

Tripodos

From corporate activism
to "Dark PR" corporate
discourses and their
influence on public opinion
in the digital society.



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Monograph

From Corporate Activism to “Dark PR:” Corporate Discourses and Their Influence on Public Opinion in the Digital Society

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From Corporate Activism to “Dark PR:” Corporate Discourses and Their Influence on Public Opinion in the Digital Society

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From Corporate Activism to “Dark PR:” Corporate Discourses and Their Influence on Public Opinion in the Digital Society

Traditionally the best-practice corporate communications strategy has been for companies to remain neutral with respect to social and political issues. Milton Friedman’s well-known 1970 article, *A Friedman doctrine: The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits*, famously prescribed that businesses should refrain from promoting social causes, and even condemns the practice writing: “The use of the cloak of social responsibility, and the nonsense spoken in its name by influential and prestigious businessmen, does clearly harm the foundations of a free society”.

While Friedman’s recommendations were never more than superficially adhered to by large corporations, as seen from sugar, automobile, and fossil fuel PR over the last half century (Ennis, 2023), there has been a marked shift since the early 2000s to more outwardly take social stands (Bakan, 2020a, Bakan, 2020b). Today, corporations are active voices in the digital environment, promoting political discourse that supports their bottom line in new ways. They have begun to adopt certain positions, sometimes controversial and polarizing (Villagra *et al.*, 2021). Their discourse aims to influence public opinion, ultimately affecting beliefs on issues related to health and the environment, in ways that are often overtly political.

Thus, the term “corporate activism” has gained weight as a way of describing corporate strategies towards social debates. Wilcox (2019) points out that the main objective of corporate activism “is to participate in the marketplace of ideas and to enunciate the company’s values through policies and actions with which various segments of the public may disagree”. This activism manifests itself through practices such as corporate advertising as a way to express a position on a controversial issue, or through the public participation of different top-level figures such as CEOs, among others.

On many occasions corporate activism is transparently disingenuous, such as cases when they frame issues in ways that distract from the negative externalities of their business models, and away from political solutions. Recently, the scale of these practices has grown enormously with the rapid increase of digital media, and in tandem, digital propaganda models (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2021).

Some media and authors have begun to denounce such actions under the term “dark PR”, which would allude to deliberate disinformation promoted by companies (Ennis, 2023; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2023). This concept would also encompass practices against competitors and political opponents in order to affect their reputation.

Interestingly, it is also worth reflecting on the practices that companies will have to develop in order to protect themselves from disinformation. For example, the sugar industry has used disinformation to blame the meat (fat) industry for ill-health (Taubes and Kearns, 2012), and the fossil fuel industry has attacked the wind industry by blaming them for the death of whales (Atkin and Thomas, 2022). These are only a few of many examples of these kinds of blame-shifting (Ennis, 2023). These tactics can only be expected to expand exponentially in the context of the digital conversation, and corporations themselves will be interested in implementing effective tactics and tools to defend themselves. Properly used, verification by companies could contribute to reducing rumours about their own sector of activity, helping other companies in their area of activity. However, if misused, corporate activism, or dark PR, can be a tool to discredit citizen activism and critical voices that denounce malpractice.

Further research into this line of inquiry is direly needed, and issue 57 of *Tripodos* aims to fill that gap. The studies featured in this issue review new approaches, methodologies, and considerations related to the study of dark PR and that will be of significant interest to researchers and lay readers alike.

In an interesting study by researchers at OTH Regensburg, Carina Leonhard and Katherine Guertler break from the standard practice of looking at greenwashing in advertising aimed at the general public, to analyse how corporations greenwash their own boards, shareholders, and the communities of practice. They do this through a careful review of a mining and commodity trading company’s climate report, and derived novel and interesting findings that will be valuable for future researchers in this space.

Taking another novel approach to studying greenwashing, Célia Belim and Raphaël Baptista Marques of the University of Lisbon analysed not corporate dark PR, but a campaign against it. They evaluated the Portuguese activist campaign: “Greenwashing: Don’t paint yourselves green! Tell things as they are” by DECO PROteste. Through discourse and rhetorical analysis of campaign materials, as well as focus group discussions with university students, they identified a number of areas where future campaigns can be improved.

Francisco Segado-Boj (Complutense University of Madrid) and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo (Catholic University of Murcia) explore the field of study related to Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) applications (i.e. WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) as vehicles for information, and disinformation dissemination. They find that research into the use of these applications as delivery vehicles for news is

disturbingly sparse, and note, with an urgency underscored by the increasing global scale of dark PR, that significantly more research is needed.

Corporations can also be the target of disinformation campaigns and be affected by attacks that seek to damage their images and reputations. Eze Ugochukwu Zacky (University of Nigeria, Nsukka) and Chinwendu Judith Zacky-Eze (University of Nigeria, Nsukka) analysed communication strategies and tactics for organisational resilience through ten case studies of multinational corporations and political organisations. Their analysis provides insight into the ways in which organisations can defend against disinformation. Their enlightening findings revealed several critical insights into how organisations can improve their resilience against disinformation, including how immediate public announcements, as well as close-collaboration with fact-checkers, can be effective communication strategies to mitigate the spread of disinformation and reduce reputational damage.

Andrea Castro-Martínez and José Luis Torres Martín of the University of Malaga analysed the negative influence tactics, or dark PR, used to discredit citizen activism denouncing gentrification, rising housing prices and the loss of local heritage in the city of Malaga in Spain. They found that mainstream media gave greater prominence to institutions and politicians than to citizen organisers, significantly downplaying their demands.

Leticia Rodríguez Fernández is full professor in the Department of Marketing and Communication and general director of Strategic Communication at the University of Cadiz. Principal researcher of the group SEJ688 "Comunicación estratégica e influencia en la sociedad digital", she is also scientific editor of the journal *Visual Review*. International Visual Culture Review (Scopus, Q.2) as well as member of the scientific committee of the journals *Index*

Comunicación and *Doxa Comunicación*. She is a member of the CRUE in the Forum against Disinformation Campaigns in the field of National Security (DSN). She has been principal investigator of the project "Female leadership in digital environments. Study of self-perception and reference models in female academics and students at the UCA" and has participated as a researcher in two national plans and in eight privately funded projects.

Grant Ennis. Since 2020 Grant has been an adjunct lecturer at Monash University. Grant's teaching and research focuses on disinformation, as well as the political and commercial determinants of health. The author of the acclaimed book *Dark PR: How corporate disinformation undermines our health and the environment*, his work has been referenced in: *Journal of Trans-*

port & Health, Traffic Safety Research, Alcohol Clinical & Experimental Research, The Australian, Michael West, Australian Financial Review, Irish Times, Irish Examiner, Irish Independent, among others. His scholarship has had international reach and has contributed to parliamentary discussions related to nutrition and transport in Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

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Combatting Disinformation: Analysing Effective Communication Strategies and Tactics for Organizational Resilience

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In an era where disinformation spreads at unprecedented speeds, strategic communication emerges as a critical tool in countering false narratives and building resilience within organizations. This study delves into the effectiveness of communication strategies in combating disinformation and enhancing organizational resilience. Using case studies and content analysis of five multinational corporations and five political organizations, the study is guided by the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Resilience Theory (RT). The findings uncovered varying effectiveness in communication strategies, including immediate clarifications, social media engagement, and collaboration with fact-checkers. Further findings revealed that multinational corporations demonstrated success in proactive measures such as real-time monitoring and transparency, resulting in a reduction of disinformation spread by up to 40%. In contrast, political organizations, while facing unique challenges due to polarized environments, achieved notable gains

En una era en la que la desinformación se propaga a velocidades sin precedentes, la comunicación estratégica emerge como una herramienta crucial para contrarrestar narrativas falsas y construir resiliencia dentro de las organizaciones. Este estudio analiza la efectividad de las estrategias de comunicación en la lucha contra la desinformación y el fortalecimiento de la resiliencia organizacional. Utilizando estudios de caso y análisis de contenido de cinco corporaciones multinacionales y cinco organizaciones políticas, el estudio se guía por la Teoría de la Comunicación de Crisis en Situaciones (SCCT) y la Teoría de la Resiliencia (RT). Los hallazgos revelaron una efectividad variable en las estrategias de comunicación, incluyendo aclaraciones inmediatas, participación en redes sociales y colaboración con verificadores de hechos. Además, los resultados mostraron que las corporaciones multinacionales lograron éxito en medidas proactivas como el monitoreo en tiempo real y la transparencia, lo que resultó en una reducción de hasta un 40 % en la propagación de desinformación. En con-

through grassroots engagement and rapid responses. The research also revealed the critical role of trust-building and tailored communication strategies in fostering stakeholder confidence. The study proposes a six-pronged framework integrating proactive monitoring, transparent communication, and stakeholder collaboration to mitigate disinformation and enhance resilience. These findings contribute theoretical insights and practical strategies to the fields of crisis communication and organizational studies.

Keywords: *disinformation, strategic communication, organizational resilience, crisis management, fact-checking.*

traste, las organizaciones políticas, aunque enfrentaron desafíos únicos debido a entornos polarizados, lograron avances notables a través del compromiso de base y respuestas rápidas. Los hallazgos también revelaron el papel crítico de la construcción de confianza y las estrategias de comunicación personalizadas para fomentar la confianza de los grupos de interés. El estudio propone un marco de seis puntos que integra el monitoreo proactivo, la comunicación transparente y la colaboración con los grupos de interés para mitigar la desinformación y mejorar la resiliencia. Estos hallazgos aportan perspectivas teóricas y estrategias prácticas a los campos de la comunicación de crisis y los estudios organizacionales.

Palabras clave: *desinformación, comunicación estratégica, resiliencia organizacional, gestión de crisis, verificación de hechos.*

In the contemporary digital landscape, the rapid proliferation of disinformation poses a critical challenge to organizations worldwide. Disinformation, defined as false information deliberately spread to deceive or mislead, has become increasingly sophisticated and widespread, particularly through digital channels such as social media, online news platforms, and user-generated content sites (Benkler *et al.*, 2018). The rise of this phenomenon has blurred the line between fact and fiction, eroding public trust and complicating the efforts of organizations to maintain their credibility and effectively communicate with their stakeholders.

Organizations today operate in an environment where the ability to manage and counter disinformation is crucial not just for safeguarding their reputations but also for ensuring operational continuity. Disinformation can be weaponized to create confusion, sow discord, and undermine confidence in organizational messages, making it a significant threat to both public and private entities (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). This threat is compounded by the fact that disinformation campaigns are often meticulously planned and executed with the aid of digital tools that

enable the rapid and widespread dissemination of false information, frequently outpacing the efforts to counteract it (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). The strategic intent behind these campaigns often aligns with specific political or economic interests, leveraging digital propaganda and astroturfing techniques to create an illusion of grassroots support or opposition (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

The consequences of disinformation are far-reaching. Beyond the immediate damage to an organization's reputation, disinformation can erode public trust in institutions, distort public discourse, and weaken democratic processes (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Moreover, the psychological and social impacts of disinformation, including increased polarization and the spread of conspiracy theories, further complicate the communication environment (Pennycook and Rand, 2019). As such, organizations must develop robust communication strategies that are not only reactive but also proactive in addressing the multidimensional challenges posed by disinformation. This involves integrating advanced analytics, real-time monitoring, and strategic stakeholder engagement into their communication frameworks to enhance resilience and adaptability (Fallis, 2015).

Despite the growing recognition of these challenges, many organizations remain inadequately prepared to combat disinformation. Traditional communication strategies often lack the agility and technological integration necessary to respond effectively to the dynamic nature of modern disinformation campaigns. This deficiency has left many organizations vulnerable to reputational damage, operational disruption, and loss of stakeholder trust. The pressing challenge, therefore, lies in identifying and implementing communication strategies that can effectively counter disinformation, ensuring organizational resilience in an increasingly complex and hostile information environment.

This study seeks to address this critical gap by aiming to:

1. Analyse the effectiveness of current communication strategies used by organizations to combat disinformation.
2. Identify the key tactics that contribute to organizational resilience in the face of disinformation.
3. Examine the role of technology and digital tools in enhancing the effectiveness of communication strategies against disinformation.
4. Develop a framework for organizations to implement proactive and reactive measures to mitigate the impact of disinformation.

Based on the study's objectives, the following research questions guided the analysis:

1. How effective are current communication strategies in combating disinformation?
2. What key tactics contribute to organizational resilience?
3. How do technology and digital tools enhance communication effectiveness during disinformation crises?
4. What framework can organizations adopt for proactive and reactive measures against disinformation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of digital communication has fundamentally transformed how information is disseminated, consumed, and perceived. The ease and speed with which information can be shared across digital platforms have, unfortunately, also facilitated the spread of disinformation—false or misleading information deliberately intended to deceive. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon; it has roots in propaganda efforts that can be traced back to ancient times, where rulers and states would spread misleading information to influence public opinion and maintain power (Bernays, 1928). However, the advent of the Internet and social media has drastically amplified the reach and impact of disinformation, making it a pervasive and persistent challenge in modern communication (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

The evolution of disinformation can be understood through several key phases. Initially, traditional media—newspapers, radio, and television—were the primary channels through which disinformation was spread. Governments and organizations would sometimes manipulate these media to propagate certain narratives, often under the guise of legitimate news (Salmon, 1989). With the development of the Internet in the late 20th century, the landscape began to change. The Internet introduced new forms of communication, such as email, forums, and websites, which provided new avenues for the dissemination of disinformation. For instance, during the 1990s, chain emails and dubious websites became common tools for spreading hoaxes and conspiracy theories (Sunstein, 2001).

The true transformation occurred with the rise of social media platforms in the early 21st century. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube democratized the flow of information, allowing anyone with an Internet connection to share content with a potentially global audience (Zhao and Resnick, 2015). This democratization, while beneficial in many ways, also made it easier for disinformation to proliferate. The algorithmic nature of these platforms, designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritizes sensational or emotionally charged content, which disinformation frequently embodies (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). This has led to the rapid spread of false information, often outpacing the dissemination of factual content.

The impact of disinformation on digital communication is far-reaching and diverse. One of the most significant consequences is the erosion of public trust in information sources. As disinformation becomes more prevalent, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to discern credible information from falsehoods (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017). This erosion of trust can lead to a general skepticism toward all information, including that from reputable sources, thereby undermining the very foundation of informed public discourse (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003).

Furthermore, disinformation can have serious consequences for public health, safety, and democracy. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of disinformation regarding the virus and vaccines led to significant public confusion, hesitancy, and in some cases, harmful behaviour (Bridgman *et al.*,

2020). Similarly, disinformation has been used to influence political outcomes, as seen in the 2016 US presidential election, where false narratives were widely circulated to sway voter opinions (Benkler *et al.*, 2018). These examples illustrate the dangerous potential of disinformation to disrupt societal stability and influence critical decisions.

Another impact of disinformation is its effect on organizational communication strategies. Organizations now face the challenge of not only promoting their messages but also defending against false narratives that can damage their reputation (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007). Disinformation campaigns can target companies, political groups, or even individuals, often leading to public relations crises that require significant resources to manage. The ability of disinformation to spread rapidly and widely on digital platforms means that organizations must be vigilant and proactive in their communication strategies, employing sophisticated monitoring and response techniques to counteract falsehoods (Tucker *et al.*, 2018).

The technological evolution that has enabled the spread of disinformation has also made it more difficult to control. The use of bots, deepfakes, and other forms of digital manipulation has made disinformation more sophisticated and harder to detect (Ferrara, 2017). Bots can amplify disinformation by rapidly sharing and liking content, creating the illusion of widespread consensus (Shao *et al.*, 2018). Deepfakes, which use artificial intelligence to create realistic but fake videos, pose a new and particularly concerning threat, as they can be used to fabricate events or statements, further blurring the line between reality and fiction (Chesney and Citron, 2019).

STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING DISINFORMATION: BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

Disinformation presents a significant challenge to modern communication strategies, requiring organizations to develop effective methods to detect, counteract, and mitigate its spread. This literature review explores the strategies that organizations have implemented to combat disinformation, focusing on best practices and the challenges associated with these approaches.

Effective strategies to counteract disinformation often involve a combination of technological, procedural, and educational approaches. One of the primary best practices is the implementation of robust fact-checking mechanisms. Organizations such as FactCheck.org and Snopes.com play a crucial role in verifying information and debunking false claims (Graves, 2016). Fact-checking initiatives can be integrated into organizational communication strategies to ensure that disinformation is promptly addressed and corrected.

Another key practice is the use of advanced technologies for disinformation detection. Machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) have become essential tools in identifying and analysing disinformation patterns. For instance, algorithms designed to detect fake news use natural language processing (NLP) to analyse textual content and identify anomalies indicative of disinformation (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). AI tools can also monitor social media platforms

for the rapid spread of false information, providing organizations with timely insights into potential disinformation threats (Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Educational campaigns aimed at increasing media literacy are also crucial. Research indicates that improving individuals' ability to critically evaluate information can reduce the susceptibility to disinformation (Pennycook and Rand, 2019). Organizations can implement training programmes to educate employees and the public about recognizing and avoiding disinformation. These programmes often include workshops, online courses, and informational materials that emphasize critical thinking and fact-checking skills.

Transparency and openness in communication are additional best practices. In the process of openly addressing and correcting disinformation, organizations can build trust with their audiences. For example, when a company or public figure publicly acknowledges and refutes false claims, it demonstrates a commitment to honesty and credibility, which can enhance its reputation and mitigate the impact of disinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

Despite these best practices, several challenges hinder the effectiveness of disinformation combat strategies. One major challenge is the evolving nature of disinformation tactics. As digital tools and techniques advance, so do the methods used by those spreading disinformation. For example, the use of deepfakes —hyper-realistic but fake videos created using AI has introduced new difficulties in detecting and countering false information (Chesney and Citron, 2019). The sophistication of these techniques makes it increasingly difficult for traditional fact-checking and detection methods to keep pace. The sheer volume of information and the speed at which it spreads pose another significant challenge. Social media platforms and other digital channels can disseminate information rapidly, making it challenging for organizations to keep up with monitoring and responding to disinformation (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). The vast amount of data generated online requires sophisticated tools and significant resources to manage effectively.

Furthermore, there is the issue of algorithmic bias. Social media algorithms designed to promote engaging content can inadvertently amplify disinformation. For example, algorithms that prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content can lead to the widespread dissemination of false information, as such content often garners more engagement than accurate but less provocative material (Zollo *et al.*, 2017). Addressing this bias requires not only technical solutions but also a reevaluation of how content is moderated and promoted on these platforms.

A critical challenge is also the lack of coordination among various stakeholders. Combating disinformation requires collaboration between organizations, governments, technology companies, and the public. However, differing interests and priorities can lead to fragmented efforts and inefficiencies. For instance, tech companies might implement disinformation controls that are at odds with regulatory requirements or public expectations, complicating the overall response to the issue (Tucker *et al.*, 2018). Finally, there are issues related to the legal and ethical dimensions of disinformation combat. Striking a balance between addressing false information and upholding freedom of speech

is a complex challenge. Overly aggressive measures to control disinformation can lead to accusations of censorship and violations of civil liberties. Thus, organizations must manage these legal and ethical considerations carefully while developing their strategies (Gorwa, 2019).

The role of technology and digital tools in enhancing organizational resilience has become increasingly critical in the context of combating disinformation. Technological advancements offer organizations powerful means to improve their resilience against the proliferation of false information (Benoit, 2014). This review explores the various technologies and digital tools that contribute to organizational resilience, examining their evolution, effectiveness, and the challenges associated with their implementation. The evolution of technology in disinformation management has been marked by significant advancements, driven by the increasing complexity of digital communication environments. Early efforts to combat disinformation primarily relied on manual monitoring and traditional media literacy programs. However, as the digital landscape expanded and the volume of information increased, technology has evolved to provide more sophisticated solutions.

In the early 2000s, the focus was on developing basic content verification tools and search algorithms to identify and flag false information (Constâncio, 2023). The advent of social media platforms introduced new challenges, necessitating the development of tools that could analyse and manage the rapid spread of information across multiple channels (Veil *et al.*, 2011). The rise of big data and analytics enabled organizations to track and analyse large volumes of data to identify disinformation patterns more effectively (Culotta, 2014). Recent advancements have seen the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) into disinformation management. AI-driven tools now utilize natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis to detect disinformation with greater accuracy. For example, machine learning algorithms can analyse textual and visual content to identify anomalies that suggest the presence of false information (Vlachos and Riedel, 2014). These tools have evolved to address the growing sophistication of disinformation tactics, such as deepfakes and coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Several technological tools have proven effective in enhancing organizational resilience against disinformation. One such tool is the use of AI-powered fact-checking systems. These systems leverage NLP and machine learning algorithms to automatically verify the accuracy of information and identify misleading content. For instance, platforms like Full Fact and Claim Buster use AI to assess the veracity of claims made in news articles and social media posts (Thorne and Vlachos 2018). These tools can provide real-time feedback and corrections, helping organizations manage disinformation more efficiently. Another critical technology is social media monitoring and analytics tools. These tools track the spread of information across social media platforms and analyse engagement patterns to identify potential disinformation threats. Tools like Brandwatch and Talkwalker offer advanced analytics capabilities, including sentiment analysis and trend monitoring, to help organizations understand and respond to emerging disinformation trends (Chesney and Citron, 2019). Through monitoring social

media activity, organizations can detect and address disinformation before it gains widespread traction.

Cybersecurity measures are also essential in protecting organizations from digital threats associated with disinformation. Technologies such as intrusion detection systems (IDS) and firewalls help safeguard against cyberattacks that can facilitate the spread of false information. For example, organizations can use IDS to detect unusual network activity that may indicate a coordinated disinformation campaign (Markus and Robey, 1988). Implementing robust cybersecurity protocols ensures that organizations' digital infrastructures remain secure and resilient. Digital tools that facilitate collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing are also vital. Platforms like Slack and Microsoft Teams enable real-time communication and collaboration among team members, allowing organizations to coordinate responses to disinformation more effectively. These tools can be integrated with disinformation management systems to streamline information sharing and decision-making processes (Faraj *et al.*, 2011).

CHALLENGES, LIMITATIONS OF TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS AND THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Despite the advancements in technology, several challenges and limitations remain. One significant challenge is the issue of algorithmic bias. AI and machine learning algorithms can inadvertently reinforce existing biases in the data they analyse, leading to inaccurate or biased outcomes (Angwin *et al.*, 2016). Addressing algorithmic bias requires continuous refinement of algorithms and careful consideration of the data used for training. Another challenge is the need for continuous adaptation to evolving disinformation tactics. As disinformation strategies become more sophisticated, technological tools must be updated and refined to remain effective. This requires ongoing investment in research and development to keep pace with emerging threats (Pennycook and Rand, 2019).

The increasing reliance on advanced analytics and monitoring tools to combat disinformation has brought significant concerns surrounding privacy and data security. The collection and analysis of vast amounts of data raise ethical questions about the handling of personal information, requiring organizations to navigate these complexities responsibly (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, the integration of technological tools into existing organizational processes can be both complex and resource-intensive, often challenging organizations to align new technologies with their established systems and workflows. Effective implementation, therefore, necessitates careful planning and coordination to ensure seamless integration and alignment with organizational objectives (Markus and Robey, 1988).

These challenges highlight the importance of adopting robust theoretical frameworks that guide organizations in addressing the complex issues posed by disinformation. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), provides valuable insights into managing communication during crises, particularly those triggered by disinformation. It emphasizes the alignment of response strategies with the nature of the crisis and the organization's perceived

responsibility. SCCT highlights the necessity of timely dissemination of accurate information, consistent messaging, and active stakeholder engagement. Via tailoring communication strategies to the specific type of crisis and stakeholder expectations, organizations can mitigate reputational damage and maintain public trust.

Complementing SCCT, Resilience Theory articulated by Holling (1973) and expanded by Walker *et al.* (2004), further aids in understanding how organizations adapt and respond to disinformation crises by building their capacity for recovery and sustained operation. In the context of disinformation, resilience theory provides insights into how multinational corporations and political organizations can develop adaptive strategies to withstand and recover from the disruptive effects of false information. This theory highlights the importance of building systems and processes that enhance organizational agility, allowing for continuous learning and improvement in communication practices (Barton, 2001). Upon applying resilience theory, this study examines how these organizations can foster resilience through proactive strategies, such as investing in technologies for detecting disinformation, promoting a culture of agility, and refining communication protocols based on previous experiences.

The integration of SCCT and Resilience Theory offers a robust framework for analysing the complex interplay between disinformation, communication strategies, and organizational resilience. SCCT offers practical insights into crisis management through focusing on immediate response strategies, while resilience theory broadens the scope by emphasizing long-term adaptability and learning. Together, these theories guide the exploration of how multinational corporations and political organizations can strategically deal with disinformation crises, maintain operational effectiveness, and enhance their resilience in the face of emerging challenges. Together, these frameworks serve as essential tools for multinational corporations and political organizations seeking to handle the complexities of combating disinformation while enhancing their resilience through strategic communication.

METHODOLOGY

Employing qualitative research design, the study utilizes case study and content analysis to investigate and analyse communication strategies and tactics for organizational resilience, incorporating a quantitative component to assess communication frequencies. This combination allowed for a detailed investigation of how specific organizations navigated disinformation crises and the strategies they implemented. The case study approach provided rich contextual insights into organizational responses to real-world challenges (Ridder, 2012). Complementing this, content analysis systematically evaluated the textual data from various sources to assess communication strategies and responses, using frequency counts as a supplementary quantitative measure (Krippendorff, 1980). This methodological combination was chosen to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, leveraging in-depth qualitative

insights from case studies and content analysis, with frequency counts offering a supplementary layer of measurable data. This approach enhances the depth and validity of the findings while maintaining the study's qualitative focus.

Data sources included publicly available organizational reports, press releases, social media posts, and mainstream media coverage related to disinformation events. These documents were selected based on their direct relevance to the disinformation crises under investigation, recency (within the defined timeframe), and availability of detailed content for analysis. The study analysed 350 documents from 10 organizations during a 6-month period (January 2024 – June 2024), with a focus on the most recent disinformation events. This approach emphasized the relevance of addressing recent disinformation crises, ensuring the findings reflect and address contemporary challenges in disinformation management. The data collection was concentrated within this timeframe, to allow for a focused examination of the most recent disinformation events —(the deliberate dissemination of false information targeting an organization with intent to disrupt trust, damage reputation, or cause disinformation among stakeholders).

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the organizations, which is particularly suited for selecting cases that can provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under study (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). The sample included ten organizations, carefully selected to represent both multinational corporations and political organizations, thus capturing a range of organizational types and contexts. These organizations were selected based on the following criteria:

- Evidence of having encountered viral disinformation campaigns or politically motivated attacks.
- Proof of successful mitigation strategies documented in public reports and media coverage.
- Availability of sufficient public data for analysis.

The sample size aligns with qualitative research principles, which prioritize in-depth exploration of cases over statistical generalizability (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Organizations from three African countries, including Nigeria, were included to examine the socio-political and economic environments that present unique disinformation challenges. This ensured that the study's findings would be relevant to emerging markets and comparable contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Diverse industries, such as telecommunications, finance, pharmaceutical, Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), renewable energy and political organizations, were represented to ensure sector-wide relevance. Ethical considerations were maintained through anonymizing the organizations' identities to respect their privacy and confidentiality, given the sensitivity of the disinformation issues they encountered. This approach ensured that the findings could be shared without exposing organizations to potential reputational risks or renewed disinformation campaigns.

The data collection process was conducted in two stages: the Case Study Stage and the Content Analysis Stage, ensuring comprehensive data to explore the research objectives.

CASE STUDY STAGE

The case study method involved gathering data from publicly available sources to understand how organizations responded to disinformation crises. These sources included: press releases, official statements, corporate reports, and media coverage.

Additionally, attempts were made to engage with key communication personnel from the organizations to supplement publicly available data. The data collection was guided by three core areas:

- **Communication Strategies:** Exploring how organizations communicated their messages during disinformation crises.
- **Tactical Responses:** Documenting specific actions taken by organizations to mitigate the effects of disinformation.
- **Organizational Resilience:** Understanding how organizations maintained public trust and countered false information effectively.

This stage provided rich contextual insights, as the data examined organizations' real-life contexts, aligning with case study research principles (Stake, 2006; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

CONTENT ANALYSIS STAGE

The content analysis stage involved systematic collection of textual data from official communication channels during disinformation crises. The data sources included:

- **Press Releases/Official Statements:** Capturing organizational responses to disinformation events.
- **Social Media Posts:** Analysing real-time engagement and message dissemination.
- **Media Articles:** Contextualizing how organizational responses were portrayed in external narratives.

The data collection period concentrated on the most recent disinformation cases within the stated timeframe; defined as 6 months. This timeframe ensured relevance and a comprehensive examination of current organizational practices in disinformation management. The dataset comprised documents relevant to the disinformation events, spanning key organizational communication channels. This collection ensured a thorough understanding of organizational responses during the critical period following disinformation events. The final dataset of 350 documents was categorized as follows: 70 press releases/official statements, 100 social media posts, 80 corporate reports, and 100 media articles.

The data analysis process was conducted in two stages, aligning with the case study and content analysis components of the study.

CASE STUDY DATA ANALYSIS

Each organization was analysed individually to identify key communication strategies, tactical responses, and overall organizational resilience in managing disinformation. The analysis specifically focused on the following:

- **Communication Strategies:** Understanding how organizations communicated their messages during disinformation crises.
- **Tactical Responses:** Examining the specific actions taken by organizations to mitigate the effects of disinformation.
- **Organizational Resilience:** Exploring how organizations adapted to maintain public trust and counter the spread of false information.

A cross-case synthesis approach was then used to identify patterns and commonalities across the selected cases (Ridder, 2012). This method enabled the identification of best practices and key success factors in disinformation management. The case study analysis adhered to best practices in case study research, examining contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts (Stake, 2006; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The qualitative content analysis involved the systematic coding and interpretation of textual data from organizational press releases, social media posts, and news articles. Textual data were reviewed line-by-line, allowing the researcher to identify recurring patterns, themes, and underlying meanings related to communication strategies. Coding categories were developed inductively based on emerging themes and deductively from predefined categories, such as:

- **Message Clarity:** Evaluating the transparency and clarity of organizational messages.
- **Consistency of Messaging:** Assessing the uniformity of messages across different communication channels.
- **Timeliness of Responses:** Measuring how quickly organizations responded to disinformation.
- **Audience Engagement:** Analysing audience responses, including social media engagement (likes, shares, comments) and press mentions.
- **Disinformation Counteraction:** Evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies used to counter false information.

