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## **Moving Beyond 'Facts are Facts': Managing Emotions and Legitimacy after a Fake News Attack**

**Marie Joachim** (Essca School of Management, 55 Quai Alphonse le Gallo, 92513 Boulogne-Billancourt, +33 (0)174345276, [marie.joachim@essca.fr](mailto:marie.joachim@essca.fr))

**Itziar Castelló** (Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), City University of London, [itziar.castello-molina@city.ac.uk](mailto:itziar.castello-molina@city.ac.uk))

**Glenn Parry** (Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, United Kingdom, +44 (0)1483 684307, [g.parry@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:g.parry@surrey.ac.uk))

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### **Abstract**

Through a case study of the Irish Health Service Executive's (HSE) response to a fake news attack on their HPV vaccination campaign, we argue that responses to fake news should be analyzed from a legitimacy perspective. We propose a model of emotion legitimacy management where the HSE and a third-party collaborated to: (1) connect with the emotional aspects of the issue, (2) leverage emotions to build vicarious legitimacy, (3) transfer the third-party's legitimacy to the organization, and (4) activate the target public emotionally. This study contributes to the field of fake news and legitimacy management by moving beyond fact-checking and debunking strategies. We suggest a framework centered on legitimacy and organizational agency in using emotions to counteract fake news. Finally, we emphasize the importance of third-party vicarious legitimacy building and its transfer to the organization.

**Key words:** fake news, legitimacy, crisis management, emotions

In 2015, Ireland's Health Service Executive (HSE) faced a fake news attack from an anti-vaccination organization called Reactions and Effects of Gardasil Resulting in Extreme Trauma (REGRET). REGRET's attack mainly used images and testimonies from girls allegedly suffering irreversible health damages after vaccination. This campaign significantly reduced the rates of vaccination for the human papillomavirus (HPV) in Ireland from 85% to 50% in less than two years (Corcoran, Clarke, & Barrett, 2018). In response, the HSE launched its own

information campaign encouraging people to “get the facts, get the vaccine” (VID-HSE-23.03.2018), which focused on challenging REGRET’s arguments with scientific data. Though logical and factual, this strategy had limited success in boosting vaccination uptake. Soon afterwards, Laura Brennan, a 25-year-old Irish woman suffering from terminal cervical cancer caused by HPV, joined the HSE as a patient advocate and quickly became the public face of its HPV campaigns (FACEB-08.12.22-HSE). Her capacity to emotionally connect with the public through social and mass media was decisive in increasing Ireland’s HPV vaccination rates to 74% (HSE-2023). In this article, we examine how the HSE and Laura Brennan managed to convince thousands of young girls and their families that they should get vaccinated, thus overcoming REGRET’s fake news campaign.

Fake news attacks, especially those happening on social media, are increasingly of concern to organizations (Caroline, 2019). Fake news attacks involve the intentional and purposive spread of misleading information (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Current research on organizational responses to fake news attacks look at prebunking and debunking strategies that revolve around how to ensure logic-based inoculation of the public (Ecker et al., 2024). This is based on educating citizens in detecting fake news (Tay, Hurlstone, Kurz, & Ecker, 2022), promoting impartial sources of information (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Woolthuis, Nooteboom, de Jong, & Faems, 2014) and enhance information veracity through third-party sources and fact-checking (Kim, Moravec, & Dennis, 2019). Independent sources and third-party fact checkers are presented as trustworthy endorsers that tend to create empathy (Crijns, Claeys, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017) and deliver a message unthinkingly accepted by the public (Priester & Petty, 2003; Tay et al., 2022). These strategies stem from a psychological interest in understanding how people respond to fake news, centering on the importance of transmitting information veracity (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

However, we argue that previous studies neglect that the objective of most fake news is an attack to the targeted organization's legitimacy (Ecker et al., 2024). By focusing on information checking, previous perspectives undermine the complexities of how the construction of social judgements influence organizations. They also neglect that truth can be understood as socially constructed and as a continuum (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Ecker et al., 2024). Precisely because truth is not self-evident, fake news can easily create confusion (Ecker et al., 2024).

Following these assumptions, we therefore analyze fake news as leading to legitimacy crisis. Legitimacy scholars show how members of the general public, with less direct, transactional interest in the issue, are influenced by evaluators validity cues (in the form of data, facts, etc.) but also by more subtle processes of socialization, persuasion and norm diffusion (Burstein, 2021; Deitelhoff, 2009). They rely on associative, spontaneous and less conscious forms of legitimacy formation and can be influenced by cognitive and emotional heuristics (Haack, Pfarrer, & Scherer, 2014). Haack et al (2014) argues for the need to understand the juxtaposition of cognitive and emotional heuristics in order to better apprehend legitimacy spillovers from one subject to another (de Vaujany & Vaast, 2016; D.A. Snow & Benford, 1988). It is however less understood how organizations can strategically manage these cognitive and emotional heuristics to repair legitimacy after a fake news attack.

To answer this question, we study HSE's efforts to address a fake news attack against their HPV vaccination campaign starting in 2015. We make sense of the case using multiple sources of data, namely social media netnography, video, radio, mass media analysis, and interviews. We study how the HSE dealt with a legitimacy loss that spilled from the REGRET fake news campaign. We observe how the HSE worked closely with a third-party advocate, Laura Brennan, that became a central element of the HSE legitimation strategy. Laura built vicarious legitimacy by echoing the public experience and deploying emotional batteries. Then, she worked on transferring this legitimacy to the HSE so that the public could recognize the HSE

vaccination campaign as legitimate again. Finally, both the HSE and Laura emotionally activated the public to promote behavioral change towards vaccination. This was enabled by the HSE connection with the emotionality of the issue of fake news and by its deployment of the science-based discourse.

Our findings contribute to the understanding of organization responses to fake news attacks and legitimacy management. First, we contribute to understanding the strategic management of fake news by theorizing how fake news attacks can turn into legitimacy crisis. We show how organizations manage their legitimacy through a sophisticated interplay between the management of the public's emotions and the deployment of their science-based discourse. We also argue the central role of third-parties in building vicarious legitimacy and transferring the legitimacy to the organization.

## **Theory**

### *Fake news and response strategies*

Fake news refers to fabricated information intended to create a false narrative about an organization or individual (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). It challenges the “truth status” of information about an organization (Domenico, Sit, Ishizaka, & Nunan, 2021; Hahl, Kim, & Zuckerman Sivan, 2018; Moravec, Minas, & Dennis, 2019), leading people to form misleading beliefs that influence their decisions (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). This, in turn, impacts public attitudes toward organizations (Visentin, Pizzi, & Pichierri, 2019). Research indicates that fake news can damage corporate reputations (Berthon & Pitt, 2018) and pose financial risks to organizations (Caroline, 2019). For example, false allegations of an imminent takeover briefly boosted Twitter's stock price (Brigida & Pratt, 2017).

Fake news is deliberately used to undermine trust in organizations esteemed for their high epistemic standards, such as scientific and political institutions (McKay & Tenove, 2020). This poses significant threats to societal stability and democratic processes.. For instance, Castello et al. (2022) demonstrated how fake news jeopardized COVID vaccination efforts, while Lewandowsky and van der Linden (2021) detailed how misinformation linked autism to NHS UK vaccination programs, questioning public trust in the NHS. Ecker et al. (2024) highlighted that almost 40% of Americans questioned the legitimacy of institutions after allegations of fraud in the 2020 presidential elections.

Despite growing awareness of the dangers posed by fake news to organizational legitimacy, research predominantly originates from psychology (e.g. Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021) and information systems (e.g. Kim & Dennis, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). Scholars in these fields explore motivations for belief in and dissemination of fake news, as well as the technological mechanisms enabling its rapid spread (Domenico et al., 2021).

Recently, organizational psychology has begun examining how organizations respond to fake news (Caroline, 2019; Petratos, 2021). Prebunking strategies aim to counter anticipated fake news by flagging dubious sources (Kim et al., 2019) or inoculating the public with logical defenses (Ecker et al., 2024), emphasizing education on falsehood detection and source verification (Tay et al., 2022). Policy recommendations often focus on preventative measures, such as adopting United Nations standards on fake news and propaganda (Ecker et al., 2024; Petratos, 2021). However, prebunking strategies have their limitations. Studies show that flagging sources is not enough to change the target audience's frames, and people will still "believe what they want to believe" (Moravec et al., 2019). They might have small effects in platforms that prefer "friction-less sharing" (Ecker et al., 2024, p. 30).

Given the unpredictability of fake news attacks (Jolley & Douglas, 2017) preventive strategies must complement debunking efforts. Corrections and counterarguments are primary methods used to mitigate false beliefs post-dissemination (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Tay et al., 2022). Theoretical frameworks concerning the impact of corrections have predominantly focused on cognitive factors, aiming to reinstate truth through factual responses (Ecker, Hogan, & Lewandowsky, 2017; Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Chadwick, 2020; Kendeou, Butterfuss, Kim, & Van Boekel, 2019; Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). For instance, corrective measures such as warning statements ("smoking kills") and the removal of misleading terms like "light" from cigarette packaging have been employed by governments in Australia and France to combat tobacco misinformation campaigns (Cappella, Maloney, Ophir, & Brennan, 2015). However, Cappella et al., (2015) argue that while corrections generally reduce misconceptions, their effectiveness is limited. Scholars have also advocated for the use of third-party fact-checkers to combat fake news (Domenico et al., 2021; Kim & Dennis, 2019). Information endorsed by trustworthy sources is often accepted without critical evaluation (Priester & Petty, 2003; Tay et al., 2022). Moreover, the empathy of the target audience toward an endorsed third-party enhances organizational trust (Crijns et al., 2017). Despite organizational endorsement, third parties are expected to maintain impartiality and independence to reinforce information credibility (Woolthuis et al., 2014).

