

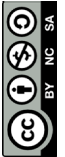
Dark Public Relations As a Strategy to Discredit Citizen Activism. The Case of the City of Malaga: From Urban Forest to Gentrification

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Dark Public Relations strategies are an unethical practice aimed at diverting attention, damaging competition, or establishing narratives of individual responsibility for public issues. This paper explores this practice as a way to discredit citizen activism, using the case of Malaga (Spain) as an example. This study examines associative movements, their demands, interviews with collectives and experts, and media analysis to understand citizen activism in Malaga and its interactions with institutions, companies, and the media. The results show the challenges Malaga faces due to tourism development, gentrification, rising house prices and the loss of local heritage, as well as the reactions of the different collectives that have mobilized under the initiative "A Malaga to live in". The conclusions highlight how authorities develop strategies aimed at undervaluing and overshadowing the demands of local residents, justifying them with arguments about economic and tourism development.

Las estrategias de Dark Public Relations constituyen una práctica poco ética enfocada a desviar la atención, dañar a la competencia o establecer narrativas de responsabilidad individual sobre asuntos públicos, entre otras cuestiones. Este trabajo explora esta práctica como vía para desacreditar el activismo ciudadano a través del caso de la ciudad de Málaga (España). Mediante un análisis del movimiento asociativo, sus demandas, entrevistas a colectivos, expertos y un análisis de medios, se pretenden analizar las prácticas activistas ciudadanas desarrolladas en la ciudad de Málaga y su relación con las instituciones, empresas y medios de comunicación. Los resultados plasman el problema que la ciudad tiene debido a la turistificación, la gentrificación, el aumento del precio de la vivienda y la pérdida de patrimonio local, así como las reacciones de los distintos colectivos que se han unido para luchar por "Una Málaga para vivir". Las conclusiones señalan cómo las autoridades desarrollan estrategias encaminadas a minusvalorar y opacar las demandas ve-

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cinales con el argumento del desarrollo económico y turístico de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: *activismo ciudadano, dark public relations, turistificación, comunicación política, desarrollo sostenible.*

The city brand helps to differentiate territories and to position themselves as a tourist (Hospers, 2011) and economic (Jacobsen, 2009) attraction for visitors and investors. Strong brands increase their memorability and attractiveness (Kavaratzis, 2017; Boisen *et al.*, 2018). Malaga has worked on its brand to establish itself as a relevant tourist destination that has been enhanced in recent years in the cultural and business aspects (Castro-Higueras and Pérez-Rufí, 2021) to promote the attraction of national and international investment. Forbes magazine highlighted it in 2020 as one of the best European cities to live in (Méndez, 2020) and according to data from the European Commission, the satisfaction of its inhabitants with their quality of life was very high (European Commission, 2020).

However, after the pandemic, a malaise that already existed among the citizens (Castro-Martínez and Pérez Ordóñez, 2019; Chamizo-Nieto *et al.*, 2023) began to grow and spread from the area of the historic centre to the rest of the city, based on the phenomenon of touristification and gentrification. At the same time, the institutions and economic powers have insisted on the idea that Malaga is a successful city that must continue in its line of development.

This paper aims to explore how public relations (PR) practices are being used by authorities and companies to discredit citizens' demands for a different model of city.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND CITIZEN ACTIVISM TODAY

The rise of transnational activism in the digital age has encouraged the demands of collectives to directly address corporations, businesses and development regimes to demand a new politics (Bennett, 2003). Social forums constitute a common ground for cooperative action and a battleground on the global anti-neoliberal struggle and for "other possible worlds" (Reitan, 2006).

Agostini and Zomeren (2021) add to the double chamber model of the classical motivations for collective action —identity, injustice and efficacy—the moral motivation, extending it to members of advantaged groups acting in solidarity with the disadvantaged. Their results show positive interrelationships between the four motivations —especially between morality and identity—

with emotional injustice and politicised identification as the strongest specific motivations.

For his part, Reguillo (2017) focuses on networked political configurations, which involve the appropriation and use of the digital sphere and the coordination of physical and digital action networks with the aim of generating opposition to the proprietary powers and saying “enough is enough” to this predatory and greedy system (p. 13). This technopolitics (Sierra, 2018) contributes to visibility in the public space and increases user identification, as participatory and horizontal narratives stimulate awareness and social change (Freire, 2002). On the other hand, social networks also help to create a collective identity and build common narratives, thus providing arguments for discourse and action (Khazraee and Novak, 2018). By making central places available to individuals where public discourses around public events are generated, sustained and disseminated (Kou *et al.*, 2017), they facilitate opposition to dominant discourses.