During the coding process, qualitative content analysis was applied to uncover deeper contextual insights beyond frequency counts. For instance, text fragments were grouped into categories based on their relevance to communication strategies, and key themes such as “proactive engagement” and “message consistency” were identified. Through repeated iterations of analysis, distinctive

patterns in organizational messaging and audience responses were identified and interpreted. The supplementary quantitative angle involved measuring the frequency of key communication tactics employed by the organizations. A frequency table was created to illustrate:

- Tactics/Communication Strategies: The specific actions taken.
- Frequency: How often these actions were employed.
- Percentage: The relative proportion of each tactic within the total data.

Audience engagement was assessed using metrics such as social media likes, shares, comments, and press mentions. These metrics were qualitatively interpreted to understand the nature of audience interactions and their implications for communication effectiveness. Observable outcomes, such as shifts in audience sentiment (e.g., tone of comments) and reductions in disinformation spread, were also analysed qualitatively within a defined post-event period of 7 days.

To ensure the reliability and credibility of the coding process, the coding schemes were developed based on existing literature, communication theories, and management frameworks (Krippendorff, 1980). Two independent coders were trained to apply the coding scheme. Discrepancies were resolved through discussions, refining the definitions of categories as needed.

RESULTS

This section provides a detailed report of the findings derived from the case study and content analysis of ten selected organizations, comprising five multinational corporations and five political organizations. The results are structured around the four research questions guiding the study, ensuring alignment with the study objectives. Furthermore, the findings are interpreted through the lenses of the *Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)* and *Resilience Theory (RT)*, offering clarity and coherence in addressing the study's aims.

RQ1: How effective are current communication strategies in combating disinformation?

The study reveals a varied landscape of communication strategies employed by organizations to combat disinformation. These strategies were analysed through a content analysis of organizational practices and effectiveness, as reflected in the frequency and outcomes of tactics employed.

QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

A quantitative analysis of 89 communication tactics showed varying degrees of effectiveness. The table below highlights the frequency of these tactics:

Table 1: Frequency of key communication tactics

Tactics/Communication Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Immediate public clarifications	18	20%
Use of social media	15	17%
Collaboration with fact-checkers	12	13%
Hosting Q&A sessions	8	9%
Targeted advertising	9	10%
Engagement with media	12	13%
Publishing detailed reports	6	7%
Town hall meetings	5	6%
Educational campaigns	4	5%
Total	89	100%

Source: Author’s Analysis, 2024.

The most frequently employed tactics —*immediate public clarifications* (20%) and *use of social media* (17%), proved instrumental in mitigating disinformation. These strategies significantly reduced the spread of false narratives and restored public trust.

Messaging Effectiveness

Organizations that prioritized clarity and consistency, channel utilization and timeliness in their messaging experienced better outcomes. For example, multinational corporations like the Technology Firm achieved a 40% reduction in disinformation spread within a week by issuing immediate clarifications and leveraging real-time monitoring systems. This proactive approach aligns with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), emphasizing timely responses to manage reputational risks (Coombs, 2007). In political organizations, Regional Political Party 3 demonstrated the importance of rapid responses via establishing a social media team that addressed disinformation about election fraud within hours, preserving voter confidence.

Public Response

The effectiveness of communication strategies was further measured with audience responses, including social media engagement, media coverage, and public trust indicators. Organizations that engaged directly with their audience, such as hosting Q&A sessions or releasing infographics, reported positive shifts in public perception. For instance, the Pharmaceutical Company noted a 30% decrease in customer inquiries following live Q&A sessions addressing vaccine safety concerns. The focus on transparency and frequent updates demonstrates adherence to SCCT and contributes to organizational resilience by maintaining stakeholder trust (Pennycook and Rand, 2019).

RQ2: What key tactics contribute to organizational resilience?

Organizational resilience was closely linked to adaptive and proactive communication practices tailored to specific crises.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS: MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS***Technology Firm***

Implemented real-time monitoring response team and data analytics to track and address disinformation trends, successfully reducing disinformation spread by 40% within the first week. Rumors regarding data privacy breaches were countered through immediate public clarifications via social media and press releases. This approach also resulted in a 25% increase in positive media coverage. The proactive and transparent strategies align with SCCT's emphasis on timely and clear communication for reputation management and Resilience Theory's adaptability principles (Coombs, 2007; Holling, 1973).

Pharmaceutical Company

Focused on transparency and public engagement through live Q&A sessions with experts and infographics to debunk false claims about vaccine safety. Partnerships with social media platforms ensured disinformation was flagged and countered effectively, maintaining public trust and reducing customer inquiries by 30%. These efforts highlight SCCT's focus on building trust during crises and Resilience Theory's proactive engagement emphasis (Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Holling, 1973).

FMCG Company

Leveraged targeted advertising campaigns and partnered with fact-checking organizations to address false claims about poor product quality. This approach maintained sales stability and increased customer engagement by 20%. These strategies demonstrate SCCT's role in proactive engagement and adaptability, supported by Resilience Theory's emphasis on dynamic responses (Krippendorff, 1980; Holling, 1973).

Financial Institution

Stabilized market perception during insolvency rumours by creating a dedicated microsite featuring real-time updates, financial reports, and FAQs. This approach improved stakeholder confidence and avoided potential financial losses. These efforts reflect SCCT's principles of maintaining clear communication channels and Resilience Theory's capacity for system integrity (Coombs, 2007; Holling, 1973).

Renewable Energy Company

Countered accusations of greenwashing via publishing data-driven reports validated by third-party auditors and launching an open-access dashboard with real-time metrics. These strategies successfully mitigated public perception challenges and reduced regulatory scrutiny. The emphasis on data and collaboration illustrates SCCT's adaptability and Resilience Theory's focus on evidence-based responses (Sims *et al.*, 2009; Holling, 1973).

POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Labour Union: Utilized multi-channel communication, including social media, traditional media, public rallies, newsletters and fact-checking, to counter false narratives of destabilizing strikes, 15% effectiveness was recorded in increasing public support. The use of diverse communication channels and fact-checking supports Crisis Communication Theory and demonstrates resilience through effective adaptation to political discourse (Walker *et al.*, 2004).

Regional Political Parties (1, 2, and 3): Leveraged grassroots engagement, rapid response mechanisms, and official communication platforms to combat election-related disinformation. Strategies included hosting town hall meetings, utilizing social media for timely corrections, and engaging with local influencers to build community trust. These efforts effectively reduced the spread of false claims, improved public understanding, and maintained voter confidence. The approaches highlight Resilience Theory's emphasis on adaptability to localized contexts and Crisis Communication Theory's focus on proactive, transparent, and consistent communication, ensuring public trust and credibility (Markus and Robey, 1988; Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018; Zuboff, 2019; Coombs, 2007).

Political Advocacy Group: Organized educational door-to-door campaigns, public seminars and partnership with media organizations, increasing public skepticism toward disinformation while reinforcing credibility. The focus on education and media partnerships reflects Crisis Communication Theory and Resilience Theory's emphasis on proactive and context-specific strategies (Holling, 1973; Coombs, 2007).

RQ3: How do technology and digital tools enhance communication effectiveness during disinformation crises?

The role of technology emerged as a significant element in combating disinformation, particularly through real-time analytics, social media platforms, infographics and digital dashboards.

- **Real-Time Analytics:** Organizations like the Technology Firm utilized advanced monitoring tools like AI-driven analytics to track and counter disinformation trends swiftly, reducing response times significantly.
- **Social Media Engagement:** Effective use of platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook facilitated rapid message dissemination, aligning with Krippendorff's (1980) findings on channel effectiveness.
- **Infographics and Dashboards:** The Renewable Energy Company and Pharmaceutical Company employed visual tools to enhance public understanding, counter false claims, and validate transparency.

Public Response to Digital Tools

Organizations leveraging digital tools reported improved outcomes, including:

- Increased audience trust (e.g., 25% rise in positive media coverage for the Technology Firm).

- Higher engagement levels (e.g., 20% increase for the FMCG Company).

These results affirm the role of technology in fostering resilience through timely and accessible communication, a key tenet of Resilience Theory.

RQ4: What framework can organizations adopt for proactive and reactive measures against disinformation?

Proposed Framework

The findings suggest a six-pronged framework for organizations to effectively address disinformation crises through both proactive and reactive strategies:

1. **Proactive Monitoring and Analytics:** Organizations must establish real-time tracking systems to identify disinformation trends and mitigate potential risks. For instance, the Technology Firm successfully utilized data-driven monitoring to debunk disinformation early.
2. **Transparent Communication:** Frequent updates and clarity in messaging enhance trust and credibility. The Pharmaceutical Company's Q&A sessions and the Renewable Energy Company's real-time dashboards are notable examples of transparent practices.
3. **Collaboration with Stakeholders:** Building partnerships with fact-checkers, media organizations, and regulators strengthens an organization's capacity to counter disinformation. The FMCG Company's alliances with fact-checkers and the Financial Institution's collaboration with media platforms exemplify this approach.
4. **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Promoting critical thinking and skepticism is key to disinformation resilience. The Political Advocacy Group's seminars and campaigns highlight the effectiveness of educating stakeholders on identifying and countering false information.
5. **Dedicated Response Platforms:** Organizations should create accessible microsites or platforms that provide real-time updates, FAQs, and verified reports to counter disinformation effectively. The Financial Institution's microsite successfully stabilized market perception during a crisis.
6. **Rapid Engagement and Rebuttals:** Utilizing social media for swift responses to disinformation ensures timely corrections and minimizes disinformation spread. This is evident in the Renewable Energy Company's rapid engagement strategy and the Pharmaceutical Company's live updates.

The Regional Political Parties' grassroots tactics, for instance, may be less effective in urbanized, tech-savvy settings.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to analyse the effectiveness of communication strategies and tactics in combating disinformation and fostering organizational resilience. The findings of this study are discussed below in relation to the four

key research questions, with a focus on their alignment with existing theoretical frameworks, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Resilience Theory (RT), and their contributions to the existing body of literature.

RQ1

The findings from the study suggest that organizations adopt a range of communication strategies to combat disinformation. These strategies vary across industries but have demonstrated varying levels of effectiveness. The most common techniques identified were immediate public clarifications, the use of social media, and collaboration with fact-checkers. The study found that organizations employing immediate clarifications saw a significant reduction in disinformation-related crises. This aligns with SCCT, which emphasizes the importance of rapid and transparent communication during crises (Coombs, 2007). For instance, the Technology Firm, by issuing swift clarifications, was able to counteract false narratives that emerged from disinformation campaigns and maintain a positive public perception. This rapid response helped mitigate reputational damage, an outcome supported by previous studies that assert the effectiveness of quick, clear communication in reducing negative public perceptions during crises (Benoit, 2014; Coombs, 2007).

Further, the role of social media as a central tool in crisis communication was prevalent across organizations in this study. Social media not only served as a channel for disseminating accurate information but also as a platform for direct engagement with the public. For instance, the Pharmaceutical Company employed social media platforms for real-time engagement with its audience, addressing queries and correcting disinformation about vaccine safety. This is consistent with previous studies that highlight the critical role of social media in real-time crisis management and its ability to engage audiences interactively (Veil *et al.*, 2011). The study also found that using interactive Q&A sessions on social media not only provided clarity but also created a sense of community, which further strengthened the organization's credibility.

However, despite the effectiveness of these strategies, challenges persist, especially in ensuring the accuracy of information disseminated. As highlighted in the findings, even when organizations provide clarifications or counter-disinformation messages, false narratives can continue to spread if they are not consistently addressed. This highlights a significant gap in current strategies, as it is crucial to monitor the persistence of disinformation and ensure that all messaging remains consistent and accurate across various platforms over time. While the use of AI-driven tools to monitor online trends was identified as a successful approach, this solution is not without its own challenges, particularly in dealing with information that evolves rapidly, or in contexts with low technological engagement.

In light of these findings, it is evident that current communication strategies, though largely effective, could benefit from more integrated, multi-layered approaches. This includes continuous monitoring, the creation of real-time feedback mechanisms, and partnerships with external organizations, such as fact-checkers, to ensure that information is consistently verified and counteract disinformation at all levels.

RQ2

The second research question focused on identifying the tactics that contribute to building organizational resilience against disinformation. The findings demonstrate that adaptive communication strategies, combined with collaborative efforts, are central to resilience. These strategies resonate with Resilience Theory, which argues that an organization's ability to withstand and adapt to crises depends largely on the flexibility of its response mechanisms and its capacity to learn from previous challenges (Holling, 1973).

Several organizations, such as the Renewable Energy Company and the FMCG Company, incorporated educational campaigns and public-private partnerships into their communication efforts. For example, the Renewable Energy Company utilized infographics and detailed reports to enhance public understanding of renewable energy initiatives, positioning itself as a trusted source of information in an industry often overshadowed with disinformation. This approach directly contributes to resilience by establishing the company as a credible, authoritative voice in its field, a tactic supported by Veil *et al.* (2011), who suggest that organizations that invest in public education build long-term trust and reduce vulnerability during crises.

Similarly, organizations like the National Labour Union leveraged grassroots engagement and community outreach programs as part of their resilience strategy. Through involving local communities in their communication efforts, they created a network of informed individuals who could serve as reliable sources of information within their communities, thus fostering a culture of resilience at the local level. This highlights the broader implications of Resilience Theory, which suggests that resilience is not just an internal organizational trait but a collective effort involving stakeholders at all levels.

Another important tactic for building resilience, as observed in the study, was collaboration with external stakeholders, such as media organizations and fact-checkers. The Pharmaceutical Company's partnership with fact-checking organizations proved vital in combatting the spread of vaccine disinformation. These collaborative efforts not only enhanced the organization's credibility but also provided an avenue for rapid information verification and correction. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of networked approaches in building resilience (Barton, 2001).

RQ3

Technology played a critical role in enhancing communication effectiveness during disinformation crises. The study found that digital tools such as AI-driven analytics, real-time dashboards, and automated content distribution platforms were integral to organizational responses to disinformation. The Technology Firm, for example, used AI-driven analytics to identify trends in online discussions and detect emerging disinformation campaigns before they could escalate. This proactive monitoring allowed the organization to craft timely responses and ensure that corrective measures were taken immediately. This aligns with research that emphasizes the role of technology in enabling organizations to be more agile and responsive in times of crisis (Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Constâncio, 2023).

The use of infographics and interactive social media content was another crucial digital strategy employed by several organizations. These visual tools, when combined with clear and concise messaging, helped to demystify complex issues and make accurate information more accessible to a broader audience. The Pharmaceutical Company's use of infographics to convey vaccine safety statistics, for instance, allowed them to present evidence in a more digestible and compelling format. This supports the work of Coombs (2007), who suggests that visual aids can enhance communication efforts by providing clarity and fostering engagement.

However, the findings also pointed to limitations in digital tool accessibility, particularly in developing regions or communities with limited access to the Internet. While digital tools were highly effective in certain contexts, the study reinforces the importance of balancing digital and traditional media to ensure that all segments of the audience are reached effectively.

RQ4

The study proposes a six-pronged framework for organizations to adopt proactive and reactive measures against disinformation. This framework includes proactive monitoring, transparent communication, and collaboration with stakeholders, educational campaigns, dedicated response platforms, and rapid engagement. The findings suggest that organizations that integrate these strategies into their crisis communication plans are better positioned to handle disinformation crises effectively.

The study also emphasizes the need for long-term planning and stakeholder engagement as part of a thorough approach to combating disinformation. This approach not only mitigates the immediate effects of disinformation but also contributes to organizational resilience over time. Through maintaining consistent, clear, and transparent communication across all channels and stakeholders, organizations can build a strong reputation and become a trusted source of information, which is essential in mitigating the impact of future crises.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to analyse the effectiveness of communication strategies and tactics employed by organizations to combat disinformation and build resilience. The research was guided with four key questions addressing the effectiveness of these strategies, the tactics that foster resilience, the role of technology, and the development of a suitable framework for organizational responses.

The findings reveal several critical insights into how organizations can enhance their resilience against disinformation. First, the study shows that immediate public clarifications, strategic use of social media, and collaborations with fact-checkers are highly effective communication strategies that mitigate the spread of disinformation. These tactics have proven effective in maintaining organizational credibility and reputation, especially when implemented swiftly and transparently. Second, adaptive communication and collaborative efforts

were found to be key to fostering organizational resilience, as they allow organizations to adjust to evolving disinformation trends and build a network of trusted sources. Technology, particularly AI-driven tools for real-time monitoring, emerged as a central enabler in combating disinformation, helping organizations stay ahead of false narratives. Lastly, the development of a comprehensive framework combining proactive and reactive measures was identified as essential for organizational resilience in the long term.

These findings contribute to the broader theoretical framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Resilience Theory (RT) by reinforcing the importance of transparent and adaptive communication strategies. They align with previous research on the role of real-time engagement and educational efforts in fostering organizational trust and credibility. Furthermore, the study extends the understanding of how organizations can leverage technology in crisis management, providing new insights into the role of digital tools in disinformation combat. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that organizations must develop multi-layered communication strategies and foster resilience through proactive and reactive measures. Upon adopting these strategies, organizations can better address the challenges posed by disinformation, enhancing their long-term sustainability in an increasingly digital world.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of communication strategies against disinformation, there are few limitations. First, the study primarily focused on organizations in technologically advanced sectors, which may not fully represent industries or regions with limited access to digital tools. Future research could explore how organizations in low-tech respond to disinformation and what tactics they employ in such contexts.

Second, the study relied on a qualitative approach, which, while providing in-depth insights, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Quantitative studies involving a larger sample size could provide a broader perspective on the effectiveness of these communication strategies across diverse industries. Furthermore, future research could investigate the role of government regulations and media policies in shaping organizational responses to disinformation, considering the political and regulatory landscapes in different regions.

Lastly, a longitudinal study would provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of communication strategies and organizational resilience in combating disinformation, particularly in the aftermath of crises.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The practical implications of this study are significant for organizations seeking to combat disinformation and enhance their resilience. The research highlights the importance of immediate and transparent communication, social media

engagement, and partnerships with external fact-checkers in building trust with stakeholders and minimizing the negative effects of disinformation. In adopting a multi-channel communication strategy that includes real-time monitoring and rapid response, organizations can effectively address false narratives before they escalate.

The study also highlights the value of technology in enabling organizations to stay ahead of disinformation trends. Organizations should invest in AI-driven analytics tools that can identify emerging falsehoods and facilitate timely responses. Additionally, training and capacity building in digital communication should be prioritized to ensure that organizations are equipped to handle disinformation crises effectively.

Furthermore, the proposed six-pronged framework offers a holistic approach for organizations to adopt both proactive and reactive measures. This framework is intended to be flexible and adaptable to various organizational contexts, providing a roadmap for improving communication strategies and building resilience against disinformation in an increasingly complex digital environment. The findings not only contribute to the theoretical understanding of crisis communication but also offer practical guidance for organizations seeking to mitigate the risks of disinformation in the digital age.

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The Dark Side of News Consumption: A Systematic Review on Private Messaging Networks Studies and Journalism

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In recent years, there has been a growing trend of news sharing through private messaging apps. This shift presents significant challenges for journalism, particularly in terms of media trust and news dissemination. Despite the importance of studying the role of private messaging apps in shaping public opinion, there is a lack of systematic approaches. After a scientific literature review including terms such as “WhatsApp”, “Telegram”, and “mesospaces”, content and thematic analyses were carried out to identify research methods and topics. A total of 61 documents was retrieved in late 2022, 53 of which are articles in WoS journals. Results shed light on the most common practices, and while WhatsApp remains the most studied platform, paradoxically, it is still in the experimental stage. While the use of private messaging apps for news reception may be considered a private activity, the findings suggest that this private reception does not necessarily equate to individual or isolated consumption. The results have implications for stages such as news gathering and pro-

En los últimos años, ha habido una creciente tendencia de compartir noticias a través de aplicaciones de mensajería privada. Este cambio presenta desafíos significativos para el periodismo en términos de confianza en los medios y difusión de noticias. A pesar de la importancia de la investigación sobre mensajería privada y periodismo en la construcción de la opinión pública, faltan enfoques sistemáticos. Tras una revisión de literatura científica que incluyó términos como “WhatsApp”, “Telegram” y “mesoespacios”, se realizaron análisis de contenido y temáticos para identificar métodos y temas de investigación. Se recuperaron 61 documentos en 2022, de los cuales 53 son artículos en revistas WoS. Los resultados arrojan luz sobre las prácticas más comunes y, aunque WhatsApp sigue siendo la plataforma más estudiada, paradójicamente aún se usa de modo experimental. Si bien el uso de aplicaciones de mensajería privada para la recepción de noticias puede considerarse una actividad privada, los hallazgos sugieren que esta recepción privada no necesariamente equivale a

duction, while also revealing subtopics in research on these platforms, such as the need for new digital literacies, trust as a primary casualty of disinformation, and some community practices. This approach underlines the need for transnational studies to identify common practices in the use of these technologies that are not solely driven by the particular context of a country.

Keywords: *journalism, mobile instant messaging, news consumption, systematic review, WhatsApp.*

un consumo individual o aislado. Las implicaciones de los resultados se relacionan con la recopilación y producción de noticias, pero también surgen subtemas como la necesidad de nuevas alfabetizaciones digitales, la confianza como primera víctima de la desinformación y algunas prácticas comunitarias. Este enfoque subraya la necesidad de estudios transnacionales para identificar prácticas comunes con estas tecnologías que no estén únicamente impulsadas por el contexto particular de un país.

Palabras clave: *mensajería móvil instantánea, periodismo, consumo de noticias, revisión sistemática, WhatsApp.*

RESEARCH ON JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

It has been scientifically established that private messaging networks, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, are among the primary sources of disinformation dissemination (Salaverría *et al.*, 2020). However, research on the intersection of online private messaging and journalism remains in its early stages, despite the fact that the media play a central role in shaping public opinion. Digital media has been a major focus of Communication Studies in the 21st century (Montero-Díaz *et al.*, 2018). Journalism Studies have not been an exception, with recent decades seeing particular research streams exploring various aspects of Digital Journalism (Salaverría, 2019), such as its forms (e.g., news recommenders, Mitova *et al.*, 2023), its language (e.g., data journalism, Fernandes *et al.*, 2023), and its economic aspects (e.g., O'Brien *et al.*, 2020), among others.

One of the fastest-growing research domains within digital journalism is the relationship between social media and journalism (Segado-Boj, 2020). Numerous systematic reviews and meta-analyses have explored various aspects of this relationship, including how journalistic organizations select and present content on social media (Anter, 2024), how reporters and journalists use social media as a news source (Zubiaga, 2019), how users share news within these platforms (Quevedo-Redondo *et al.*, 2022), and the characteristics of misinformation and disinformation circulating through social media (Damstra *et al.*, 2021)

Most research on social media and journalism has predominantly focused on Twitter (now known as 'X'), with less attention given to other platforms (Segado-Boj, 2020). Additionally, much of this research has centered on open, asymmetric social media, while fewer studies have explored what are referred to as closed, symmetric social media or dark social media —platforms that facilitate private or semi-private conversations. In contrast, since 2015, there has been a decline in most forms of public participation related to news, such as liking, sharing, and commenting, while sharing within private messaging apps has increased (Altay *et al.*, 2024).

This study, therefore, represents the first attempt to synthesize the body of work examining the relationship between journalism and private messaging apps, as well as other closed or semi-private platforms.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As the main goal, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of research on journalism and private messaging networks to date. In order to achieve this, the specific objectives are as follows:

1. Characterizing the existing research on journalism and private social media regarding methods adopted.
2. Describing the most common objects of study and most frequently analyzed topics.
3. Suggesting new lines of research by identifying empirical evidence and potential gaps in the research on private messaging networks and journalism.

Following the cited specific objectives, the article aims to answer these research questions:

1. What are the common changes in news content features (topic, news values, objectivity) resulting from MIM technologies across different countries and regions?
2. How does the use of MIM for news consumption interact with other media platforms in shaping public opinion, trust in news, digital literacies, and participatory journalism?
3. What are the actual effects of MIM on the relationships between journalists and sources, particularly in terms of critical journalistic approaches?
4. How does news consumption through MIM impact political and current events knowledge among users?
5. What type of news consumption patterns do MIM encourage?

THE RISK OF CONSUMPTION WITH NO CONTEXT

Structure and context play a crucial role in the attention and behavior of news users. For instance, in the case of tablets, "the chronological and associative structuring of

news articles into so-called developing news stories would lead to more attention for news, and better recall and comprehension of news” (Cauwenberge *et al.*, 2015). However, social media in general, and private messaging networks in particular, offer the opposite: no context and no structure. A similar phenomenon occurs with the influence of interfaces on the navigation process. As Verhoeff (2017) pointed out, interfaces are not just something, but they force users to do something. Private messaging networks, with their “lack of interfaces,” would force users to do nothing (no comparing news, no checking links, no contrasting sources).

From the perspective of news consumption, unintentional consumption is probably one of the most related consequences of private messaging networks. Researchers have investigated the phenomenon of unintentional news consumption in diverse media landscapes. A study by Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) analyzed data from online surveys conducted in four nations (Italy, Australia, UK, and USA) to explore how people inadvertently encounter news on popular social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The research focused on individuals who don’t actively seek news on social media but may stumble upon it while using these platforms for other purposes. These “incidentally exposed” users were compared to those who don’t use social media at all. Key findings of the study include: a) users who unintentionally encounter news on social media tend to access a wider variety of online news sources compared to non-social media users, b) the impact of incidental exposure is more pronounced among younger demographics and individuals who generally show less interest in news, and c) the effect is more significant for YouTube and Twitter users compared to those on Facebook (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018).

These results suggest that even without intentionally seeking news, social media users may be exposed to a broader range of information sources, potentially influencing their news consumption habits and knowledge acquisition. The influence of community sharing is clear.

While the concept of sharing has been a popular topic of research in journalism in recent years (Villi and Noguera-Vivo, 2017; García-Perdomo *et al.*, 2017; Noguera-Vivo, 2018), the analyzed platforms are usually social networks (X, Facebook, Instagram), and the private side of online messaging remains under-theorized. Through sharing and commenting, users actively participate in the news ecosystem.

In this context, one of the key points is, under the approach of News-Find-Me perception, the effects of this consumption on knowledge acquisition, the expression of political interests, and consequently, the quality of democracies (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2018). Trust and credibility are key in terms of selection of news sources by users who have profiles related to Communication, such as journalists, professors, or communication students (Martos Moreno and Sánchez Gonzales, 2024). However, this may not be the same for more general profiles not related to Communication or Journalism. The collaborative nature of agenda-setting construction is clear, but its effects and cycles are not. Still, it is proven that after the peak of attention for certain memes and social campaigns, social and mainstream media often play a collaborative role in generating sustained interest in specific issues (Jang *et al.*, 2016).

Under the historically optimistic statements about the origins of Web 2.0, it was said that “the wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2005) would make content with more quality more visible, because “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) know more than a single journalist or media outlet. However, it has been proven that incidental exposure strengthens the news-finds-me perception and is negatively associated with news consumption (Park and Kaye, 2021).

For all these reasons, a better understanding of gaps, opportunities, and theoretical debates in research on journalism and MIM could help media produce better journalistic content to optimize their relationship with audiences.

METHODS

This work presents the results of a systematic literature review, a methodologically rigorous examination of published scientific findings on a specific topic within a given field (Kitchenham *et al.*, 2009). This method enables researchers to identify, evaluate, and interpret existing scientific information on the subject (Ramírez-Montoya and García-Peñalvo, 2018). Systematic reviews surpass traditional literature reviews by minimizing subjectivity, avoiding biases, and prioritizing transparency and traceability (Morales-Vargas *et al.*, 2020). This approach has been widely adopted in Journalism Studies to summarize and analyze published research on various topics, including solutions journalism (Lough and McIntyre, 2023), fake news (Abu Arqoub *et al.*, 2022), and the use of artificial intelligence (Ioscote *et al.*, 2024).

This systematic review follows the SALSA Framework: Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (Booth *et al.*, 2012). The process began with a comprehensive search for relevant documents (Search), followed by a rigorous evaluation to exclude irrelevant materials (Appraisal). The remaining papers were then Synthesized and Analyzed to draw meaningful conclusions.

SEARCH

On September 19, 2022, a total of 61 documents were retrieved from Web of Science using the following search query: Journalism AND (“Dark Social Media” OR “WhatsApp” OR “Instant Messaging” OR “Telegram” OR “Mesospaces” OR “Closed social media”). The search was conducted across abstracts, titles, and keywords. Of these documents, 53 were articles published in Web of Science journals, with 30 in Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and 23 in Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI). No publication date filter was applied to capture the entire timeline of relevant research in Journalism studies. The retrieved documents spanned from 2011 to 2022, with 2011 marking the earliest publication and 2022 the most recent.

APPRAISAL

Next, the following inclusion criteria for the documents were established:

- Theoretical or empirical articles.
- Published in English or Spanish.
- Focused on the use of private or semi-private platforms.
- Analyzing processes of news production, consumption, or distribution of information about current events.

Documents that felt on these criteria were also excluded:

- Focused on social networks or the use of mobile instant messaging apps (MIM) in general, without specific emphasis on private platforms.
- Focused on private or semi-private platforms but not covering their use for the consumption, production, or dissemination of information/news.
- Methodological articles focused on proposing generic procedures for the analysis of private or semi-private platforms.
- Editorial notes or comments.

Two researchers independently applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the retrieved documents. In cases of disagreement, which occurred for 6 documents, the researchers engaged in discussions to reach a consensus on whether to include or exclude the item. As a result of this process, 30 articles (49.2% of the initial sample) were included in the final analysis, while 31 articles (50.8%) were excluded.

Digital Journalism dominates the sample, publishing 30% of the papers. *Journalism Practice*, *New Media & Society*, and *Profesional de la Información* follow, each contributing 6.7% of the sample. The remaining 15 venues have published one paper each, accounting for 3.3% of the sample per venue (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of documents per source

Sources	n
Digital Journalism	9
Profesional de la Información	2
New Media & Society	2
Journalism Practice	2

Source: Authors.

SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS

The final sample was analyzed using a dual strategy. First, following Tong *et al.* (2025), a quantitative content analysis was conducted, focusing on three main categories:

- 1. Analyzed platforms (see Table 2)
- 2. Geographical scenarios of the samples (see Table 3)
- 3. Methods employed in the studies (see Table 4)

These variables were identified based on explicit declarations in the sampled papers, without interpretation or evaluation by the authors of this review. It's important to note that the variables were not mutually exclusive; a single study could analyze multiple platforms and geographical scenarios simultaneously, or employ more than one method.

Secondly, following Segado-Boj *et al.* (2015), we conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring topics in the literature. The identified themes are listed and defined in section 3.2.

In addition to providing descriptive results, we conducted chi-squared tests to examine potential relationships between the methods used in each paper and the thematic issue assigned to it. These tests yield p-values and chi-squared values. A p-value closer to 0 and a higher chi-squared value indicate a lower probability that the distribution among categories (e.g., the use of a specific method to analyze a certain topic) differs from a proportional distribution, suggesting a potential relationship between two categories. The tests were conducted treating each category (method used and thematic issue of the paper) as a dichotomous variable. For example, papers that used content analysis were compared against those that did not, in relation to whether they researched news consumption or not. For brevity, only comparisons that reached a p-value below the traditional significance threshold of $p < .05$ are reported. Comparisons not listed should be considered non-significant. Tables 6-10 present the distribution tables, comparing observed and expected counts to identify which categories show a higher frequency (observed) than would be expected from a probabilistic distribution (expected).

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Research on dark social media has primarily focused on WhatsApp, which emerges as the most frequently studied platform. Other Messaging Instant Messaging (MIM) services, such as Telegram and WeChat, follow in prominence. The private uses of Open Asymmetric Social Media platforms, like Facebook or Twitter, appear less frequently in the literature (see Table 2).

Table 2. Number of platforms analyzed in the sample

Platforms	n	%
Whatsapp	21	70
Telegram	6	20
Facebook	4	13.3
WeChat	4	13.3
Twitter	3	10
MIMS	2	6.7
Facebook (groups)	1	3.3
SMS	1	3.3
Line	1	3.3
Facebook Messenger	1	3.3
Instagram	1	3.3
YouTube	1	3.3

Source: Authors.

Regarding geographical areas, European settings predominate in the literature. However, a significant number of studies focused on regions from the Global South, particularly Latin America and Africa, were also identified. Notably, none of the papers in the sample examined the United States or Canada (see Table 3).

Table 3. Geographical scenarios analyzed in the sample

Geographical scenarios	n	%
Europe	12	40
Latin America	5	16.7
Mid East	5	16.7
Africa	4	13.3
Asia	4	13.3

Source: Authors.

Regarding research methodologies, in-depth interviews, surveys, and observation emerge as the most frequently employed methods. Content analysis techniques, whether quantitative or qualitative, which focus on message examination, appear in only one out of four documents in the sample (see Table 4).

Table 4. Methods employed in the sample

Methods	n	%
In depth interviews	11	36.67
Survey	9	30
Observation	7	23.33
Other	6	20
Content analysis	5	16.67
Qual Content Analysis	3	10
Case Study	3	10
Focus groups	2	6.67
Experiment	1	3.33

Source: Authors.

News production emerges as the most prevalent research topic, closely followed by news consumption. In contrast, ‘Audience participation and community’ and ‘News dissemination’ receive less attention in the literature (see Table 5).

Table 5. Topics analyzed in the sample

Topic	n	%
News production	16	53.3
Audience participation & Community	6	20.7
News dissemination	6	20.7
News consumption	11	37.8

Source: Authors.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

“News Production”

The rise of instant messaging platforms has significantly impacted the news production process, offering privacy and speed advantages (Bykov *et al.*, 2018). WhatsApp has emerged as the dominant platform, despite technical competition from Telegram, due to its larger social capital (Sánchez-Gonzales and Martos-Moreno, 2020). Journalists are still experimenting with WhatsApp, using it both internally for newsroom communication and externally to reach wider audiences (McIntyre and Sobel, 2019; Moon, 2021).

The evolving media landscape, characterized by disinformation and cyber-propaganda on private messaging networks (Ncube, 2019), has given rise to new

journalistic roles, such as fact-checkers, with WhatsApp being a primary source of fake content (Pacheco *et al.*, 2019). This shift has also raised ethical concerns regarding source relationships, blurring the lines between on-the-record and off-the-record information (Dodds, 2019). Furthermore, WhatsApp has transformed “journalistic cultures,” influencing editorial practices, source relationships, and idea generation (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021).

News Production on Messaging Instant Messaging (MIM) platforms involves creating, curating, and disseminating news through private messaging networks like WhatsApp. This process capitalizes on the speed and privacy of these platforms while addressing challenges related to ethical source relationships and misinformation spread.

This topic examines how journalists and newsrooms utilize MIM apps and closed social media throughout the news production cycle, from newsgathering to writing and editing. It also explores the potential transformations resulting from the widespread adoption of these communication tools, encompassing various subtopics within this field of study.

News Production and Narratives

Journalists view Telegram as a tool for crafting more relevant headlines and incorporating multimedia elements (Sánchez-Gonzales and Martos-Moreno, 2020). This aligns with observations by Kermani (2018) and Boczek and Koppers (2020) that news disseminated through MIM tends to be shorter, more straightforward, and includes audio-visual formats like screenshots or links. In Spain, the political chatbot Politibot succeeded on Telegram by prioritizing verification, customization, simplicity, and clarity, though challenges in usability and navigability remained, with segmented content emerging as crucial for enhancing journalistic potential (Sánchez-Gonzales and Sánchez-González, 2020).

The changes brought by MIM appear primarily formal, with no evidence of shifts in news values or objectivity (Kermani, 2018). Boczek and Koppers (2020) noted crime stories’ popularity on WhatsApp.

For news gathering, journalists use MIM to monitor events and stay updated, especially in high-volume information situations. These platforms represent hybrid interactions of news production embedded in social practices, impacting journalistic practices in information gathering, security, interpretation, and the informational cultures of journalism (Belair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2017).

News Production and Audience Collaboration

MIM facilitates audience collaboration in news production, potentially involving participation across all phases, including interpretation and editing (Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim, 2020). However, this collaboration primarily focuses on news gathering, with citizens serving as sources through MIM. This approach is particularly valuable for proximity journalism, especially in covering events like traffic incidents. The use of citizen sources via MIM highlights the need

for rapid verification systems to maintain information quality (Chagas, 2018). Local news organizations benefit from MIM by gathering information from areas without correspondents (McIntyre and Sobel, 2019). Some urban communities have shown an emerging use of WhatsApp and other digital platforms for information dissemination, indicating growth in participatory practices. However, community media often lack planned strategies for managing these platforms for informational purposes (Sierra, 2021). This collaborative approach aligns with the concept of citizen journalism, where community members actively participate in news gathering and reporting. It reflects a shift in the traditional journalist-audience relationship, with audiences increasingly assuming roles as sources and even collaborators in the news production process.

News Production and Sources

MIM platforms are increasingly replacing traditional communication channels like telephone or email for interactions between journalists and their sources, including PR practitioners (Bykov *et al.*, 2018; Mashiah, 2021). These interactions can occur in either semi-public, one-to-many formats or more private, one-to-one confidential exchanges (Agur, 2019). The integration of platforms like WhatsApp into daily professional routines is creating new tensions in journalism. These include balancing open and closed communication, as well as trust and secrecy. Consequently, new forms of social interactions and co-production in journalism are emerging, shaping a hybrid media logic influenced by the growing use of chat apps (Agur, 2019). This shift reflects the broader impact of digital media on traditional journalism, where real-time communication and accessibility are increasingly prioritized. However, it also raises questions about information security, source protection, and the evolving nature of journalistic practices in the digital age.

In this context, organizations utilize WhatsApp group chats to keep journalists informed about current events and provide timely updates. This approach extends to both large, established entities and smaller organizations with limited resources for attending media events or press conferences (Dodds, 2019). WhatsApp has even been employed for conducting interviews (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2022).

Journalists generally view the faster and more direct relationship with sources via messaging platforms positively (Dodds, 2019). This is particularly valuable in dangerous situations like armed conflicts, where WhatsApp or Telegram are considered more reliable and secure for contacting sources due to their encrypted communication. These channels help build trust with sources, with journalists exercising caution and emphasizing their gatekeeping role to maintain credibility and protect audiences from misinformation. WhatsApp plays a crucial role in facilitating communication and verification with sources, especially in remote and conflict zones. However, journalists also experience a loss of privacy, as sources can contact them at any time, potentially disregarding established schedules (Dodds, 2019). From an organizational perspective, the introduction of Messaging Instant Messaging (MIM) technologies represents a paradigm shift.

Unlike established guidelines for social media, organizations often lack specific regulations for these platforms. This is particularly significant, as improper use of MIM could strain relationships between PR practitioners and journalists (Mashiah, 2021).

News Production and Media Outlets Organization

Lastly, journalists use MIM to communicate with one another, enabling the exchange of information and recommendations across different newsrooms (McIntyre and Sobel, 2019). It also serves as an internal communication tool within newsrooms for coordinating routine tasks and procedures, and even functions as a managerial resource (Moon, 2022). During the COVID-19 lockdown, journalists increasingly relied on interactive digital platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter to conduct virtual meetings, source, and share stories (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2022).

‘NEWS CONSUMPTION’

Private consumption does not equate to individual consumption, as some topics, such as political news, are disseminated intensely on WhatsApp. This is why community and privacy boundaries are crucial when deciding whether or not to share news (Swart *et al.*, 2019). Over 60% of Spanish users receive political news via WhatsApp at least once a week, solidifying its role as a significant news source in many countries. Additionally, the percentage of users who share news through this platform is even higher—77%—with the practice being more common when the message is visual. These figures highlight the potential of instant messaging as a tool for political discussion and polarization (Pont-Sorribes *et al.*, 2020).

The way people perceive news on instant messaging platforms is influenced by the technological affordances of these private spaces. At the same time, these technological characteristics predict “multiple social media news use behaviors” (Peng and Miller, 2023). While instant messaging platforms are ideal for fostering a sense of belonging in close-knit communities—such as among friends, family, and colleagues—they are less effective at breaking the boundaries of local communities, “complicating the notion of public connection itself” (Swart *et al.*, 2018).

The utopian idea of private messaging tools enhancing news sharing is sometimes countered by studies that highlight how these tools can constrain user participation (Xu, 2022), enabling only specific forms of news sharing—often not the most effective ones. This tension arises from the challenge of integrating journalistic practices within pre-existing social spaces like private messaging networks. In fact, chat apps represent “complex and hybrid interactions of news production embedded in social practices” (Belair-Gagnon *et al.*, 2017).

In terms of user behavior patterns, it is important to distinguish between two main profiles: the incidental reader, who connects for leisure or entertainment, and the routine reader, who monitors networks for news items of interest. “Direct consumption usually leads to sharing on closed networks, while incidental exposure typically leads to sharing on open networks” (Díaz-Campo *et al.*, 2021).

News consumption on instant messaging networks involves receiving, perceiving, and sharing news content through private messaging platforms. This form of consumption is characterized by the intense dissemination of specific topics —particularly political news— shaped by the technological features of the platforms, privacy settings, and users' behavior patterns and community dynamics.

Traffic and Trust

Another area of research explores how citizens access news through MIM and the factors influencing this behavior. Studies in this field highlight the growing popularity of MIM as a news source. For instance, 64% of citizens in Spain (the focus of this study) report receiving at least one piece of political news via WhatsApp. Additionally, 38% of individuals sometimes share news about political affairs, and approximately 31% occasionally provide comments. However, while WhatsApp is increasingly becoming a source of traffic for media outlets (Mañas-Viniegra *et al.*, 2019), there is a noticeable trend of individuals placing less trust in information received through this channel compared to more traditional social media platforms like Facebook (Pont-Sorribes *et al.*, 2020).

Trust is often the first casualty in times of widespread disinformation. WhatsApp, with its unique media ecosystem, is particularly conducive to delegitimizing voting processes by spreading screenshots that mix fake news, humor, and propaganda (Ncube, 2019).

A Social Activity by Default

Other studies have not only examined the frequency of news consumption on WhatsApp and Facebook groups but also explored its nature. In this context, Swart *et al.* (2018) argue that news consumption on these platforms is primarily a social and community-building activity. As a result, the type of news shared and consumed is shaped by the characteristics of the group and the relationships among its members.

This group dynamic may be more influential than professional profiles. In fact, the content shared within some local communities closely aligns with “traditional journalistic conceptualizations of news” (Swart *et al.*, 2019).

Technological features also play a significant role in shaping news consumption on these platforms. A study on the Chinese platform WeChat (Peng and Miller, 2023) found that specific technological features, such as the option to ‘subscribe to’ or ‘follow’ a news medium, can enhance news consumption. Additionally, other research on WeChat has highlighted how the platform's affordances influence news sharing. This study revealed that features like privacy settings, limitations on news release frequency and comments, and restrictions on group and individual chat sizes enable and constrain users' participation in news distribution, promoting certain types of news sharing while limiting the social or political impact of others (Xu, 2022).

In a similar vein, WhatsApp has been utilized as an ideal platform for designing fact-checking apps that help confirm the origin of news and verify or dismiss facts (Pacheco *et al.*, 2019).

News Effects

Specific research has focused on the potential implications of using MIM for news. In one such study, Valenzuela *et al.* (2021) found a moderate correlation between users' political knowledge and the frequency with which they shared public affairs content on WhatsApp.

Another study explored how the use of automated tools for news distribution on closed social media platforms influences users' perceptions and assessments of information. In this context, Sánchez-Gonzales and Sánchez-González (2020) examined users' experiences with a Telegram bot designed to provide political information. Their experiment revealed that most participants expressed a willingness to continue using the service in the future, and they rated the information received as both understandable and accurate.

Digital Media Literacies

Media literacy is essential for both superficial news consumption (such as killing time or scanning news) and deeper engagement, especially when predicting social media use. In other words, research has shown that the easier a platform is perceived to be, the more likely people are to engage with news. A study conducted with this focus on WeChat confirmed this (Peng and Miller, 2021).

NEWS DISSEMINATION

Researchers have distinguished between using these platforms as a one-way communication channel and using them for 'real conversation with the readers' (Negreira-Rey *et al.*, 2017). However, at the intersection of this dichotomy, some experimental projects have emerged where journalistic chatbots offer a blend of both approaches. In particular, for political information, chatbots have been well-received by the public due to two main factors: the quality of curated content and even the "emotional connection with the information" (Sánchez-Gonzales and Sánchez-González, 2020). Additionally, the customization provided by chatbots can help overcome the barrier of audience disinterest in receiving news from official media channels on private messaging networks.

The dissemination of news through instant messaging platforms has also altered the structure of news itself. A study on Telegram channels in Iran revealed that screenshots, colloquialisms, and a lack of shared structure were among the main features of journalistic content disseminated on the country's most popular private messaging platform (Kermani, 2018). While the structure of news has changed more than its content, traditional biases can still be found in news shared via instant messaging. In fact, political coverage can reflect traditional biases within information on these platforms (Ameli and Molaei, 2020).

Media outlets' strategies for news dissemination are varied, but innovations in engagement and relational approaches remain underdeveloped, even as access to news via WhatsApp is growing in some countries (Mañas-Viniegra *et al.*, 2019). As several studies have pointed out, "technological change is faster than relational or cultural change in a newsroom" (Boczek and Koppers, 2020), reminding scholars to approach any new technological wave with skepticism.

In the specific context of war correspondents, the primary reasons for using WhatsApp are to protect sources and expedite the delivery of critical information (Christensen and Khalil, 2024).

News dissemination on instant messaging networks refers to the process of distributing news content through private messaging platforms, utilizing methods ranging from one-way communication to interactive chatbots. It requires an adaptation of the news structure to the platform's characteristics, offering customization and emotional connection while balancing traditional journalistic practices with the unique features of instant messaging.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY

Instant messaging has become an integral part of journalistic practice (Mashiah, 2021) and the default method of communication for certain communities, particularly those engaged in topics such as political discourse. Research has highlighted the influence of these private—yet social—practices on citizens' understanding of political issues, which could have broader implications for journalistic practices. For instance, while "personal uses of WhatsApp were strongly predictive of engagement in protest and expressive forms of political participation," no clear relationship was found between the extremity of issue positions (polarization) and WhatsApp usage (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2019).

Audience participation is shaped not only by the topics discussed but also by traditional journalistic roles, such as gatewatching, through what can be described as "collective curation," similar to practices seen in radio journalism (Chagas, 2018). While private platforms have often been seen as an opportunity for intense collaboration with audiences during specific events, some research has found that sustained reciprocity can lead to co-creation throughout the news process, allowing citizens to play a role "in shaping the epistemologies of journalism" (Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim, 2020). Insights into new forms of 'co-creation' are a common theme in related studies (Agur, 2019).

While private messaging networks can help build strong and active communities around media, these communities often lack a "planned strategy" in their use of these channels (Sierra Gutiérrez, 2021). In other words, reaching a broader audience often comes with a trade-off in terms of control.

Audience participation on instant messaging networks involves the active engagement of users in the creation and dissemination of news through private messaging platforms. This participation fosters community engagement and collaboration while enabling individuals to influence journalistic practices and contribute to discussions, particularly in political contexts.

HYPOTHESES TESTS

“Five cases were identified where news topics were significantly associated with specifics research methods, based on the chi-squared test. Specifically, dissemination was more frequently studied using content analysis - χ^2 (1, N = 30) = 6, p = .014 - (see Table 6).

Table 6. Frequency table of papers on news dissemination and using content analysis

		Content Analysis		
News dissemination		0	1	Sum
0	Observed	22	2	24
	Expected	20.00	4.00	24.00
1	Observed	3	3	6
	Expected	5.00	1.00	6.00
Sum	Observed	25	5	30
	Expected	25.00	5.00	30.00

Source: Authors.

In-depth interviews were significantly associated with news production - χ^2 (1, N = 30) = 5.66, p = .017- (see Table 7).

Table 7. Frequency table of papers on news production and using interviews

		Interview		
News production		0	1	Sum
0	Observed	12	2	14
	Expected	8.87	5.13	14.0
1	Observed	7	9	16
	Expected	10.13	5.87	16.0
Sum	Observed	19	11	30
	Expected	19.00	11.00	30.0

Source: Authors.

According to the chi squared test - χ^2 (1, N = 30) = 4.98, p = .026- news consumption was more frequently studied through surveys (see Table 8).

Table 8. Frequence table of papers on news consumption and using surveys

		Survey		
News consumption		0	1	Sum
0	Observed	16	3	19
	Expected	13.30	5.70	19.0
1	Observed	5	6	11
	Expected	7.70	3.30	11.0
Sum	Observed	21	9	30
	Expected	21.00	9.00	30.0

Source: Authors.

Finally, audience participation was significantly studied through observation $-\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 7.87, p = .005-$. Additionally, the only case of an experiment was found in the study on audience participation, which also showed a positive chi-squared result $-\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 4.14, p = .042-$ (see Tables 9 and 10)."

Table 9. Frequence table of papers on audience and participation and using observation

		Observation		
Audience & Participation		0	1	Sum
0	Observed	21	3	24
	Expected	18.40	5.60	24.00
1	Observed	2	4	6
	Expected	4.60	1.40	6.00
Sum	Observed	23	7	30
	Expected	23.00	7.00	30.00

Source: Authors.

Table 10. Frequency table of papers on audience and participation and using experiments

		Experiment		
Audience & Participation		0	1	Sum
0	Observed	24	0	24
	Expected	23.20	0.800	24.00
1	Observed	5	1	6
	Expected	5.80	0.200	6.00
Sum	Observed	29	1	30
	Expected	29.00	1.000	30.00

Source: Authors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To date, research on the impact of MIM on news content features, such as topic, news values, and objectivity, has primarily focused on specific scenarios. While this approach provides valuable insights, the evidence may be influenced by the particular contexts of the countries or regions where the studies are conducted. The field would benefit from more transnational studies to identify common changes resulting from the introduction of MIM technologies, which are not solely shaped by the professional, economic, or political contexts of individual countries.

Similarly, the research analyzed is often conducted within parameters that are too narrowly focused on a single platform, in this case, mobile instant messaging apps. This approach overlooks the holistic nature of media consumption, particularly when addressing public opinion. Issues such as trust in news, emerging digital literacies, or participatory journalism cannot be fully understood by examining private social platforms in isolation. Instead, interdisciplinary and multi-platform approaches are crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of these complex phenomena.

One of the distinguishing features of the current research on MIM, private social media, and Journalism is its focus on data and samples from outside the USA and the Western sphere. Six out of ten papers in the sample examined cases and events outside of Europe and Anglo-Saxon America. This finding challenges the general dominance of Western scenarios in Communication and Media Studies (Ekdale *et al.*, 2022) and, more specifically, in the field of Social Media and Journalism (Segado-Boj, 2020). This trend may be explained by the significant prominence of WhatsApp, other MIM platforms, and private social apps in the Global South and other regions beyond the USA and Western Europe.

Studies have indicated that MIM are changing the dynamics between journalists and sources, but evidence on the effects of these transformations

remains limited. While some research has examined the perceived advantages or drawbacks of using MIM as a communication channel (e.g., Dodds, 2019), there is a need for more evidence on actual changes in relationships. For instance, it remains unclear whether the newfound proximity between reporters and sources encourages a less critical journalistic approach.

As for the methods used, experimental designs could be applied more broadly, beyond the specific topic of Audience and Participation. News consumption and even news dissemination could benefit from experimental research that provides evidence on the effects of consuming news through these platforms. Additionally, news production could expand its methodologies beyond the ethnographic approach. While current findings stem from a qualitative perspective, such data could be measured in various scenarios and analyzed in relation to other variables, which could further deepen our understanding in this area.

From the audience's perspective, future research could examine the relationships or differences in political or current events knowledge based on the use of MIM for news. Additionally, more evidence is needed regarding the type of news consumption encouraged by MIM or specific platforms. Future research could include issues related to the type of news consumption promoted (snacking or regular consumption), as well as the type of preferred sources (partisan content or neutral-balanced information).

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When Green Is Not Green: The Message of the Portuguese Association for Consumer Protection (DECO PROteste) Awareness Campaign Against Greenwashing and Its Reception by Young Portuguese University Students

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This study analyses the DECO PROteste 2023 anti-greenwashing campaign. The research focuses on three objectives: characterizing the campaign's message construction, understanding its rhetorical potential, and exploring the perceptions of young Portuguese university students. Discourse and rhetorical analysis were applied, focusing on naming, predication, argumentation, and perspective, alongside Aristotle's ethos, pathos, and logos. A focus group of Communication Sciences students provided qualitative insights. The findings reveal that the campaign highlights the growing issue of greenwashing and calls for greater corporate transparency. The campaign's emotional and logical appeals were particularly effective; for example, phrases like "Enough!", "Don't paint yourselves green", along with statistical evidence, reinforced the message. However, participants suggested the campaign's language could be more

Este estudio analiza la campaña contra el greenwashing de DECO PROteste de 2023. La investigación se centra en tres objetivos: caracterizar la construcción del mensaje de la campaña, comprender su potencial retórico y explorar las percepciones de jóvenes universitarios portugueses. Se aplicaron análisis del discurso y retóricos, enfocándose en la denominación, predicación, argumentación y perspectiva, junto con los conceptos de ethos, pathos y logos de Aristóteles. Un grupo focal con estudiantes de Ciencias de la Comunicación proporcionó retroalimentación cualitativa. Los hallazgos revelan que la campaña resalta el creciente problema del greenwashing y aboga por una mayor transparencia corporativa. Los apelativos emocionales y lógicos fueron particularmente impactantes, con frases como "¡Basta!", "No te pintes de verde", además de la evidencia estadística, que reforzaban el mensaje. Sin embargo, los participantes sugirieron



accessible to reach a broader audience. They emphasized the need for clearer examples of greenwashing and more dynamic content. In terms of effectiveness, participants acknowledged learning from the campaign but felt it might not drive widespread behavioral change. To improve the impact of this type of campaign, they recommended clearer language, stronger calls to action, the use of guilt appeal, and wider distribution across platforms, including television. These findings suggest refining communication strategies to ensure broader societal resonance and encourage action.

Keywords: *campaign anti-greenwashing, greenwashing, message, reception, Portugal.*

que el lenguaje de la campaña podría ser más accesible para llegar a un público más amplio. En términos de efectividad, los participantes reconocieron haber aprendido de la campaña, pero consideraron que podría no generar un cambio conductual generalizado. Para mejorar el impacto de este tipo de campañas, recomendaron un lenguaje más claro, llamadas a la acción más contundentes, el uso de recursos de culpabilidad y una distribución más amplia en varias plataformas, incluida la televisión. Estas contribuciones sugieren la necesidad de refinar las estrategias de comunicación para garantizar una mayor resonancia social y fomentar la acción.

Palabras clave: *campaña contra el greenwashing, greenwashing, mensaje, recepción, Portugal.*

In recent years, environmental concerns have increasingly gained prominence within society. In response, businesses often adopt green marketing strategies that emphasize ambiguous or deceptive claims over genuinely sustainable practices (Álvarez-García and Sureda-Negre, 2023). This phenomenon is known as greenwashing. Greenwashing has gained attention in academia for its relevance in organizational practices and its interdisciplinary research challenges (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). It is considered a regressive behavior stemming from corporate social responsibility (CSR), particularly with respect to an organization's (lack of) environmental involvement, which is valued both socially and by consumers.

Although greenwashing —a “type of miscommunication or misconduct”— can be captured by existing European Union (EU) rules prohibiting deceptive information (European Securities and Markets Authority [ESMA], 2024, p. 3), companies making misleading environmental claims, or greenwashing, made up 25% of climate-linked risk incidents from September 2022 to September 2023, up from 20% the same period the year prior (RepRisk, 2023). These are results extracted from environmental, social, and governance (ESG) data and research company RepRisk, which examined both public and private companies, globally

and across sectors. RepRisk report documented instances of greenwashing rising 35% overall last year, which is proving to be a growing problem. 18% of companies—and 31% of public companies—who have engaged in greenwashing since 2018 also participated in social washing, or making misleading social claims, in the last year.

Some studies suggest that greenwashing literacy interventions, including textual and visual elements, informative texts, and quiz games, can effectively help consumers identify and reduce the impact of deceptive environmental claims (e.g., Álvarez-García and Sureda-Negre, 2023; Dutta-Powell *et al.*, 2023; Fernandes *et al.*, 2020; Naderer and Oprea, 2021). It is in this context that this study proposes to analyze the awareness campaign by the Portuguese Association for Consumer Protection (DECO PROteste) against greenwashing and its reception by young Portuguese university students. We chose to study this campaign, because it was the only visual campaign we found available that directly raises awareness against greenwashing, simultaneously targeting organizations and consumers. The video from this campaign was chosen for analysis, given that the literacy intervention combining textual and visual elements is more effective (e.g., Fernandes *et al.*, 2020).

This article, therefore, aims to understand the construction of the message, its rhetorical architecture and reception among Portuguese university students. With the present study, it is intended to respond to Torelli *et al.*'s (2019) academic challenge to study the role of non-business organizations in moderating or amplifying its influence on stakeholders (p. 11) regarding greenwashing. This research assumes a theoretical anchor related to communication: a) the encoding-decoding theoretical model, by Hall (1997), considering that it will be about encoding (message of campaign) and decoding (perception of receivers); and b) rhetorical theory (Aristotle, IV century B.C./2005).

This proposal, owing to its innovation, comprehensive approach (by integrating both message focus and receiver perception within the same study), and timeliness, has the potential to offer valuable insights into the topic under investigation.

GREENWASHING, CORPORATE ACTIVISM AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The term *greenwashing* was introduced in 1986 by Jay Westerveld (Pearson, 2010), though Jerry Mander had previously referred to it as “eco-pornography” in 1972. It was with the foundational work of Greer and Bruno (1996) that research on greenwashing began to expand considerably (Laufer, 2003), with a notable increase in studies from 2011 onwards (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). In the academic literature, greenwashing has been associated with concepts such as selective disclosure (e.g., Delmas and Burbano, 2011, p. 67; Lyon and Maxwell, 2011, p. 9; Tateishi, 2017, p. 3) and decoupling (e.g., Guo *et al.*, 2018, p. 1828; Siano *et al.*, 2017, p. 27; Walker and Wan, 2011). Greenwashing, characterized by misleading communication, induces the consumer to perceive a certain

“green” product—a sustainable product designed to minimize its environmental impacts—as eco-friendly, when it is not. In other words, it refers to the deceptive portrayal of a company’s products or activities as environmentally friendly (Yilmaz and Baybars, 2022). It is the act of disseminating disinformation to consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service (e.g., Baum, 2021; Naderer *et al.*, 2017; Naderer and Oprea, 2021).

Corporate activism and greenwashing are deeply connected in contemporary business strategies. This tactic has arisen in response to growing environmental awareness and consumer demand for sustainable goods (Yilmaz and Baybars, 2022). Stakeholder activism pushes businesses to enhance their ESG standards, yet firms with poor ESG ratings are more likely to resort to greenwashing (Lee and Raschke, 2023).

Despite CSR initiatives becoming more commonplace within business environments, research on the communication of CSR and its effectiveness remains underexplored (Christis and Wang, 2021). CSR has become a crucial component for corporations globally (Hesse and Rünz, 2020, p. 3), driven by the significant impact that business operations have on society, influencing development pathways and local community outcomes (Fordham and Robinson, 2018). As a dynamic concept, CSR encompasses a wide range of perspectives and approaches concerning corporate relations with broader society, emphasizing the responsibility organizations hold towards the environment, their stakeholders, and society at large (Fordham and Robinson, 2018). It can be said that the objective of CSR can be understood as aligning corporate financial pursuits with social goals (Ait-Sidhoum and Serra, 2017).

CSR is commonly conceptualized as a multi-dimensional framework (e.g., Carroll, 1979; Ait-Sidhoum and Serra, 2017). Carroll’s (1979, p. 500; 2016) definition, a cornerstone of CSR theory, highlights four key dimensions: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. This model serves as a foundational guide for analyzing and classifying CSR interpretations. Additionally, CSR may encompass four alternative dimensions: the economic, focusing on the organization’s direct and indirect financial outcomes; the environmental, addressing the ecological impacts of organizational operations; the social, covering aspects related to employee well-being, customer satisfaction, and future generations’ quality of life; and corporate governance, which involves the dynamics between directors, managers, and other stakeholders. The dimension that matters in the present study is the environmental one.