We argue that existing theories centered on fact-checking and independent endorsement inadequately address the complexity of managing fake news for three reasons: Firstly, they treat information as an end rather than a means, overlooking the primary aim of most fake news campaigns: undermining organizational legitimacy (Ecker et al., 2024). Secondly, by focusing on information and external fact-checkers, these theories diminish the role of organizational agency in crisis management resulting from fake news attacks. Thirdly, they oversimplify the veracity of information as a dichotomy (true or false), disregarding the social construction of



organizations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and the influence of emotions in social evaluations (Lok, Creed, DeJordy, & Voronov, 2018), which are crucial in the context of fake news. Recent research has underscored the role of emotions in the spread of fake news (Carrasco-Farré, 2022; Martel, Pennycook, & Rand, 2020). Fake news often gains traction due to its provocative nature (Tandoc et al., 2018). However, most studies on organizational responses to fake news emphasize factual communication. As Ecker et al. (2024) argue, “Simply declaring that ‘facts are facts’ is not sufficient, particularly given that people’s processing of evidence and knowledge claims is to some extent determined by social factors. It is precisely because truth is not self-evident that malicious actors can easily create confusion” (p. 32).

#### *Legitimacy crisis management and emotions*

To address these limitations, we examine how organizations manage legitimacy crises. A legitimacy crisis arises when an organization's actions are socially contested (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Legitimacy refers to the extent to which observers perceive an organization as conforming to social norms, standards, or beliefs (Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011). Crisis management has been defined as a “set of coordinated communication and actions used to influence evaluators’ crisis perceptions” (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015, p. 346). Traditional crisis management literature often employs attribution theory (Coombs, 2007) to understand how responsibility is attributed during crises. However, attribution theory is limited in addressing fake news, where the very existence of a crisis is debated (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Fake news crises focus on how social judgments are formed and managed (Jahng, 2021; Tandoc et al., 2018).

During a legitimacy crisis, organizations seek to influence observers' perceptions to rebuild legitimacy. Recent research on social judgement formation (Bitektine, 2011; Mishina, Block, & Mannor, 2012) build on cognitive and social psychology to complement institutional

perspectives on legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). It highlights that legitimacy is subjectively bestowed and shaped by perceptions that develop among beholders. Beyond cognitive, strategic, and moral dimensions of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), legitimacy formation also involves conscious deliberation and subconscious emotional processes (Bitektine, 2011). While evaluators like policymakers and scholars tend to use rational processes in assessing legitimacy, the general public often relies on associative, spontaneous judgments (Bitektine, 2011; Haack et al., 2014). This is also case of general users of social media users loosely connected with the issue (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019). Legitimacy judgements of the general public will be influenced by evaluators validity cues (in the form of data, facts, etc.) but also by more subtle processes of socialization, persuasion and norm diffusion (Burstein, 2021; Deitelhoff, 2009).

Third-parties play a crucial role in legitimacy formation, as evaluations of one organization can spill over to others perceived as cognitively related (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Legitimacy scholars recognize the role of a third-parties, in generating positive legitimacy spillovers to an organization (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Kostova and Zaheer (1999) suggest that one of the main mechanisms that underlines legitimacy spillovers is the degree of similarity between the object of reference and the organization evaluated. The object of reference is often an ideal. Ideals are structured around a set of basic and universally moral concepts such as care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, and purity (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt and Joseph, 200&). The degree of similarity has been mostly described as “cognitive reference point” that sets the mental heuristics leading to social judgements (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 273). Haack et al (2014) argues for the need to study the juxtaposition of similarity heuristics with emotional heuristics to understand legitimacy spillovers.

The role of emotions in organizational legitimacy has gained attention (Scott, 2008; Voronov & Vince, 2012) as emotions shape social judgments (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Hart

& Nisbet, 2012). Individuals are more receptive to emotionally resonant messages that reinforce their beliefs (de Vaujany & Vaast, 2016; D.A. Snow & Benford, 1988). Managing moral and solidarity emotions is central to legitimation efforts (Barberà-Tomàs, Castelló, de Bakker, & Zietsma, 2019). For instance, Lefsrud et al. (2016) show how oil institutions and activists used symbolic images in their legitimacy struggle to evoke strong moral emotions in their constituents. Such emotions foster coherence and continuity, enhancing organizational recognition over time (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Ontario winemakers, for example, leveraged solidarity emotions to foster public identification and pride in their products (Massa, Tucci, & Afuah, 2017). Managing emotions can be done through promoting emotional dynamics between emotional “lows” (e.g., frustration, disappointment, or upset) and “highs” (e.g., excitement, passion, or enthusiasm). The dynamics of the highs and lows are explained by Jasper (1998), who describes the emotional battery as the “contrast” between positive and negative emotional states; this drives action, fosters creativity, and instills a feeling of urgency. For instance, animal welfare activists suppress painful emotions to offer persuasive, rational arguments to external “others” (Jarvis, Goodrick, & Hudson, 2020). Catholic workers open themselves up to vulnerability and uncertainty to heighten emotions and connect more deeply to the group ethos (Ness & Summers-Effler, 2018).

Despite the increasing recognition of emotions in building legitimacy (Barbera-Tomas et al. 2019), few studies have explored how to manage emotions during a legitimacy crisis. The context of fake news is important because the point of initiation for organizations is very different from those encountering other challenges. Fake news crises elicit strong negative emotions towards organizations (Pollock, Lashley, Rindova, & Han, 2019). Those managing such crises must navigate emotions while maintaining institutional norms (Reinecke & Ansari, 2021; Suddaby, Ganzin, & Minkus, 2017).

## Methods

### *Research context: HPV vaccination campaign case study*

In 2015, Ireland's HSE suffered a fake news attack by an anti-vaccination organization called REGRET. This organization was campaigning against the HSE's strategy of using the Gardasil vaccine to protect young women against HPV, which is an identified cause of cervical cancer. The fake news attack was channeled through social media. It contained more than 60 stories about alleged victims of the Gardasil vaccine. REGRET's attack decreased vaccination rates from 85% to 50% in less than two years (GOV3-2022). Alarmed by the effectiveness of REGRET, Brenda Corcoran (HSE's Immunisation Office Director) realized the HSE had lost legitimacy for the vaccination campaign and could not deal with the crisis on its own. Even though the organization had been leading an ongoing prevention campaign of communication for vaccination based on scientific facts the rate of vaccinated children was still decreasing. They thus sought new ways of responding to the crisis. Soon after, Laura Brennan, a 25-year-old woman suffering from terminal cervical cancer, contacted the HSE's HPV campaign director, Aghna Harte, to offer help with the campaign. Laura joined a team of patient advocates but soon became the face of the HSE, working closely with the HSE team and contributing to an uptick in Ireland's HPV vaccination rates to 74% nationally (HSE-2023) and 90% in Laura's home county (Clareecho-2020) in 2020. Figure 1 summarizes the timeline of events since 2010. We focus our study on the HSE's response to target public's exposure to fake news. Indeed, previous research has shown that inoculation before exposure to fake news can reduce the belief in antivaccination information but once people have been exposed very hard to change their minds (Jolley & Douglas, 2017). This paper focuses on how the HSE, facing the failure of an "only rational" response to fake news worked with Laura to engage with the families targeted by the vaccination campaign—this is what we call the target public since they were the target

of the HSE campaign—to improve the legitimacy of the campaign and organization (the HSE) and, ultimately, increase the vaccination rates.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

#### *Data sources and collection*

We observed the interactions between four types of actors: REGRET and the people leading and supporting its fake news campaigns; the HSE, via employees and official communications; Laura Brennan, independent from the HSE but supporting it; and, finally; the target public, namely the people (mostly Irish families) who were the target of the HSE and REGRET campaigns. The research team collected data about the case from September 2020 to January 2024. We made sense of the case by triangulating data from multiple sources (Yin, 2009), namely social media netnography, video, radio, mass media analysis, and interviews, each of which we will describe in detail. Table 1 summarizes the data and its uses.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

***Netnography.*** We conducted a netnography study (Kozinets, 2015) by examining the Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram social media platforms. We took a community-based approach (Kozinets, 2015) and looked at the interactions between REGRET, Laura Brennan, the HSE, the Irish Cancer Society, and other key actors (e.g., Dr. David Robert Grimes) who promoted the HPV campaigns. To that aim, we observed the interactions between these actors by collecting discussion threads and posts as well as comments. We also searched for engagement with the posts to observe the extent to which the actors supported each other (especially Laura and the HSE). On Twitter, we reviewed three accounts: Laura Brennan’s public personal account, the HSE’s official account, and REGRET’s official account. We collected 345 interactions (discussion threads) containing 2,396 tweets in total. The tweets are referred to as follows in the text: “TW-date-name of the author.” On Facebook, we collected

posts on three accounts: REGRET's, the HSE's, and the Irish Cancer Society's. We collected 97 discussion threads containing 189 posts. We refer to the posts as follows: "FACEB-date-author." Finally, we collected data from Laura's public personal Instagram account. We collected 56 posts from this account. We refer to her Instagram posts as follows: "INST-date-Laura."

**Videos.** Videos constituted a central element of the HSE and Laura's strategy. We analyzed 25 videos, totaling 527 minutes, posted on YouTube and on RTÉ's website (an Irish TV channel). A list of videos analyzed is provided in Table 1 of the appendices, available from the authors. We refer to the videos as follows: "VID-source-date."

**Radio recordings.** We analyzed four radio programs. The radio recordings informed listeners about Laura's experiences and gave us detailed information about her discourse and the way she expressed her emotions. We refer to the recordings as follows: "Radio-source-year."

**Press articles.** We read 36 press articles and analyzed four websites; these helped us to contextualize the case and gave us a general understanding of the narratives of the organizations under study. We refer to the recordings as follows: "Source-year."

**Interviews.** We conducted 10 interviews with Laura's family (her parents and brother) and people from Irish health institutions supporting Laura's advocacy (the HSE, Royal College of Physicians, Irish Cancer Society, scientists). Each interview lasted between 39 and 107 minutes. All the interviews have been anonymized, and pseudonyms are used in this paper. Unfortunately, Laura died in 2019, so we were not able to engage directly with her.