The dynamic environments implied by social networks have enabled both emerging collective actions and organised social movements to expand their repertoires of action and their communicative strategies (Ortiz, 2016). However, collective actions that bring together independent—but interdependent—heterogeneous participants and generate an ecosystemic value proposition need to achieve legitimacy. Thomas and Ritala (2022) point out three relevant processes to achieve this legitimacy: discursive legitimization, performative legitimization and the construction of the ecosystem’s identity.

For Prentice and Paluck (2020), behavioural interventions are a highly effective resource for social change, as they are based on social norms, they are grounded in group processes and, rather than being hypothesis-driven, they are repeatedly tested on the basis of observation. Thus, social information is used to update the perception of norms, in a continuous and dynamic process that takes place within social groups and in which peer action is of great importance as an example.

FROM CSR TO DARK PUBLIC RELATIONS

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is nowadays understood as a fundamental part of the image and reputation of both organisations and institutions. There has not always been unanimity on this issue, since, from theorists such as Friedman (1970) to everyday business practices; it is common for corporations to put more effort into increasing their profits than into working for the common good. The essence of CSR is the return to society of part of the profit through different formulas linked to strategic business management and organisational communication. However, although it has existed as a practice for centuries, it has developed especially in recent years and has resulted in a broad terminology that qualifies professional practices and academic findings (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). For Siltaoja (2006), value priorities play an influential role in SR programmes by influencing the substance and development of reputation and brand stories in the corporate context. However, it is common for institutions

and companies to declare that they are developing CSR programmes, despite the fact that many of them are apparent actions that seek short-term profitability in terms of image or are motivated by pressure from their publics.

More recently, more social and externally related issues, rather than purely internal practices, have been incorporated into their lines of action (Bakan, 2020). In this way, CSR is extended to what is known as corporate activism, which embodies the values and vision of brands (Wilcox, 2019). In theory, the causes that brands espouse in their corporate activism practices should be genuine and sincere, but they have been found to not only engage in image-cleansing strategies through their claims, but are even used to divert attention from issues of relevance, damage competitors or establish narratives of individual responsibility for public issues (Coombs and Holladay, 2013; Ennis, 2023). This unethical use of PR has been termed Dark PR (DPR) or Black PR (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2023) and encompasses a variety of practices that have been enhanced in the digital arena, both in corporate and political contexts (Gerrits, 2018; Moravčíková, 2020; Boman, 2021). Dark PR or Black PR is a practice that is still little addressed in the academic environment but is gaining relevance in the professional management of communication and image, where its presence is increasing. For Rodríguez-Fernández (2023, p. 1) "Dark PR or Black PR campaigns are an advanced level of negative campaigns and they fictionalise prescription and influence, normally with the aim of discrediting the political adversary or competitor". Edwards (2021) points out that public relations has exploited phenomena related to political and strategic communication, such as political marketing, propaganda, disinformation or lawfare, to impact their audiences and fulfil their objectives. Although disinformation and the propagation of fake news or hoaxes are tools also used by PR practitioners (Verwey and Muir, 2019; Edwards, 2021), they have not stopped applying those that have proven effective for decades, such as publicity, lobbying or slime machine strategies (Bernays, 2013; Eco, 2015; Esser *et al.*, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

This work is framed within the area of study of PR and strategic communication, as it aims to be an approach, through a case study, to the PR techniques that can affect the image of citizen activism.

As this is an exploratory research, the general objective (GO) is to analyse the citizen activist practices developed in the city of Malaga and their relationship with institutions, companies and the media. In order to achieve this, several specific objectives are established:

- SO1- to identify the main axes of citizen activism in the city.
- SO2- to study the way in which these collective actions relate to the political and economic powers.
- SO3- to know the opinion of experts on the object of study.
- SO4- to describe the role of the media in this context.

A qualitative methodological design has been chosen to cover such a complex and changing object of study. The decision to configure the research as a case study does not obviate the complexity of the multiple and multifaceted realities that coexist in Malaga. The varied interaction of social, economic, historical and political factors that make up the city’s landscape is taken into account and taken on as a challenge by integrating the many unique cases of different citizens’ movements. Although methodologically it would have been easier to focus on a specific situation —a single case within the city— a broader approach has been chosen, encompassing the different actors that coexist in this context. Nevertheless, the research maintains rigour and clarity by establishing a reliable and detailed approach that succeeds in identifying commonalities in current practices.