The environmental movement, which gained momentum during the countercultural protests of the mid-1960s and was further catalyzed by the first Earth Day in the 1970s, encouraged corporations to integrate environmental considerations into their performance. Although the term *greenwashing* lacks a universally accepted definition in the literature, it generally refers to a broad range of deceptive communications designed to create an overly positive perception of an organization’s environmental actions among stakeholders (e.g., Torelli *et al.*, 2019). The growing volume of CSR-related claims, whether genuine or not, complicates stakeholders’ ability to discern between organizations that

genuinely adopt sustainable development models and those that merely project such an image.

Jones (2019), comparing the green advertising techniques of companies with well-documented strong and weak social and environmental track records, discovered that all companies utilize a comparable overarching narrative centered on consumer empowerment, regardless of their genuine ethical performance, rendering greenwashing a relative concept.

To compose a literature review on the thematic focus in approach —message and perception of campaigns against greenwashing—, a Boolean search was conducted on the academic database Communication and Mass Media Complete (EBSCOhost), “the leading provider of research database” (<https://www.ebsco.com/>), using the keywords “message” AND “greenwashing” AND “perception”, in September 2024. The limiters “Academic (Peer-Reviewed) Journals” were applied, not opting for any temporal or linguistic restrictions. The search generates ten results. The careful reading of these articles resulted in the final selection of two useful articles (Christis and Wang, 2021; Ferguson *et al.*, 2019), which confirms the scarcity of bibliography on the subject.

Christis and Wang (2021) observe that for companies to achieve effective CSR communication, they must adopt a consistent communication style that aligns environmental actions with corresponding messages. This uniform communication style proved to be the most effective of the three evaluated approaches (greenhushing, uniform, and greenwashing) and stood in stark contrast to greenwashing, which was the least effective and led to negative consumer responses. These findings were drawn from an online experiment aimed at understanding how environmental CSR communication influences consumer trust, purchase intentions, and advocacy. The study evaluated three aspects of CSR communication: message content, communication style, and complementary tactics.

Ferguson *et al.* (2019), through an online survey, examined the comparative persuasive effectiveness of corporate versus activist NGO website communications and their influence on the perception of the triple sustainability values (social, economic, and environmental) and corporate greenwashing, in relation to a proposed oil pipeline in Canada. The results from both pro and con website framings supported the hypotheses grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, revealing a “non-expert” peripheral route leading to positive persuasion through unsubstantiated claims, green imagery, and deceptive language in corporate communications, while an “expert” central route led to negative persuasion through the verifiable factual content presented by the activist NGO. The empirical findings highlighted the importance of coherent alignment with triple sustainability values in enhancing the credibility of corporate moral discourse for both internal and external stakeholders.

Using the frameworks of legitimacy and signalling theory, Torelli *et al.* (2019) sought to evaluate the varying impacts of misleading environmental messages on stakeholder perceptions and to analyze reactions to an environmental scandal. The hypotheses, tested via a four-by-two experimental design, demonstrate that different degrees of greenwashing exert distinct influences on stakeholder

perceptions of corporate environmental responsibility and their responses to environmental scandals. Stakeholder reactions are more pronounced when greenwashing is revealed in the context of a scandal, particularly if the company operates in an environmentally sensitive industry. This indicates that certain stakeholder groups may be more responsive to environmental harm when the associated risks are higher.

Research has demonstrated that a considerable proportion of advertisements incorporate elements of greenwashing, with misleading claims being more prevalent in US magazines compared to those in the UK (Baum, 2012). To address this issue, scholars have investigated strategies to increase consumers' greenwashing literacy, such as using educational content and quiz-based interventions (Naderer and Oprea, 2021). The widespread occurrence of greenwashing not only deceives consumers, but also diminishes the competitive edge of companies that are genuinely committed to environmental responsibility (Dimitrieska *et al.*, 2017). Solving this problem necessitates stricter regulation of environmental advertising and heightened consumer awareness (Baum, 2012; Naderer and Oprea, 2021). For example, advertising literacy enables individuals to interpret and comprehend the processes involved in media creation, including how communicators and audiences behave within the media landscape and what persuasive techniques are used for specific objectives (Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020). Implementing advertising literacy interventions or training is believed to enhance consumers' understanding of these persuasive methods, thereby increasing their knowledge and confidence in recognizing such strategies (Fernandes *et al.*, 2020). Research has shown that only when consumers are able to identify the deceptive intent of a green advertisement, and thus recognize it as greenwashing, can properly evaluate the ad (Fernandes *et al.*, 2020; Parguel *et al.*, 2015; Schmuck *et al.*, 2018).

Also, the literature review conducted by Álvarez-García and Sureda-Negre (2023) and based on a sample of 20 papers examines greenwashing trends in relation to education, highlighting key themes such as greenwashing literacy as a preventative measure, the prevalence of greenwashing in higher education institutions and educational resources, methods for identifying deceptive green advertising, and educational initiatives aimed at countering greenwashing.

Taking the described state of art and context into consideration, the present proposal aims to answer the research questions:

1. How is constructed the message of DECO PROteste's awareness campaign against greenwashing, "*Greenwashing*: Don't paint yourselves green! Tell things as they are" [*Greenwashing*: Não se pintem de verde! Contem as coisas como elas são"]?;
2. What is the rhetorical potential of the message of DECO PROteste's awareness campaign against greenwashing, launched in 2023?;
3. How is the message of DECO PROteste's awareness campaign against greenwashing, "*Greenwashing*: Don't paint yourselves green! Tell things as they are", perceived by young Portuguese university students?

METHOD

In line with research questions, the specific objectives are: 1) to understand how the message of the awareness campaign against greenwashing, “*Greenwashing: Don’t paint yourselves green! Tell things as they are*” is constructed; 2) to characterize the rhetorical potential of the message of DECO PROteste awareness campaign against greenwashing launched in 2023; and 3) to know the perceptions of young Portuguese university students about the message of DECO PROteste campaign “*Greenwashing: Don’t paint yourselves green! Tell things as they are*”.

CAMPAIGN

The campaign selected for analysis is titled “*Greenwashing: Don’t paint yourselves green! Tell things as they are*” by DECO PROteste, “the largest consumer organization in Portugal” (DECO PROteste, 2025), with the support of the Portuguese Directorate-General for Economic Activities. This campaign, committed to helping consumers recognize misleading environmental claims, is chosen because it is topical, because it is pioneering as regards this issue in Portugal, and due to the scarcity of visual campaigns on this issue. Searches were conducted on February 5, 2025, using the Google search engine with the keywords “anti greenwashing” and “campaign”, as well as on the Ads of the World website, which “curates creative advertising campaigns from all around the world to ensure you can stay up-to-date on the latest global advertising and marketing campaigns” (Ads of the World, 2025), using the keyword “greenwashing”. No useful results were found, leading to the inference that this Portuguese campaign, primarily focused on the video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDFOrriF0yU&t=2s>) analyzed in this article, is pioneering in its approach to the topic.

The campaign, which includes the referred video along with additional articles, was made available starting January 26, 2023, on online social media platforms and the DECO website, among other outlets, with further reinforcement planned for February and March (Agência Lusa, 2023). The campaign targets all consumers, including children, as well as businesses, and also includes educational initiatives in schools (Agência Lusa, 2023). Additionally, three episodes of DECOpode, the organization’s podcast, were planned, dedicated to the topic of greenwashing (Soares, 2023). The video, which lasts 2 minutes and 22 seconds and is divided into four segments—*Introduction, What is Greenwashing?, Why Does It Happen?, and How Can We Help?*—had accumulated 1,313 views on YouTube as of February 5, 2025.

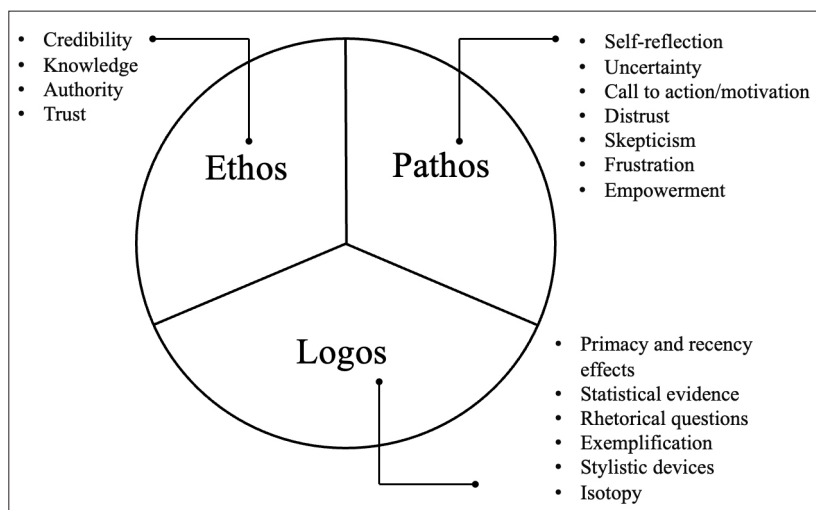
Founded in 1974, DECO PROteste has over 370,000 members and is present throughout Portugal, with seven regional offices (DECO PROteste, 2025). Its mission is to empower consumers through information, negotiation, and advocacy. DECO PROteste conducts independent testing and assessments, free from political and economic influences, strengthening consumer confidence and decision-making. Additionally, the organization represents consumers in national and international bodies, such as the European Consumer Organisation—BEUC (DECO PROteste, 2025).

TECHNIQUES

The techniques of discourse analysis (first objective), rhetorical analysis (second objective) and focus group (third objective) were applied. The discourse analysis focuses mainly on four discursive strategies which are: naming (how is the phenomenon referred to?); predication (which characteristics are attributed to the phenomenon?); argumentation (which explicit/implicit arguments to build the defense?); perspective (speaker's positioning) (e.g., Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1987).

The rhetorical analysis is based on Aristotle (IV century B.C./2005)'s three rhetorical appeals: 1. *ethos*, derived from the moral character of the speaker, building the impression that he is worthy of faith; 2. *pathos*, centered on the emotion that the speech stimulates in the audience; and *logos*, focused on what the speech demonstrates (pp. 96-97), which assume the condition of dimensions, having each of them categories to better scrutinize the rhetoric present in the message under analysis. The categories are derived from the literature (deductive logic) and from the specifics of the corpus (inductive logic). From the corpus, the following subcategories were identified (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Categorization matrix for rhetorical analysis



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In an exploratory study of reception/perception, the focus group was conducted with five young (four girls and one boy) first-year university students attending Communication Sciences bachelor degree at the Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, University of Lisbon (ISCSP, ULisboa), and previously exposed to the corpus. An invitation was made to students based on their analytical and critical capacity demonstrated in classes held during the second academic semester. Therefore, participant recruitment was based on a combination of

purposive and convenience sampling. The group comprised the students who accepted the invitation. The focus group, lasting one hour, was conducted online via the Zoom platform to accommodate the geographic convenience of participants, who were no longer in the academic period (on June 29, 2023, at 11 a.m.). Young people were chosen because about 97% of Portuguese individuals in this age group are concerned about the environment (Green Savers, 2021) and because Portuguese adolescents have adopted some commitments to the preservation of the planet. More than half (56.8%) of those who responded to the survey of Health Behaviour in School Aged Children ([HBSC], 2022) say they actively seek ways to reduce environmental problems. ISCSP-ULisboa students are chosen for ease of access to them. The focus group guide included 16 questions structured into three thematic sections: 1. knowledge about greenwashing; 2. campaign under analysis; and 3. repercussion.

Framework analysis, as described by Ritchie and Lewis (2003), was selected as the foundation for data analysis, progressing through the stages of familiarization, coding, framework development, and interpretation. This analytical framework involved the creation of a coding structure organized into categories, collaboratively developed by the researchers involved in the analysis, and employed to systematically manage and structure the data (Gale *et al.*, 2013). Instead of relying on participants' full accounts, this framework restructured the data, offering a useful approach for summarizing and condensing the information (Gale *et al.*, 2013) to meet the research objectives. The analysis focused on four dimensions: the definition of the concept of greenwashing; evaluations of the campaign under study; cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects; and repercussion. To enhance incisiveness, the participants' quotes were shortened while preserving the core meaning of their statements. The names of the students are real, as the students agreed to be identified.

Ethical conditions were ensured in the application of the three techniques: for example, in the case of qualitative content analysis techniques (discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis), the categorization guidelines were specified in detail. In the case of the focus group, participants were previously informed about the object and objectives of the study.

RESULTS

MESSAGE OF THE DECO PROTESTE AWARENESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST GREENWASHING

Naming: The campaign uses the term *eco-whitening* to describe the phenomenon of *greenwashing*, a growing issue in the context of sustainability claims.

Predication: The campaign critiques the widespread use of environmental buzzwords in marketing. It asserts that "Eco-friendly, sustainable, climate-neutral are banal expressions, generic, vague, and exaggerated environmental claims that want to convince consumers that they make more sustainable purchases

—this is greenwashing or eco-whitening”. Companies may misuse these terms to present themselves as environmentally conscious without substantiating their claims. The campaign highlights that “when a company claims that it meets certain environmental protection goals or that it has a certain environmental performance but in fact it does not, that is greenwashing”. This practice is labeled as “unfair commercial practice”, as it manipulates consumer trust with false or unclear environmental benefits.

Argumentation: The campaign argues for greater transparency and accuracy in corporate communications. It stresses that “without mistakes and confusion, companies must provide true, accessible, and understandable information that explains why the product is sustainable.” The growing prominence of sustainability has intensified the need for such clarity, as “sustainability is the order of the day”. Yet, despite the importance of sustainability in consumer choices, there remains a significant problem. The campaign points out that “more than half of Europeans make their choices based on environmental claims. But most of these claims are not based on scientifically proven data”, raising concerns about the authenticity of many of these statements. Additionally, “50% of environmental claims on websites in the EU do not provide enough information or easily accessible evidence to justify and support what they say”, reinforcing the need for stronger regulatory oversight to ensure that such claims are substantiated.

Perspective: The campaign adopts a firm stance against greenwashing, calling for honesty and transparency in corporate sustainability claims. The slogan “*Enough! Let’s tell things as they are*” encapsulates this approach, urging companies not to falsely present themselves as environmentally responsible and stop manipulating public perception. The phrase “*Don’t paint yourselves green*” serves as a direct challenge to businesses that engage in superficial environmental branding without making meaningful efforts toward sustainability.

RHETORICAL POTENTIAL OF THE MESSAGE OF DECO PROTESTE AWARENESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST GREENWASHING

Ethos: The campaign builds *credibility* by providing *knowledge* and reliable data. It clarifies that “*this is greenwashing or eco-whitening*”, thereby naming the practice it seeks to combat. It further strengthens its *authority* by citing consumer behavior, stating that “more than half of Europeans make their choices based on environmental claims. But most of these claims are not based on scientifically proven data”. The campaign stresses the lack of verifiable information, noting that “50% of environmental claims on websites in the EU do not provide enough information or provide easily accessible evidence to justify and support what they say”. To establish *trust*, it refers to recognized certifications like “*the Ecolabel*”, “an EU certificate verified by competent authorities, ensuring that the product or service has a high environmental performance”.

Pathos: The emotional appeal of the campaign motivates consumers to reflect on their actions and to act more responsibly. It provokes *self-reflection* by asking questions such as “Do you usually make sustainable choices and purchases?” and “Are you sure this gas station is environmentally friendly? How?... Is it really like that?” These rhetorical questions aim to make consumers question their assumptions, and it highlights *uncertainty* with statements like “Are these shoes eco? Hmmm. Who guarantees you that plastic really comes from the oceans?” To guide consumers towards better choices, it advises: “How can you be a sustainable consumer? Start by looking for the European eco-label, the Ecolabel”. The campaign also employs motivational language such as “Don’t paint yourselves green. Tell things as they are!” to emphasize the importance of honesty. Through *distrustful statements* like “100% organic cotton sweaters. Hmmm. I won’t comment!” it fosters *skepticism*, while consumers’ *frustration* is channeled into action, as seen in “But most of these [environmental] claims are not based on scientifically proven data”. Finally, it *empowers* consumers with the call: “Enough!”

Logos: The campaign appeals to logic by using both psychological effects and concrete data to support its arguments. It leverages the *primacy and recency effects*, reinforcing key messages like “Don’t paint yourselves green. Tell things as they are!” to ensure that these statements resonate and remain memorable. It backs up its claims with *statistical evidence* (e.g., “50% of environmental claims”; “more than half (57%) of European consumers”). The use of *question marks* —e.g., “Do you usually make sustainable choices and purchases?”, “Is it really like that?”, “Are these shoes eco?”, “Who guarantees you?”, “Why does this happen?”, and “How can the consumer be sustainable?”— engages the audience in critical thinking. The campaign also offers *exemplifications* such as “detergents with green labels”, “100% organic cotton sweaters”, “eco shoes”, and “environmentally friendly gas stations” to illustrate misleading claims. The *repetitive use* of key phrases like “Enough!” and “Don’t paint yourselves green” further strengthens the message through stylistic devices. Lastly, the campaign’s *isotopy*, or the repetition of words and expressions, enhances the message’s oral delivery, as emphasized in the video, where key phrases are highlighted for impact.

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG PORTUGUESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ABOUT THE MESSAGE OF DECO PROTESTE CAMPAIGN

Concerning *the definition of the concept of greenwashing*, two of the five participants either didn’t know the concept or didn’t know how to define it. The remaining three participants were familiar with the concept and generally came up with a common definition: “I think greenwashing is when brands, for example, take advantage of the emergence of environmental concerns in a misleading way” (Teresa).

Once a definition had been put forward, all the participants confirmed that they had already been exposed to campaigns that highlighted environmental issues in a misleading way. Regarding the sender of these campaigns, everyone gave the example of the textile industry.

In the *evaluations of the campaign under study* dimension, the first piece of information recorded was that none of the participants had seen it before. Regarding the construction of the campaign in particular, the participants pointed out the lack of involvement and clarity in communication in two aspects: (1) the voice of the narrator (Inês); and (2) the content, which “although very interesting, should be explained better and more clearly, since it is a little-known concept” (João). One of the participants concludes by saying that the video should be more interactive and include calls to action: “The language of the video should be more attractive and, at the same time, understandable in order to reach as many people as possible” (Inês).

On the other hand, one of the participants said that the examples provided by the campaign, to better illustrate the information, “are good, but very generic” (Sofia). It would therefore be beneficial, according to the participant, to include more concrete and specific examples. Still about the campaign, all the participants said that the expression “Enough!” caught their attention and that the slogan was competent: “don’t paint yourselves green”.

As for the *cognitive, emotional and behavioral effects*, the interviewees acknowledged, first, that they had learned from the campaign. Still in the cognitive dimension, one of the participants said she had been introduced to the EcoLabel symbol, the ecological symbol of the EU.

In terms of emotional effects, the group of participants showed relief or happiness that the campaign exists. On the other hand, one of the participants mentioned that it was possible that the campaign would create distrust and that the result would be that “the consumer would become disappointed with some brands” (João).

All the participants referred that the campaign had encouraged them to “investigate greenwashing” (Sofia), thus fulfilling the behavioral factor. In addition, they feel more inclined not only to be aware of misleading campaigns, but also to discuss the issue within their interpersonal relationships.

Finally, regarding the last thematic dimension, *repercussion*, all the participants agree that the campaign may not be effective in stimulating social change: “It seems to me that this video can only be appreciated by people who are already aware of the issue of greenwashing” (Joana).

In addition, Teresa states that the video is too short to raise awareness and only serves as an introduction to the subject. João and Inês believe that the impact will also vary according to the age and academic qualifications of the viewers. Finally, the students say that the video format is preferable, but it should be broadcast on television to reach as many people as possible, and that the use of the appeal to guilt in the campaign “is effective” (Inês).

The participants highlighted recommendations in two main areas: message construction and strategy. As far as message construction is concerned, greenwashing campaigns should choose to use clear language, defining all the concepts in such a way as to be understandable to as many people as possible. The continued use of the video format is also recommended. Participants also suggest continuing to use the guilt appeal, as it can be a catalyst for consumer participation in the purchase of ecologically sustainable products/services.

Finally, they suggest the inclusion of more examples, preferably concrete ones, which clearly illustrate greenwashing. As for strategy, they recommend placing the video on more platforms, not just YouTube, and broadcasting it on television, so that there is an orchestration of channels. They point out that the video for this campaign should be part of an integrated communication strategy, with this video serving as bait for a series of other videos, for example. Finally, they call on the *media* to put this issue on the agenda, both in traditional news segments and in specific headings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with the theoretical framework on greenwashing, CSR, and consumer communication, particularly emphasizing the deceptive nature of greenwashing and its effects on stakeholders. DECO PROteste awareness campaign against greenwashing reflects the growing societal concern around environmental sustainability claims, addressing the tactics businesses use to mislead consumers. According to Álvarez-García and Sureda-Negre (2023), greenwashing is a widespread phenomenon in green marketing strategies, and this campaign provides a clear and strategic effort to combat this trend. The use of rhetorical strategies in the campaign, especially in naming and critiquing ambiguous environmental claims, reinforces previous research highlighting the need for clearer and more substantiated CSR communications (Christis and Wang, 2021). By labeling the practice of eco-whitening and urging consumers to question the authenticity of environmental claims, the campaign taps into the growing academic discourse that links greenwashing to selective disclosure and decoupling strategies (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Siano *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, the campaign's insistence on transparency and accuracy in corporate communication aligns with the theoretical foundations of the encoding-decoding model by Hall (1997) and rhetorical theory (Aristotle, 2005). DECO PROteste message construction emphasizes the critical decoding process by the consumers, prompting them to interpret and question the intent behind the environmental claims they encounter. The campaign successfully challenges greenwashing practices by encouraging young consumers to develop a critical mindset and recognize the discrepancy between claimed and actual environmental responsibility. These findings support Torelli *et al.*'s (2019) hypothesis that stakeholders are more responsive to deceptive practices when they can accurately interpret the message (e.g., when the risks are higher).

Regarding the participants' understanding of greenwashing, it is notable that two of the five were either unaware of the concept or could not define it. This finding is consistent with existing literature that identifies a gap in public awareness and understanding of greenwashing, despite its growing prevalence in corporate communications (Álvarez-García and Sureda-Negre, 2023). The three participants who were familiar with the term provided a definition aligned with academic conceptualizations of greenwashing as a deceptive practice aimed at exploiting environmental concerns for corporate gain (Yılmaz and Baybars,

2022). This mirrors the broader academic consensus that greenwashing involves misleading environmental claims that obscure genuine corporate responsibility (e.g., Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

The recognition of greenwashing in the textile industry by participants further reinforces the widespread association of greenwashing with sectors known for environmental impact, such as fashion and fast fashion. This suggests that, while there is a basic awareness of the issue, there remains a need for deeper education and broader recognition of greenwashing across various sectors. This also aligns with the need for enhanced greenwashing literacy, as noted by scholars like Naderer and Oprea (2021).

Participants' critiques of the DECO PROteste campaign highlight significant shortcomings in the construction of the message. The concerns about the narrator's voice and the lack of clarity in explaining the concept of greenwashing reflect an important theoretical consideration from Hall's (1997) encoding-decoding model, wherein the encoded message by the sender may not be effectively decoded by the receiver.

Moreover, the participants' feedback on the need for more engaging, interactive elements and specific examples is consistent with research on effective CSR and environmental communication, which emphasizes the importance of relatable and concrete messaging (Christis and Wang, 2021). The suggestion to make the video more interactive and include calls to action also aligns with the rhetorical principle of engaging the audience emotionally and behaviorally, which Aristotle emphasized in his rhetorical theory. This could enhance the campaign's persuasive power and strengthen its call to consumers to be more critical of green claims (Schmuck *et al.*, 2018).

In terms of cognitive effects, the campaign succeeded in raising awareness and introducing participants to specific tools like the EU EcoLabel, which plays a significant role in distinguishing genuine environmental claims from greenwashing. This educational component of the campaign is vital, as previous studies suggest that empowering consumers with knowledge is one of the most effective ways to combat greenwashing (e.g., Fernandes *et al.*, 2020).

Behaviorally, the campaign did seem to prompt action, with participants reporting a newfound interest in investigating greenwashing further. This is a positive outcome, as it suggests that the campaign was effective in fostering critical thinking and encouraging proactive consumer behavior, which is a key objective in greenwashing literacy interventions (e.g., Naderer and Oprea, 2021). The behavioral effects also reflect the potential for such campaigns to trigger broader social discussions, a step towards greater accountability for businesses engaging in greenwashing practices.

While the cognitive and behavioral impacts of the campaign are promising, the participants' skepticism regarding its broader social impact is noteworthy. Their belief that the campaign might only resonate with individuals already familiar with greenwashing highlights a critical limitation in the campaign's reach. This points to a challenge identified by Torelli *et al.* (2019), where stakeholders who are not already attuned to environmental issues may not respond as strongly to CSR-related campaigns.

The recommendation to extend the campaign beyond YouTube and incorporate it into a more comprehensive, multi-channel strategy, including television broadcasts, supports the notion that awareness-raising campaigns should be part of an integrated communication strategy to maximize impact. This also ties into Christis and Wang's (2021) findings that consistent and widespread communication enhances CSR campaign effectiveness. Furthermore, the suggestion to include more concrete examples of greenwashing, as proposed by the participants, would enhance message clarity and help demystify the concept for the public.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the complexities of greenwashing and its impact on CSR and consumer awareness. The DECO PROteste campaign illustrates the urgent need to confront deceptive environmental claims, reflecting a societal demand for transparency in sustainability efforts. While the campaign effectively raises awareness, it also highlights gaps in public understanding, indicating that many consumers remain under-informed about greenwashing.

Focus group discussions show that, although the campaign introduced useful symbols like the EU EcoLabel, it struggled with message clarity and engagement. Participants called for more detailed explanations and interactive elements, emphasizing the need for tailored communication strategies to enhance comprehension.

Future research can explore several proposals: developing educational initiatives focused on greenwashing awareness, assessing the effectiveness of multi-channel communication strategies, conducting longitudinal studies on consumer behavior changes, incorporating engagement metrics to evaluate audience responses, and analyzing greenwashing across various industries.

This study makes significant scientific contributions by expanding theoretical frameworks related to greenwashing and CSR. It provides empirical evidence that links consumer communication strategies to stakeholder perceptions and underscores the importance of greenwashing literacy. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research enriches the understanding of consumer attitudes through both quantitative and qualitative insights. Socially, the findings raise public awareness about the deceptive nature of greenwashing, empowering consumers to critically evaluate corporate sustainability claims. This awareness contributes to broader movements advocating for transparency and ethical business practices while informing policy discussions regarding consumer protection and environmental regulation. Professionally, the study offers valuable insights for marketing and communication professionals involved in CSR initiatives, enabling them to develop more effective campaigns. It also provides a framework for evaluating anti-greenwashing efforts, highlighting the necessity for transparent and substantiated CSR communications to prevent misleading claims.

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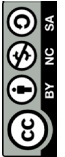
Unearthing Corporate Greenwashing: A Content Analysis of Sustainability Reporting in the Mining Sector

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Greenwashing is a common form of corporate disinformation that is often challenging for the general public to detect. Companies engage in greenwashing in their sustainability reports to mislead shareholders and stakeholders about their environmental efforts, seeking to enhance legitimacy and gain competitive advantages. While systems for identifying greenwashing exist, they typically focus on advertising, leaving greenwashing in corporate reports underexamined. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a qualitative content analysis of a climate report from a mining and commodity trading company, considering the company's profile, the report's target audience, and current research. The findings reveal that the company employs numerous subtle greenwashing strategies to project a more sustainable image through strategic omissions, hedging language and vague long-term goals. Moreover, this research contributes to the understanding of greenwashing in corporate reporting, which is typically aimed at a more informed audience, such as shareholders and experts, as

El greenwashing es una forma común de desinformación corporativa que a menudo resulta difícil de detectar para el público en general. Las empresas recurren al greenwashing en sus informes para engañar a los accionistas y las partes interesadas sobre sus esfuerzos ambientales, con el fin de mejorar su legitimidad y obtener ventajas competitivas. Aunque existen sistemas para identificar el greenwashing, estos suelen centrarse en la publicidad, dejando el greenwashing en los informes corporativos poco examinado. Este estudio tiene como objetivo abordar esta laguna mediante un análisis cualitativo de contenido de un informe climático de una empresa de minería y comercio de materias primas, considerando el perfil de la empresa, el público objetivo del informe y la investigación actual. Los hallazgos revelan que la empresa emplea numerosas estrategias sutiles de greenwashing para proyectar una imagen más sostenible a través de omisiones estratégicas, hedging y metas vagas a largo plazo. Además, esta investigación contribuye a la comprensión del greenwashing en la infor-

opposed to the general public. The results underscore the need for stricter regulation of sustainability reports and highlight the importance of fostering greater scrutiny among shareholders.

Keywords: *greenwashing, corporate communication, sustainability reporting, climate communication.*

mación corporativa, que se dirige a un público más informado, como accionistas y expertos, en lugar de al público en general. Los resultados subrayan la necesidad de una regulación más estricta de los informes de sostenibilidad y destacan la importancia de fomentar un mayor escrutinio por parte de los accionistas.

Palabras clave: *greenwashing, comunicación corporativa, informes de sostenibilidad, comunicación climática.*

As environmental responsibility gains importance in the public consciousness, corporations face increasing pressure to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable practices. While this public pressure has undoubtedly inspired some companies to adopt more environmentally friendly practices, it has also led to a rise in greenwashing, whereby organizations misleadingly portray their products or business practices as more sustainable than they really are (Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020).

Greenwashing communication techniques have evolved to become increasingly sophisticated and thus more difficult to identify, partly in response to increased scrutiny following the exposure of various greenwashing scandals (Bowen, 2014). The greenwashing found in corporate environmental reporting stands in contrast to that in advertising, which has been the focus of much greenwashing research (e.g. Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). Yet corporate public relations, including sustainability reporting, is typically targeted at shareholders, potential investors, employees, and customers, while the classical target audience for advertising is consumers, so it is only natural that companies would adopt different communication strategies.

