process, the co-creation of brands imply that reputation is equally co-created in mutually beneficial collaborations (Arvidsson, 2005:244, Hatch & Schultz, 2010:592; Ind et al., 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

There is a scarcity of studies in literature that applied either Coombs and Holladay's (2012:412) paracrisis theory, or Fombrun and Van Riel's (2004:53) EQ. For example, Apéria, Brønn and Schultz (2004:229) concluded that transparency was the most important construct of the EQ during a crisis. With regard to paracrises, a study of user-generated parody accounts by Wan et al. (2015:383), conducted a content analysis of tweets to establish the motivators for parody accounts and how they compromise strategic messages. Based thereon, the study of Wan et al. (2015:383), recommended a checklist to determine response strategies by asking (i) if the parody account causes confusion, (ii) if the parody account overpowers the organisation's voice, and (iii) if traditional media had followed up on the story. Consequently, this study seeks to address a clearly identified gap in literature by integrating both the EQ of Fombrun and Van Riel (2004)

and the paracrisis response strategies recommended by Coombs and Holladay (2012) in a single study, while further analysing both quantitative and qualitative data in order to suggest suitable paracrisis response strategies to maintain emotionally appealing brand reputations that resonate with critical social media communities.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By applying the core principles of the synergistic approach (Hall & Howard, 2008:249) to mixed methods in a triangulation design (Creswell, 2010:51,59; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010:11), the study benefitted from different but complementary data to be collected on the same topic. Method triangulation is defined by Hair, Samouel, Page, Celsi and Money (2016:311), as using different data collection methods and comparing the findings, typically involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data were to bring together the strengths of both forms of research to validate results. Moreover, additional documented advantages of the synergistic approach (Hall & Howard, 2008:249) are flexibility, reflexivity and pragmatism to select the most practical manner in which multiple perspectives can work together to answer the research problem. In so doing, a sample of social media management experts was drawn using purposive sampling (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2015:178) and snowball sampling (Hair et al., 2016:184) while the target population for this study was social media management teams. To gather quantitative data, a sample that met the sampling criteria was drawn from social media management experts judging by their content on social networks such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, as well as their opinion pieces on industry websites dedicated to the topic of this study. To collect qualitative data, an initial purposive sample was drawn from shortlisted nominees for the prestigious 6th Annual Bookmarks Awards as judged by industry.

Data was collected during a self-administered online survey. In total, 188 respondents received the online questionnaire of which 137 complete responses were received. In addition, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 participants while giving equal weighting to both quantitative and qualitative and methods. In terms of data analysis, multiple linear stepwise regression analysis (Oliveira, 2013:193; Pallant, 2007:140) for quantitative data using IBM SPSS (2016) predictive analytics software were synergised with Miles and Huberman's (1994:12) concurrent technique for thematic analysis, using Atlas.ti (Friese, 2012:1) software for qualitative data. In addition, the SPSS Cross Tabulation function was used to perform Chi-square calculations.

A concurrent process of data collection and data analysis enabled the researcher to confidently establish data saturation after a realised sample of 137 respondents for the online survey. A 72.87% completion rate and a satisfactory Cronbach alpha value of 0.805 was obtained for this study, which exceeded the 0.70 minimum acceptable value for Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Crano, Lac, & Brewer, 2015:69; DePoy & Gitlin, 2016:236). A pilot study using a purposive sample of 17 respondents who met the sampling criteria was conducted based on the initial questionnaire. Considering that several changes were made to the questionnaire to address the poor completion rate, findings of the pilot study were not included in this study. Both the exploratory and the descriptive objectives of the study were met.

6. RESULTS

Table 1 below graphically illustrates the interactions between variables that were investigated statistically in this study by means of a number of regression analyses. In addition, statistical findings are confirmed in the data that emerged from the thematic analysis.

Table 1: A parody account intended for harmless fun significantly predicts the distinctiveness of the parodied brand

Dependent Variable (Emotional resonance construct)	**Type of data**	**Findings of linear stepwise regression analysis**	
Brand Distinctiveness	Independent variables (in best model):	**Intent for Harmless Fun**	**Intent to Expose Wrongdoing**
	Beta (β) values	β = .265	β = -.264
	Best Model:	Brand Distinctiveness = 2.735 + 0.265 (Intent for Harmless Fun) - 0.264 (Intent to Expose Wrongdoing)	
	Statistics	R^2 = .015; F = 12.045; p < .05	

Findings reported in Table 1 above verify the data analysed in qualitative theme: recognise parody that compliments reputation and theme, parody accounts hijack distinctive strategic messages of which the following sub-themes emerged:

- **Clever parody accounts raise top-of-mind awareness:** A significant number of participants agreed that a cleverly written satire, funny and entertaining parody account attract attention, visibility, conversations, viral word-of-mouth sharing, "free advertising" and "free fans" for a brand. When audiences "heard of brand X through that cheesy, that cocky account", a parody account may reach audiences that may not otherwise have been aware of a brand, because "they'll check out the original brand to compare and then go: 'Oh, that's actually quite cool'".
- **A parody account compliments a distinct emotionally resonant reputation:** Many participants agreed that, regardless of the criticism expressed, a parody account is indicative of popularity, prominence and relevance, because "people have noticed you enough to dedicate time to impersonating you". Participant nine noted: *"The parody could actually mean that you have a very good reputation. Even negative parody – because why do people 'skinner' about you? Because you're so damn good."* Likewise, participant 8 articulated: *"Well, if you're big enough to have someone have a parody of you it's actually kind of testimony to your success... Like they say, you know you're doing well if you have haters..."*
- **As the highest form of flattery, parody accounts are indicative of care, love and affinity for distinct brands:** A parody account is created *"because he loves the brand so much, plus he wants to sort of ride on its coat tails... so why punish that guy?"* Likewise,

Participant 14 elaborated: *"It still means that people care. The moment no one is mocking you is the moment you are not relevant."* Similarly, Participant two observed: *"Parody is the highest form of flattery. So, sometimes it does have a beneficial angle and I think it all depends on the seriousness of the brand."*

Table 2: Explicitly admit wrongdoing is not a suitable paracrisis response strategy for a parody account intended for harmless fun

Intention of the parody account	**Explicitly admit wrongdoing**		**Total**
	Yes	**No**	
Harmless fun*			
No	7	53	60
Yes	2	80	82
*Pearson χ^2 = 3.537 (1); p = .060 1 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.80.			

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of Refute as a paracrisis response with Intention of the parody account

Intention of the parody account	**Refute**		**Total**
	Yes	**No**	
Harmless fun*			
No	15	45	60
Yes	7	74	81
*Pearson χ^2 = 5.817 (1); p = .016 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9.36.			

Findings reported in Table 2 and Table 3 above verify the data analysed in qualitative themes Recognise parody that compliments reputation and the theme, Clever parody is the voice of the people, of which the following sub-themes emerged:

- **When parody accounts resonate with popular sentiment, followers can effortlessly express their affinity:** Popular parody accounts resonate with audiences because "it has to touch a nerve" and "there is a fibre of truth, there is something you can connect with". Participant Nine observed: *"So, when you touch a human truth, whether it's positive, negative and neutral. You kind of go: 'Shit, that's so me'... The reason parody is a threat is because it touches a human truth."* Therefore, an effective parody account "has to represent the views of many people" because "you only have power if enough other people believe in what you are doing". In this manner, people "follow them because they believe in the anti-sentiment of that brand or, they love the sentiment of that brand".

- **Social communities enjoy being entertained by clever comedy:** Most participants agreed that a parody account's good use of entertaining humour is appreciated for its wit, comic relief in stressful situations and providing fun in social media timelines. Satire is an effective strategy to make content appreciated, noticeable and "if it's funny enough, it will stay with people forever". Participant 17 explained: *"Parody account is based a lot on sarcasm – sarcastic comments about the company or ironic comments about the company. And I think that's where the power is. Parody accounts have a personality, jokes don't. Maybe that's the difference".*

In addition, findings of the cross tabulation analysis in Table 2 and Table 3 above confirm the qualitative data interpreted in the theme: Establish the intent of a parody and the theme: Monitor and analyse conversations of which the following sub-themes emerged:

- **Establish the intent of a parody:** Most participants agreed that the motivations and aims of parody accounts vary considerably and therefore it "comes back to identifying, is this harmful or not?". Before responding to a parody account, therefore, the intent of a parody account needs to be established on a "case-by-case basis". In fact, there is "quite a fine line" between mocking a brand "just to have fun and be a little bit playful" and being a malicious troll. Nevertheless, many participants suggested that parody is a reputational judgement of some sort because "positive or negative, it's telling you something about your reputation" and "even if it is negative, it means that they are trying to have a conversation with you and that is all you need to take from the parody". Participant 18 elaborated: *"It could be in love, it could be in whatever. But, if it's in anger, the account, it's going to almost completely disrupt in every corner."*
- **The value of social media metrics to analyse the extent of the potential reputational risk of a parody account:** The vast majority of participants agreed that ORM metrics such as mentions, sentiment, advocacy, impressions, reach, engagement, conversations, influence and resonance are continuously monitored and analysed to ascertain the level of reputational risk of a parody account. Therefore, "if people are engaging more with our parody account then with us... let's see what the parody account is getting right." Participant Three articulated: *"Is it generating a big level of discussion? Are people saying what does BP have to say about this? If that is happening a lot... If a journalist retweets it and asks for a comment, then yes you do have to [respond]. And you see immediately a lot of people are talking about it. You need to be concerned."*