The data collection and analysis schedule was structured between July and October 2024 and the tools used to collect the data were:

- Documentary analysis of reports (12) and press reports (6) in order to describe the current situation in the city, as well as the main axes of citizen activism in Malaga. This tool corresponds to SO1.

Table 1. Reports analysed

2024	Plan Estratégico de Turismo 2021-2024- Observatorio Turístico Málaga
2024	Plan de Acción 2024- Observatorio Turístico Málaga
2024	La percepción de la actividad turística para los malagueños/as 2024 -Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol
2024	Boletín Coyuntura Turística Agosto 2024- Turismo Costa del Sol
2024	Balance turístico y previsiones de verano 2024- Diputación de Málaga-
2024	Análisis de Competitividad en la cuota de mercado de la Conectividad Aérea de la Costa del Sol, 2023/22- Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol Málaga
2024	Observatorio Turístico 2023 Málaga Costa del Sol
2024	CEM Informe socioeconómico de la provincia de Málaga y propuestas para la competitividad empresarial 2023 - 2024
2023	Informe GEM Málaga 2022-2023. Ed. Universidad de Málaga.
2023	Agenda urbana, indicadores 2022- Observatorio Medio Ambiente Urbano Ayuntamiento de Málaga
2021	Informe sobre evaluación del hotel-rascacielos en el Muelle de Levante en el paisaje patrimonial de Málaga- ICOMOS
2021	Informe caracterización bioclimática de la ciudad de Málaga- OMAU

Source: Own elaboration.

- Semi-structured interviews with 7 activists with different profiles. Representatives of citizens’ associations, neighbourhood associations,

members of collectives such as the Malaga Urban Forest (BUM), the initiative against the skyscraper and digital activists who develop their actions individually on the networks. This tool corresponds to SO1 and SO2 and the strategy for the selection of the sample was established on the basis of the results of the previous tool. Once the axes of citizen activism in Malaga had been identified, the representatives of these groups or prominent figures in their demands were contacted and asked to participate. Three of them chose not to collaborate in the research.

- 4 semi-structured interviews with experts who, from different perspectives, have analysed the context in which the phenomenon is being studied. They are researchers, teachers and professionals from the fields of advertising, PR, journalism, ecology, architecture, politics and tourism. The selection process to ensure its credibility was established by identifying 8 experts linked to Malaga society and of proven prestige who had knowledge of the situation the city was going through in order to be able to offer a balanced and in-depth analysis of the object of study. Four of the contacts declined to participate in the research. This tool corresponds to SO2, SO3 and SO4.
- The interviews took place telematically (Cisneros-Caicedo *et al.*, 2022) in September and October 2024. Two basic outlines were drawn up—one focused on activists and the other on experts—of topics to be addressed by means of eight questions that served as a guide to deal with aspects such as the situation of the city; the relations between institutions, companies and citizen associations; or the role of the media in relation to the state of opinion on certain issues, among other matters. The interviews were transcribed where necessary and analysed afterwards through digital tools like Atlas.Ti. Participants were offered the possibility of anonymising their answers to preserve their identity.
- Analysis of the presence in the media, both in news pieces and editorials, of the issues addressed by the social groups analysed. We chose to use a convenience sample (Sedgwick, 2013) given the large amount of news generated by the city about the area of study and the impossibility of carrying out a detailed analysis of them. A purposive sampling (Lauretto *et al.*, 2012) of relevant information available in the media—43 pieces between 2020 and 2024—has been chosen, as it is a pragmatic strategy to illustrate the discourses of the entities in relation to the problems addressed. The selection has been made on the basis of the publications on the movements analysed—using their names and demands—in the main local newspapers, as well as in the national media where the city's issues have had an impact.

In this way, the theoretical framework outlined above on social movements and public relations strategies provides a basis for interpreting the information gathered. The use of multiple combined data sources and the application of a sound methodological triangulation provide a global perspective of the phenomenon, which is analysed in a comprehensive way, thus improving the quality of the information and ensuring the validity of the results.