Corporate reports influence shareholders' decision-making processes and should therefore be held to a high standard of quality (Torelli *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, sustainability reports have repeatedly been found to lack objectivity and crucial disclosures, preventing investors from accurately evaluating a corporation's environmental efforts (Deegan and Rankin, 1996; Zharfpeykan, 2021). As a countermeasure, legal requirements for sustainability reporting have been introduced, aiming to improve environmental reporting and increase transparency. Yet these regulations are by no means standardized, and in many markets, they are inexistent or only recently introduced (Randazzo and Perozzi, 2023).

Communications scholars have developed various models for understanding corporate disinformation, including greenwashing (e.g. Carlson *et al.*, 1993; Nemes *et al.*, 2022; Ennis, 2023). To better understand how these systems for categorizing and examining green (washing) claims in advertising can be applied to corporate PR, a content analysis of the climate action plan of the world's largest mining company by revenue was conducted. The investigation of the communication strategies in the mining industry is especially compelling because natural resource extraction has enormous adverse impacts on the land, environment, water, soil and air (Worlanyo and Jiangfeng, 2021), yet companies are under pressure from stakeholders to demonstrate more ecological practices. The subject of this case study, Glencore plc, portrays itself as “advancing tomorrow through [its] transition-enabling commodities” (Glencore plc, 2024b, p. 1). Nonetheless, the company has been accused of greenwashing (e.g. Knaus, 2019), and shareholders have exerted pressure on the company to improve its sustainability reporting (cf. Glencore plc, 2023c).

To investigate how the language in the climate report compares to established greenwashing communication techniques, the content of the climate action report was coded using a mixed deductive-inductive approach. First, green claims in the text were coded deductively based on the greenwashing framework from Nemes *et al.* (2022), and then an inductive recoding process was conducted to identify any novel themes beyond the original framework. The analysis of these claims indicates that some strategies from greenwashing in advertising are also common in corporate reporting (e.g. selective disclosure), while other strategies were less common (e.g. outright lies). Moreover, a new greenwashing strategy which has not been previously reported was identified: the rhetorical technique of hedged assertion, or a claim with a qualification to express caution about its strength, was employed to epistemically weaken potentially contentious statements by framing them as beliefs.

GREENWASHING IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

A growing awareness for environmental issues has emerged, leading to a shift in consumer behaviour toward a preference for products and companies perceived as environmentally friendly (Naderer *et al.*, 2017). Consumers became willing to pay a premium for sustainable products, while public pressure on producers grew as environmentally harmful practices were exposed and scrutinized. Green claims originally focused on the advertised services and products, highlighting aspects such as a product's recyclability. In response to misleading environmental marketing claims, one of the first regulatory guidelines against greenwashing was released in the United States in 1992 (“Green Guides”; Federal Trade Commission, 1992). Nonetheless, the amount of misleading green advertising continued, in part due to the non-binding nature of the guidelines and the ambiguous wording (Rotman *et al.*, 2020).

Today, sustainability and environmental consciousness are integral components of corporate social responsibility (CSR). This development has led

organizations to strive to project a green image, with the products or services only one aspect. Environmental communication operations for this approach include corporate reports, corporate websites, and PR campaigns portraying organizations as voluntarily eco-friendly (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

Definitions of greenwashing vary, but it is generally understood to refer to the discrepancy between the communicated environmental efforts of an organization and its actual performance (Bowen and Aragon-Correa, 2014a; de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). Depending on the communication strategy, it can be addressed to any combination of consumers, investors or other stakeholders. As it entails the purposeful distribution of misleading information, greenwashing is understood to be a type of disinformation (Naderer *et al.*, 2017).

The purpose of greenwashing is to ensure organizational viability and a competitive advantage (Cornelissen, 2000). Social and environmental disclosures can stem from legal requirements, pursuit of competitive advantages, external requirements in the form of demands from banks and shareholders, or industry-specific codes of conduct, including compliance with societal expectations (Deegan, 2002). In general, substantive green efforts have a positive effect on a company's performance, while green actions that are only symbolic and recognized as such have a negative effect (Walker and Wan, 2012).

The rise of greenwashing has led to increased scepticism of green claims in advertising or public relations, even true claims, as consumers have lost trust in companies (Naderer *et al.*, 2017). Even an organization's stakeholders, who are better informed than the general public about a company's practices, struggle to distinguish genuine sustainability from fraudulent green claims (Parguel *et al.*, 2015).

Corporate climate change communication is an under-researched topic (Vasquez, 2024), despite the role that companies can play in contributing to or reducing carbon emissions. Public pressure to (appear to) promote ecological practices can result in impression management via corporate social responsibility reporting (Jaworska, 2018), most prominently researched in the oil industry. These companies have been found to recognize the phenomenon of climate change while backgrounding the relationship to petroleum extraction and fossil fuel consumption, instead emphasizing techno-optimistic future solutions (Zhang and Zhang, 2024). The reports are dominated by references to "transition" and net-zero pledges, while a disconnect between the companies' investments and actions versus their sustainability discourse can be attested (Li *et al.*, 2022; Fuoli and Beelitz, 2023). Indeed, the companies typically portray themselves not as ecological villains, but as victims of climate change or as heroes and leaders in the energy transition (Dahl, 2022; Zhang and Zhang, 2024). Like the petroleum sector, the mining industry relies on the extraction of non-renewable natural resources, so it seems likely that similar communication strategies may be employed.

TYOLOGIES OF GREENWASHING AND CORPORATE DISINFORMATION

Greenwashing can influence people through functional or emotional appeals, and in practice a strategy combining both types of appeal is commonly employed (Naderer *et al.*, 2017). Functional green claims, for example the promotion of low carbon emissions, have a positive effect on the perception of a company's environmental image, with prior knowledge about sustainability increasing the effectiveness of these appeals. Meanwhile, emotional appeals in greenwashing employ intrapersonal communication mechanisms which invoke memories and personal values.

Scholars have responded to greenwashing by cataloguing, analysing and typologizing green claims. Carlson *et al.* (1993) created one of the first schemas for describing green claims, proposing a matrix consisting of five types of environmental claim which continues to guide greenwashing research today. The first type of green claims is *product-oriented*, i.e. focused on specific attributes of the service or product, such as biodegradability. A *process-oriented claim* highlights the sustainability of the production technique, the disposal method, or the organization's technology. Thirdly, *image orientation* seeks to associate the corporate identity with a popular environmental cause, thereby leveraging the public support to enhance the organization's image. A fourth strategy involves stating an independent *environmental fact*, even one wholly unrelated to the company, to leverage its validity and thereby bolster the credibility of the organization's other claims. Finally, a *combination claim* consists of multiple types. These green claims are not necessarily greenwashing, as they may genuinely communicate an organization's sustainable practices. Nonetheless, this typology also typically holds for greenwashing claims.

Carlson *et al.* also characterized types of deceptiveness. The first category involves *vague or ambiguous claims*, meaning the wording is unclear or has multiple possible interpretations. The next category of deceptiveness is the *omission of information* essential for the evaluation of a green claim's validity. Lastly, *false claims*, consisting of inaccurate and completely fabricated information, are recognized as the most misleading type of green claims. Additionally, a claim can contain a *combination* of the aforementioned categories.

More recently, Nemes *et al.* (2022) codified various existing models to create an integrated framework of greenwashing. The framework is divided into three categories, starting with those used to describe the company's environmental impact. The first type, *selective disclosure*, describes a claim which distracts from the organization's greater environmental impact. *Empty claims* exaggerate a company's achievements, while *irrelevant claims* tout accomplishments that are required by law or custom. Some claims are outright *lies*, while others are *just not credible*, promoting a choice that is harmful or controversial. The second category of greenwashing is based on (mis)alignment. For instance, *corporate responsibility in action* is a claim that does not represent an organization's true practice, while *dubious certifications and labels* misuse certifications to promote a sustainable image. The concept of *political spin* describes claims which boast a green

commitment, while the organization lobbies against environmental regulations. *Co-opted endorsement* claims that the organization's activities are endorsed by others. The final category describes deceptive communication practices. A claim with *no proof* is not supported by independent evidence, while a *vague claim* is poorly defined or so broad as to be meaningless. *Misleading symbols* are visuals that induce a false perception of greenness. The final type of greenwashing, *jargon*, entails using technical language which is difficult to understand.

CASE STUDY: GLENCORE PLC AND ITS CLIMATE ACTION TRANSITION PLAN

To gain insight into the practice of greenwashing in corporate environmental reporting, a prominent company from an inherently unecological industry was selected. Glencore plc is a multinational mining and commodity trading corporation and describes itself as “a leading integrated producer and marketer of natural resources, with worldwide activities in the production, refinement, processing, storage, transport and marketing of metals and minerals and energy products” (Glencore plc, 2024a). The multinational corporation's headquarters are in Baar, Switzerland, its oil and gas head office in London, England, and its registered office in Jersey, a British Crown Dependency with its own independent corporate law. Glencore currently operates more than 100 subsidiaries, with offices and operating sites in over 30 countries.

The company's earnings can be attributed to two main sources, energy products (i.e. coal and oil) and metals and minerals (e.g. zinc, copper, and iron ore; Glencore plc, 2024a). Currently, the majority of Glencore's earnings stem from energy products, which are primarily extracted in Africa, Australia and South America. Although Glencore started as a metals and crude oil trading firm, coal now constitutes the biggest share of both production volume and EBIT out of all industrial activities. Apart from gold, coal is Glencore's only commodity continuously growing in production volume.

The environmental and social impact of natural resource extraction is a common point of criticism (Malin *et al.*, 2019). Glencore's business operations as a mining corporation are inherently unsustainable, as the extraction of non-renewable resources, their further processing and associated waste disposal are unarguably detrimental to the environment. While issues such as contaminated soil, water pollution, and the depletion of agricultural resources predominantly affect local communities in the Global South, the carbon emissions associated with mining and the extracted commodities such as coal harm the environment on a global scale (Jenkins, 2004).

Glencore's environmental credibility is further limited by previous accusations of greenwashing. For instance, following increasing public pressure to move towards renewable energy, Glencore commissioned an astroturfing campaign to promote coal (Knaus, 2019). In this campaign (2017-2019), non-renewable energy was presented as indispensable for current energy needs, and disinformation about renewable energy was disseminated among the Australian public. After the

campaign was exposed, public trust in Glencore's commitment to CSR diminished greatly. In response, the company pledged to limit its coal production and invest in renewable energy, but the credibility of this commitment was undermined by statements from the CEO asserting that coal divestment would be pointless (Hume and Sanderson, 2020) and the subsequent expansion of its coal mining business (Glencore plc, 2023a). Furthermore, legal complaints have been lodged against Glencore for "misleading claims about climate impact" with Australia's advertising regulator, though later dismissed (Ad Standards, 2022).

Nevertheless, Glencore, the world's biggest miner by revenue, aims to position itself as an environmentally friendly company. Glencore has vowed to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and since 2020 the corporation has published regular environmental reports documenting its plans for a low-carbon future (Glencore plc, 2020). The company's spurious environmental policies have led to opposition from shareholders, notably at the 2023 annual general meeting (AGM). The management board proposed a resolution to approve the 2022 climate report (Resolution 13), which was rejected by 30% of shareholders (Glencore plc, 2023c), who called for greater clarity and disclosure, especially regarding the progress and governance of climate matters (Reuters, 2023). Additionally, a group of shareholders coordinated by the Australian Centre for Corporate Responsibility requisitioned Resolution 19, seeking disclosure on the alignment of Glencore's continued thermal coal production with its climate commitments and the Paris Agreement. The company argued vehemently against this resolution, calling it "unnecessary", "unclear", and "undermining [...] the Company's strategy", and recommended that shareholders vote against the resolution (Glencore plc, 2023c, p. 17). While it was ultimately rejected in the shareholder vote, it is noteworthy that 29% of votes were cast in favor of the resolution.

In response to this investor pressure, Glencore followed the Financial Reporting Council's recommendation¹ and consulted with shareholders on their areas of interest. The main concerns and Glencore's corresponding commitments were included in the 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan (CATP) (Glencore plc, 2023b; 2024b). At the 2024 AGM, the resolution to approve the company's 2024-2026 CATP was rejected by fewer than 10% of voting shareholders, although this resolution poll had the lowest voter participation at the AGM (66%; Glencore plc, 2024c), suggesting there may be lingering concerns about the report. This episode illustrates the power of shareholders to demand more comprehensive environmental reporting and ultimately influence a corporation's strategy.

¹ According to the UK Financial Reporting Council, a vote of more than 20% against a board recommendation should lead to the company consulting shareholders on the reasons behind their rejection and an update on the resulting actions within six months after the AGM (UK Corporate Governance Code 2018 Provision 4, 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To gain insight into the greenwashing strategies employed in corporate sustainability reporting, the 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan (CATP) of the commodity trading and mining company Glencore was selected for analysis (Glencore plc, 2024b). Glencore's reporting is particularly interesting for the analysis of greenwashing indicators, as the mining sector is highly polluting and inherently unecological, the company has been previously exposed for greenwashing, and there has been documented investor pressure to improve its environmental reporting.

Glencore's 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan is a 35-page document prominently featuring the tagline "Energising today / Advancing tomorrow". The report consists of approximately 19,000 words, 13 photographs, 13 charts and diagrams, and two tables. The first section, "Introduction and context" (pp. 1-9), informs readers about the scope and purpose of the document, alongside various disclaimers that projections about the future are inherently uncertain, followed by a lengthy definition of "our emissions". The following pages include statements from the Chairman and the CEO, then a report on the company's acquisition of a majority interest in steelmaking coal unit Elk Valley Resources (EVR). Glencore's purpose ("to responsibly source the commodities that advance everyday life") and business model are illustrated in a large diagram. On pages 6-9, the company's position on climate and energy transition along with their decarbonization targets are presented.

The second section, "Our strategic pillars" (pp. 10-17), begins with the company's plans to improve operational performance, notably the reduction of emissions belonging to Scope 1 (direct emissions from sources that an organization owns or controls directly), Scope 2 (indirect market-based emissions that come from purchased or acquired energy) and Scope 3 (indirect emissions that are not produced by the company, but for which it is indirectly responsible). As Glencore mines carbon-based fuels such as thermal coal, Scope 3 emissions account for over 90% of their reported emissions footprint. The next item, "Advancing tomorrow", explains that metals such as copper, nickel, zinc, aluminum and cobalt are essential for the transition to low-carbon technology. The final item in this section describes how the company is adapting its business model to include recycling metals, carbon trading and carbon credits.

The third section is titled "Responsible business practice" (pp. 18-31) and begins with an overview of the company's governance framework for climate matters and descriptions of the relevant roles and duties. Next, Glencore's approach to risk management is presented, including climate-related physical risks (e.g. extreme heat), risks and opportunities associated with the transition to a low-carbon economy, and scenario forecasts for thermal coal, copper and nickel. The next item addresses the company's approach to capital allocation, particularly in the context of climate, followed by a description of Glencore's principles for a "just transition" to a low-carbon economy. Then the company's "External engagement" is described, reflected in goals such as the acceleration of clean technology, emissions reduction, transparent disclosure, and a just

transition. The section concludes with information on transparency and metrics, including an overview of which CSR topics are addressed in which corporate reports.

The final section, “Additional information” (p. 33), includes various disclaimers about planning and forecasting, climate change and sourcing. The report is not independently audited, and “Glencore accepts no responsibility for any loss, damage, cost or expense (whether direct or indirect) incurred by any person as a result of any error, omission or misrepresentation in information in this document”. The final page of the report contains the contact information for the company’s headquarters in Baar, Switzerland.

To analyse the sustainability claims in the CATP, a qualitative content analysis was conducted following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2018; 2019), supported by the software MAXQDA. The content of the CATP was coded with 13 a priori categories for identifying greenwashing derived from the integrated framework of greenwashing by Nemes *et al.* (2022, Table S1), including the 27 sub-categories. Codes referring to legal requirements or regulations were based on Swiss and UK legislation, the locations of Glencore’s headquarters and registered office, respectively. This framework was supplemented by TerraChoice’s category of *lesser of two evils* (“claims that may be true within the product category, but that risk distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole”; 2012, p. 10), which has no clear correspondent in Nemes *et al.*’s framework. In the final round of coding, a new inductive category with no known precedent, a *hedged assertion*, was introduced. Hedging is a rhetorical strategy to mitigate the force of a claim (Lakoff, 1972). Specifically, a hedged assertion is a claim with a qualification to express caution about the strength of a claim (Benton and Elswyk, 2018); in the CATP this was typically expressed by adding the phrase “we believe”.

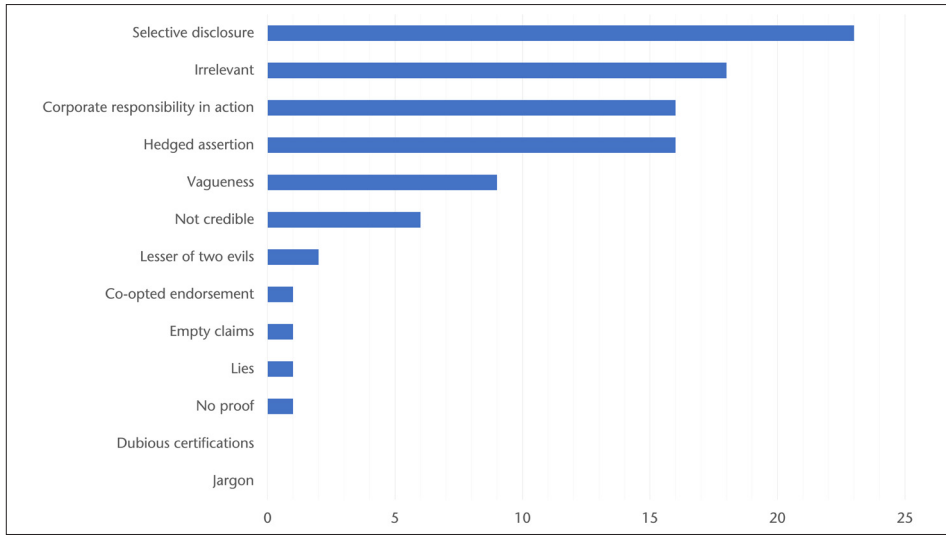
The content coding via MAXQDA was conducted in three rounds. In the first round, the fundamental validity of the deductive categories was affirmed. In the second round, the primary categories were coded. In the third round, the primary categories were verified and where relevant recoded with the appropriate subcodes. After the coding process was complete, the subsequent analysis was prepared using the analysis functions of MAXQDA. The Code Matrix and Code Relations Browsers in MAXQDA were employed to extract the coded segments and their attributes, as well as to identify intersections between codes. The resulting tables were then refined in a spreadsheet software and the analysis was supplemented through visualization tools.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The coding of Glencore’s 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan generated 94 code applications for greenwashing. The content with the most coding instances referred to the acquisition of EVR (p. 4, N=12), the company’s sustainability goals (p. 6; N=10), the company’s position on offsetting and carbon capture (p. 17; N=16), and the description of the company’s transition efforts (p. 26; N=12).

The a priori codes based on the framework of Nemes *et al.* (2022) were applied a total of 76 times, and TerraChoice's (2012) category of *lesser of two evils* two times (Figure 1). The novel inductive code of *hedged assertion* presented 16 times.

Figure 1. Frequency of greenwashing coding applications



Source: The authors.

The theme of *political spin*, referring to an organization's anti-environmental lobbying efforts, is beyond the scope of this text analysis, and was thus not evaluated. The theme of *misleading symbols*, visuals designed to evoke an environmental sensitivity, was not independently coded due to its prevalence and a discussion of executional greenwashing in the CATP is included in the discussion.

Of the categories codified in Nemes *et al.* (2022), the most frequent greenwashing type is *selective disclosure* (N=23), describing instances where a narrow claim is used to mitigate a larger impact. This theme includes subcodes for the organization failing to consider cumulative environmental impacts², claims with an insignificant impact³, missing evidence of environmental impact⁴, or

2 "Scope 3 emissions associated with third-party volumes traded by our marketing business are not included in our emissions reporting and targets because, in our view, by trading in the third-party volumes, our activities do not generate additional Scope 3 emissions [...]" (p. 2).

3 "Our thermal coal production has decreased" (p. 9).

4 "As the focus on accelerating the circular economy grows, we support our customers in developing solutions that further battery and electronics/electrical circularity through provision of raw materials and responsible end-of-life processing and recycling of battery components [...]" (p. 17).

incomplete reduction of emissions⁵. The second most prominent theme, *irrelevant* (N=18), refers to accomplishments that are compulsory by law⁶ or the industry standard of practice⁷. *Corporate responsibility in action* (N=16) indicates claims that do not reflect consistent organizational practice⁸. The fourth most common code, *vagueness* (N=9), is reflected in claims without a defined scope⁹ or where emissions are not officially published¹⁰. Claims which are *not credible* (N=6) tout environmentally attributes of an unsustainable practice¹¹. The remaining themes were rare or not identified in the dataset.

The novel inductive code of *hedged* assertion was applied 16 times for instances of the phrase “we believe” as hedging device. These statements fall into three categories: claims lacking scientific evidence¹², framing legal requirements or generally accepted truths as part of Glencore’s belief system¹³, or shifting responsibility by calling for government action as a prerequisite to implementing

5 “We will prioritise reducing our emissions and consider offsetting our residual and hard to abate emissions on our road to meet our 2050 net zero ambition” (p. 17).

6 “We support the guidance on climate-related disclosures under IFRS S2, developed by the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB). Moving forward, we are preparing to align to its recommendations when it is implemented for companies listed in the UK” (p. 31).

7 “We support the goals of the Paris Agreement (Article 2, Paris Agreement) to limit the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels [...]” (p. 6).

8 “We have therefore decided to remove the production cap, anticipating that our production of thermal coal should continue to decrease over time, reflecting our decarbonisation targets” (p. 9); in contrast to the announcement on p. 4 that Glencore has acquired a new majority stake in EVR, a steelmaking coal company. Or: “We aim to collaborate with key stakeholders, other mining companies and other industries to support civic dialogue and greater transparency in our operating countries” (p. 26); in contrast to previous accusations of astroturfing.

9 “We also have ongoing workstreams to mitigate, manage, and reduce our activities’ impacts on nature and natural capital” (p. 26).

10 “We have not addressed the treatment of the announced acquisition of a 77% interest in Elk Valley Resources (EVR) in relation to Glencore’s decarbonisation targets” (p. 2).

11 “Any such investments [in thermal coal or oil brownfield sites] will not compromise the delivery of our emissions reduction targets” (p. 25).

12 “However, we believe that the transition away from steelmaking coal for steel production will be slower than thermal coal, given the important role steel is anticipated to continue to play in supporting the construction of transportation and renewable energy infrastructure, and the expected limited availability in the medium term of alternative steel production technologies that do not require coal” (p. 9).

13 “We support meaningful and reasonable disclosure, transparency and traceability of product and organisational carbon footprint assessments, as for instance defined by the GHG Protocol. We believe these inventories should prioritise identification and disclosure of material sources of emissions, and follow consistent, harmonised data protocols, including attestability requirements” (p. 30).

sustainable practices¹⁴. In some instances, the hedge is a qualifier weakening a statement, seemingly to prevent it from being an outright lie.

The theme of *lies* merits some discussion. Only one segment was coded for this category, which is understandable considering the possible repercussions of misleading shareholders in a corporate report (Walker and Wan, 2012). The segment that was coded as a lie states: “In partnership with the Colombian government, we support local infrastructure programmes such as those addressing water access and education facilities” (p. 28). While Glencore received recognition for their programs from the government, they were not working in partnership. This statement further underscores previous conclusions that greenwashing strategies are often used in combination with one another (e.g. Carlson *et al.*, 1993). The statement invokes the Colombian government (*co-opted endorsement*), while the need for the supposedly altruistic projects ensuring access to water was caused by the consumption and contamination of the local water supply and the diversion of a river by Glencore for mining purposes (*corporate responsibility in action*; Kodde and Joanknecht, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The qualitative content analysis of Glencore’s 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan aims to identify greenwashing in a corporate report through a system of indicators. The findings provide insights into the use of greenwashing strategies in corporate sustainability reporting, especially for sectors whose business practices are inherently unsustainable, such as the extractive mining of fossil fuels and rare earth metals.

Indicators of greenwashing were identified in 94 segments, although our coding application was very conservative to avoid redundancies or unwarranted overzealousness. For example, the entirety of page 4 is an extended exercise in post-denialism. This text passage, consisting of 742 words, describes Glencore’s acquisition of a major stake in a coal enterprise. The green claims are carefully formulated and highly selective, for example: “We concluded that while not a metal, steelmaking coal is an important transition-enabling commodity as it is an essential input into much of the world’s steelmaking in its current form” (p. 4). While it is true that steel is required for some elements of the energy transition, such as the construction of wind turbines, not all steel is ultimately used in ecological products; nor is the combustion of carbon-based fuels as part of the steelmaking process an environmentally friendly practice; nor is coal the only energy source that can be used for producing steel. As such, this single claim could be simultaneously coded as an *empty claim* (the potential use of

14 “For example, we believe significant power sector reform is needed (both within and across national borders) to drive the energy transition, given that many governments are still demanding significant levels of fossil fuels to support their energy systems” (p. 6).

steel in the energy transition justifies the use of fossil fuels for its manufacture); *selective discourse* (steelmaking coal is better than thermal coal); or *vagueness* (the statement does not acknowledge which portion of the world's steel relies on coal, or that there are more sustainable energy alternatives). We ultimately coded this segment as *corporate responsibility in action*, as the act of expanding the stake in coal mining while claiming this to be an environmental practice seemed the most egregious claim, but closer parsing would have led to even more coding applications for this and numerous other segments.

Beyond the sheer frequency of greenwashing claims, even with our conservative coding system, the lack of consensus on a system for weighting greenwashing claims makes it difficult to judge the extent to which Glencore may be misleading its shareholders. An absolutist approach, as advocated by Nemes *et al.* (2022), would contend that even a single indicator of greenwashing is evidence of the practice. Therefore, the volume of greenwashing indicators identified in the CATP provides a compelling argument for the allegation that Glencore is engaging in greenwashing. Notably, the disclaimers on the pages 2 and 33 aim to protect Glencore from legal liability for misleading statements¹⁵.

Our focus on corporate sustainability reporting reveals some differences in greenwashing compared to advertising, which has been investigated more extensively in the academic literature. One of the common assumptions of greenwashing is that the receiver can be deceived and manipulated by the language used. Yet the target audience for corporate reporting consists of stakeholders with a vested interest in the company and greater knowledge about the sector. As such, it seems likely that investors reading a corporate report are better positioned to detect misleading facts or language, including greenwashing. Glencore's CATP was not found to contain instances of *jargon*, *unclear/ambiguous words*, or blatant *green talk*, which may have been readily exposed among an informed audience. The additional risk of legal ramifications was also likely a deterrent against outright *lying*. Rather than relying on deceptive language, the report focuses on small initiatives and minor aspects of the business while avoiding detailed strategies or addressing the overall environmental impact. This finding echoes Jaworska (2018), which illustrated that CSR reports in the oil industry perform "discursive grooming" (Pilger, 1998) of public perception to create the impression that climate

15 "This document has not been prepared as financial or investment advice or to provide any guidance in relation to our future performance. [...] Due to the inherent uncertainty and limitations in measuring greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and operational energy consumption under the calculation methodologies used in the preparation of such data, all CO2e emissions and operational energy consumption data or volume references (including, without limitation, ratios and/or percentages) in this document are estimates. There may also be differences in the manner that third parties calculate or report such data compared to Glencore, which means that third-party data may not be comparable to Glencore's data" (p. 3). Much of the language on page 33 is repeated verbatim.

change is being proactively addressed. Damaging subjects like the petroleum sector's contribution to climate change are backgrounded or weakened through hedging, while technological or market-based future goals are pledged and the industry portrayed as a victim of climate change.

This content analysis uncovered a novel indicator of greenwashing: the use of *hedged assertions* to introduce contentious claims into the communicative space while disavowing accountability for their truthfulness (cf. Hyland, 1998). By prefacing potentially misleading or even false statements with phrases like “we believe,” the company projects an epistemic stance weaker than knowledge, thus attempting to shield themselves from legal or reputational consequences. Betz-Richman (2022) argues that an untruthful hedge, which deliberately misrepresents an epistemic position, constitutes a form of deception equivalent to lying. Accordingly, we contend that a hedged assertion designed to mislead—particularly in the high-context setting of a corporate report—should be regarded as equally egregious as an outright lie.

One element which has not yet been discussed is the use of visual, or executional, greenwashing in the CATP (cf. Parguel *et al.*, 2015). The CATP includes several photos depicting images such as people in safety gear, landscapes, or a greenhouse with vegetation. None of the photos shows the mining and processing of coal, oil or metals, despite their significance to Glencore's revenue stream. Shades of green, blue, and brown, which are used to evoke nature and can be viewed as a form of greenwashing, are used prominently throughout the report. As Glencore selected turquoise as its corporate colour, this colour scheme could arguably be considered a calculated use of visual greenwashing, or simply consistent application of corporate design.

This intensive investigation of greenwashing in corporate reporting can be expanded to relate to other deceptive communicative practices. One relevant schema is provided in Ennis (2023), who adopted a framing approach to propose nine strategies for what he calls dark PR, or corporate disinformation campaigns to reframe global problems including climate change. The three counter-factual frames include *denialism*, claiming there is no problem, followed closely by *post-denialism*, which argues that a negative effect such as global warming is indeed positive, and *normalization*, which claims that the situation is normal. Four pseudo-solutions are characterized. The *silver boomerang*, also known as the Jevons effect, describes a solution with a negative rebound effect, for example when technological progress increases resource efficiency, but the falling cost leads to increased demand. Similarly, a *magic solution* is a promised process or product which may never materialize. The *treatment trap* emphasizes treating an outcome rather than preventing it, while *victim blaming* shifts the blame from the policy or organization causing a problem to the people victimized by it. Finally, the *knotted web* argues that the problem is complex and has no clear answer, implying that the pursuit of a solution is not worthwhile. As in the other models, a *multifactorial* approach can combine the frames above to muddy the waters even further. Most, if not all, of these strategies can be found in Glencore's CATP. Concepts which were not included in Nemes *et al.*'s (2022) descriptors of greenwashing, but certainly present in the CATP, are the *silver boomerang*

(characterizing steelmaking coal as contributing towards the energy transition, which may ultimately deter investment in more sustainable practices) and *magic solutions* (future recycling of scrap materials and metals in batteries to reduce the need for mining).