Findings of the cross tabulation analysis in Table 2 and Table 3 above confirm the qualitative theme: Guard against indiscriminately shutting down parody, from which the following sub-themes emerged:

- **Refute, but when management is seen as a bully, sentiment sides with the parodist as the underdog:** Aggressive, "knee-jerk" responses typically damage reputation and cause a "PR nightmare". Likewise, overzealous legal action by prominent brands often culminates in a "David and Goliath" situation. Whereas the brand is perceived as the

"bully", the parodist receives support and sympathetic attention as a victim or "underdog". Participant Two elaborated: *"So, if a brand acts out and becomes the villain within a situation, their followers and their customers can quickly turn on them and people that are prospective clients – they could turn around and say: 'You know what, this bank is a douche and I am not actually going to do business with them'."*

- **As fair comment, parody accounts should not be closed down:** The right to free speech, criticism and fair comment is protected by South Africa's constitution. Participant three articulated: *"I think the big thing for me is a parody account is actually great. It can be fun and it can be good for transparency. It can be good for public debate and fair comment. Just remember, you are still accountable... Parody and satire done in an amusing and intelligent way – it counts as fair comment, you see."*
- **The Streisand effect illustrates that "the internet does not like to be told what to do" when refuting criticism:** Regardless of the method chosen in an attempt to "just delete them, or ban them", most participants mentioned that it remains problematic due to the uncontrollable principles of social media. The closing down of parody accounts and related attempts to control or conceal information creates the impression that the brand is attempting to hide something, "because often there is a lot of truth in the parody". Therefore, aggressive threats often imply more publicity for the parodist who will "become a very well-known blog as soon as you sue me, so please go for it". Owing to a discoverable digital footprint, "people are still sharing it and even if you delete the Twitter account it will be online, it will be a poster". In addition, it is likely that new parody accounts may be created to satirise management as a villain. This sentiment is verified in the quantitative data (Q7): Request the closing down of the parody account. Of the 150 participants, 105 (70.00%) said No, 24 (16.00%) said Yes and (4.00%) were not sure. Pertaining to Other, one participant commented: *"I do not think brands should try have parody accounts shut down unless it infringes on IP. Community manager needs to learn about the Streisand effect before attempting to shut down parody accounts".*

As mentioned before, the analysis Table 2 above furter indicated that Explicitly admitting wrongdoing is also not a suitable paracrisis response for parody accounts intended for harmless fun. Interestingly, none of the other paracrisis response strategies, namely, Ignore and Implicitly admit wrongdoing were significant for parody accounts intended for harmless fun. Correspondingly, findings confirm the qualitative theme: Respond by co-creating content, of which the following sub-themes emerged:

- **Humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter by taking it on the chin and playing along:** Most participants agreed that collaboration with parody accounts and their followers may strengthen the authenticity, positive sentiment, influence and top-of-mind awareness. This is especially true for prominent, much-loved brands that are often parodied, less serious brand personalities and when encountering light-hearted, playful spoofs. Instead of being confrontational, "then it is just a case of managing it and engaging in a dialogue as opposed to coming from that perspective of, you know: 'We are so big, we're going to try shut you down'". Much preferred is a brand that has a "sense of humour", "have a

laugh", be "mature", "be the bigger person in that conversation", "take a joke", and be not offended that easily. Instead, management is advised to "take it on the chin", "play along" and engage in an authentic, human-like dialogue with parodists.