RESULTS

Malaga had 586,384 inhabitants at the end of 2023, an increase of more than 15,000 since 2018 (INE, 2024). Since the pandemic, seven out of every ten new inhabitants in the province are foreigners. According to the Diputación de Málaga (2024) the tourism market in the province had an economic impact of 19,137 million Euros in 2023, the best year for tourism on the Costa del Sol, with over 14 million visitors. The city’s situation is complex because, although its economic and tourism figures are positive, salaries and housing have become a stumbling block for its inhabitants (table 2)

Table 2. Data on the current context of Malaga

Economy and employment
• Malaga ended 2023 with 726,900 employed people, the fourth Spanish province with the highest absolute growth. • The city is identified with a leading position in entrepreneurship and with an economy whose conditions favour it. • In March 2024 there were 12,918 tourism businesses and 124,142 employees in the province.
Tourism
• In the first four months of 2024, Malaga has received 2.23 million travellers in regulated accommodation. • Between 2019 and 2023 tourist establishments have increased in the province of Malaga by 72 %; 89.7 % of the totals are dwellings for tourist purposes. • In the last five years the tourist accommodation infrastructure in the city of Malaga has grown by 90 %. • Malaga province hosts almost half of the travellers staying in tourist flats in Andalusia and two out of every three foreign tourists. • Malaga Airport has been the second fastest growing of the main Spanish tourist destinations in 2023 and the fastest growing of the seven airports with more than five million passengers. • The main issuers are the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands.
Housing
• The price in Malaga city has increased by 32.9 % in 2024. • Malaga is the 5th most expensive province in terms of second-hand property prices, with a year-on-year increase of 15.41 %. • Increase of 13.2 % in the price of renting in the capital. • Since 2007, buying has risen by 40 % and rents by 80 %. • Buying a house requires on average 56 % of one’s income. • Rental supply has fallen by more than 30 % since 2020. • One third of homebuyers are international. • 44 % of purchases are made without a mortgage loan.
Heritage
• The project to build a skyscraper hotel in the city’s port will have for ICOMOS an inadequate, profound and irreversible impact on the urban landscape and especially on the Farola de Málaga. • The bioclimatic conditions of some neighbourhoods, especially the densest ones, are adverse according to the Observatory of Urban Environment (OMAU).

Source: Own elaboration.

A study on the perception of tourism by the people of Malaga (Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol, 2024, pp. 22-23) detects the following problems:

- They do not consider their income to be highly linked to the tourism sector, although they do believe that it generates wealth, employment and opportunities for leisure and entertainment.
- They highlight 4 main negative elements caused by tourism: the increase in housing prices, the increase in the rental price of housing, overcrowding and that consumer prices tend to grow more because it is a tourist destination.
- The negative aspects are more relevant in the capital, highlighting the price of land and housing, the increase in rental prices, higher consumer prices, overcrowding, noise and traffic. Other negative effects also appear, such as the degradation of natural resources, environmental concerns, transport costs and the loss of local authenticity.
- The general perception is more positive in coastal areas.
- 23 % of the population consider that measures to improve tourism management are needed.
- The measure proposed by the majority to manage tourism is the improvement (or increase) of the infrastructure of public services to cope with the arrival of tourists.

The conclusion of this study indicates that “although all reports and indicators show that the Province of Malaga depends on tourism, the study reveals that the majority of Malaga residents are not fully aware of the real importance of tourism for their economy” (Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol, 2024, p. 25) and proposes a series of measures, such as awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of tourism in schools; a campaign in the media and social networks to inform citizens about the relevance of the sector; awareness-raising of local councils to reduce the negative impacts of tourism; and a plan aimed at improving the coexistence of tourist spaces and residential areas.

The main neighbourhood activist groups with a presence in the city have been identified (Table 3). Their main demands focus on preserving the idiosyncrasy of the city by fighting against tourism and gentrification, allowing residents to have a good quality of life, access to decent housing, defence and promotion of green spaces and heritage conservation.

Table 3. Main neighbourhood activist groups

Plataforma “Málaga para Vivir”	Crisis of access to housing and fight against the speculative and exclusionary city model promoted by the institutions.
AAVV Centro Antiguo	Promotes the defence of the rights of residents in the area and the improvement of the environment and coexistence.
Asociación Vecinal Lagunillas	Defence of neighbours and the area against the expulsion of the population and its replacement by a floating population that destroys or weakens the social fabric.
Bosque Urbano Málaga	Platform that fights to prevent the urbanisation of 177,000 m ² and proposes to convert it into a forest area.
Defendamos Nuestro Horizonte	Platform against the port tower on the Levante breakwater. No to the destruction of the cultural heritage of the landscape’.