In summary, the climate action report demonstrates numerous instances of greenwashing strategies, especially in proportion to the brevity of the report (37 pages, only 32 of which have significant text) and our conservative coding policy. As the 2022 climate report faced significant opposition due to shareholder desire for greater clarity and disclosure, together with previous greenwashing scandals, it seems likely that more instances of greenwashing may have been present if there had not been prior issues.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative content analysis of Glencore's 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan (CATP) indicates strategic use of discursive greenwashing to present the company as environmentally friendly and future-oriented, while obscuring the true environmental impact of its inherently unsustainable operations. The findings reveal that Glencore's green claims rely on hidden tradeoffs, vague plans for recycling and lowering emissions, highlighting negligible initiatives, and touting legally required actions as voluntary environmental efforts. Meanwhile, Glencore's main revenue stream, the mining of coal and metals, is generally underreported or presented as a necessary business practice for the transition to renewable energy. Rather than modifying its business model, Glencore positions its business practices as more sustainable than they really are.

While previous frameworks of greenwashing and corporate disinformation, most notably Nemes *et al.* (2022), were validated by the communicative strategies employed in the CATP, this analysis suggests two significant developments for the study of greenwashing. Firstly, blatant greenwashing, such as the use of jargon, green talk or lying, which are commonly reported strategies in advertising, was avoided in this corporate report. This shift is likely due to two factors: the risk of repercussions for obvious disinformation in a corporate sustainability report of a publicly traded company, and the higher level of knowledge that can be presumed among the target audience. The result is more subtle and sophisticated greenwashing techniques. To identify the indicators of greenwashing in the CATP, a comprehensive understanding of the mining industry and its products, the relevant legal frameworks, the environmental impact of the company's portfolio and its business strategy are necessary. Expecting the average reader to invest this degree of research is unreasonable, although investors and institutional shareholders can be presumed to possess greater contextualized knowledge.

Secondly, the combination of selective disclosure and hedged assertions emerged as a significant greenwashing strategy in the CATP. Through selective disclosure, Glencore emphasizes small initiatives and vague commitments, giving the impression of progress without offering concrete details (cf. Jaworska, 2018). At the same time, it downplays or omits the company's broader

environmental impact. Notably, this study identified a novel strategy for corporate greenwashing: the use of hedged assertions (“we believe”) to subtly deflect responsibility by framing green claims as opinions rather than facts. This strategy allows the company to avoid full accountability and diminish the risk of legal repercussions, while still making the assertion. Collectively, these tactics create a misleading narrative for stakeholders and should therefore be recognized as a critical indicator for corporate greenwashing in sustainability reports, requiring further scrutiny in future research.

Notably, Glencore has backpedaled from some of its green projections since publishing the CATP in March 2024. In August 2024, the company announced that it would not follow through on the demerger of its coal business (Glencore 2024d), a scenario projected in the CATP implying a transition to more sustainable business practices. While the company justifies the decision as a response to shareholder preferences and the potential for enhanced cash generation, this move appears to prioritize short-term financial gains over the broader imperative of reducing carbon-intensive operations. By maintaining its coal assets, even under the guise of a “responsible decline,” Glencore risks undermining its stated climate goals and the global push for decarbonization. Moreover, the increased debt cap (from \$5 billion to \$10 billion) further signals a focus on capital flexibility rather than an aggressive reduction of coal-related activities. For critics, this decision exemplifies a tension between profit maximization and meaningful climate action, raising doubts about Glencore’s willingness to align fully with the principles of a low-carbon economy.

The analysis of the 2024-2026 Climate Action Transition Plan has implications for policymakers, investors, and environmental advocates. It demonstrates that legal requirements and oversight for sustainability reporting are necessary, as Glencore has not altered its potentially deceptive communication strategy, despite previous accusations of greenwashing and significant shareholder opposition to past reports. Even though legal requirements for sustainability reporting have become stricter in many European countries, the current legislation in Switzerland and the UK is not sufficient for preventing companies from greenwashing in their reports; and clearly, self-regulation cannot be expected. More rigorous guidelines on the content of sustainability reporting should be developed and enforced, especially concerning the detailed disclosure of a corporation’s current environmental impact.

Furthermore, the evidence for increasing sophistication of greenwashing strategies calls for independent experts to audit sustainability reports. The improvement of accountability and transparency can only be ensured if deceptive disclosure practices are identified by experts with familiarity with the industry, the relevant legal regulations and strategies of corporate disinformation. Investors also bear responsibility to conduct thorough due diligence when evaluating green claims.

Despite the greenwashing and unsustainable practices highlighted in this analysis, we remain hopeful that greater awareness of corporate disinformation, along with increased scrutiny, will drive more transparent and honest corporate reporting, ultimately fostering more sustainable business practices.

Carina Leonhardt is a student of International Relations and Management at OTH Regensburg. Her research interests include disinformation, particularly greenwashing. This investigation into the strategies by

which corporations deceive the public and even their own investors through greenwashing contributes to the critical analysis of corporate communication practices.

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Her teaching, research and public outreach projects focus on promoting media literacy and resilience to misinformation among the general public through awareness raising and education.

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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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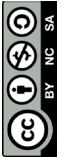
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Dark Public Relations strategies are an unethical practice aimed at diverting attention, damaging competition, or establishing narratives of individual responsibility for public issues. This paper explores this practice as a way to discredit citizen 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-



Keywords: *citizen activism, dark public relations, tourism, political communication, sustainable development.*

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).

PRESS

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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Fundamentals



I Think it's Interesting, but Irritating: Mobile Phones as an Advertising Medium Aimed at Spanish Children

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Following McLuhan's reflections regarding the influence of the medium on how users perceive messages, this study analyses minors' perception of media and screens, with special emphasis on smartphones. The results are based on a survey of 1,070 children aged 10-14 from Spain. According to the study, children consider mobile phones as the primary medium for receiving advertising, as well as the one that annoys them the most with commercial messages. Despite their interactive nature, respondents found outdoor advertising and television more entertaining and amusing than mobile phones, yet they considered television to be the most reliable medium. Finally, they highlighted the personalised aspect of smartphones.

Keywords: children, mobile phone, communication media, advertising medium, television.

Siguiendo las reflexiones de McLuhan sobre la influencia del medio en la percepción de los mensajes por parte de los usuarios, este estudio analiza la percepción de los menores sobre los medios y las pantallas, con especial atención a los smartphones. Los resultados se basan en una encuesta realizada a 1.070 niños españoles de entre 10 y 14 años. Según el estudio, los niños consideran que el móvil es el principal medio para recibir publicidad, así como el que más les molesta con mensajes comerciales. A pesar de su carácter interactivo, los encuestados consideran que la publicidad exterior y la televisión son más entretenidas y divertidas que los teléfonos móviles, aunque consideran que la televisión es el medio más fiable. Por último, destacaron el aspecto personalizado de los smartphones.

Palabras clave: niños, teléfono móvil, medios de comunicación, soporte publicitario, televisión.

The advertising sector is undergoing a period of change and uncertainty (Taylor and Carlson, 2021) as it searches for alternatives, the effectiveness of which depends more on the quality of the message than on the quantity of the impact achieved, especially among an audience as demanding as minors in terms of communication and media, as they are highly important for the goods and services market (Lichy *et al.*, 2022). Advertising investment has shifted toward media and platforms where the user is located (Ditrendia, 2021; Infoadex, 2021), which is why the mobile phone has become a key medium in advertising campaigns.

When we refer to mobile advertising, we include all actions and formats that the user is able to receive through the mobile screen (MMA, 2014). The adaptation of digital communication models to this mobile medium is categorised as advertising specifically designed to take advantage of all the opportunities offered by this device (personalisation, geolocation, interactivity, etc.). Thus, on the one hand, we have the reproduction of formats and conventional models of advertising on mobile phones, or in other words, a conception of the mobile device as just another medium, and on the other hand, we find the exploration of innovative models and formats that are focused on taking advantage of the technological specificity of these new devices (location, contextualised information, ubiquitous social connectivity, etc.), as well as on the ease of synergy between platforms, and most of all on exploiting the possibilities of mobile devices for the effective segmentation of users (Martínez and Aguado, 2014).

Unlike mass media, mobile phones are characterised by their portability, interactivity, immediacy, and omnipresence (Gómez-Tinoco, 2012). Mobile advertising must adapt to the dynamic nature of this device, and according to Atkinson (2013), it is no longer just a matter of adapting the advertising message to mobile communication, but also of integrating the consumer and developing strategies that are more digital, participatory, and less intrusive (Wang *et al.*, 2016). A review by Maseeh *et al.* (2021) of the main trends in academic research on mobile phone advertising points to five variables consistently identified as key factors in this context: personalisation, entertainment, credibility, news value, and annoyance. The entertainment variable is especially important for younger users in the mobile context (Feijoo *et al.*, 2021). Thus, when advertising is presented in an entertaining scenario, such as online games, minors tend to avoid the adverts (Martí-Pellón and Saunders, 2015; Martínez *et al.*, 2013).

In examining the reviews by Maseeh *et al.* (2021) and Jebarajakirthy *et al.* (2021), user attitude is a key variable in describing the relationship between minors and mobile advertising. As such, this study assumes that the prior attitude toward a medium or platform also affects how minors interact with the advertisements displayed. In effect, the theory offered by McLuhan *et al.* (1987), which states that “the medium is the message”, has been revived.

The integration of McLuhan’s theory into advertising implies a profound understanding of how different media can be used to shape the public perception of a brand or product. In the current digital era, where the quantity and variety of available media have expanded exponentially, this theory becomes even

more relevant. Advertisers must consider not only the content of the message but also how the chosen platform for its dissemination will affect its reception.

For example, the use of interactive media such as mobile applications can transform advertising into a more participatory experience, increasing consumer engagement with brands and ads. In a world where advertising increasingly seeks personalization and emotional connection with the consumer, it is crucial understanding how different media can be used to influence ad perception and behaviour. This also invites deeper reflection on the cultural and social impact of media on understanding the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The findings of the meta-analysis by Maseeh *et al.* (2021), which analysed 20 years of research on mobile advertising, show that attitude towards receiving mobile advertisements is significantly and positively associated with customers' intention to receive mobile advertisements. Personalization, entertainment, and credibility are positively associated with customer attitudes towards receiving mobile advertisements, while irritation is negatively associated with it. Their analysis reveals that the factors that have the most positive influence on consumer attitude are entertainment and credibility, while the impact of personalization is minimal, in contrast to previous findings such as those of Xu (2006), who found that personalization was one of the determining factors in users' positive attitude towards receiving mobile advertising.

Gao and Zang (2016) emphasized that minors are the most common users of mobile devices and also more likely to view mobile advertising. This demonstrates that this age group is among those who constitute the largest part of the target audience for mobile advertising (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Kim and Han, 2014), along with Generation Z. As previously was the case with online advertising (Andersen *et al.*, 2008; Sandberg, 2011), this new generation of users become irritated when they receive adverts on their devices (Martínez *et al.*, 2013; Martínez, 2019), which generates negative attitudes toward advertising (Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Jebarajakirthy *et al.*, 2021). This stance is softened by perceiving a certain added value in advertising content, either in the form of entertainment or other benefits such as offers, promotions, discounts or access to exclusive products (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022; Martí *et al.*, 2013).

An experiment conducted by Feijoo *et al.* (2020) shows that the exposure of minors to advertising when browsing on mobile phones is higher than in media such as television, which may also lead to the medium being perceived as saturated with commercial messages, thereby causing the user to have a negative attitude. Curiously, the level of use and familiarity that minors have with a specific platform (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) has a corresponding impact on the credibility they grant to these sites as a source of advertising: the more they use a platform, the more they trust it (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2021). The degree of trust, as well as their attitude toward the message, are key variables in children's advertising awareness (Rozenaal *et al.*, 2016).

Certain trends suggest that minors have adopted a much more negative stance toward digital advertising than all other generations, especially toward mobile banner adverts (Kantar Millward Brown, 2017). Regarding the behaviour intention expressed towards such mobile advertising, the most frequent reaction among young people is often indifference (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2021). A minority acknowledged some kind of interaction, even if it was simply to close the ads. Children report sensation or emotional processing (“it does not appeal to me”, “I do not like it”, “it is not entertaining”) as the causes motivating their interaction, rather than rational advertising literacy.

This is not the case with adults, an example of which is a study by Harms *et al.* (2019), which has shown that consumers actually prefer banners to article-style, native adverts in terms of attitude and credibility. Children are more tolerant of advertising that tries to identify them with real personalities, such as those who appear in influencer marketing (Moral *et al.*, 2016; Feijoo and Sádaba, 2021; Núñez-Gómez *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Gómez *et al.* 2021). Indeed, message personalisation is a quality that minors value in mobile phone advertising (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022).

However, it is also crucial to consider the ethical and privacy concerns that arise with the use of personal data in mobile advertising (Ullah *et al.*, 2023). The collection and analysis of personal data for ad personalization should be done transparently and respecting the user’s privacy. Consumers are increasingly aware of their privacy rights, and their trust may be negatively impacted if they perceive that their personal information is being used inappropriately.

The new generations demand new formats, novel messages, and values, especially on the mobile phone, which can be achieved by creating adaptable content designed specifically for the smaller screen, such as videos, musical narratives, and messages that are synthesised and immersive, which are associated formats and proposals that offer experiential value (Boyd, 2014; Burroughs, 2017; Castelló-Martínez and Tur-Viñes, 2020; Pires *et al.*, 2021).

The advertising format is another variable that influences the perception of the message (Feng *et al.*, 2016; Harms *et al.*, 2019), which can help to foster a positive view of the content by the audience.

However, preferences when looking at screens tend to differ between males and females, depending on the social concerns of each gender (Coyne and Archer, 2004; Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004). Thus, one of the main lines of research linking gender and the media addresses differences in consumption. Moreover, it is common in the field of video games to find research that classifies games into “blue” and “pink” (Márquez, 2013), and in the digital context this trend of differentiating use routines according to gender continues: while boys spend more time on gaming apps and YouTube when using the mobile phone, girls prefer social networks, especially Instagram and TikTok (Feijoo *et al.*, 2020).

Age is another determining factor in children’s relationship with advertising consumption, especially when analysing the level of credibility and trust placed in advertisements: as children grow older, they become more sceptical of such messages (Chu *et al.*, 2014; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974). Understanding the persuasive intent of advertising seems to be achieved around the age of eight

to ten (Koslow, 2000). However, there is no guarantee that they will have an especially deep insight into the motives of advertisers at that age (Ali and Blades, 2014).

In the mobile context, another aspect that seems to introduce differences in advertising consumption is screen ownership (Feijoo *et al.*, 2020; Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022). In general, socioeconomic status is a variable that has been widely studied in the Latin American context, where it has been observed that the new screens such as those of mobile phones have a more homogeneous penetration regardless of socioeconomic status (Trucco and Palma, 2020). Nevertheless, even though this is not usually a recurrent segmentation variable in the Spanish context, it will also be taken into account in this study given the increasing social inequality in this country (Ayala and Cantó, 2022).

The scientific discussion on linking children to digital and integrated marketing activity is still in its infancy compared to research that has examined other media such as television (Jans *et al.*, 2017; Oates *et al.*, 2014; Oprea *et al.*, 2020). This study aims to fill this gap.

The need for research is especially relevant in the Latin American context, where investigation has been rather scarce (Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Jebarajakirthy *et al.*, 2021). One might argue that in light of the scientific contributions made to date, there are still areas in which research may be able to shed light on the issue in order to better understand the role played by the mobile phone as an advertising medium, as well as the attitudes and reactions it generates within younger users. This is a screen that has been described in terms of its ability to deliver messages that are interactive, entertaining, immersive, personalised, and trustworthy. Consequently, it is the key to testing whether or not children perceive it in this way in today's media ecosystem. Thus, the results herein provide important information for advertisers and agencies that target children in their communications through mobile devices for the purpose of achieving effective planning in their online advertising.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to gain knowledge regarding the positioning that children from 10-14 years of age give to the mobile phone as an advertising medium by comparing it with other media and platforms that also broadcast or display advertising messages (television, radio, the computer, and outdoor adverts), along with its presence in the consumption routines of the public under study.

For this purpose, self-administered online surveys were carried out with children between 10 and 14 years of age who live in Spain. A total of 1,070 individuals participated, with a confidence rate of 95% and a +/-3% margin of error. The sampling procedure was multi-staged and stratified, and it included proportional allocation using four geographical areas as a first stratum, which were aggregated ad hoc (following the classification of NUT areas used by the EU), along with a second level of stratification according to the socioeconomic level

of the families (low, middle, and high). The final selection of the individuals to be surveyed was made according to cross quotas of gender and age. The fieldwork took place between April and June of 2022.

Table 1. Summary description of the sample

	Minors (N=1,070)
Age	10 to 12 years old: 58.2% (623) 13 to 14 years old: 41.8% (447)
Gender	Boys: 51.9% (555) Girls: 48.1% (515)
Socioeconomic status	Low: 30.9% (331) Middle: 50.3% (538) High: 18.8% (201)
Screens owned by children	PC: 18.5% (198) Laptop: 44.8% (479) Tablet: 58.4% (625) Smartphone: 76.7% (821) TV: 31.3% (335) None: 7.9% (84)

Source: Own elaboration.

The following research questions were formulated in order to answer the stated objective:

RQ 1- What characteristics and aspects of the mobile phone as an advertising medium do Spanish children value compared to other media?

RQ 2- Are there differences in the positioning given to each media according to the age, gender, and socio-economic group of the minors surveyed?

The novelty of this study lies in the fact that in Spain there are no current or similar studies that have examined mobile phones as an advertising medium, compared to more traditional media that are more familiar to children, such as television.

Given the scant attention paid to the consumption of advertising by minors in digital environments (Jans *et al.*, 2017), this study has taken an exploratory approach that seeks to shed light on the attitude of children toward the advertising they consume through diverse online and offline media, but with a special focus on mobile phones. For this reason, within the context of a larger survey, a series of questions were designed for this purpose, taking as a reference the characteristics and aspects that previous literature had highlighted and measured in mobile advertising as follows: level of advertising exposure (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022, 2021; Küster *et al.*, 2017); degree of annoyance and/or irritation caused by advertising (Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Tsang *et al.*, 2004); the entertainment it arouses (Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Tsang *et al.*, 2004); level of desire or pleasure in receiving advertisements (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022; Küster *et al.*, 2017); personalisation of the message (Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Xu, 2006); level of trust (Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Tsang *et al.*, 2004); and the desire to know more about the promoted product (Küster *et al.*, 2017).

The questions were formulated in hierarchical fashion as closed-ended questions that allowed the participants to organise and rank different options in a specific order (Hernández *et al.*, 2010). The aim was for children to evaluate the media —street location or shopping centre (outdoor advertising), television, mobile phone, computer, and radio— in relation to the characteristics outlined above. This type of closed-ended question was chosen because priority was given to revealing the positioning that minors give to media as advertising channels; it was also considered that this type of question would be pleasant and dynamic for the minors.

The questions were specified in the survey as follows:

Table 2. Structure of the questions used in the survey

Question formulation		
Classify the following media by ranking in first place the one in which...	<i>You watch the most advertising</i>	...and by ranking in last place the one that has the least effect in these aspects
	<i>The advertising annoys you the most</i>	
	<i>The advertising is the most entertaining</i>	
	<i>You most like to watch the advertising</i>	
	<i>You feel that the advertising is more targeted at your tastes and interests</i>	
	<i>You trust the advertising the most</i>	
	<i>After seeing an advertisement, you have the strongest desire to learn more about the product</i>	
Options to classify street/shopping centre; television; the mobile phone; the computer; radio		

Source: Own elaboration.

In this particular study, we present a descriptive analysis of the variables described with the aim of addressing the research objectives outlined. Additionally, a bivariate analysis is also considered, taking into account demographic variables such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status to identify and understand differences among different population groups. To determine the statistical relevance of the observed differences in responses across these intersections, we used the independence test based on Pearson's Chi-square statistic to determine the degree of association between two nominal variables. In all cases, we established that the p-value to reject the null hypothesis of the tests conducted would be <0.05. When this occurs, the differences will be reported as significant, and the corresponding cells will be shaded in Table 3 (pp. 13-15) to highlight them.

In order to safeguard the integrity of the participants and researchers of the study, authorisation to collect the information was requested from the guardian of each child by way of a signature on an informed consent document, previously validated by the Ethics Committee of the university to which this research has been assigned (XXXXX University), which also reviewed and approved the methodological design of the project.

RESULTS

For this research, we used the categories of analysis of the mobile phone as a benchmark from the point of view of its advertising usefulness, as indicated by previous literature (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022; 2021; Jebarajakirthy *et al.*, 2021; Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Tsang *et al.*, 2004; Xu, 2006). Moreover, we studied these categories among underage users, not only with mobile phones, but also on other platforms and media where advertising is frequently displayed.

These variables are significantly related to each other, or in other words, Pearson's chi-square test showed a relationship of dependence ($p < 0.05$) among all the variables defined for this analysis (exposure, annoyance, entertainment, tastes, personalisation, trust, and a desire to know the product) in the responses related to first place.

POSITIONING OF THE MEDIA AS A CHANNEL FOR ADVERTISING

Regarding the first study variable, which is the level of advertising consumption, more than 90% of the children surveyed indicated that the mobile phone (47.3%) and television (46.4%) are the media through which they see the most advertising.

The computer and outdoor adverts (street and/or shopping centres) were ranked first by less than 10% of the sample, while the percentage who selected radio was anecdotal, probably due to the fact that children are exposed to this medium very infrequently (e.g. when driving with their parents in the car).

It is also interesting to observe the media that was ranked second by the participants: a significant percentage of the children once again pointed to television (31.5%) and mobile phones (28.0%). It should not be forgotten that television, and more recently mobile phones, are well known for being saturated with advertising.

With regard to another type of digital advertising, such as that received through the computer, after mobile phones and television, this is the medium through which children feel they receive the most advertising (nearly 26% selected it as their first or second choice).

The media through which children are most annoyed by advertising depends to a large extent on the previous variable: 63.7% indicated that the medium through which they are most annoyed by advertising is, by far, the mobile phone. Television generates much less annoyance compared to the mobile phone, despite being chosen as the second most annoying medium (21.4%). Digital advertising through the computer was the most annoying, as it took second place in the responses (35.7%). Outdoor advertising and radio advertising, on the other hand, were the least annoying.

Figure 1. Media ranking according to the amount of advertising viewed and the annoyance generated



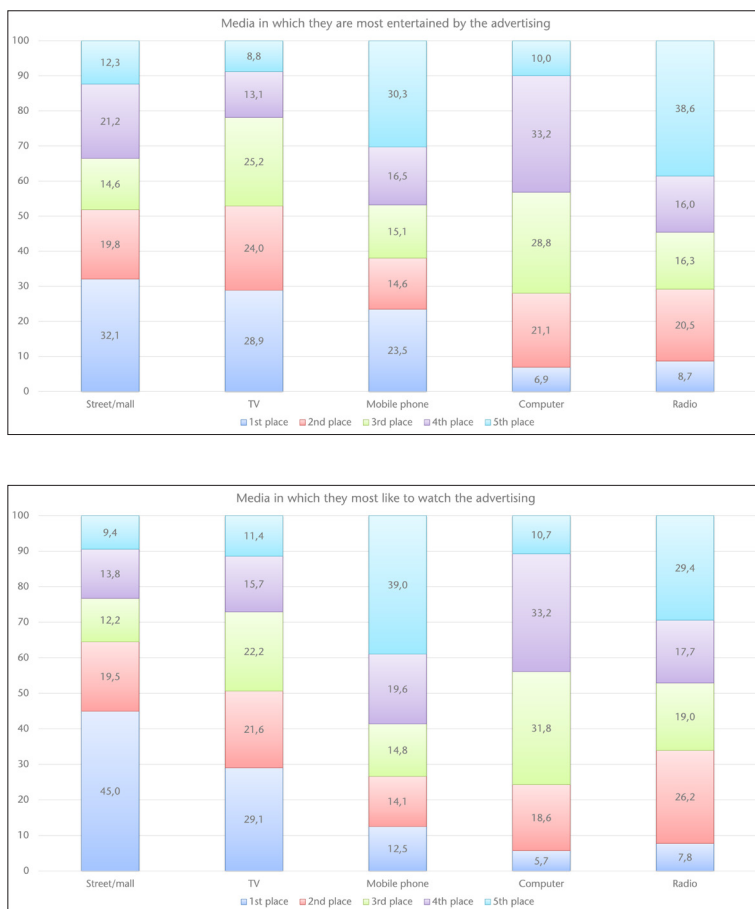
Source: Own elaboration.

A recurring variable of study when addressing the relationship between advertising and children is the level of entertainment and amusement it provides. In this study, it was found that outdoor advertising was the medium most cited by children as their first choice in this category (32.1%), ahead of television (28.9%) and mobile phones (23.5%). It is necessary to highlight the fact that advertising messages on mobile phones, despite being an interactive platform, do not produce a strong perception of entertainment. In fact, if we look at the results obtained in the responses related to the second choices, a higher percentage of children chose radio over mobile phones, and more than 30% chose the mobile phone as the medium through which they are least entertained by advertising.

In direct relation to the previous observations, nearly half of the sample (45.0%) chose streets/shopping centres as the locations where they most like to

see commercial messages, and secondly, television (29.1%). The mobile phone came in third place, selected by 12.5% of the respondents, far behind the statistics achieved by television and outdoor advertising. Additionally, the mobile phone is the medium that in last place (39.0%).

Figure 2. Media rank according to how entertaining they perceive advertising to be and the medium through which they most like to consume it



Source: Own elaboration.

In terms of personalisation of the advertising message, children acknowledged that digital advertising is the medium that offers them messages most in line with their interests. Thus, 60.2% selected the mobile phone as the medium through which they feel they receive the most advertising consistent with their tastes, well ahead of television and outdoor advertising. In second place, nearly 50% of the sample chose the computer and, once again, the mobile phone was selected by only 19.1%.

Another variable of interest when studying a communication medium such as an advertising channel is the level of trust perceived by the audience, which is automatically transferred to the advertising message that is broadcast. In this case, nearly half of the sample (43.2%) selected television as the medium they trust the most, followed by advertising displayed on/in the street/shopping centres (27.2%). Only 16.1% selected the mobile phone as the platform they trust the most for receiving advertisements, while 29.7% rated the mobile phone as one of the least trusted media, which is comparable to radio. Upon observation, it seems that the statistics associated with the variables of enjoyment and taste show a pattern that is similar to the results of the trust variable.

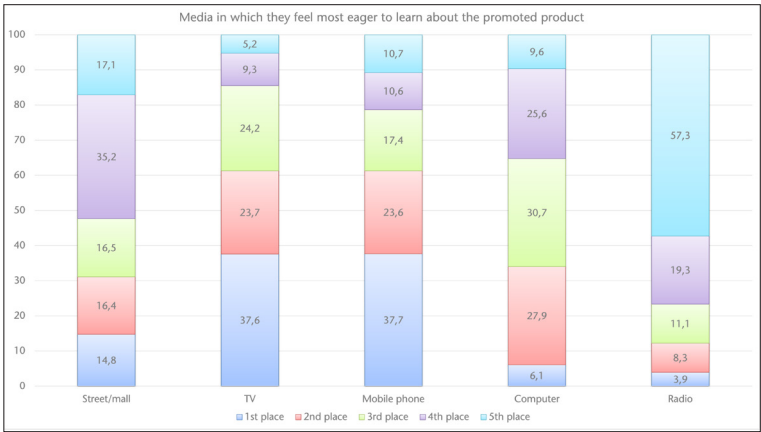
Figure 3. Media ranking according to the affinity and trust generated by advertising



Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, we wanted to position the media according to the one that arouses the greatest desire in children to become familiar with the promoted product. In this case, the preferred media chosen were the mobile phone (37.7%) in first place, and television in second place (37.6%). This could be due to the perception of the mobile phone as a platform that broadcasts messages in line with users' tastes. It can also be confirmed that in the selections for second place, 27.9% placed advertising received by computer as the medium that generates the most interest in obtaining more information about the advertised product. In connection with this variable, the medium that was rated the worst was radio, probably due to the fact that the generation that participated in this study has a preference for audio-visual consumption.

Figure 4. Media ranking according to the interest that advertising awakens in children to learn about the promoted product



Source: Own elaboration.

DIFFERENCES BY AGE, GENDER, AND SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP

In order to study the significant differences implied by the socio-demographic variables defined, the statistics obtained from the respondents' answers to their first choice (1st place) were used as a reference.