- **Humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter by reciprocating with love and humour:** When bantering with a parody account, both the parody account and the official account attract new followers and extend their engagement as more communities join the conversation. In addition, the official social media brand account gains affinity as social media users appreciate humour, fun, play and authentically entertaining dialogue. Moreover, playful bantering creates far more interesting content, compared to the often somewhat monotonous posts by official social media brand accounts. Participant 10 articulated: *"That's when you need to engage with that person and say: 'Okay, it's a very funny thing that you've made there, and we really respect the humour, but it's kind of a dig at us. Why don't you like us?' And then he might turn around and say: 'Actually, I love you guys, I just thought it was funny.' And then you can have this really cool, real conversation between two people."*

In fact, when considering that parodists care about and often love a brand despite its flaws, many participants agree that all parodists may be valued as potential brand ambassadors. In other words, the brand reciprocates positive emotions by illustrating that the brand cares enough to take the "time and effort to actually try to reply to that parody". Participant Two explained: "A brand that can take itself less seriously online is more likely to be engaged with and also, appreciated. And also, people like it if someone is bantering with a brand account and the brand has a little bit of a laugh back or, has a little bit of a tongue-in-cheek response. People are, like: 'Bravo, that is amazing, what a great response'. You will get a lot more kudos from your audience and your brand champions who, in turn, will spread that outside."

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, findings indicate that when user-generated parody accounts are intended for harmless fun, to neither refute nor explicitly admit to wrongdoing are suitable paracrisis response strategies to maintain emotionally resonant brand reputations. Notwithstanding the risks of paracrises, social media managers in South Africa seem to appreciate a sense of humour. As such, they appreciate the manner in which well-written satire in light-hearted, playful spoofs intended for harmless fun are not overtly didactic and imposing, with the ability to distil issues and offer comic relief. It appears then that fighting back to refute a parody account intended for harmless fun will, indeed, outweigh the risks of escalating a paracrisis given that a parodied brand is already injured.

Regardless of its ability to hijack strategic messages then, the Streisand effect illustrates that the internet does not like to be told what to do and when management is seen as a bully, sentiment sides with the parodist as the underdog. As such, the Streisand effect illustrates that social media paracrises gain unprecedented attention in reaction against attempts to hide or remove parodies from public view. Moreover, angry, viral backlashes tend to be rather disproportionate to the initial issue.

Therefore, aggressive knee-jerk responses often become the fodder for intensified parody hashtags and memes, so that satirised brand identities are immortalised in a tarnished digital footprint.

As fair comment, especially in Post-Apartheid South Africa with a history of silencing dissent, social media managers seem to value the free expression of satire when a parody is not malicious. For this reason, mature brand personalities express their sense of humour by responding with humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter during a paracrisis, which communities may find more entertaining and emotionally resonant compared to many other forms of branded content that saturate social media newsfeeds.

Therefore, instead of fighting back to refute amateur satirists' playful spoofs or close down parody accounts, social media managers are more receptive to a cleverly-written user-generated parody account that raises constructive criticism compared to related malicious paracrises such as hating and trolling, especially on Twitter. In fact, popular and influential user-generated parody accounts provide valuable insights that brand personalities can apply to optimise resonance in emotionally resonant brand storytelling. These include a distinct authentic voice, strategic messages that touch a nerve or a human truth, comic relief during stressful times, a playful brand personality that reciprocates love, and brand associations such as fun and humorous entertainment.

Already, parody accounts intended for harmless fun enjoy considerable affinity and by embracing this emerging trend in the age of parody, a brand's official social media accounts may benefit from increasing engagement, reach and sentiment to ultimately co-create brand resonance. Considering that irony is not overtly didactic and imposing, humorous brand storytelling may appeal to a vast fraction of passive lurkers, the anti-establishment culture of Twitter and those sceptical about corporate communication messages.

When communities simultaneously engage with both the parody account as well as the brand's official social media account, reputation is socially constructed and co-created, which is the reason why strategic reputation management replaces top-down traditional management approaches. Likewise, if embracing the organic governing principles of peer-to-peer networks instead of traditional top-down crisis communication, the most intrusive paracrisis responses seem to be knee-jerk responses, where management refutes the claims made by a non-malicious parody account by fighting back to gain control. In such cases, paracrises may easily escalate into full-blown crises, especially considering the highly antagonistic environment of Twitter. Therefore, by embracing the playfulness of the digital landscape, as pointed out by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), Mikkonen and Bajde (2013:331) and Fournier and Avery (2011:25), official social media brand accounts that seek visibility and enhanced emotional resonance are best associated with playful and humorous brand personalities.

Finally, findings recommend an additional paracrisis response strategy to Coombs and Holladay's (2012:412) classification, namely: humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter. Although Coombs (2014:8) admits that the most suitable response to a paracrisis that ridicules an organisation is a sense of humour, such a response is overlooked in Coombs and Holladay's (2012:412) classification of paracrisis responses. Correspondingly, light-hearted, playful spoofs are regarded as the highest

form of flattery, since they often express love for a prominent brand and therefore humorous, tongue-in-cheek banter reciprocates emotions such as affection and care with engaged brand communities.

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