Source: Own elaboration.

THE ACTIVISTS’ PERSPECTIVE

The neighbourhood movement has been fully active in Malaga since the democratic transition but, in recent years, the opposition of certain sectors to the city council’s policies on urban planning, housing, tourism, etc. has revitalised it “A turning point was ‘Málaga no se Vende’, I think in 2018 (...) I think it was the germ of 29J” (Villén, personal communication, 7 October 2024). However, its activists recognise that “it is very difficult or impossible to counteract the effect on public opinion of the media and the communication budgets of the institutions” (Molina, personal communication, 10 October 2024).

In terms of the communication tools they use, all those consulted recognise that their main means of transmission for their messages are social networks. Despite this, some of them claim to have regular contact with the media. Such is the case of Mónica Reino, organising secretary of the AAVV Centro Antiguo, Julián Molina, member of the Instituto de Estudios Urbanos y Sociales or Pedro Francisco Sánchez, from the Asociación Bosque Urbano Málaga: “They usually publish our press releases, come to our press conferences, call us for interviews or programmes where we can express our demands” (Sánchez, personal communication, 14 October 2024). However, they claim that “in general, whether a media outlet supports you more or less has to do to a large extent with whether your demands affect their income from institutional advertising” (Molina, personal communication, 10 October 2024). Faced with these difficulties, other organisations such as Defend Our Horizon have opted to expand and diversify their communicative actions: website, collection of signatures on Change.org, crowdfunding on Goteo, cultural manifesto of support, street actions, production of graphic and audiovisual material, etc.

But where there is unanimity among those interviewed is in the existence of unethical practices that could be classified as DPR on the part of both public institutions and certain economic sectors, such as the hotel industry: “They want to discredit our citizens’ movement, they don’t invite us to meetings, they treat

us like bitter old women, they tell us that we have to go to the countryside if it bothers us" (Reino, personal communication, 8 October 2024). But the pressures have gone further: "Some members of the city council have been quite unethical, they have even gone so far as to publish my name" (José @BarriosMalaga, personal communication, 1 October 2024).

In addition, "There are even mentions of the Mayor indirectly accusing us of 'speaking ill of Malaga'", as well as "insults and disrespect from councillors and area directors on social media" (Villén, personal communication, 7 October 2024). Some media outlets have been used by the city council to convey their messages in order to discredit the citizens' movement: "They have tried to give the public the impression that we are a group created and manipulated by the opposition parties to harm the government team. That we are radicalised and that our proposals lack common sense" (Sánchez, personal communication, 14 October 2024). It can even be said that these tactics have bordered on the criminal: "I have filed two complaints with the National Police against the establishment below my house. When I enter my house they insult me: 'crazy', 'bitch', etc." (Reino, personal communication, 8 October 2024). These matters have also been taken to court as a deterrent measure, as these collectives cannot compete with the economic power of a public administration: "We received threats and a request for costs for requesting precautionary measures of more than 235,000 euros, in a clear attempt to scare and intimidate the collective so that we would withdraw the legal actions" (Sánchez, personal communication, 14 October 2024).

Thus, corporate activism serves to condition —if not silence— critical voices within Malaga society and the media:

There are sectors in this city with a great deal of power in the media, such as the hotel industry, construction and tourism. This influence is exerted not only directly on the media, through their own advertising, but also through their influence on politics, which is another very important means of income for the media (Molina, personal communication, 10 October 2024).

Despite their effectiveness, the groups believe that there is no defined and concerted strategy behind these actions by the main sectors of the Malaga economy: "They do not make strategic use of communication, they work in a reactive way and are very focused on marketing (sales and consumption). I also believe that there is an excessive dependence on political decisions" (Defend Our Horizon, personal communication, 13 October 2024).

In short, the local citizens' movement's view of its relations with its closest public institution can be summarised as follows: "We have a government team that works with those sectors —the economic powers of Malaga— forgetting the citizen. And not only forgetting them, but abandoning them and using them as well" (José @BarriosMalaga, personal communication, 1 October 2024).

THE VIEW OF THE EXPERTS

Expert opinion is more divided on the brand that the city of Malaga has been cultivating in recent years. While for some “it can be defined as a combination of culture and contemporary dynamism, oriented towards international projection” (Carrasco, personal communication, 25 September 2024), for others “we must ask ourselves whether it is already a strategy that was born poor and weak. Based on three axes that have had an irregular impulse and result: culture (...), technology (...) and tourism” (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024).