Table 3. Preferences segmented by age, gender, and SEG of the minors

Media in which children...		AGE		Gender		SEG			TOTAL
		10-12	13-14	Boy	Girl	Low	Middle	High	
watch the most advertising	Street/mall	36	14	27	23	16	24	10	50
		5.8%	3.1%	4.9%	4.5%	4.8%	4.5%	5.0%	4.7%
	TV	287	166	245	208	132	237	84	453
		46.1%	37.1%	44.1%	40.4%	39.9%	44.1%	41.8%	42.3%
	Mobile phone	262	235	235	262	166	245	86	497
		42.1%	52.6%	42.3%	50.9%	50.2%	45.5%	42.8%	46.4%
	Computer	32	21	34	19	14	23	16	53
		5.1%	4.7%	6.1%	3.7%	4.2%	4.3%	8.0%	5.0%
	Radio	6	11	14	3	3	9	5	17
		1.0%	2.5%	2.5%	0.6%	0.9%	1.7%	2.5%	1.6%
are most annoyed by the advertising	Street/mall	17	3	10	10	10	5	5	20
		2.7%	0.7%	1.8%	1.9%	3.0%	0.9%	2.5%	1.9%
	TV	144	85	121	108	64	112	53	229
		23.1%	19.0%	21.8%	21.0%	19.3%	20.8%	26.4%	21.4%
	Mobile phone	375	307	339	343	221	347	114	682
		60.2%	68.7%	61.1%	66.6%	66.8%	64.5%	56.7%	63.7%
	Computer	58	39	62	35	27	56	14	97
		9.3%	8.7%	11.2%	6.8%	8.2%	10.4%	7.0%	9.1%
	Radio	29	13	23	19	9	18	15	42
		4.7%	2.9%	4.1%	3.7%	2.7%	3.3%	7.5%	3.9%

Media in which children...		AGE		Gender		SEG			TOTAL
		10-12	13-14	Boy	Girl	Low	Middle	High	
find the advertising to be the most entertaining	Street/mall	202	141	171	172	113	171	59	343
		32.4%	31.5%	30.8%	33.4%	34.1%	31.8%	29.4%	32.1%
	TV	178	131	166	143	90	154	65	309
		28.6%	29.3%	29.9%	27.8%	27.2%	28.6%	32.3%	28.9%
	Mobile phone	150	101	126	125	89	121	41	251
		24.1%	22.6%	22.7%	24.3%	26.9%	22.5%	20.4%	23.5%
	Computer	41	33	42	32	14	44	16	74
		6.6%	7.4%	7.6%	6.2%	4.2%	8.2%	8.0%	6.9%
	Radio	52	41	50	43	25	48	20	93
		8.3%	9.2%	9.0%	8.3%	7.6%	8.9%	10.0%	8.7%
like to watch the advertising the most	Street/mall	271	210	242	239	162	233	86	481
		43.5%	47.0%	43.6%	46.4%	48.9%	43.3%	42.8%	45.0%
	TV	194	117	166	145	80	162	69	311
		31.1%	26.2%	29.9%	28.2%	24.2%	30.1%	34.3%	29.1%
	Mobile phone	77	57	69	65	51	56	27	134
		12.4%	12.8%	12.4%	12.6%	15.4%	10.4%	13.4%	12.5%
	Computer	37	24	37	24	15	37	9	61
		5.9%	5.4%	6.7%	4.7%	4.5%	6.9%	4.5%	5.7%
	Radio	44	39	41	42	23	50	10	83
		7.1%	8.7%	7.4%	8.2%	6.9%	9.3%	5.0%	7.8%
feel that the advertising is more targeted at their interests	Street/mall	61	33	50	44	37	45	12	94
		9.8%	7.4%	9.0%	8.5%	11.2%	8.4%	6.0%	8.8%
	TV	123	62	101	84	53	96	36	185
		19.7%	13.9%	18.2%	16.3%	16.0%	17.8%	17.9%	17.3%
	Mobile phone	351	293	316	328	210	310	124	644
		56.3%	65.5%	56.9%	63.7%	63.4%	57.6%	61.7%	60.2%
	Computer	70	47	74	43	25	70	22	117
		11.2%	10.5%	13.3%	8.3%	7.6%	13.0%	10.9%	10.9%
	Radio	18	12	14	16	6	17	7	30
		2.9%	2.7%	2.5%	3.1%	1.8%	3.2%	3.5%	2.8%

Media in which children...		AGE		Gender		SEG			TOTAL
		10-12	13-14	Boy	Girl	Low	Middle	High	
feel the most trust in receiving and consuming advertisements	Street/mall	166	125	141	150	105	130	56	291
		26.6%	28.0%	25.4%	29.1%	31.7%	24.2%	27.9%	27.2%
	TV	275	187	254	208	144	242	76	462
		44.1%	41.8%	45.8%	40.4%	43.5%	45.0%	37.8%	43.2%
	Mobile phone	95	77	86	86	50	82	40	172
		15.2%	17.2%	15.5%	16.7%	15.1%	15.2%	19.9%	16.1%
	Computer	36	21	35	22	16	32	9	57
		5.8%	4.7%	6.3%	4.3%	4.8%	5.9%	4.5%	5.3%
	Radio	51	37	39	49	16	52	20	88
		8.2%	8.3%	7.0%	9.5%	4.8%	9.7%	10.0%	8.2%
feel more eager to learn about the promoted product	Street/mall	97	61	73	85	48	82	28	158
		15.6%	13.6%	13.2%	16.5%	14.5%	15.2%	13.9%	14.8%
	TV	245	157	215	187	122	203	77	402
		39.3%	35.1%	38.7%	36.3%	36.9%	37.7%	38.3%	37.6%
	Mobile phone	218	185	197	206	133	194	76	403
		35.0%	41.4%	35.5%	40.0%	40.2%	36.1%	37.8%	37.7%
	Computer	36	29	43	22	19	34	12	65
		5.8%	6.5%	7.7%	4.3%	5.7%	6.3%	6.0%	6.1%
	Radio	27	15	27	15	9	25	8	42
		4.3%	3.4%	4.9%	2.9%	2.7%	4.6%	4.0%	3.9%
TOTAL		623	447	555	515	331	538	201	1070
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
*Shaded data indicate a significant difference (p<0.05) in the results obtained between the different categories of analysis for each variable (age, gender, and GSE).									

Source: Own elaboration.

DIFFERENCES ACCORDING TO THE AGE OF USERS

Firstly, the age variable was found to be dependent with regard to the following study variables, as the chi-square tests showed a dependency relationship: level of exposure to advertising χ^2 (4, N = 1,070) = 18.779, p < .05; annoyance χ^2 (4, N = 1,070) = 13.000, p < .05; and personalisation of the advertising message χ^2 (4, N = 1,070) = 10.740, p < .05.

As shown in Table 3, a higher proportion of older respondents (13-14 years old) perceive that the medium through which they receive the most advertising is the mobile phone (52.6%). However, younger respondents (10-12 years of age) tend to indicate that they are more exposed to advertising input from television (46.1%). Moreover, taking into account differences by age, children from 10 to 12 years old are more likely than children from 13 to 14 years old to perceive a greater presence of outdoor messages.

On the other hand, the age factor indicates that younger children generally tend to be less tolerant of advertising in all media, with the exception of mobile phones, whereas a higher percentage of 13-14 year olds tend to rate the mobile as the platform they find most annoying for receiving advertisements (68.7%). This trend might be explained by the fact that older children make greater use of mobile phones.

Finally, segmentation by age shows that as children grow older, a higher percentage values the personalisation of mobile advertising. Consequently, 65.5% of the children between 13 and 14 years of age say that the mobile phone is the medium that offers messages more related to their interests, compared to 56.3% of children between 10 and 12 years of age, who tend to perceive television as the medium that is more in line with their tastes.

DIFFERENCES ACCORDING TO GENDER

The gender of the user also implies significant differences in the results obtained. Chi-square tests showed a dependency relationship between the following study variables: χ^2 (4, N = 1,070) = 14.697, $p < .05$ (exposure*gender); χ^2 (4, N = 1,070) = 9.033, $p < .05$ (personalisation*gender); χ^2 (4, N = 1,070) = 11.797, $p < .05$ (desire to know the product*gender).

Girls tend to view more advertising on mobile phones than boys (50.9% vs. 42.3%), while boys are more likely to watch TV than girls (44.1% vs. 40.4%). Significant differences were also observed in relation to exposure to advertising on the computer and radio, with a higher percentage of boys than girls.

With regard to the variable of personalisation of advertising, as the mobile phone is the device through which they generally feel they receive advertising that is more segmented, girls chose it more than boys (63.7% compared to 56.9%). Males are more likely than females to feel that television and computers offer advertising messages related to their interests.

Regarding the medium that arouses more curiosity about the promoted product, girls have a greater preference than their male counterparts for the mobile (40.0% vs. 35.5%) and outdoor advertising (16.5% vs. 13.2%), while males have a greater inclination toward television and computers, which is in line with the results presented in the previous paragraph.

DIFFERENCES ACCORDING TO THE SEG OF THE USER'S HOUSEHOLD

It was also confirmed that there is an association between the socio-economic group of the household to which the respondent belongs and the variables of

annoyance, taste, and trust in advertising: χ^2 (8, N = 1,070) = 20.892, $p < .05$ (annoyance*SEG); χ^2 (8, N = 1,070) = 17.355, $p < .05$ (tastes*SEG); χ^2 (8, N = 1,070) = 15.881, $p < .05$ (trust*SEG).

It is interesting to note that children belonging to households in the high SEG reported in greater numbers than the other groups that the medium through which they are most bothered by advertising is television (26.4% compared to 19.3% for the low SEG and 20.8% in the middle SEG); however, they are the most tolerant regarding mobile advertising. Thus, the low SEG indicated to a greater extent than the others that the advertising that irritates them the most is mobile advertising (66.8% compared to 56.7% for the high SEG). It also bears mentioning that the high SEG was more irritated by radio advertising than the other segments (7.5% compared to 2.7% for the low SEG and 3.3% for the middle SEG).

In terms of the medium through which they most like to receive advertising, the low socio-economic group showed a greater preference for outdoor adverts (48.9% vs. 42.8% for the high SEG and 43.3% for the middle SEG), as well as mobile advertising (15.4% vs. 13.4% high SEG and 10.4% middle SEG). The high socio-economic group showed a greater inclination for television (34.3% compared to 24.2% for the low SEG and 30.1% for the middle SEG), while the middle SEG gave higher scores to the computer (6.5% vs. 4.5% low SEG and 4.5% high SEG) and radio (9.3% vs. 6.9% low SEG and 5.0% high SEG).

It is important to highlight the way in which the socio-economic variable indicates differences in terms of the level of trust placed in communication media as advertising channels. Similarly, in this case the trends displayed within the 'annoyance' variable are repeated, or in other words, the groups that indicated less tolerance for receiving advertising in a given medium referred to it once again as the medium they trust the least to receive advertising. Thus, children in the high SEG pointed to the mobile phone as the most trusted medium to receive advertising in higher numbers than the other groups (19.9% compared to 15.1% for the low SEG and 15.2% for the middle SEG). However, they tend to trust television the least as an advertising medium (37.8% vs. 43.5% low SEG and 45.0% middle SEG). The low SEG is the group that trusts mobile phone advertising the least, despite being the group that reported the greatest exposure to mobile advertising, and that also said it was the preferred medium for receiving advertisements.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The novelty of this research lies in allowing one to reflect on the positioning that minors give to the media and the platforms that are used most often as advertising channels. It has been possible to analyse the position that the mobile phone occupies as a receptor of advertising messages compared to other media closely connected with children. Some interesting conclusions have been drawn from this study. Firstly, based on the findings, according to the rationale of the minors, the mobile phone stands out mainly for its potential to offer personalised

messages in line with their tastes and interests; however, it is generally through this device that they most dislike receiving advertisements, which directly influences the fact that it is not a reliable, enjoyable, nor entertaining medium for the minors surveyed. One should not ignore the fact that children stated they receive the most advertising from mobile phones and television; this is consistent with previous literature indicating that children consume an average of 14 minutes of advertising per hour of mobile phone browsing, a statistic similar to that of television (Feijoo *et al.*, 2020). It seems evident that the minors surveyed perceive an overload of advertising on mobile phones, which especially affects its position as a medium for receiving advertisements.

The results obtained allow us to reflect on certain trends detected that should be further analysed in future research. Thus, one can see that media with the highest levels of trust are those through which children do not feel they receive a large amount of advertising, and these media also produce the least amount of rejection. Therefore, it appears that the level of trust depends to a large extent on the degree of disruption or annoyance caused by advertising. This approach opens the door to questioning the aspects, elements, and features of advertising that engender trust in the minor.

While the mobile phone was selected as the medium through which respondents receive the most commercial messages and are most annoyed by advertising, they also recognise that this device personalises persuasive content the most. As a result, the mobile phone has also been identified as the medium that awakens the most interest in minors to learn more about the products being promoted. There seems to be a relationship between the variables of personalisation and the desire to know more about the advertised product in the mobile context, which are also the two most valued characteristics of this device as an advertising medium, in contrast to previous studies that have also highlighted the entertainment aspect (Kuster *et al.*, 2017; Maseeh *et al.*, 2021; Tsang *et al.*, 2004; Xu, 2006). This may be due to the fact that the mobile phone is perceived as a medium that is increasingly saturated with advertising (Feijoo *et al.*, 2020).

The comparison with television is unavoidable, as the medium was also characterised by its saturation of advertising messages. It was revealed in this study that the screen through which children prefer to receive advertisements is television, an idea that was previously pointed out by Feijoo and Sádaba (2022), who found that children perceived advertising to be highly segmented by television. In line with the aforementioned, as the TV screen has been rated as less annoying, the trust placed in it by the minors is higher compared to the mobile phone. Therefore, in this study, television has a higher position as an advertising vehicle than the mobile phone in the minds of the surveyed children.

It is also necessary to highlight the outstanding qualities of outdoor advertising. This medium was rated as especially entertaining, and children enjoy receiving advertisements through this format, both of which are relevant characteristics for this age group (Küster *et al.*, 2017). Unlike television or digital advertising, the relationship children have with outdoor advertising has been

addressed less often by science (Jans *et al.*, 2017); thus, in subsequent research it would be interesting to further investigate the factors that drive this positioning, and whether or not perceiving it as a saturated space influences these results.

By observing changes to the findings that have resulted from introducing the variables of age, gender, and socio-demographic group, it has been possible to see the variations they imply in the general trends indicated regarding the mobile phone as an advertising medium. In terms of age, it was found that as the minors grow older, they place more value on the personalisation of advertising messages offered by mobile phones, and they also develop a greater tolerance for message saturation. With regard to gender, one can observe that the mobile phone holds a higher position in the minds of girls than boys. On the other hand, it was interesting to observe how the trust variable is only dependent on the socio-economic group of the household to which the child belongs, which leaves the door open for further research on the impact of socio-educational levels on the child's ability to deal with the advertising received through screens.

Finally, this study offers some lines of thought and reflection that do not pretend to be conclusive, given the limitations of the method used and the treatment of the information. Having opted for a quantitative approach limits a deeper understanding of children's motivations behind their choices. Moreover, the findings reflect impressions, or perceptions of the respondents that may differ from their actions. Likewise, the survey was self-administered and computer-based, and as a consequence the researcher has no record of what level of commitment and understanding the child had at the time of completing the survey. However, a pilot test was carried out to minimise this risk, which ensured that the children under study comprehended the questions, and that the questionnaire was not too long, as this might have resulted in a temptation among the minors to give random answers.

In essence, this research has sought to reveal the way in which children position the mobile phone as an advertising vehicle in comparison to other media and platforms. It has been confirmed that mobile advertising was perceived as excessive and annoying, most likely because it was intrusive and interfered with the children's activity. It should not be forgotten that minors want to be in control of when they see advertising (Feijoo and Sádaba, 2022), which is why television and the street are the most highly valued spaces for advertising. Furthermore, trust seems to depend on this variable, and not so much on other aspects such as use or experience with the medium, as Feijoo and Sádaba (2021) have pointed out. This trend should be explored more deeply in future research.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This article presents some practical implications that should be taken into account if advertisers seek to connect with this young segment. Regardless of the fact that mobile advertising offers technical possibilities impossible to provide by other means, minors consider it abusive and irritating. Brands should focus on creating advertising experiences that are not only less intrusive but also more

entertaining and valuable for the user. This includes ads that offer something beyond the simple promotion of a product or service, such as educational content, interactive experiences (AR, VR, gamification), or entertainment tailored to their preferences. Format issues should also not be overlooked: short and vertical videos are often perceived as less irritating for mobile users.

Finally, it is important not to forget that young people are increasingly concerned about their privacy and view intrusive advertising negatively. It is important to balance personalization with respect for privacy and ensure that users have control over the data they share and how it is used for advertising purposes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Football and Social Media Presence in China. A Case Study of the Spanish First Division Football League

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Social media play a pivotal role in corporate communication, and its importance extends to sports. The dynamic interplay between social media and sports has witnessed noteworthy evolution in recent years. This study examines the use of Chinese social media platforms by clubs participating in the 2022-2023 season of the Spanish First Division Football League (La Liga), to provide a better theoretical understanding of this phenomenon and make recommendations for the clubs' adaptation to the Chinese market. Four research objectives guide this study. First, to identify the specific purpose driving the use of these social networks by the Spanish First Division clubs. Second, to quantify the presence of these clubs on the Sina Weibo platform. Third, to verify the official status of the clubs' accounts across each social network. Finally, to rank the clubs based on their degree of engagement and effectiveness in using the selected social networks. The findings reveal that all clubs in the Spanish First Di-

Las redes sociales desempeñan un papel fundamental en la comunicación corporativa y esta importancia se extiende al ámbito de los deportes. La interacción dinámica entre las redes sociales y los deportes ha sido testigo de una evolución notable en los últimos años. Este estudio se centra en el uso de las plataformas de redes sociales chinas por parte de los clubes participantes en la temporada 2022-2023 de la Liga Española de Fútbol de Primera División, con el fin de proporcionar apoyo teórico y recomendaciones para la adaptación de los clubes al mercado chino. Cuatro objetivos de investigación guían este estudio. En primer lugar, identificar la finalidad concreta que motiva el uso de estas redes sociales por parte de los clubes de Primera División española. En segundo lugar, cuantificar la presencia de estos clubes en la plataforma Sina Weibo. En tercer lugar, verificar el estado oficial de las cuentas de los clubes en cada red social. Finalmente, clasificar a los clubes en función de su grado de com-

vision use at least one Chinese social network, predominantly Sina Weibo; that a select few engage with Bilibili and TikTok (Chinese version); and that not all accounts on these social networks carry an official designation. Notably, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona emerge as the frontrunners with the highest follower count across all social networks analyzed. In conclusion, the study underscores the limited extent of social media management by clubs in the 2022-2023 season of the Spanish First Division in the Chinese market.

Keywords: communication, social networks, sport, football, Spanish First Division, China, Weibo, Bilibili, Chinese TikTok.

promiso y efectividad en la utilización de las redes sociales seleccionadas. Los hallazgos revelan que todos los clubes de la Primera División española utilizan al menos una red social china, predominantemente Sina Weibo; que unos pocos elegidos interactúan con Bilibili y TikTok (versión china); y que no todas las cuentas en estas redes sociales llevan una designación oficial. Significativamente, Real Madrid y FC Barcelona emergen como los líderes con mayor número de seguidores en todas las redes sociales analizadas. En conclusión, el estudio pone de relieve el limitado alcance de la gestión de las redes sociales por parte de los clubes en la temporada 2022-2023 de la Primera División española en el mercado chino.

Palabras clave: comunicación, redes sociales, deporte, fútbol, Primera División española, China, Weibo, Bilibili, TikTok chino.

In the contemporary digital era, the Internet and social networks play a crucial role in communication, possessing significance in connecting individuals, shaping opinions, disseminating information, fostering engagement, and creating personal as well as professional opportunities. Similarly, social media and sports are closely linked, and this relationship has evolved significantly in recent years. Traditionally, the broadcasting of major sporting events heavily relied on conventional media channels, lacking immediate feedback mechanisms due to their one-way nature (Lv and Wangsun, 2023). This landscape has shifted, with social media platforms now constituting a pivotal component for athletes, teams, and sports organizations. This shift has not only revolutionized the interaction between sports entities and their fan base but has also transformed self-promotion strategies. Research across diverse disciplines has underscored the profound impact of social media, and within the realm of football, the use of social networks is indispensable (Li, 2020), given that major events in the sporting world increasingly use alternative media platforms and disseminate messages through social media channels (Zuo, 2020). Consequently, this broadens the audience's access to information and allows catering to personalized preferences in content (Zhao and Li, 2023).

This study aims to assess the contemporary visibility of Spanish First Division football clubs during the 2022-2023 season on Chinese social media platforms as it is important the projection of football in other countries (Lobillo and Muñoz, 2016, p. 196). Three distinct and influential Chinese social networks have been selected for analysis: Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and the Chinese version of TikTok. The main objective is to investigate the use of these social networks by Spanish First Division football clubs. Specifically, the objectives include determining whether all clubs incorporate Sina Weibo in their social media strategy; verifying the authenticity of accounts on each platform; and ultimately establishing a ranking based on the extent of engagement on the analysed social networks. The goal of this research is to provide new insights and discoveries that enhance our understanding of how Spanish football clubs navigate social networks in China. Additionally, the study aims to uncover trends and changes in communication management, providing a clearer understanding of evolving dynamics in this context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SOCIAL MEDIA

New technologies have rapidly permeated society, inundating the consumer market and transforming our lifestyles in just a few years. Currently, the ability to communicate in real-time with any part of the world and the convenience of accessing information without consulting a physical encyclopedia are considered indispensable (García del Castillo, 2013). In the words of Sotelo González (2012), “The Internet and other emerging social media enable the multidirectional flow of messages and offer greater possibilities for selection, expression, and communication”.

Human beings inherently crave social relationships, and their interaction with the surrounding environment is crucial. Membership in social circles holds decisive importance, and these circles have been significantly enriched by virtual spaces and media. Chat spaces, groups, or action circles, for instance, provide exciting opportunities for individuals to interact in a secure, dynamic, and effective manner. They serve as platforms for sharing and exchanging experiences and information, or simply expressing oneself (Herrera, 2012).

As García del Castillo (2013) points out, virtual social networks exemplify the concept of Web 2.0. In the Web 1.0 era, website managers generated content for users, while in the Web 2.0, users generate content for other users.

Web 2.0 has turned the network from a simple digital showcase to an open platform, in which user participation architecture becomes a primary feature and one of the terms that would feed back into its evolution (Sidorenko *et al.*, 2022, p. 34).

SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHINA

Traditional communication encompasses conventional media such as television, newspapers, and magazines. However, with the rapid advancement of network

technology, access to information has expanded, ushering in a new era of interaction and information exchange through the Internet (Zhang, 2023), so the timely availability of news and information, coupled with the robust entertainment features of the Internet, has gradually eroded the advantages of traditional media (Zhang M., 2019).

In the specific context of China, it is evident that new media in the age of social networks is intricately linked to network development. New media, as an emerging form of Internet-based media, encompasses various platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, websites, and microfilms (Zhang, 2023).

Sina Weibo has experienced rapid growth due to its immediacy, convenience, and interactivity in recent years, becoming the most representative social network platform (Ji, 2022). In fact, according to Zhou (2021), Sina Weibo has become the most popular microblogging platform in China, propelled by influencers, and celebrities, an intricately designed news information system, and robust network security monitoring. With regards to Bilibili, while it may not be a mainstream sports medium, the one-way communication method of traditional sports media is unable to meet users' demand for personalized and segmented content in the age of social media. That is, users seek to participate in the interaction of sports culture in multiple dimensions and levels, which is why Bilibili has been gradually accumulating a large number of sports fans by relying on its unique Bullet Screen culture and its secondary attributes (Qiao, 2023). In the case of the TikTok platform, "its origin goes back to its predecessor Musical.ly, which until 2016 focused on lip-synching and choreographies performed by very young audiences" (Sidorenko *et al.*, 2022, p. 35). On the other hand, with the advent of the 5G era, new media platforms like TikTok have become the go-to destination for contemporary leisure and entertainment (Shang and Zhang, 2023), as the software focuses on providing a platform for young people to create and share short music videos (Dong, 2020).

SPORTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Sport and Media studies did not gain prominence within the Sociology of Sport until the early 1980s, when, under the influence of British studies, there was an expansion of the topics of study in the Social Sciences, sparking scientific interest in the relationship between sport and the media (Llopis-Goig, 2016). However, in recent years, all major events have embraced alternative media platforms (Zuo, 2020), leveraging digital media technology to enhance the audiovisual communication of sports events. Currently, short videos integrate texts, images, music, and other elements, positioning them as the most important medium for sports events (Zhao and Li, 2023).

Similarly, social networks have become an ideal tool to connect audiences, fans, clubs and events (Küster *et al.*, 2024), and thanks to the evolution of communication platforms, interpersonal communication has become more accessible, contributing to the emergence of numerous international sports programs in China (Shang and Zhang, 2023). The interplay between sport

and communication extends beyond the extremely important role media has traditionally played in sports financing (Sotelo González, 2012). Given the escalating intricacies of the social media era, sports communication in China has inevitably entered a new phase (Xie and Xue, 2022). A notable example of this evolution is the emergence of “short video + sports”, a new form of broadcasting that combines new media and sports. This innovative blend combines the competitive and entertaining features of sports and the fragmented nature of short videos, adeptly catering to the audience’s preferences in the era of social media (Zheng, 2022).

FOOTBALL AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHINA

Because social networks strengthen the relationship between communication and football (Li, 2020) and social media management is increasingly crucial to the success of sports organizations, the communication departments of football clubs prioritize actions directed at their external audiences, particularly the media, recognized as the most important audience for professional football clubs (Cano Tenorio, 2017). “Social media plays a key role in today’s sports management, especially in football clubs, due to its global reach and ability to interact and connect with fans in an industry of great popularity, emotional burden, and economic, political and social impact” (Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2023, p.10).

For this reason, in the current century, one of the most important objectives for these clubs is cultivating loyalty among followers, fans, and other audiences capable of decisively influencing their marketing strategies, and in this sense, social networks play an essential role in achieving this objective (Cano Tenorio, 2017). Likewise, football clubs use social networks to reach different audiences, including the media and the government (Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024).

Regarding the convenience of social networks as corporative communication tools for professional football clubs, it is important to highlight that sports organizations routinely employ these networks for immediate and effective interaction with the public (Lobillo and Muñoz, 2016). In particular, the two-way interactivity of social media provides a space for fans to communicate freely with each other no matter the time and place. For example, after the match, fans can express their opinions in the digital space through graphics, moving images, short videos, and other diverse forms (Feng and Yu, 2022). It should also be noted that the inherent political, social, economic, and cultural implications of football communication are a permanent focus for the media on football organizations and their actors (Castillo-Esparcia *et al.*, 2016). And, in the case of the clubs in the Spanish First Division Football League, for example, they use social networks not only to share news stories but also to recall historical moments that contribute to building their own identity (Ballesteros-Herencia and Herrero-Izquierdo, 2023).

Football clubs, especially renowned ones, recognize the positive prospects of social media, viewing its development as an avenue to expand the football landscape, while the media, in turn, offer a more convenient way for clubs to interact with their fans (Li, 2020). On the other hand, “the particularity of football as a modern spectacle attracts millions of followers worldwide” (Castillo-Esparcia

et al., 2016, p. 251). For example, during the World Cup in Russia, short videos related to the World Cup on the Weibo platform reached a staggering 17.76 billion views, with over 630 million views on the day of the final, demonstrating the immense potential and value of this video format (Liu and Li, 2021).

The popular perception of Bilibili is often associated with niche subcultures, however, starting in 2021, Bilibili shifted its approach, by separating sports videos from the “life” section and creating a separate sports section, leading to over 110 million users watching sports and fitness videos, accumulating broadcast exceeding 30,000 million views. Notably, basketball content emerged as the most popular, followed by aerobics, soccer, wrestling, fishing, and billiards (Qiao, 2023). TikTok, for its part, purchased the World Cup broadcast rights and strategically embedded event-related content on its platform, maximizing interactivity, entertainment, and sociability, successfully transforming itself into a new mode of communication different from traditional media such as CCTV, Tencent Sports, and Migu Video. TikTok transformed the event’s communication from a single channel to a combination of “mass communication + user communication”, bringing a more focused and participatory carnival experience for the entire nation (Lv and Wangsun, 2023).

OBJECTIVES

Studying the use of social media by La Liga clubs is important due to the growing influence of these platforms on sports communication worldwide. The overall objective is to investigate the current presence of Spanish First Division clubs on the three social networks in China.

The specific objectives are as follows:

1. Identify the use of these social networks by clubs in the Spanish First Division.
2. Confirm whether all clubs incorporate Sina Weibo in their social media strategy.
3. Verify the official status of the clubs’ accounts across each social network.
4. To rank the clubs based on their degree of engagement in the selected social networks.

HYPOTHESES

Given that China is already an important market for international football clubs, La Liga clubs need to use China’s social media to expand their influence. In this regard, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1. All clubs in the Spanish First Division use at least one social network in China.
2. All clubs in the Spanish First Division use at least Sina Weibo.

- 3. All the social media accounts of clubs in the Spanish First Division are official.
- 4. Real Madrid and FC Barcelona have the highest follower counts across all social networks.

METHODS

The quantitative method adopts an external perspective toward the object of study, aiming to achieve maximum objectivity. Aligned with a positivist viewpoint, this approach seeks to uncover general laws about the targeted group (Abalde Paz and Muñoz-Cantero, 1992). More specifically, the objective is to discern the distribution of specific variables of interest within a given population (Hueso González and Cascant i Sempere, 2012).

Conversely, social network analysis functions as a methodological framework, employing a suite of tools to interconnect individuals, organizations, etc., and elucidate the emergent social structures arising from the relationships established by actors (Sanz Menéndez, 2003). In the context of social network analysis, the observed attributes of social actors are understood through the discernment of patterns or structures within the links between units (Wasserman and Faust, 2013). Social media analysis allows us to compare the volume and activity of followers across La Liga clubs, and to identify more effective strategies to optimize participation on the most important social platforms.

Therefore, this study uses a manual method to collect quantitative data on the presence of Spanish First Division football clubs on Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and Chinese TikTok during the 2022-2023 season, with a focus on verifying the official status of the accounts. Additionally, the study aims to rank the clubs based on their follower count in the aforementioned social networks.

Examples of the examined items are presented in the following table 1:

Table 1. Initial items

Club	City						
		Social media presence	Sina Weibo	Yes	No		
			Bilibili	Yes	No		
			Chinese TikTok	Yes	No		
		Number of social networks		3	0		

Source: Authors' creation.

SAMPLE

The sample is composed of the 20 clubs in the 2022-2023 season of the Spanish First Division will be selected. The presence of these Spanish clubs will be analyzed on the main social networks in China, which are Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and TikTok (Chinese version). Data collection took place between March 24 and 31, 2023.

RESULTS

Quantitative data collected in this study provide a clear view of the presence of La Liga clubs on Chinese social networks. The analysis of the clubs’ official social media accounts and their number of followers allow us to compare their digital performance and explore possible correlations between their choice of platforms and their ability to attract fans. The results offer practical guidance for clubs to gain more attention in the Chinese market.

Table 2 presents the results on the social media presence of the 20 clubs in the 2022-2023 season of the Spanish First Division.