### *Data analysis*

We followed a three-step inductive theory generation approach (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). First, we conducted open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to understand how the HSE

and Laura interacted with the target public and REGRET during and after the fake news crisis. When looking at the data, we were intrigued by the importance the HSE placed on Laura in resolving the crisis. Also, we were puzzled by the way Laura exposed her own suffering and engaged emotionally on social media, as this was a discourse that was far removed from the HSE initial discourse, which mainly consisted of providing scientific data. The netnographic approach allowed us to capture the interactions Laura developed with vaccine-hesitant people and with members of anti-vaccination groups. From the analysis of social media, we identified some of the emotional strategies used and observed the responses to these messages. We used Gylfe et al.'s (2016) video methods to analyze the use of emotions in videos. We looked at data showing Laura's (videos and photos) within the setting in which they were taken (private moment, hospital, and official event) and extrapolated intentionality from the discourse and the emotion work. Finally, we patterned her actions across our data (social media, interviews, and visual material), identifying, for example, when and how she shared details of her treatment with posts (pictures and text) of her in the hospital. We also used the interviews and archive data to complement our knowledge of the case and corroborate the first intuitions we had from direct observation of the data. From this, we identified 75 first-order codes.

Second, we conducted a second-order analysis to search out similarities and differences across codes to streamline our data structure. We reduced the number of first-order codes to 55 and identified 26 second-order codes related to what we considered to be the most interesting process; that is, repairing the vaccination campaign legitimacy with emotion management done by the organization and Laura. We identified 6 third-order codes that captured the emotion work undertaken to counter the fake news attacks. The authors met regularly to exchange views on their analysis and reach agreement on all the codes proposed in the data structure. We iterated between data and theory to conceptualize the categories (Gioia et al., 2013). Lastly, we built our data structure (Figure 2) and designed a model to visually make sense of the process (Figure

3). We present the model in the findings. Table 2 gives examples for each of the second-order codes.

INSERT FIGURE 2 AND TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

## Findings

We describe how the HSE and Laura Brennan, worked to repair the HSE legitimacy after the REGRET fake news campaigns. Through this case, we present a model of emotion management after a fake news crisis consisting of four main elements. First is the organization's connection with the emotionality of the issue. Second, Laura's emotional vicarious legitimacy building. Third, Laura's transfer of this legitimacy to the organization. Finally, Laura and the organization's activation of the target public to convince them to get vaccinated. Figure 3 depicts the model.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

### *Connection with the emotionality of the issue*

***Recognize the emotionality of the issue.*** The first months of fake news attacks by REGRET caused a drastic drop in vaccination rates and the HSE realized they needed to do something about this. However, their communication efforts, which were mainly centered on training nurses and doctors, were failing. As Helen, the former Head of HSE Immunisation Office, acknowledged: “*The HSE had lost legitimacy*” (Helen-June-2022).

The HSE's campaigns, were framed using a purely scientific approach. Anna argued that they could not make the necessary emotional connection with the target public, in this case vaccine-hesitant (mainly) girls and their parents. They needed to create an emotional connection to make people react: “*The first year we were on social media, we took a tack that we replied*



*to every single comment that they posted with factual information on the website, but it was making absolutely no impact at all” (Anna-June-2022).*

Matters escalated when, at one of the first events organized by the HSE to present the HPV campaign, Helen and Bob were attacked by members of REGRET: *“We were verbally and close to physically attacked [...] they hijacked the meeting [...] they wheeled in a young lady in a wheelchair; they videoed the interaction at the meeting and this video was seen by several million people” (Bob-June-2022).* The aggression made Helen and Bob realize that the HPV vaccination campaign was highly emotional. At that stage, the Minister for Health decided to get involved. As Daniel, an independent scientist and social media influencer, noted: *“[The] Minister for Health, Simon Harris, became very personally involved as well [...] he] has a brother who is autistic, and his family are very used to misinformation.” (Daniel-July-2022).* The dawning recognition that emotions were necessary to the campaign was cogently expressed by Rose, the HSE’s social media manager: *“The REGRET campaign was so emotive that facts just weren’t going to cut it. It [the HSE’s campaign] needed to meet emotion with emotion” (Rose-June-2022).*

***Recognize the need for a third-party to deal with emotionality.*** The HSE was fundamentally a scientific institution. Their slogan for the HPV campaign was “get the facts.” It was difficult to change the science-based orientation of the HSE; however, the lived experiences of Bob, Helen, and Minister Simon Harris made them reflect on how they might engage differently with REGRET. They were more aware of the importance of emotions for the target public. They also knew that the HSE’s loss of legitimacy meant that this could not be achieved by the HSE alone. They realized that they needed new actors; people who could bring about a shift away from the campaign’s purely scientific orientation and bring in some human experiences. They acknowledge that they, as members of the HSE, could not be the vessel for a more emotional discourse, and that patients would be a much better voice for emotions: *“I*

*think if you want to promote HPV vaccination. You get far more bang for your buck if you have a 14 or 15 year old girl. And I got the HPV vaccine because I read up on it and I want to get it then if you have a 40 year old woman who works as a gynecologist. Or worse. A 40 year old man who works as a gynecologist” (John-July-2022)*

***Embed third-parties in the organization to deal with emotionality.*** The HSE started to work with patient advocates. They quickly realized that being a patient was not a sufficient condition for effective engagement with the target public. Helen stated that: *“We had tried on a number of occasions to look for women who’d had cervical cancer [...] but it didn’t really develop [a] huge amount. They were very helpful, but it certainly didn’t catch on the way Laura did”* (Helen-June-2022).

Laura Brennan, a young woman suffering from terminal cervical cancer, contacted the HSE via a Facebook message. Anna, who led the communication campaign at the HSE, connected emotionally with Laura and soon understood how important it was for the organization to embrace the emotional discourse that Laura was bringing to the organization. As Anna said: *“She [Laura] was delighted to be involved in the campaign, really took it on as kind of a personal challenge”* (Anna-June-2022). Laura actively took part in official events and actions undertaken by the HSE and other partnering organizations: *“I’ve done lots of media interviews and have spoken at many HPV related events. I was very lucky to be invited to Copenhagen by the WHO [World Health Organization] to consult with them about HPV advocacy”* (HSE-official website-sept. 2018). To ensure the advocacy’s success, the HSE insisted on bringing Laura an emotional support for her actions. Daniel highlights: *“Everybody at the HSE adored Laura, she was a beautiful person”* (Daniel-June-2022). The organization also brought her a lot of emotional support outside of their publicly open interactions. Laura was wholeheartedly nurtured by the organization, as Anna explained: *“They [Laura’s family] wanted somebody to mind her and somebody to be like the one person that they can call if they need it. [...] I was*

*delighted to be that person [...] And we talked a lot*” (Anna-June-2022). Anna continued: “*We always said we were lucky [...] It’s not like we were carrying her along for the ride. It was like we each had our objectives and hers aligned with ours*” (Anna-June-2022). The autonomy Laura had was very important in achieving the HSE’s emotion work, as it helped the target public to differentiate Laura from the organization and more easily connect with her.

Laura had a powerful story and an amazing way of engaging with the target public. The HSE provided her with knowledge about the illness and with communication support to help her engage with the press, produce videos, and make presentations in meetings. Most importantly, Laura felt supported and embedded in the HSE, and the HSE trusted her. The HSE was able to create a foundation upon which to develop an alternative discourse that included emotional and personal stories and the HSE’s scientific arguments.

#### *Vicarious legitimacy building*

The HSE oriented their efforts toward cultivating Laura’s own management of emotions by developing a very personal emotional connection between her and the target public who had been exposed to REGRET’s fake news campaigns. This rests on the creation of two type of emotional heuristics: first, creating emotional solidarity echoing the target public own experience. Second, resorting to emotional battery, from moral shock to positive emotions to elicit empathy from the target public.

***Echo target public experience.*** Through Laura’s story, the HSE deployed solidarity emotions. Laura often argued she was just an ordinary girl to whom young women and their parents could easily relate. In her videos and social media, she shared everyday moments with her family and friends. In the documentary *This Is Me* she was filmed enjoying a drink in the pub with her friends, discussing matters unrelated to her cancer (VID-Laura-31.05.2019). REGRET tended to share the testimonies of girls who had, prior to the vaccination, outstanding

academic credentials and sporting aptitude. Laura presented herself in stark and realistic contrast to the idealized narrative of the “elite” victim employed in the fake news from REGRET. Laura portrayed herself as ordinary, a “*very rebellious 13-year-old*,” who achieved only average results at school (VID-Laura-31.05.2019). As her brother Marc said, “*She just resonated because she was a normal woman; she’s like anyone’s daughter, anyone’s sister*” (Marc-July-2022).

Laura strategically decided to show proof of the reality of her illness. By consistently sharing videos and images of her body in pain, Laura and the HSE aimed at showing reality, as Anna explained: “*We went with a stronger campaign, definitely. And real-life stories always work because people can see themselves in the person*” (Anna-June-2022). One way of achieving this was for Laura to show her body through pictures and present herself physically to the world. As John, a reputable scientist and councilor at the HSE, stated: “*I think that lived experience—it will always be much stronger than anything that somebody can talk about*” (John-July-2022). In response, people showed faith in Laura’s testimony. The public responded with support when she shared the more normal moments one might expect to see in a young girl’s life on social media. For instance, @canisgallicus commented: “*Laura hope u enjoyed Ed Sheeran*” (TW-08.05.2018-Michelle) or she posted pictures of a trip in Turkey with a friend with people commenting about how beautiful were the pictures (INST-02.06.2018-Laura).

**Deploy emotional battery.** Laura sought to trigger moral shock by revealing the facts of her lived reality not through cold statistics and science, but through images of her own life and impending death. Laura’s story triggered moral shock to engage the public and connect. Laura often shared her experience of having cancer on the radio (Radio-Clare-2019) and was quite upfront about her imminent death: “*If I could, I would sit down with every parent in the country, but I’m afraid I don’t have time for that. I’ll probably be dead in a couple of years [...] I’m facing my death, and the reason is a virus that your child doesn’t have to get*” (HSE-2018).

Laura's death was central to her message and also to the way she visually narrated her story, as shown in the documentary about her life, *This Is Me*. The documentary opens with images of Laura's funeral, with her lying dead in her coffin (VID-Laura-31.05.2019). Including footage of her funeral in the documentary was important to Laura, despite initial opposition from the HSE. Sharing sadness and guilt was an emotional strategy that supported the moral shock she sought to create to work against the fake news spread by REGRET. For instance, in a video for the WHO, Laura's father is shown in tears but smiling while trying to comfort his wife, expressing guilt about Laura's cancer (VID-WHO-28.01.2019).