One of them even argues that “there is no prospective and participatory strategic planning of all the actors, but simply a push by the city council” (Álvarez-Nobell, personal communication, 12 October 2024).

Regarding the current state of Malaga’s economy and quality of life, there seems to be more consensus: “Well, dying of success (...) The model has gone too far, and reorienting it has negative consequences, especially for the people of Malaga” (Expert 1, personal communication, 3 October 2024). Another of the specialists consulted further elaborates on this affirmation, asserting:

The data leave no room for doubt, the success story does not hold water. If we look at some indicators, for example, we are the last province in GDP per capita at national level (...) Have we not improved at all? (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024).

Álvarez-Nobell (personal communication, 12 October 2024) acknowledges that Malaga is “a city with a lot of potential, which has managed to develop certain infrastructures, but whose standard of living is high and intimately linked to urban speculation and the tourist boom”.

Despite this, there is some digression on this issue: “On the one hand it can be said that the city’s economy has improved, but there are also problems of saturation in some parts of the city due to the increase in tourists and visitors” (Carrasco, personal communication, 25 September 2024).

This situation is also reflected in employment, since “we are committed to tourism, which provides unstable work with low pay” (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024).

There is unanimity when it comes to defining the relations that these groups have with both public institutions, especially the city council, and private companies:

Relations are almost non-existent and the political situation —absolute majority— does not help them to carry more weight. They (their demands) are not taken into account, but freedom of expression is respected. Unfortunately, the solution does not seem to be through dialogue but through legal action (Expert 1, personal communication, 3 October 2024).

Another corroborates that “relations are non-existent, and this is detrimental to both sides. The success of 29J is largely due to the lack of understanding and willingness to deal with these issues on the part of institutions and companies”

(Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024). The lack of defined strategies and measures also affects this situation since “the fact that there is a conflict of interests between residents, tourists and other agents involved makes it difficult for there to be a real positioning towards concrete measures” (Expert 2, personal communication 10 October, 2024).

The other major protagonists, the media, should, according to one of the experts, stick to treating these demands “exactly like other social demands, reporting rigorously” (Carrasco, personal communication, 25 September 2024). At the other extreme, their capacity to condition the thinking of citizens is recognised (Expert 1, personal communication, 3 October 2024).

Other opinions believe that the local media, for the most part, “are clearly biased towards pro-government positions” and “have not lived up to their role of objectivity, impartiality and news balance” (Álvarez-Nobell, personal communication, 12 October 2024). But the role they play in society is being called into question by the city’s inhabitants, because “when the reality is very different from what the media talk about, they no longer convince and lose credibility” (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024).

Although the existence of an orchestrated strategy of DPR is denied, “it is true that we have come to see how on social media there have been local politicians haranguing these groups to put pressure on them, even singling out individuals” (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024). As for corporate activism on the part of Malaga’s hospitality, tourism and construction companies, it is thought that they “play an essential role in positioning and growing the city as an attractive destination for locals, visitors and investors alike” (Carrasco, personal communication, 25 September 2024). However, there is a negative side: “There is a lack of seriousness and commitment, especially when there is no data to support a positive contribution to the productive fabric of the city” (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024). In this sense, there is a generalised perception that “the city council has these groups under very tight control and there is too much silence. There is not much public complaint” (Expert 1, personal communication, 3 October 2024). But this influence also occurs in reverse: “the lobbying work that sectoral and business associations carry out in public institutions is evident” (Álvarez-Nobell, personal communication, 12 October 2024). In this sense, Malaga even considered the possibility of declaring the centre as a non-residential zone to cater for the reality of hotel and commercial uses, which “demonstrates the influence that certain key tourist sectors can have and how proposals can be put forward that are clearly not committed to preserving habitability in the city” (Expert 2, personal communication 10 October, 2024).

The last recommendation is in favour of the appropriate and ethical use of PR:

The moment PR turns towards understanding, working side by side with the city and making it clear that its aim is to rebuild the model and that the benefit is for both sectors and citizens, things will change. In the meantime, we will continue to distrust PR that is closer to Erik the Red when he put Greenland to Greenland than to 2024 (Campos, personal communication, 5 October 2024).

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During the pandemic, the mayor appealed to the public to avoid crowds and to facilitate the movement of visitors. He also called for mobility restrictions for residents to be maintained, but not applied to visitors in order to boost the economy.

The mobility problems in the city generate such a high volume of traffic that the Directorate General of Traffic has appealed to the population to share cars. For its part, one of the measures announced by the City Council is a communication campaign to encourage people to reduce the number of home deliveries and use lockers and in-store collections.

The mayor also made some statements about the housing problem which caused national controversy: he played down the importance of moving from Malaga itself to the outskirts of the city in search of housing; and in a town hall meeting and in response to a citizen, de la Torre stated that with a job it would not be so difficult to have access to a rental contract.

Other members of the municipal government team expressed similar sentiments. The councillor for Innovation, Alicia Izquierdo, also played down the importance of having to move to the metropolitan area of Malaga to be able to live just a few days after the city was the scene of the first great citizens' mobilisation for housing on 29 June 2024. The demonstration, which was attended by approximately 15,000 people, was even covered by the international media.

While the municipal opposition accuses the mayor of prioritising the construction of housing beyond the reach of the majority of citizens and suppressing green areas, the local government team is in legal dispute with the citizens' group Urban Forest over the use to be made of the land where the old Repsol oil company containers.

The neighbourhood association prefers the whole area to be used for a large park, the council wants to include the construction of 1,300 homes. While the legal process continues, Urban Forest is raising funds for the project thanks to popular donations.

On another environment-related issue on the local agenda, the efficiency of the municipal cleaning services, the councillor of the area, Teresa Porras, has repeatedly blamed citizens for their incivility.

The project to build a large tower for a hotel with Qatari capital is another of the controversial issues. Although the land belongs to the port authority, which is administratively dependent on the state government, the explicit support of the municipal council for this building has been met with outright rejection by citizens' groups such as the Defend Our Horizon Platform, which describes the construction as an attack on the landscape and has lodged several legal appeals against the awarding of the project.

Noise pollution is another of the points of conflict between Malaga's citizens' associations and the mayor's office. The former denounce the council's permissiveness with noise and, specifically, with the noise generated by premises used for hospitality and leisure. A study suggests that more than 120,000 inhabitants of densely populated areas of the capital suffer noise levels higher

than those recommended by the health authorities, while both the council and the hotel and catering industry have begun to receive their first setbacks in the courts.

Malaga's urban epicentre is being depopulated by its original inhabitants and traditional businesses in favour of mass tourism. As a result, rental prices have soared to such an extent that it is difficult for the average Malagueño to afford. To all this must be added the dirt and noise pollution that the already few residents of the centre have to put up with due to tourist and hotel activity. For the last 30 years, the Association of Neighbours of the Centre has been denouncing this process of progressive gentrification and expulsion to which they are being subjected to the permissiveness, if not inaction, of the municipal councillors.

Faced with the opposition of a certain sector of the public to the major projects of Malaga City Council, the local media have been taking sides through their editorial lines and opinion columns. Hence the unequivocal support of editorialists such as Javier Recio —deputy director of *Diario Sur*— or Gonzalo León —from his weekly column in *La Opinión de Málaga*— for the council's development policy. For its part, the city's other major newspaper, *Málaga Hoy*, gave a platform to the architect of the Torre del Puerto, José Seguí. However, it is also interesting to note how some positions are becoming more moderate with the passage of time and popular pressure, such as the one on the port project by Manolo Castillo, director of *Diario Sur*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, Malaga has experienced a great economic and touristic development that has led to unease among citizens due to the effects it has had on their quality of life. This situation seems to coincide with emerging forms of activism “as a result of the general logic of the unfolding of capitalism and its process of accumulation by dispossession” (Sierra, 2018, p. 982). The “limit situation”, in Freire's words (2002, p. 85), that is emerging in the Malaga context has managed to bring together different sub-themes that have taken shape through a macro-generating theme that goes from the most general to the most concrete. What some time ago was conceived as an unprecedentedly viable issue now constitutes the focus of collective citizen action, which is centred on a common objective and which has crystallised into massive demands that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. This issue involves two basic groups of actors: those it serves and those it denies. From their perspective, all those involved advocate for the city's progress, so PR strategies focus on this idea as a positive axis of communication. However, the question lies in the concept of progress itself, which seems to have a different meaning for neighbourhood activists and for businesses and institutions.