Laura's work elicited emotions of sadness and moral shock but also empathy in the target public. For example, the user @eosull responded to a post about the documentary, *This Is Me*, by writing: "*Sad but beautiful. Tears flowed @thankyoulaura*" (TW-31.05.2019-Eileen). In response to a post made by Laura explaining the vile comments she had received since the beginning of her advocacy, user @richardinho3 responded: "*That's shocking to hear. Some very sad people out there. You are doing great work and keep doing it Laura*" (TW-07.09.2018-Richie). In some cases, the target public reacted angrily to the propagation of fake news related to Laura's situation. For instance, the user @Rinnythegopher commented on one of Laura's posts: "*I am amazed to live in a time when there is a VACCINE FOR CANCER and ashamed to live in a time when rampant ignorance and cruelty prevents its use to save lives. Sweet Baby Jesus... people it is a VACCINE against CANCER! What do you NOT get? Humans suck. Not you Laura*" (TW-11.07.2018-Rinny). The target public connected because they were witness to Laura's struggles. @RichelleFlan, for instance, commented on one of Laura's posts: "*What a selfless act to be promoting care for others whilst you go through your own difficult journey. I wish you all the best with your treatment and thank you as a mother of a little girl for advocating on her behalf*" (TW-11.07.2018-Richelle).

Laura aimed at transforming this emotional connection based on negative emotions into positive energy to reinforce the target public's engagement. Laura did not want to stay in a negative emotional state or just rely on sadness and negativity to share her message. She also presented herself as a beautiful, strong, and happy woman; a woman promoting positivity and transforming negative emotions into positive energy that would convey an alternative true story. For Laura, promoting positivity and sharing happiness was central to her strategy: "*Laura always brought a smile to banish tears*" (clareecho-2019). Despite being in pain, she was keen to be seen as more than just a victim. Vicky Phelan, a fellow patient advocate, remembers: "*I was struck by her positivity. I couldn't get over how positive she was*" (journal.ie-2019). On social media, she regularly shared improvements in her condition and details of how the treatment was going: "*[G]ot the best possible outcome from my scan. So today is [a] great day thanks for all the positive vibes my way... #cervicalcancer #greatnews #gintonight #celebration*" (TW-26.04.2018-Laura). The target public also engaged with Laura's way of integrating humor and dedramatizing her situation. Some users responded to Laura with good natured humor; for example, when she asked people on Twitter what to do with her mask from radiotherapy, someone suggested she turn it into a "hat stand" (TW-30.01.2019-Laura). In sum, the HSE's active use of Laura's story, first through emotional batteries (Jasper, 1998) promoting moral shock and sharing happiness supported by similarity with the target public, and consistency created emotional connection, which helped the HSE—through Laura—to engage in the following stage of emotion management after a fake news attack.

### *Legitimacy transfer*

To restore the legitimacy of the HSE's vaccination campaign, Laura sought to transfer her emotional connection with the target public to the organization. First, Laura supported the HSE, and more specifically its HPV vaccination campaign. Second, Laura humanized the

organization, showing how friendly and how close she was with people from the HSE. Finally, she denounced the threat and scaremongering techniques of fake news conveyors, thus reinforcing the credibility of organizational discourse.

**Support the organization.** Within hours of having her diagnosis Laura contacted the HSE to work with them for cervical cancer prevention. She saw the organization as a legitimate actor to convey her message and decided to support their campaign: *“I got behind the campaign [HSE HPV vaccination campaign] because I don’t want any father, sister, brother, friends or family to lose someone from such a horrible illness”* (VID-RTE-13.04.2018). The HSE benefitted from Laura’s emotional connection with the target public, as established through her official advocacy. Indeed, Laura became the face of the HSE’s HPV webpage (HSE-2019) and spoke at official events (TW-07.12.2018-HSE). She participated in several of the HSE’s official prevention campaign videos for the HPV vaccine (VID4-23.03.2018). Laura support to the HSE through her advocacy, enabled her to validate the HSE’s actions and transfer the emotional connection to the organization. She support the HSE production of knowledge and recommend to people to look at their sources to get the best information. Through the connection she made with the target public, and have people relate to her, she is able to direct them to the organization’s information: *“it’s natural to be scared of things I’d probably would’ve been scared of things if I didn’t have my full information about everything. So I would urge parents to go onto reputable websites like HPV.ie [HSE HPV website]”* (VID-RTE-13.04.2018). Laura also openly supports the organization’s online. On Twitter she for instance is grateful for the HSE, responding to a doctor: *“Aw thank you Elaine and thank you for looking after me so well! So lucky to have people like you in our health service @PeopleofHSE @HSELive”* (TW-08.11.2018-Laura2).

**Humanize the organization.** Laura also worked in providing a human face to the HSE through her personal connection to the organization. Laura displayed a genuine emotional connection with the HSE. Laura often showed her friendships with people from the scientific community. She for instance showed a close friendship with Daniel, an HSE physician. Laura also displayed her connection and friendship with those from the HSE and the HPV Alliance, which she supplemented with images of her physical condition. She was accompanied by Helen from the HSE during her appearance on Irish television's *The Late Late Show* (VID-RTÉ-13.04.2018). On one picture she posted on her Instagram from this event she smiles with Helen in front of the *Late Late Show* logo, referring to her as a friend (INST-15.05.2018-Laura). Laura often shows her emotional connection with nurses and doctors. In one of her tweets, she stated that *"the nurses in @ULHospitals are incredible. [...] Today was emotional and the support I got I will never forget"* (TW-27.12.2018-L). Through her pictures and comments, Laura shared the proximity she felt with the people in the HSE, providing the organization with a human face. The target public learned that the HSE was an organization worthy of Laura's trust, and therefore their own.

**Denounce the threat of fake news.** Laura denounced the unreliable nature of REGRET's messaging: *"Seeing so much antivax on social media lately is really concerning and to top it off @LMFMRADIO aired a scaremongering piece on the HPV vaccine with an antivaxxer. We know the HPV vaccine is safe and effective and will save lives [sic]. Cervical cancer on the other hand..."* (TW-15.10.2018-Laura2). Laura and the HSE also countered REGRET and its supporters' arguments with information about the proven safety of the HPV vaccine. Retweeting content produced by Daniel, a scientist on social media, Laura stated: *"I always wondered what motivated Antivaxxers to spread lies which will cost lives [sic]. I choose to believe Medical experts and science. Heck, if I didn't I would have forgone conventional cancer treatment gone on the alkaline diet and I'd be dead by now"* (TW-09.10.2018-Laura2). It was



by highlighting the scaremongering tactics of those who were spreading fake news and the ways their lies could endanger people's health that Laura created a counter-discourse to the fake news. Laura created a strong divide between the HSE and REGRET. In response to Laura's emotional energy transfer to the HSE, the target public responded with disapproval of REGRET. For example, the user @thomasbrunkard commented on an anti-HPV vaccine post about alleged side effects in a discussion with Laura: *"They sadly would still be suffering vaccine or no. The parents that push fallacies about this vaccine need another punchbag. It's selfish to spread lies that put other's daughters at risk"* (TW-24.07.2018-Thomas). Another user commented on one of Laura's posts after a comment was left against the vaccine: *"[O]h for god sake EDUCATE YOURSELF you absolute donkey. Shame on you more like. Keep up the good work Laura 🙏"* (TW- 04.03.2019-Kim).

#### *Activation of target public*

With a renewed legitimacy gained through Laura's advocacy, the HSE and Laura seek to activate the target public, generating hope for the future and propelling people to act upon their vaccination choice against HPV.

**Elicit hope.** Emotional activation consisted of creating hope and generating positive emotions in the target public. Vaccines are reliable; they represent the best hope of reducing cervical cancer. For instance, in one of Laura's tweets, she was pictured sitting in a hospital chair with various tubes connected to her arms. She is smiling, a pair of sunglasses perched on her head. She states: *"I've spent over 110 hours receiving treatment in this chair over the last 17 months. Imagine if there was a vaccine that could protect your child from this [...] Oh wait there is #hpvvaccine"* (TW-10.07.2018-Laura).

**Foster sense of responsibility to act.** The target public was encouraged to act upon the vaccination crisis and take action to vaccinate young girls and boys. Through her testimony,

Laura aimed to empower the target public to act. She transferred responsibility for preventing the spread of cervical cancer to them. When sharing her story in international as well as national prevention campaigns, she asked people to fact-check what they saw or heard about the vaccine and to get their information from reputable sources. She challenged the fake news agenda by encouraging people not to be “*swayed by rumors*” (VID-HSE-23.03.2018), but to draw on the relevant scientific resources to “*find out themselves that the vaccine is safe and effective*” (VID-HSE-12.03.2019).

Calling out to a collective dynamic in the fight for the vaccine strengthened Laura’s support base, especially on social media. Over the years, people spoke out on social media to support Laura. For instance, Twitter user Dan offered his support in a discussion thread: “*Brennan’s right; risk of cervical cancer is low before age 25...*” (TW-28.04.2018-Dan). People also complained about a radio show that had contributed to the fake news agenda by allowing an antivaxxer to broadcast false information about the HPV vaccine. John commented on one of Laura’s posts: “[T]hank you for the thread. Btw, I’ve not heard back from @LMFMRADIO or @SineadBrassil about giving #antivax campaigner @aileeniorio a platform but I’m hoping they regret the decision” (TW-15.10.2018-John). With her story, Laura encouraged people to make use of their power to prevent any child from developing a cancer like hers. She highlighted that the target public had a responsibility to take action to dismiss false information and trust science by vaccinating their children.

#### *Deploy organizational discourse based on facts*

In the process of working together Laura and the HSE found a discourse that was blending cognitive and emotional heuristics. Their discourse contain emotional work but also facts and science.