This research achieves its objectives by analysing the citizen activist practices developed in Malaga and their relationship with institutions, companies and the media (OG). The relationship between citizen initiatives and institutions is

one of opposition, as it seems that the interests for social change and the claim that Malaga should be a “city to live in” of activists are not well received by the authorities. Local and provincial authorities have a vision of the problem that refers to a lack of understanding on the part of citizens of the virtues of tourism and the economic progress of the city, and have developed communication strategies in this sense. The media, although they generally cover collective actions, serve as a loudspeaker for the official discourse.

The main axes of citizen activism in the city have been identified (SO1) which, from different fronts, advocate for a city that offers good quality of life, preserving heritage and green spaces, fighting against tourism and gentrification and defending access to housing. The case of citizen activism in Malaga coincides with the approaches of Reguillo (2017), as it has emerged as an expression that makes visible various discomforts and grievances that has taken shape by articulating multiple subjectivities that had not so far found ways of recognition and participation in the traditional political spectrum. The binding force of the different initiatives has been tourism as a trigger of an unsustainable situation for the city’s residents in terms of economy, habitability and the preservation of the city’s heritage. In this sense, behavioural interventions for social change (Prentice and Paluck, 2020) and motivations to engage in collective action, including solidarity (Agostini and Zomeren, 2021), have added to the processes of relevance to achieve the legitimisation of their demands (Thomas and Ritala, 2022). However, activists stress that this is not about tourism-phobia but a struggle to recover the quality of life.

By studying the way in which these collective actions relate to the political and economic powers (SO2), this research confirms the existence of a heterogeneous collective with its own agendas that converge in some basic demands and that has managed to impact the traditional public sphere through mobilisation in the streets. Activists point to the lack of attention from the City Council and the lack of solutions to their problems. They indicate that it discredits their demands in order to align itself with private interests. They have also denounced having received pressure from sectors such as the hotel industry to abandon their demands. On the other hand, in agreement with Coombs and Holladay (2013), it has been detected that the institutional discourse blames individual responsibility for the situation the city is experiencing in public matters such as tourism phobia, mobility problems or dirtiness.

The experts (OE3) stress the idea that despite Malaga’s economic success, it is being seriously affected by a process that hinders the quality of life of its citizens. They point out the lack of collaboration of political agents with neighbourhood social actions and the need to redirect current PR practices towards a strategy that rebuilds the city model.

The media play a relevant role in this case (SO4), since they continue to be a shaping element of the public sphere, as they lend legitimacy to the issues. The demands of the different groups are covered by the media insofar as they have gained importance within Malaga society in a majority way, although in general terms the presence of political actors prevails. Activists point to an unequal relationship with the different newspapers and media, and highlight the affinity

of some media with the political powers, in their opinion due to the income from institutional advertising. On the other hand, the media not only cover the statements of public representatives, in many cases without adopting a critical stance towards them, but editorials and opinion articles have been identified that support the institutional position and dismiss neighbourhood demands. However, it is worth noting that with the passage of time and popular pressure, some of the media outlets that support the Consistory have moderated their positions on controversial issues. This indicates that the collective actions have had an impact on public opinion and are receiving support, so the media are not so openly against them.

The collective actions developed by citizens have placed at the centre of the political debate the need to tackle the problems that have been affecting the residents of Malaga for years. However, DPR's strategies based on minimising the negative effects on citizens and promoting the beneficial aspects linked to tourism development have not had the desired effect. It is possible that some of the residents have felt challenged by statements that underestimate their difficulties as a result of a kind of 'Streisand effect' caused by statements in the media by public representatives.

The articulation of a networked communicative strategy and the call for a political intervention in the streets that legitimises and makes visible their demands demonstrates the emergence of new forms of activist organisation against gentrification and touristification.

It is important to highlight the importance of pointing out and eradicating DPR practices, combating attempts to devalue the truth or downplay the importance of the true facts. Misunderstood corporate activism or PR strategies should not be used to discredit citizens' demands. Therefore, institutional and corporate communication managers must avoid unethical behaviour that attacks citizens, as trust in the institutions on which democratic societies are based must be restored.

The limitations of this work are intrinsic to its very nature, as it is an exploratory work configured as a case study and its results cannot be extrapolated. Nevertheless, it is important because it highlights problems that occur in contexts such as the city of Malaga, where the official discourse is the opposite of the reality that some citizens seem to experience.

This is a complex and changing subject from which future lines of research can be derived, ranging from the management of communication by citizen groups, the strategic repertoires of heterogeneous groups of collective actions with common objectives, or subjects as well studied as media independence in local environments. The perspective of local authorities and the discursive and communicative tools they use should also be analysed.

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