**Provide third-party with facts.** The HSE provided her with training on scientific facts regarding relevant issues. John highlights: *“We do try and provide with training on the science we’ve been working on. It depends on what they [advocates] want to do. Like some women, they’re all women in my situation, they want to go and tell their story, like Laura and other women want to be involved in the background, like giving information, giving advice, providing reviewing policies and documents and things like that.”* (John-July-2022). Laura was provided with scientific facts by the HSE, thereby helping the organization deploy its scientific discourse. As Laura’s father, Larry, pointed out, Laura knew all the details of her disease; she was in constant contact with doctors and nurses (notes, Larry Brennan-June-2022). Laura relied on science to enhance her message and constantly updated her knowledge regarding her condition. In one Twitter conversation (TW-10.07.2018-Laura2), Laura answered an antivaxxer with links and studies to sustain and support her arguments. She described the content of the scientific studies she cited, showing that she had read and assimilated them to respond to fake news. She responded to a vaccine-hesitant user by writing: *“Safety sources pinned to the top of my page if you want to read. It is one of the most tested vaccines ever. Over 200 million doses have been administered. So there is already plenty information on how safe it is”* (TW-10.07.2018-Laura2). Laura often expressed a message of trust in science and the HSE: *“Since being diagnosed with cancer I get messages daily recommending different diets to cure me [...] I’ve had terminal cancer over a year and thanks to palliative treatment my life is great. Trust science”* (TW-08.11.2018-Laura).

**Cognitive and emotional heuristics to create legitimacy.** Laura’s testimony enabled the HSE to show that vaccines are safe and remind the target public of their positive impact: *“It’s really telling the truth, basing it on science, basing it on your experience, and also basing it on you as a user, either as a mother or a daughter, how these things are actually good and why we use them and reminding people about all the infections that we never see anymore because*

*of vaccinations” (Sarah-July-2022). Laura’s assimilation and use of scientific discourse in her advocacy enabled the HSE to find the right balance between science and emotion heuristics. As Anna, the HSE’s campaign director, observed, “Emotion has to be used sparingly. If every campaign we did had a huge emotional weight, we’d lose impact really fast. [...] And not everything needs that, needs that emotional weight. [...] I think we’re now very good at knowing what the right tone is at the right time, hopefully” (Anna-June-2022). Indeed, the right balance is important to find for the organization as they have witnessed that if the content directly relayed by the organization (e.g. official campaigns) is too emotional it might not work to respond to fake news: “we tested a few different versions of the video after editing. We had one that was really super hard hitting. Just Laura. Just the camera. There were no edits, it was just her big, beautiful eyes. And like, when we tested people, they said ‘I am absolutely horrified’, ‘too scared’, ‘I can’t even watch the end of it’, ‘it’s just too much’ or ‘I can’t bear the emotional weight of it’. So when we kind of tone it down and mixed it in with the others, it became more palatable to people because there was no point in this being shocking” (Anna-July-2022)*

### *Legitimacy outcomes*

In response to Laura’s actions, the target public thanked the HSE for their actions; this indicates that Laura had restored an emotional connection with the organization. This is shown in the following tweets: “Just watched @laura\_jbrennan doc: This Is Me on @rte. #ThankYouLaura for all you did in your short life to help save others. So grateful to the @HSELive that my three daughters have received the HPV vaccine.” (TW-10.06.2019-Tracie) and “Well done to @HSELIVE & everyone associated with this project. Special thanks to Laura @laura\_jbrennan for being the ‘face’ of this vital campaign. It’s a tough job dealing with mis-information and conspiracy-theory peddlers.” (TW-11.03.2019-Stephen). Furthermore, following Laura’s strategic actions, Laura and the HSE were simultaneously tagged and supported by the target

public. We found numerous target public testimonies confirming renewed trust in the HSE vaccination campaign, science, and vaccines after interacting with Laura. For instance, @jkd1969 tweeted: *“Sorry to hear you have to endure this... I’m determined my daughter is getting the HPV vaccine when she gets to the age”* (TW-18.07.2018-Kevin). Many people came to rely on Laura’s story to talk about the HPV vaccine and encourage its uptake. For instance, @tharry commented: *“Laura, I talk to young girls about HPV- okay 2 tell them your story?”* Laura responded, *“Of course, my full story’s on the hse website if that’s helps. Let me know if you need any more information I’d be glad to help,”* (TW-27.04.2018-Tracey).

Laura’s impact on the HSE’s vaccination campaign has been broadly recognized. The Irish Cancer Society estimates she had prevented around 12 women per year from developing cervical cancer (irishtimes-2019). Laura became hugely popular in Ireland: *“If you ask[ed] most people in Ireland at that time, they all knew who Laura Brennan was. [...] And it wasn’t just in Ireland. [...] And there’s no doubt that her input was huge in the turnaround. [...] [With the] MMR vaccine and autism, it took nearly 20 years for some of the uptake to get back to what it was”* (Helen-June-2022).

Laura’s work was also recognized on social media, as evidenced by the following testimonies: *“Well done Laura, you are a warrior & an inspiration. Thanks to you, I changed my mind (and a friend’s). Now we’re both getting our girls vaccinated”* (TW-12.10.2018-Laura) and *“I met two parents while canvassing last night who had decided not to avail of #HPVvaccine for their daughters. Laura Brennan changed their minds. What a legacy”* (TW-02.04.2019-Eric). Laura’s legacy endures and was used in subsequent campaigns such as those for COVID vaccines. As Anna explained: *“We were planning the COVID vaccine and people were starting to talk about Laura”* (Anna-June-2022).

## Discussion

We have demonstrated how the HSE, in response to a fake news assault, effectively managed its legitimacy to influence public behavior towards vaccination. The HSE collaborated closely with third-party advocate Laura Brennan, who played a pivotal role in the HSE's strategy to regain legitimacy. Laura established vicarious legitimacy by empathizing with the public's experiences and employing emotional appeals. Subsequently, she facilitated the transfer of this legitimacy to the HSE, restoring its credibility in the eyes of the public. Both the HSE and Laura emotionally engaged the public to foster behavioral change.

Two critical factors enabled Laura's effectiveness: first, the HSE's alignment with the emotional aspects of the issue, and second, the consistent use of scientific discourse on vaccines throughout the process. The HSE educated Laura on HPV issues and vaccination details, complementing her emotional efforts with factual reinforcement. Our findings contribute to understanding how organizations can confront and manage legitimacy crises arising from fake news incidents.

### *Contribution to the understanding of fake news*

Our study advances understanding of how organizations respond to fake news attacks, treating them as crises of legitimacy. Unlike most literature on fake news that focuses on its propagation (e.g. Lewandowsky et al., 2012, 2013; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021), we analyze how organizations react. Rather than merely debunking strategies centered on factual accuracy and impartial sources (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Woolthuis et al., 2014), we emphasize the importance of legitimacy.

First, viewing fake news through a legitimacy lens examines the collective construction of beliefs, encompassing both strategic and moral legitimacy dynamics (Suchman, 1995). Such scrutiny recognizes that fake news impinges on a person's right to be accurately informed about the risks they are facing (be it from tobacco, climate change or long COVID, for example)

(Ecker et al., 2024). By understanding fake news as leading to legitimacy crisis we argue that organizations deal with fake news not only because fake news hinders their organization goals, but also because they are dangerous for society. Democracy relies on authentic deliberation and open debate that transparently shape decision-making processes (Cohen, Fung, Bernholz, Landemore, & Reich, 2021; Habermas, 2022). Misinformation and fake news disturb this fundamental mechanism of democracy (Ecker et al, 2024), which organization can address as part of their political responsibilities (Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). Recognizing this, our case study highlights how organizations strategically manage discourse and mutual legitimacy transfers with third-party advocates to combat fake news. The organization did not create a highly emotional campaign to strategically claim the benefits of a moral shock (as fake news campaign do). The organization relied in a legitimacy transfer that could strengthen their moral position with a discourse based on science, while recognizing the importance of emotional connection with the target public.

Second, looking at fake news as leading to a legitimacy crisis also allows to capture the nuances of cognitive and emotional heuristics (Haack et al., 2014) that constitute legitimacy building, especially amongst the general public. This is even more the case in the publics relying on social media to be informed (Castelló, Etter, & Årup Nielsen, 2016). We therefore adhere to a recent wave of scholars claiming for the importance of emotions in the collective construction of beliefs in organizations (Voronov & Vince 2012; Barbera-Tomas et al. 2019). By recognizing emotions as a central element of legitimacy building, we also expand the understanding of the mechanism of public deliberation. We argue that public deliberation on societal issues should be understood beyond rational argumentation (Cohen et al., 2021; Habermas, 2022). We argue that passion and emotions are central in the deliberation process (Mouffe, 1992) in which organizations have an important stand (Castelló & Lopez-Berzosa, 2023). This is crucial in the management of fake news attacks since it has been argued that fake

news is purposely designed to be highly emotional (Berger & Milkman, 2012) and to morally polarize of society (Benkler et al., 2018; Hansen, Arvidsson, Nielsen, Colleoni, & Etter, 2011; Shao et al., 2016). Fake news attempt to create an alternative ideal to the mainstream ideal proposed by the organization subject of the fake news. However, this ideal is not built on universally moral concepts such as care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, and purity (Graham et al., 2013; Joseph & Haidt, 2006) but oppositional moral stands that denounce and disqualify others presenting them as enemies (Mouffe, 1992).

Our case study illustrates the interplay between cognitive and emotional strategies that drive legitimation. Cappella et al.'s (2015) study on corrective statements in the tobacco industry showed that visual elements in prevention messages are more effective than messages relying solely on scientific arguments. Similarly, Kim & Chen (2024) found that many COVID-19 debunking videos on YouTube use emotional framing to counter fake news. We contribute to this literature by showing how the organization subject to the fake news attack started to be successful at increasing vaccination rates when they developed a strategy that included an emotional connection with the public. We argue that the emotional connection included echoing the public's experience, and the deployment of an emotional battery of moral shock and happiness to strengthen the emotionality of the attachment (Jasper, 2012). It also included a process of showing support and showing the 'human' aspect of the organization so the public could identify with them. Emotions were also central to the recognition of the problems related to the first communication campaigns that were not successful. They helped the organization to realize the importance of moving beyond a discourse purely based on facts and science and think of the fake news attacks as an opportunity to re-identification with the public. Yet, the organization never renounced to the discourse of science and the importance of facts. This moral position permeated their emotional strategies, and became central to the process of



engagement with the public once the emotional heuristics had helped them to re-gain legitimacy.

*Vicarious legitimacy building and transfer and the role of third-party advocates*

Central to the deployment of emotional strategies and the legitimation process was the role of third-parties. Existing literature recognizes third parties primarily as fact-checkers or information providers (Domenico et al., 2021; Kim & Dennis, 2019); enhancing trustworthiness (Priester & Petty, 2003; Tay et al., 2022) and empathy (Crijns et al., 2017). The literature has focused on a classification based on their autonomy levels—ranging from autonomous advocates, who shape organizational perception independently (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2012), to spokespersons (Woolthuis et al., 2014). Our case presents a unique scenario in which the third-party is not a fact-checker nor an expert, beyond having experienced the consequences of non-vaccination. We argue that she had a unique capacity to connect emotionally with the target public. She did so by emotionally connecting with the audience, developing a sophisticated strategy of identification in combination with an emotional battery of moral shock and positivity. These strategies have been identified in the literature before (e.g. Jarvis et al., 2020; Jasper, 1998; Ness & Summers-Effler, 2018). Yet, interestingly, in our case, we argue that the third-party worked to vicariously improve the legitimacy of the organization subject of the fake news attack. We also observe how once her legitimacy was established, she worked on transferring it to the organization. She did so by showing her trust in the organization and her close relationships to its members. These findings show the importance of legitimacy spillovers based on cognition and emotions (Haack et al., 2014; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Yet they emphasize how these spillovers can be agentially organized so they become ‘transfers’ of legitimacy.

### *Implications for practice*

Our work supports the importance of interventions in dealing with fake news attack. Yet, interventions have been also criticized. First, interventions are criticized by those who advocate for low visibility and denial attributional strategies claiming that publics will eventually recreate the correct representation of the organization reality (Coombs 1995, 2007). Second, by those against any form of political or moral intervention by organizations. As claimed before, we argue about the importance of dealing with fake news because it impinges on a person's right to be accurately informed about the risks they are facing.

We therefore argue that organizations and communicators should be active in dealing with fake news. However, we claim that dealing with fake news is not only about promoting evidence-based information and standing firm against false or fraudulent claims. It is about creating strategies that assess the legitimacy losses and work with third parties so they can organize subsequent legitimacy spillovers. Choosing the right third-party is key to this process. The organization support (emotional and cognitive) given to the third-party is crucial for building an efficient response to a fake news attack.

There might be few unique individuals such as Laura Brennan. She was motivated and she was empathic. She also had the courage to expose herself in social media and deal with numerous instances of social media abuse and hate speech. However, as Laura claimed, her work would not have been possible without the support of an organization that believed in her and gave her the tools she needed to construct a credible discourse and diffuse her message.

### *Limitations and avenues for future research*

This case presents some limitations. We present a very extreme case in which the emotions conveyed by the third-party are related to her suffering. Suffering helped Laura in convening strong moral shocks and create powerful emotional heuristics. However, we also show how

showing suffering was not enough to convey her message. She needed to recreate emotional highs and lows as well as other strategies of identification as presenting herself as a normal girl. Research shows that moral shock is not the exclusive province of sick people or the healthcare sector. Other actors such as feminist activists (O’Keefe, 2014) and creative workers (Zanoni, Thoelen, & Ybema, 2017) use emotions (negative and positive) to convey identification. What Laura does uniquely is the combination of both emotions. This combination was also used by plastic activist in their claim about more radical solutions to reduce single use consumption (Barberà-Tomàs et al., 2019). Yet, dealing with fake news is unique because of the legitimacy loss that did not happen in other cases. It is also unique because the organization needed to realize the importance of the emotionality of the issue and go beyond their establish discourse based on science and facts.

Fake news crises deserve more research attention, to that end we outline a research agenda for enhancing our understanding of the responses to fake news attacks. First, future research could distinguish between types of fake news and show whether they are more amenable to being addressed by emotional strategies than others. Indeed, it would be interesting to better understand the extent to which the emotionality of the false information impacts the nature of the response formulated, in its combination of emotions and facts. False information regarding children’s health or war zones are more emotionally charged than rumors on companies or the stock market (Jolley & Douglas, 2017). While we have only begun to address these questions, we join others (Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Fotaki & Pullen, 2018; Lawrence, Schlindwein, Jalan, & Heaphy, 2023; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022) in calling attention to this vital and largely neglected aspect of management research.

Second, future research could enhance our comprehension of the instrumentalization of false information by private companies (e.g. Big Carbon, Big Tobacco) and the response formulated by various institutions connected to the issue at stake. In this case, the organizations

responding to the attack are diverse (e.g. other private organizations, public institutions). It would be interesting to delve deeper in the understanding of the construction dynamic of a systemic discourse to fight this widespread fake news (Cappella et al., 2015; López, 2022).

Third, through our data collection we identify that some people from the audience actively take part, along the HSE and Laura, in responding to fake news about HPV vaccine. It would be interesting to know more about the audience's agency in the response to fake news, especially when public institutions or endorsed third-parties are less visible than in our case.

Finally, future research would be to enhance the understanding of the public affective evaluations of organizations that are targeted by fake news attacks. Does the emotional impact depend on the target public's epistemologies and cultural codes? We believe that understanding the determinant of a public's reaction to an organization's emotion work against fake news would bring a better understanding on how to repair legitimacy after a fake news attack (Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017).

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## Tables & Figures

Table 1: Types of Data and Use in the Analysis

Source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Social media	<b>Twitter:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Three accounts reviewed (@Laura_jbrennan, @HSElive, and @REGRET_ie): 2,396 tweets: special analysis of tweets with identified keywords: fear, sad/sadness, strong/strength, hope, shock, pain, treatment, suffer, parents, daughter, vaccine, life, happy, scared, scaremongering, threat, story, death, as well as tweets with visual content.</li><li>We looked at the engagement for the tweets: cites, likes, and reposts. 345 discussion threads selected through Twitter search engine from the three accounts (@Laura_jbrennan, @HSElive, and @REGRET_ie); (from:); (@:); (from:); (to:)</li></ul> <b>Facebook:</b> REGRET (145 posts); HSE Ireland (27 posts); Irish Cancer Society (12 posts) <b>Instagram:</b> Laura’s account (Laurabrennan12): 56 pictures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Identifying significant stories of victims</li><li>- Understanding emotions</li><li>- Identifying the response of the public</li><li>- Understanding the organizations’ involvement</li><li>- Characterizing emotions using visual media</li><li>- Characterizing emotions</li><li>- Understanding emotion work</li></ul>
Videos	- 25 videos (527 min)	- Characterizing emotion work
Radio	- 8 recordings (140 min)	- Understanding emotion work
Press articles	- 36 articles (160 pages) - Laura’s story document (put together by her family) 44 pages	- Constructing the case’s historical background
Websites	HSE: 4 web pages REGRET: 4 web pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Constructing the case’s historical background</li><li>- Understanding of the relationship between actors</li></ul>
Interviews	10 interviews with Laura’s family and supporting institutions:	
	Pseudonym	Role and institution
	John	Oncologist (Mater Hospital + Dublin University)
	Helen	Former head of the HSE’s immunization office (HSE)
	Anna	Campaign director for the HSE (HSE)
	Rose	Social media manager for the HSE (HSE)
	Sarah	PR, (Royal College of Physicians)
	Marc	Laura’s brother (family)
	Daniel	Independent scientist (scientific community)
	Bob	Former head of the Irish Cancer Society (Irish Cancer Society)
	Harry	Laura’s father (Family)
	Mary	Laura’s mother (Family)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Understanding the institutional context for Laura’s advocacy</li><li>- Understanding the relationship between science and emotion</li></ul>



Table 2: Examples of Emotion Management after a Legitimacy Crisis Caused by Fake News

CONNECTION WITH THE EMOTIONALITY OF THE ISSUE	
<b>Recognize the emotionality of the issue</b>	<p><b>Acknowledge emotionality of the crisis</b>  <u>TW-19.05.2017-HSE</u>: “Why risk your daughter’s life or fertility, there’s a vaccine to prevent a deadly form of cancer get the HPV vaccine <a href="http://hvp.ie">http://hvp.ie</a>.”  <u>Anna-July-2022</u>: “You don’t change minds with facts and I think that’s what they had on their side at that stage was real emotion and they were really able to generate a lot of fear.”</p>
<b>Recognize the need for a third-party to lead emotion work</b>	<p><b>Science is not enough</b>  <u>Daniel-July-2022</u>: “We need all the science and the evidence as well, but that is not really what sways public views on things.”  <b>Need distance from the organization attacked</b>  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “she [Laura] was a beautiful girl who was unfortunately dying of this terrible disease. Nothing I said would match any of that.” (Helen-June-2022).</p>
<b>Embed the third party in the organization</b>	<p><b>Organization’s integration actors representing emotional discourse</b>  <u>TW-15.12.2017-HSE</u>: “Do you know a medical card applicant can nominate an advocate to act on their behalf? Visit <a href="http://medicalcard.ie">http://medicalcard.ie</a>.”  <u>John-July-2022</u>: “We had always said, you know, obviously to get an advocate would be so desirable. But we had tried on a number of occasions to look for women who’d had cervical cancer and I think there was somebody from Hawk who came forward and who helped talk at some meetings, but it didn’t really develop [a] huge amount. They were very helpful, but it certainly didn’t catch on the way Laura did.”  <b>Be endorsed by the organization</b>  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “If they speak on our behalf, we provide them with support. I think it really is essential, I think someone going out and just speaking without that support, both personal and professional, can be really difficult.”  <u>TW-11.03.2019-HSE</u>: “Advocate @laura_jbrennan has exciting news about the new uptake figures for the HPV vaccine. Get the facts, get the vaccine. #ProtectOurFuture #ThankYouLaura.” This tweet is followed by a video of Laura filmed by the HSE where she shares news about uptake of the vaccine.  <b>“Behind the scenes” support from the organization</b>  <u>INST-19.09.2018-Laura</u>: Laura posted a blurred picture of her and Daniel with a drink in hands along with other pictures of her advocacy. It shows their friendship beyond their scientific collaboration.  <u>Daniel-July-2022</u>: “she had the entire machinery of the Irish Health Service behind her. She still had to do all the hard work, she still changed those rates 100%, give her full credit for that.”</p>
VICARIOUS LEGITIMACY BUILDING	
<b>Deploy emotional battery</b>	

<b>Trigger a moral shock</b>	<p><b>Show real images of death</b>  <u>VID-Laura-31.05.2019-Laura</u>: “I would always be as glam as possible, even in my coffin. I’ll have fake eyelashes on, I’ve my mother warned.”  <u>Harry-December 2021</u>: “Laura’s family explained that she was in charge of what was filmed for, or excluded from, the documentary, especially regarding her death, and that it was very important to her to be shown in her coffin.”</p> <p><b>Share Laura’s experience of her body close to death</b>  <u>TW-06.02.2019-Laura</u>: “Thanks so much to @GavinGrace for having me on @ClareFM this morning. Where I discussed my recent near death experience.”  <u>Daniel-July-2022</u>: “The decision to shave her head was hers. That was entirely hers. And I was like, ‘Are you sure you’re doing it?’ Because she wanted to look sicker for that, and she wanted to make a point.”</p> <p><b>Trigger intense sadness</b>  <u>VID-Laura-31.05.2019-Kevin</u>: The family is filmed during the engagement party of Laura’s brother Kevin. He talks with Laura, and he is in tears speaking about the possibility that she might not be here for his wedding.  <u>TW-20.03.2019-Aisling</u>: A journalist pays a tribute to Laura in a tweet: “So so sad to hear @laura_jbrennan has died. She was a true inspiration 💔R.I.P.” It is one message among thousands of tweets.</p>
<b>Trigger positivity and happiness</b>	<p><b>Share happy private moments</b>  <u>VID-Laura-31.05.2019</u>: Laura prepares to deliver a speech, smiling. She says, “Cancer can change your body in a lot of ways. It can change your thinking in a lot of ways. But it was never going to change who I am.”  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “I think it just showed her as an ordinary person in an ordinary home, supported by her parents and her brothers.”</p> <p><b>Rely on humor</b>  <u>VID-Laura-31.05.2019</u>: Laura makes a joke by comparing a node situated near her neck to a “third boob.”  <u>Daniel-July-2022</u>: “The first day we met, we... I don’t know what happened, she made some jokes, and a lot of people thought it was a bit dark, and I laughed, and then I told the worst one and then she’s like, ‘I like you.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, she’s pretty cool.’”</p>
<b>Echo target audience’s experience</b>	
<b>Create symbolic consistency</b>	<p><b>Present the body in pain</b>  <u>VID-Laura-31.05.2019</u>: Laura shares the results of her scan: “There’s more cancerous lymph nodes in my lungs.” She looks very pale and tired, and her voice is trembling.  <u>TW-30.01.2019-Laura</u>: Laura shares in a tweet two photos of her neck before and after radiotherapy. The images highlight that the radiotherapy helped to significantly reduce the tumor on the right side of her neck.</p>

<b>Show similarity with target audience</b>	<p><b>This could happen to anybody</b>  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “Everyone will be a patient at some stage, whether it’s prevention or being in a hospital for something.”  <u>HSE2-2018</u>: In one of her official discourses with the HSE, Laura states that “even if cervical cancer can be treated and cured, the treatment itself is horrendous. Nobody would like to see their daughter go through that.”</p> <p><b>She is like you</b>  <u>Bob-July-2022</u>: “She came across as a very normal young woman.” (Bob-July-2022)  <u>TW-06.05.2018-Laura</u>: Laura shares a picture of her and her best friend at a concert. She shows that she is like everyone else and can go to a show.</p> <p><b>She could live a normal life</b>  <u>TW-17.10.2018-Laura2</u>: “I am currently replying from work. I am very busy and when I’m not I’m very tired and need to rest so I continue to try live a ‘normal life.’”  <u>Helen-July-2022</u>: “There’s no doubt that Laura’s story touched the nation’s heart because she was a very attractive woman, she was very bubbly, very lively. If you had to sort of, in your head, pick, design, if you like, somebody who you wanted to promote your message, she had all the attributes that you would want. I mean, tragically, she had a terminal disease, but she didn’t let that define her.”</p>
<b>LEGITIMACY TRANSFER</b>	
<b>Show support to the organization</b>	<p><b>Advocating publicly for the organization</b>  <u>Anna-July-2022</u>: “When Rose and the crew played that first campaign, that brought peer-to-peer, real stories, real impact, real alternatives. And then Laura pivot[ed] with the slam dunk after, it just cancelled out that emotion because this emotion was just bigger and it came from a trusted voice, I think, for a lot of those people in the middle.”  <u>TW-17.04.2018-Laura</u>: “The government discussed this a few weeks ago here’s the link to this <a href="https://beta.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2018-03-28/34/">https://beta.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2018-03-28/34/</a>.”</p> <p><b>Validating the organization’s actions</b>  <u>Discourse-Laura-Sept-2018</u>: When presented with the first Patient Advocacy Medal by the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland she said “I understand that parents are afraid but I’ll quote Dr Ciara Kelly once again when I say, you’re afraid of the wrong thing.” (personal document shared by Laura’s parents retracing her story)  <u>TW-15.10.2018-Laura5</u>: “6/ I share my story because I want you to protect your child from having a HPV cancer. I want to protect you from the scaremongering. If you want information - <a href="http://hvp.ie">http://hvp.ie</a> and medical professionals are the only place to get reputable information.”</p>
<b>Humanize the organization</b>	<p><b>Show proximity with the organization</b>  <u>John-July-2022</u>: “So she got up and spoke that day and she was amazing. And I had to speak after her, which was always a bit daunting, but I think from that day on, we became friends.”</p>

	TW-10.11.2018-DRG: This post shows a video of Laura and Daniel holding bottles of champagne, being close, and laughing. The caption reads “celebrating the inaugural Laura Brennan medal thanks to the ISGO I’m truly honored,” and the text reads “Blaming the champagne.”
<b>Denounce the threat of fake news</b>	<p><b>Accusations of scaremongering</b>  <u>Daniel-July-2022</u>: “Most parents who don’t vaccinate their children, they’re not antivaxxers, they’re just scared and they’re trying to do the best thing for their kids and they read something scary online and they go, oh, I don’t know, I’ll delay it.”  <u>TW-15.10.2018-Laura5</u>: “I share my story because I want you to protect your child from having a HPV cancer. I want to protect you from the scaremongering. If you want information - <a href="http://hvp.ie">http://hvp.ie</a> and medical professionals are the only place to get reputable information.”</p> <p><b>Accusations of lying</b>  <u>TW-25.01.2020-DRG</u>: “That’s the crucial issue: Anti-vaccine activists aren’t simply misguided—they’re mendacious to the extreme, shaping their messaging to frighten others into vaccine hesitancy.”  <u>Bob-July-2022</u>: When referring to the antivaxxers’ intervention, with a young girl in a wheelchair at a conference on HPV: “Interestingly, that girl appeared in a wheelchair many times and she had turned up at our gala event, but one of my colleagues had been in the bathroom when she went out. So she wheeled herself into the bathroom in her wheelchair and then stood up and did everything normally, got back into our wheelchair and then wheeled herself out. So we knew that this was a lie.”</p>
<b>DEPLOY BLENDED DISCOURSE (FACTS AND EMOTIONS BASED) TO ACTIVATE TARGET AUDIENCE</b>	
<b>Elicit hope</b>	<p><b>This can be prevented</b>  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “NGOs deal with larger groups of patients with cancers that are preventable—not only with cervical cancer, but with other head [or] neck cancers or any cancers that can be associated with that.”  <u>TW-15.04.2018-Laura</u>: Laura retweets a message of a user underlining the importance of the vaccine for prevention of cervical cancer.</p>
<b>Elicit responsibility to act</b>	<p><b>Transfer responsibility to the group</b>  <u>VID-HSE-23.03.2018-Laura</u>: In the official HSE video promoting the HPV vaccine, Laura insists on the slogan “Get the facts.”  <u>Anna-July-2022</u>: “I think every parent wants to see kids like theirs who are getting the vaccine, parents who are happy to get the vaccine, they want to see the other side, and they want kind of an endorsement, I suppose, from their peers. That’s really important.”</p> <p><b>Call for concrete actions</b>  <u>TW-15.10.2018-Laura4</u>: “Please do the right thing - vaccinate your children.”  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “She was successful and there was a tragic story, obviously, but she did what most doctors can do, save lives. Potentially, she actually has saved hundreds—internationally, thousands of people—from her end-of-life experience.”</p>
<b>DEPLOY ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE BASED ON FACTS</b>	

<p><b>Deploy the organization's scientific discourse</b></p>	<p><b>Make third-party knowledgeable about the issue</b>  <u>VID-RTÉ-13.04.2018</u>: During her appearance on <i>The Late Late Show</i>, Laura states: “I would urge parents to go on reputable websites like HSE.ie and watch the video. [...] And if there's something they are not sure about or that they have any more questions to go their GP.”  <u>TW-31.01.2019-Laura</u>: Laura answers with some medical details to a tweet asking why she had a mask for radiotherapy for cervical cancer: “I have mets in my para aortic lymph nodes which spread to other areas.”</p> <p><b>Reinforce trust in science</b>  <u>Sarah-July-2022</u>: “She was able to tell a story that she could be anyone's daughter. And I think that had a huge impact on what we were doing. I think we, as a professional organization, had the expertise and the credentials for supporting the science and that linked in with the personal stories, [which] is really important.”  <u>TW-15.10.2018-HSE</u>: The HSE Immunisation Office relays Laura's tweets: “Such an important thread thank you for being so honest about living with cervical cancer @laura_jbrennan #ProtectOurFuture.”</p>
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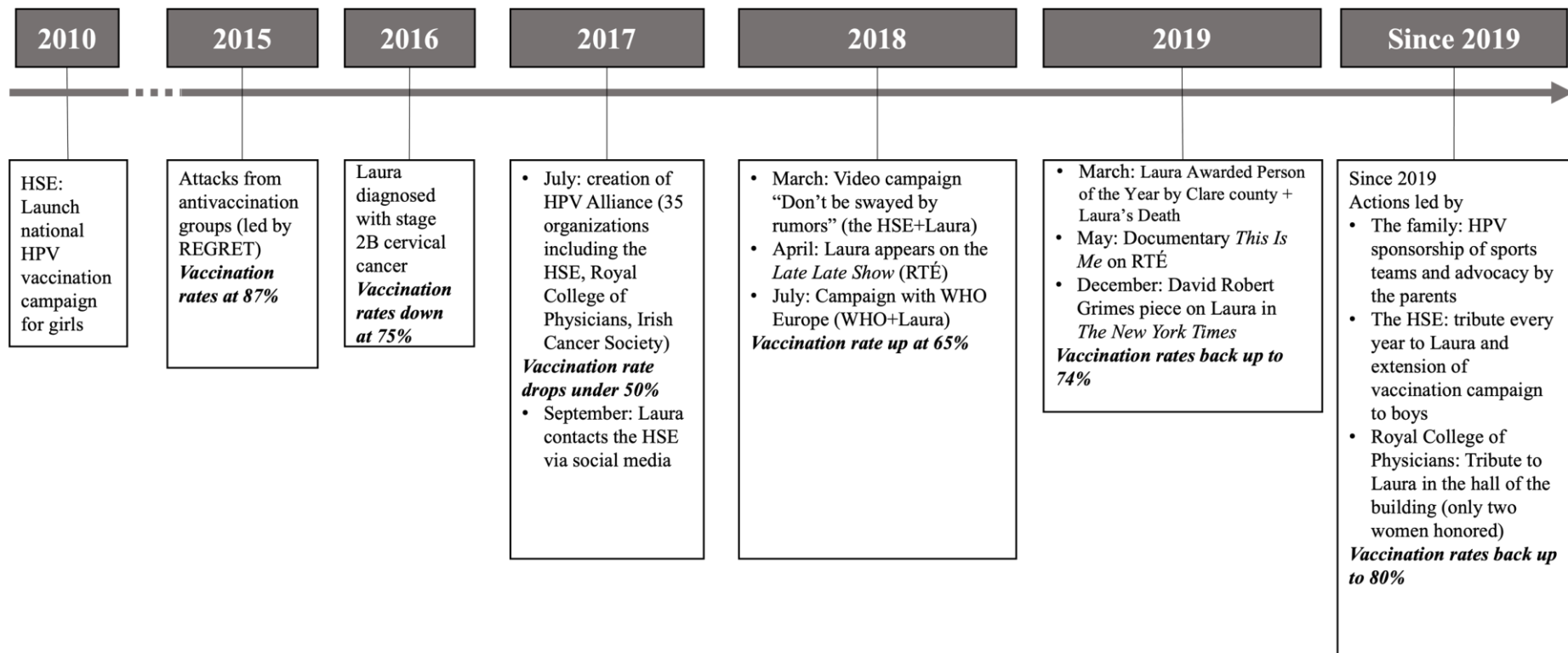


Figure 1: Timeline of Events

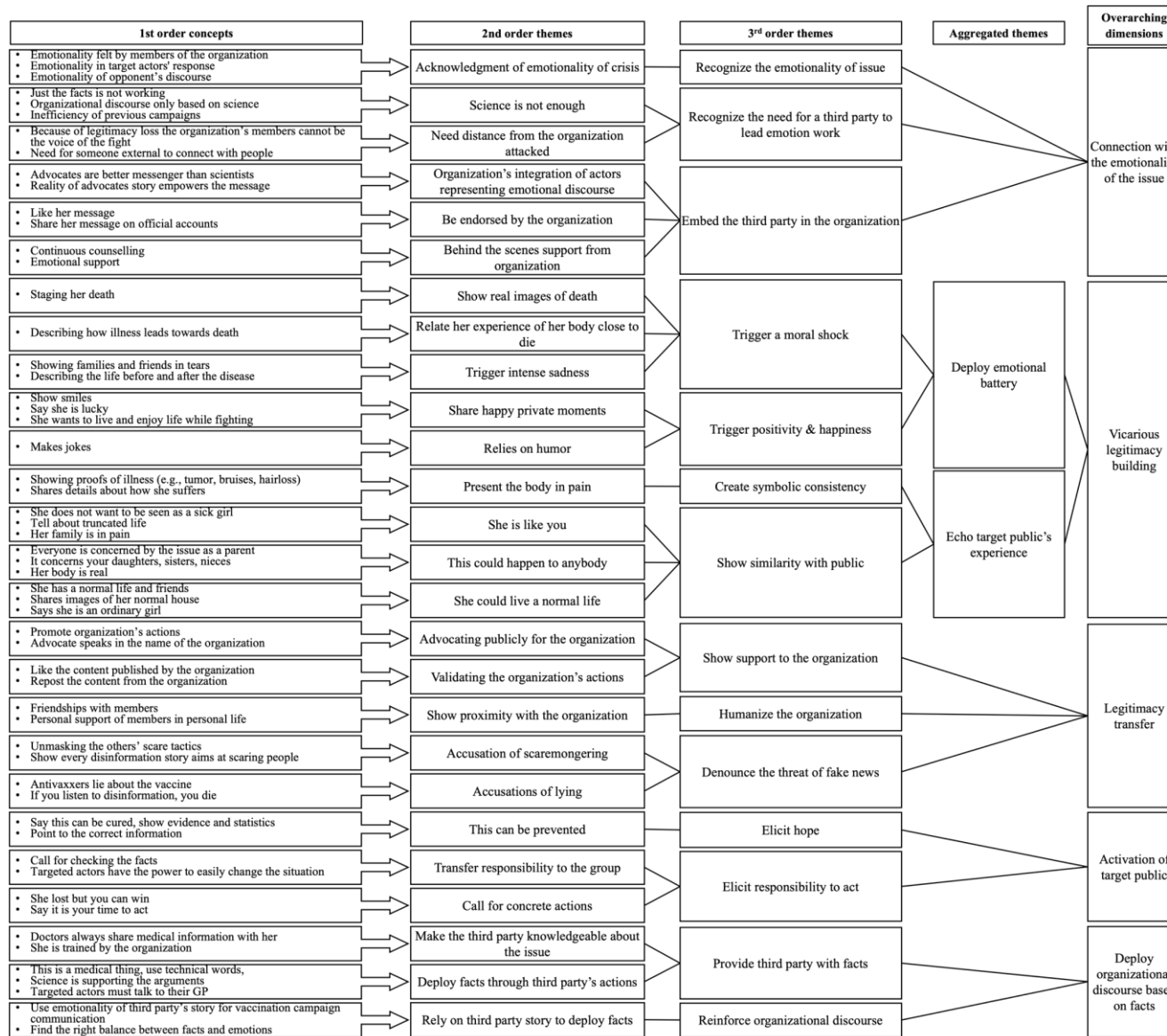


Figure 2: Data Structure for Emotion Management after a Legitimacy Crisis Caused by Fake News

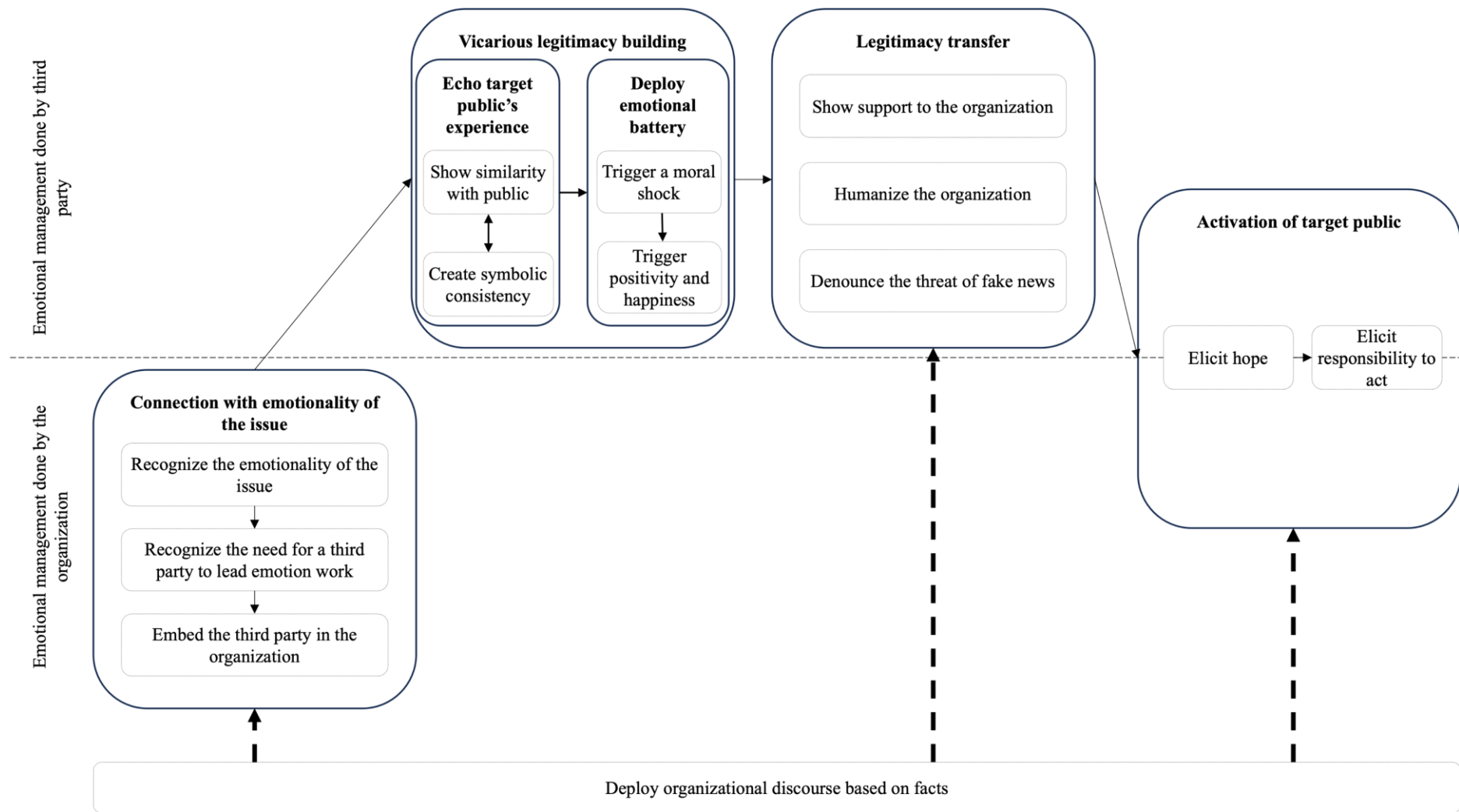


Figure 3: Model of Emotion Management after a Legitimacy Crisis Caused by Fake News