Table 2. Clubs’ social media presence in China

Team	City	Sina Weibo	Bilibili	TikTok	Total
Almería	Almería	Yes	No	No	1
Athletic Club de Bilbao	Bilbao	Yes	No	No	1
Atlético de Madrid	Madrid	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
FC Barcelona	Barcelona	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Real Betis	Sevilla	Yes	No	No	1
Cádiz	Cádiz	Yes	No	Yes	2
Celta de Vigo	Vigo	Yes	No	No	1
Elche	Elche	Yes	No	No	1
RCD Espanyol	Barcelona	Yes	No	Yes	2
Getafe	Getafe	Yes	No	No	1
Girona	Girona	Yes	No	No	1
Mallorca	Mallorca	Yes	No	No	1
Osasuna	Pamplona	Yes	No	No	1
Real Sociedad	San Sebastián	Yes	No	Yes	2
Rayo Vallecano	Madrid	Yes	No	No	1
Real Madrid	Madrid	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Real Valladolid	Valladolid	Yes	No	No	1
Sevilla	Sevilla	Yes	No	Yes	2
Valencia	Valencia	Yes	No	Yes	2
Villarreal	Villarreal	Yes	No	No	1
Total		20	3	8	

Source: Authors’ creation. Data collection: March 24-31, 2023.

As we can see, all the clubs analysed possess an account on Sina Weibo, while only a limited subset, comprising Atlético de Madrid, FC Barcelona, and Real Madrid, have a presence on Bilibili. Conversely, TikTok China garners participation from merely 8 clubs. Notably, Atlético Madrid, FC Barcelona, and Real Madrid emerge as the exclusive entities maintaining a presence across all three social networks in China. This stands in contrast to most clubs, which exhibit a presence on just one platform. Consequently, Sina Weibo has emerged as the predominant social network for Spanish football clubs.

The following table (table 3) presents the results regarding the official status of the clubs’ accounts on each social network.

Table 3. Official status of clubs’ accounts on Chinese social media

Team	City	Sina Weibo	Bilibili	TikTok	Total
Almería	Almería	No	No	No	0
Athletic Club de Bilbao	Bilbao	Yes	No	No	1
Atlético de Madrid	Madrid	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
FC Barcelona	Barcelona	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Real Betis	Sevilla	Yes	No	No	1
Cádiz	Cádiz	Yes	No	Yes	2
Celta de Vigo	Vigo	Yes	No	No	1
Elche	Elche	Yes	No	No	1
RCD Espanyol	Barcelona	Yes	No	Yes	2
Getafe	Getafe	No	No	No	0
Girona	Girona	Yes	No	No	1
Mallorca	Mallorca	Yes	No	No	1
Osasuna	Pamplona	Yes	No	No	1
Real Sociedad	San Sebastián	Yes	No	Yes	2
Rayo Vallecano	Madrid	No	No	No	0
Real Madrid	Madrid	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Real Valladolid	Valladolid	No	No	No	0
Sevilla	Sevilla	Yes	No	Yes	2
Valencia	Valencia	Yes	No	Yes	2
Villarreal	Villarreal	Yes	No	No	1
Total		16	3	8	

Source: Authors’ creation. Data collection: March 24-31, 2023.

The analysis of these platforms’ features revealed that they all offer an “official verification” function to authenticate the identity of the accounts, which allows clubs to be identified by their fans as reliable sources of audiovisual content.

As we can see, not all the clubs that have an account on Sina Weibo are official; 4 clubs are not identified. In contrast, although fewer clubs are present in Bilibili and TikTok, those that have an account are all identified as official.

Regarding the number of followers, Table 4 shows the follower counts on the 3 social networks.

Table 4. Clubs’ followers on Chinese social media

Club	Sina Weibo	Bilibili	TikTok
Almería	161,000	-	-
Athletic Club de Bilbao	333,000	-	-
Atlético de Madrid	1,410,000	71,000	535,000
FC Barcelona	10,985,000	122,000	3,382,000
Real Betis	353,000	-	-
Cádiz	182,000	-	50,000
Celta de Vigo	288,000	-	-
Elche	56	-	-
RCD Espanyol	334,000	-	745,000
Getafe	32,000	-	-
Girona	2,718	-	-
Mallorca	151,000	-	-
Osasuna	236,000	-	-
Real Sociedad	1,028,000	-	37,000
Rayo Vallecano	3120	-	-
Real Madrid	4,631,000	162,000	3,867,000
Real Valladolid	51	-	-
Sevilla	918,000	-	94,000
Valencia	1,076,000	-	64,000
Villarreal	1,125,000	-	-

Source: Authors’ creation. Data collection: March 24-31, 2023.

Overall, clubs have a higher number of followers on Sina Weibo than on the two other social networks. Notably, FC Barcelona has the highest number of followers on Weibo, more than double that of Real Madrid, the second highest. In addition, the follower counts of FC Barcelona and Real Madrid in the three social

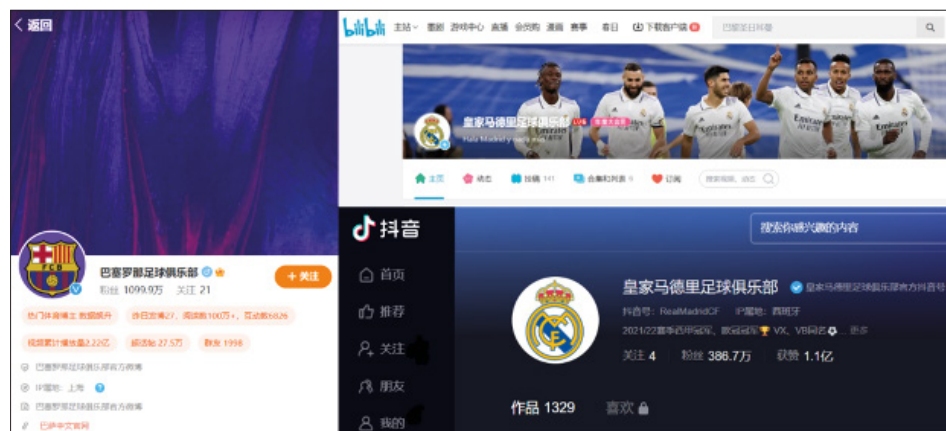
networks are well above those of the other clubs. More specifically, the following table ranks the clubs according to their follower count in each platform, from highest to lowest.

Table 5. Clubs’ ranking according to social media followers (highest to lowest)

Sina Weibo	Bilibili	Chinese TikTok
FC Barcelona	Real Madrid	Real Madrid
Real Madrid	FC Barcelona	FC Barcelona
Atlético de Madrid	Atlético de Madrid	RCD Espanyol
Villarreal	-	Atlético de Madrid
Valencia	-	Sevilla
Real Sociedad	-	Valencia
Sevilla	-	Cádiz
Real Betis	-	Real Sociedad
RCD Espanyol	-	-
Athletic Club de Bilbao	-	-
Celta de Vigo	-	-
Osasuna	-	-
Cádiz	-	-
Almería	-	-
Mallorca	-	-
Getafe	-	-
Rayo Vallecano	-	-
Girona	-	-
Elche	-	-
Real Valladolid	-	-

Source: Authors’ creation. Data collection: March 24-31, 2023.

Figure 1. Screenshot of clubs with the most followers on each platform (taken on November 2023)



Source: Authors' creation.

FC Barcelona has more followers on Sina Weibo, but Real Madrid is the leader on Bilibili and TikTok. Meanwhile, Atlético Madrid is the third most followed club on Sina Weibo and Bilibili; and RCD Espanyol is the third most followed on TikTok. In short, the clubs analysed do not have the same level of presence on the three Chinese social networks.

As for the use of these two social networks, verification on Weibo helps fans quickly identify official accounts, while verified accounts on TikTok help strengthen the audiovisual connection between clubs and their followers.

CONCLUSIONS

Upon completing the analysis, it is evident that every Spanish First Division club is present on at least one social network in China, thus confirming the validity of the first hypothesis. This suggests a collective interest from the Spanish Football League in the Chinese market. Nevertheless, while all clubs manage an account on Sina Weibo, which corroborates the second hypothesis, there is a relatively modest presence on the other two social platforms. Additionally, not all accounts on these three social networks are marked as official, which rejects the third hypothesis. This implies that the analysed clubs currently exhibit a limited and possibly under-prioritized presence on Bilibili and TikTok.

The fourth hypothesis is substantiated by the finding that Real Madrid and FC Barcelona boast the highest number of followers across all social networks. However, a nuanced examination reveals that Barcelona surpasses Real Madrid by more than double the number of followers on Sina Weibo. Conversely, on the remaining two platforms, Real Madrid holds a higher follower count than Barcelona. It is crucial to note that Bilibili and TikTok are more recent than Sina

Weibo but exhibit positive trends. Consequently, these platforms represent novel undertakings for the clubs, signifying that while Barcelona has accumulated a fan base on Sina Weibo over time, Real Madrid has strategically prioritized and succeeded in cultivating a substantial presence on other social networks.

In summary, the social media management of Spanish First Division clubs in the 2022-2023 season is still limited in China. Although major clubs like Real Madrid, Atlético Madrid, and Barcelona have put more importance on the management of Chinese social platforms, the broader landscape indicates a collective deficiency in effective management by Spanish clubs in the Chinese digital sphere. These facts highlight the need for Spanish clubs to pay more attention to the specific demands of the Chinese market, and to optimize their strategies to more effectively attract and retain Chinese fans. For example, based on the results of Barcelona and Real Madrid, it can be projected that other clubs, such as Atlético de Madrid and Sevilla, could follow a series of recommendations to attract Chinese “superfans”, strengthen their presence on platforms such as Weibo and TikTok, create locally relevant content and organize interactive events that encourage fan engagement.

This work does not only identify existing problems but also offers practical recommendations for future improvements.

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Comparative Analysis of COVID-19 Discourses by Conservative and Liberal Leaders: The Cases of Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain

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In March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis prompted the worldwide implementation of extraordinary measures to contain the disease. This situation forced political actors to use both digital channels and traditional media to communicate preventive measures and the impact of the crisis to the public. This research uses content analysis to examine the communication and discursive strategies of leaders from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Spain during their announcements of the state of alarm in each country. The results reveal distinct narrative styles in the interventions of these politicians, which can be clearly identified along the left-right political spectrum. In addition, the study identifies the use of common resources aimed at fostering cohesion and citizen awareness at a time of great difficulty for the countries they represent.

En marzo de 2020, la crisis de la COVID-19 impulsó la implementación mundial de medidas extraordinarias para contener la enfermedad. Esta situación obligó a los actores políticos a utilizar tanto canales digitales como medios tradicionales para comunicar al público las medidas preventivas y el impacto de la crisis. Esta investigación utiliza el análisis de contenido para examinar las estrategias comunicativas y discursivas de los líderes de Canadá, Estados Unidos, Reino Unido, Francia, Alemania y España durante sus anuncios del estado de alarma en cada país. Los resultados revelan estilos narrativos distintos en las intervenciones de estos políticos, los cuales pueden identificarse claramente a lo largo del espectro político izquierda-derecha. Además, el estudio identifica el uso de recursos comunes orientados a fomentar la cohesión y la concienciación ciudadana en un momento de gran dificultad para los países que representan.

Keywords: *political communication, crisis communication, discourse analysis, COVID-19.*

Palabras clave: *comunicación política, comunicación de crisis, análisis del discurso, COVID-19.*

The global pandemic caused by the coronavirus broke out abruptly on December 31st, 2019, in China, following several cases of severe pneumonia of unknown origin. The rapid spread of the disease from the Asian country to Europe and the rest of the world led the World Health Organization (WHO) to define the situation at the end of January 2020 as a public health emergency of international concern, declaring a pandemic situation on March 11th, 2020.

Crises can change the perception people have about governments and political leaders and be very transformative (Campbell, 2015). The impact of COVID-19 put both the communication abilities and leadership of political actors from different countries to the test, after restricting the freedom of movement of people and establishing a series of extraordinary measures on economic activity such as the closure of industries and commercial venues (Crespo and Garrido, 2020; Santamaría *et al.*, 2020; Hernández-Herrarte *et al.*, 2022). Emergency communication requires exhaustive preparation of the message and impeccable staging, to convey tranquillity and generate a climate of confidence among the audience, which may then favour collaboration and compliance with the recommendations adopted regarding coronavirus, since otherwise “leads to a loss of trust and reputation, economic impacts and, in the worst case, loss of lives” (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2020, p. 2).

The dissemination of institutional messages through television and the absence of clear and accurate answers about the disease have spectacularized the information and conditioned the verbal discourse of international rulers to their image (Fernández-Hoya and Cáceres, 2022). However, an adequate thematic and terminological arrangement in the political discourses around COVID-19 also offers points of support that are key to achieving discursive effectiveness and eloquence, preserving leadership and avoiding the deterioration of the political image.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION DURING THE STATE OF ALARM

Pandemic crisis communication counts on its own characteristics that differ from any implementation in other conventional or unexpected crises. According to Crespo and Garrido (2020, p. 13), it is an autonomous communication, oriented towards the management of emergency situations, being of a global nature, and whose audience is the citizenry as a whole, hardly related to other types of political communication, such as those of a governmental or institutional sort.

On the other hand, the uncertain evolution of the disease in each country made the dissemination of political messages a challenge for governments (Paulik *et al.*, 2020; Ratcliff *et al.*, 2022). The traditional media, especially television, were configured as spokespeople of the crisis in the first place. However, the new forms of digital communication, and more specifically social networks, also emerged as an informative reference, thus inaugurating a new stage of mediatization of politics throughout the world that implies processes of hybridization, convergence, divergence, and digitalization (Ferrara *et al.*, 2020; Wajahat, 2020; Goel and Gupta, 2020).

There is no doubt that social networks are massive mechanisms, easily accessible to public opinion and therefore an ideal channel for the effective communication of the measures that are taken from all government levels to confront the pandemic. In fact, digital networks have become a very useful complementary element to traditional media in order to channel the day-to-day management and quickly spread short messages on the coronavirus crisis (Vela, 2021; Gluszek-Szafraniec and Norström, 2022; Marfil, 2022). These channels make it possible to measure the outreach of messages in real time, allowing content managers to access statistics and assess their reach and impact. However, the usual procedures and regular administrative pace and processes of the states in this exceptional situation strained their decision-making and operational capacities, due to the publication of alternative discourses on the disease, false information and fake news that denied the existence of a pandemic or the real danger of the virus (Vilas, 2020). A circumstance that is seen in any major crisis, as Crespo and Garrido (2020, p. 13) expose:

The surprise factor such as destabilization, stress and the reduction of time conditions the decision-making, as well as the emotion of the affected public, the media pressure, the challenge for the image of the authorities and the danger for the power position of the rulers.

Social networks show, within this emergency context, their function as a mechanism for reverberation, discussion and evaluation of government measures (Jing and Ahn, 2021). The audience use them as a channel to express agreement or disagreement; above all, as a result of the establishment of the state of alarm, when the right to free movement was suspended and, in some way, the right of assembly (Planchat, 2021).

Likewise, the traditional media were an important source of information for citizens during the state of alarm. These are considered essential in crisis communication to reach the population that does not use social networks (Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020) and become “refuge media” (Xifra, 2020, p. 13) where any individual would find out about the development of the disease and the actions of the governments. In the context of the state of alarm, television became, unlike the press and radio, the preferred mean of communication for audiences and governments for receiving and sending public health messages, due to its competence to set the agenda and still attract the attention of the public (European Broadcasting Union, 2020; Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Wong *et al.*, 2021).

In general, television political discourses adopted a combative, metaphorical and symbolic language in the management of the emergency (Pérez *et al.*, 2021; Solís, 2021; Jing and Ahn, 2021; Ng *et al.*, 2021) and they were characterized by appealing to unity to confront society against the enemy-virus (Alegre-Agís, 2020). In this regard, the left-right axis, or as it is known in Anglo-Saxon culture, that of liberal-conservative (Conover and Feldman, 1981), supposes a variation in how the perception works concerning the values and narrative elements that characterize the political proposals and actions of international leaders. Some investigations mark out the different ways of acting based on their ideology (Pratto *et al.*, 1994) or their mental frameworks and worldviews (Lakoff, 2004). Thus, it is suggested that ideology is closely linked to the perception of hierarchies and their importance in society (Piurko *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, it is considered that conservatives tend to give importance to certain values such as hierarchy, while liberals appreciate personal ties or social relationships more. In other words, for example, conservatives have a different approach to justice (Tetlock and Mitchell, 2008; Silver and Silver, 2017) and are more reluctant to apologize than liberals are (Hornsey *et al.*, 2017). Given that, this type of discourse involves a disruption between the established relational patterns.

The exceptional political situation, the international impact of this disease, as well as the weight that this phenomenon has taken on digital channels and traditional media (Cristea *et al.*, 2022), leads us to examine the official speeches formulated in the context of the announcement of the state of alarm caused by the COVID-19, to identify the discursive strategies of international leaders.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, the quantitative method (content analysis) has been combined with the qualitative one (discourse analysis —hereinafter DA—). The first is relevant because it is a recurring technique in the dissection of verbal messages in the audio-visual medium. In fact, this methodology makes it possible to accept structured or unstructured symbolic communications as data, in addition to allowing the analysis of unobserved phenomena directly through those data related to them (Berelson, 1952; Riffe *et al.*, 1998; Krippendorff, 1997; Wimmer and Dominick, 2013). This way, it becomes an ideal tool for the analysis of televised messages intended for large audiences, which is why it can be considered the quintessential method of communication research (Igartua and Humanes, 2004). Meanwhile, the second one has been considered adequate since it allows isolating and classifying the notions and words that structure the messages within the studied discourse. That is, the DA makes it possible to know the socioeconomic, cultural, ideological characteristics, as well as the beliefs and attitudes of those who inform, from the extraction of the sense, of the significance, of what is expressed, based on the discursive form and the vocabulary used (Dijk, 2003; Cruz and Brito, 2003; Zaldua, 2006). This conjunction of methods, quantitative and qualitative, truly helps reinforce the findings, refine them and add new ones. In fact, the qualitative one, a more humanistic perspective, places emphasis on

language, on the interpretation of human events and on taking the actor's point of view, while the scientific and quantitative approach favours the objective measurement.

While they may be relevant, this research does not seek to delve into the socio-political contexts of each country or its healthcare system. Instead, it focuses on examining the characteristics of the speeches given by their leaders during the initial phase of the COVID-19 health crisis. Thus, this study aims to identify the communication and discursive strategies of conservative and liberal leaders from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain in the messages announcing the state of alarm for COVID-19, this is the main reason why it is limited to their first interventions on this matter and not to the following speeches. This general objective is specified in four specific objectives (SO):

- SO1. Examine what are the most recurring themes in the speeches of the leaders.
- SO2. To establish if the ideology determines some particular type of use of the language.
- SO3. Analyse the terms used by leaders when referring to COVID-19.
- SO4. Detail the degree of optimism or pessimism that political leaders convey in their public interventions to preserve the health of their fellow citizens.
- Under these premises, the research focuses on the following hypotheses:
- H1. The topics most used in the speeches of the analysed leaders allude to the speed of transmission of the virus and the restrictions to preserve public health.
- H2. The conservative leaders present in their television speeches a line of argument oriented onwards paternalism and a protective State, while the liberals allude to restrictions as a measure to protect the economy.
- H3. The leaders associated with the conservative axis use warlike language to refer to the virus while the liberals use other narrative frameworks.
- H4. Ideology is not a determining factor in the degree of optimism or pessimism in the face of a health, social and economic crisis having the dimensions of COVID-19.

To address the objectives and respond to the research hypotheses, the study has been planned in two phases. In the first stage, the political actors to be analysed have been delimited and the televised interventions under study where the measures adopted by each country are announced have been identified. In this sense, the leaders of six democratic countries with great weight in the international arena have been selected: the conservatives Angela Merkel (Germany), Donald Trump (United States), Boris Johnson (United Kingdom); and the liberals Emmanuel Macron (France), Pedro Sánchez (Spain) and Justin Trudeau (Canada). These leaders were selected for the international influence of their countries, and their democratic characteristics. Although it is true that there are other countries with greater international prominence such as Russia or China, these are far from being full liberal democracies (The Economist, 2021).

The leaders have been considered conservative or liberal taking into account the Anglo-Saxon definition of these concepts (Choma *et al.*, 2009) and depending on different aspects such as the political culture of their country, their careers or the ideology of the parties to which they belong.

The duration of most of the speeches examined does not exceed eight minutes. The longest is that of Emmanuel Macron (26 minutes), followed by Angela Merkel (12 minutes) and Donald Trump (9 minutes). The interventions counting on the shortest time are those of Pedro Sánchez (6 minutes) and Boris Johnson (6 minutes), followed by Justin Trudeau (7 minutes). In total, 68 minutes of recording and 9,521 words distributed heterogeneously among the speeches of the different leaders were analysed.

Table 1. Information on the political leaders and the speeches analysed

Country	Leader	Political party	Ideology	Total words	Time
Germany	Angela Merkel	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	Conservative	1,762	12'43"
Canada	Justin Trudeau	Liberal	Liberal	1,034	7'16"
U.S.A.	Donald Trump	Republican	Conservative	1,281	9'28"
Spain	Pedro Sánchez	Socialist	Liberal	923	6'11"
France	Emmanuel Macron	En Marche	Liberal	3,630	25'59"
U.K.	Boris Johnson	Conservatives	Conservative	891	6'16"

Source: Own elaboration.

In the second phase, typical of the quantitative analysis, the transcriptions of the different political speeches in their original language and in English were obtained using the tools available on the YouTube platform, with the aim of verifying that the transcripts and translations were real. Subsequently, the texts have been transferred into the word count and frequency calculation program called Key Content. This platform eases the obtaining of the frequency of every word in a text, just as it helps to know the density of keywords or the rate of repetition of words in a document. The procedure for emptying the speeches in the aforementioned application has been carried out one by one in English thanks to the possibility of accessing their translations through the official profiles of the foreign ministries studied on the YouTube platform. In the next phase, the tables with the designated concepts were filtered; omitting connectors, articles and prepositions, whose semantic contribution is secondary, and the analysis was focused on nouns and verbs in order to undertake the corresponding thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At this point in the investigation, we proceeded to group the terms according to the semantic fields to which they could belong, to define each of them, and to define the analysis sheet.

Next, the descriptors used to analyse the political speeches of the international leaders under study are here presented, where the categories or semantic field are listed, as well as several examples of each case for a better understanding.

- Covid: Terms that refer to the coronavirus in any of its variants. Examples: covid, pandemic, virus, coronavirus, etc.
- Emotions: Concepts that allude to the feelings of the audience. Examples: love, gratitude, worry, sadness, joy, desolation, etc.
- Economy: Mentions to the economic impact and the context in which the governments take measures. Examples: losses, economy, companies or deficit, etc.
- Crisis: Expressions referring to the negative environment in which the intervention of leaders occurs. Examples: urgency, emergency, alarm, risk, etc.
- Fight: Terms that allude to the context of struggle, conflict or war. Examples: enemy, fight, combat, war, challenge, etc.
- Protection: Words that appeal to care and assistance, whether in the private or public sphere. Examples: help, save, caretaking, etc.
- Politics: Concepts intended to show the tangible, the call to action or what the governments are doing or are being asked to do. Examples: mobilize, maintain, request, continue measures, law, test, etc.
- Science: Terms alluding to predictions, scenarios and forecasts made by scientists or doctors. Examples: vaccine, antibodies, treatments, experts, etc.
- Time: Expressions that mention time-based units or references. Examples: weeks, days, decades, years, centuries, etc.
- Union: Words that evoke social cohesion, appeal to unity and to the responsibility and response as a group. Examples: society, together, solidarity, compatriots, friends, families, etc.
- Emphasizer: Concepts that seek to improve or arouse perception, as well as words that appeal or refer to the emotions of the audience. Examples: a lot, big, massive, enormous, devastating, etc.

The selection of the sample is therefore intentional, since it delves into aspects of social reality, interpreting and analysing the speeches of the politicians studied, and it concerns few individuals. The selection criterion is based on convenience, that is, on the relevance of the information that can be provided by those who constitute the sample. Within this intention, it would be included as a type of homogeneous sample, since its interest is on the same profile or characteristics and it focuses on the topic to be investigated, highlighting situations or episodes, in this case, the announcement of the State of Alarm caused by COVID-19 by selected political leaders (Hernández *et al.*, 2006).

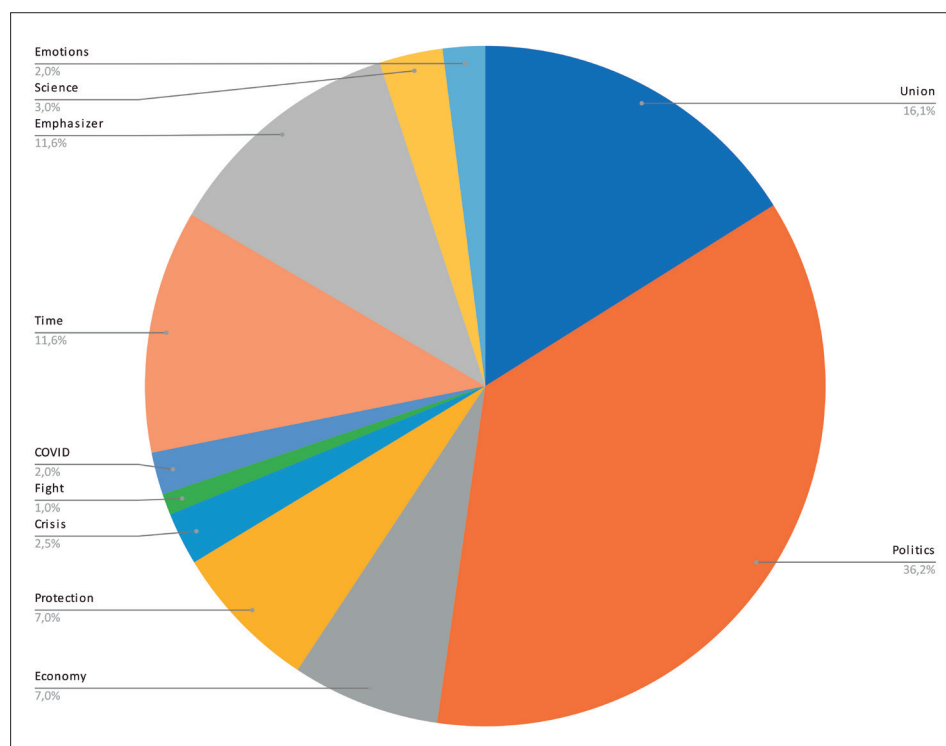
On the other hand, the data collection and coding were carried out by three researchers, after carrying out a pilot test in which they achieved a coincidence percentage of 89 %, in order to observe concordances and discrepancies and increase the internal validity of the study. Likewise, the graphical representation tool offered by Microsoft Excel program has been used for the exploitation of the data.

RESULTS

ANALYSIS OF LIBERAL LEADERS

The first part of the analysis, dedicated to the study of the interventions of rulers with liberal ideologies, Emmanuel Macron (France), Pedro Sánchez (Spain) and Justin Trudeau (Canada), reveals that the speeches delivered by these leaders have a fundamentally institutional dimension. They refer to the approval of measures, their legislation and the necessary regulations to deal with the emergency. In particular, the three leaders allude, as a priority, to the political action of citizens and the communication of the government decisions regarding management, through terms related to the semantic field 'Politics' (36.2 %). Likewise, they largely resort to words with meanings that evoke union and feeling (16.1 %); terms classified as emphazier (11.6 %), with which they seek to raise the emotions and perception of the audience concerning the problem of public health, and the lexicon around temporal references (11.6 %).

Graph 1. Semantic fields used by liberal leaders

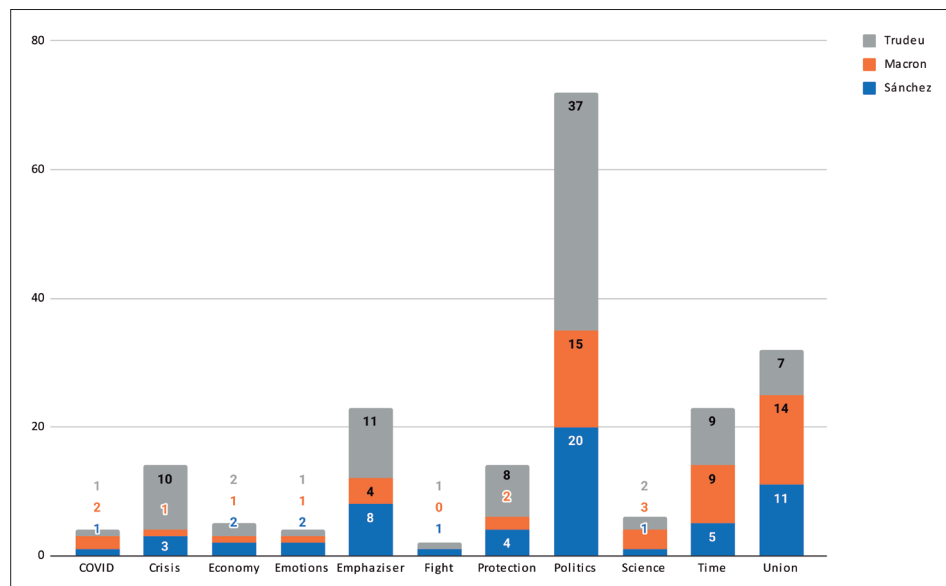


Source: Own elaboration.

If we go deeper into the interventions individually (graph 2), we can see that Justin Trudeau is the leader who most often appeals to management through measures already taken or to be taken (37 occasions). He is also the one who most frequently resorts to words classified as 'emphasizer' since they are intended to provide his speech with greatness (11 times). In the same way, Trudeau continually alludes to terms referring to the concept "crisis", which he specifically does on ten occasions. Likewise, the Canadian politician also evokes in his speech terminology related to time references on nine occasions and to feelings of belonging to the group to promote social cohesion in the context of a health crisis (6 repetitions). This allows us to affirm that the Canadian prioritizes the protection of health and compliance with government measures, above the economic situation, as well as the role of science in the public health crisis. Finally, the Prime Minister does not promote warmongering metaphors ('Fight') in his speech, thus resulting in a speech focused on people and on the measures that he considers most effective to avoid the spread of the virus.

The politician Emmanuel Macron stands out, like his Canadian counterpart, for favouring in his speech a language that largely alludes to the political measures and actions of his government (15 times). The French leader combines it with constant appeals to the feeling of union among citizens ('Union' 14), in communion with the official motto of the Republic: freedom, equality, fraternity, and time references (5). It is striking the fact that there are few occasions that the Prime Minister mentions concepts related to the semantic field 'Crisis' (1) and the 'Economy' (1), as well as the total absence of the warlike language ('Fight').

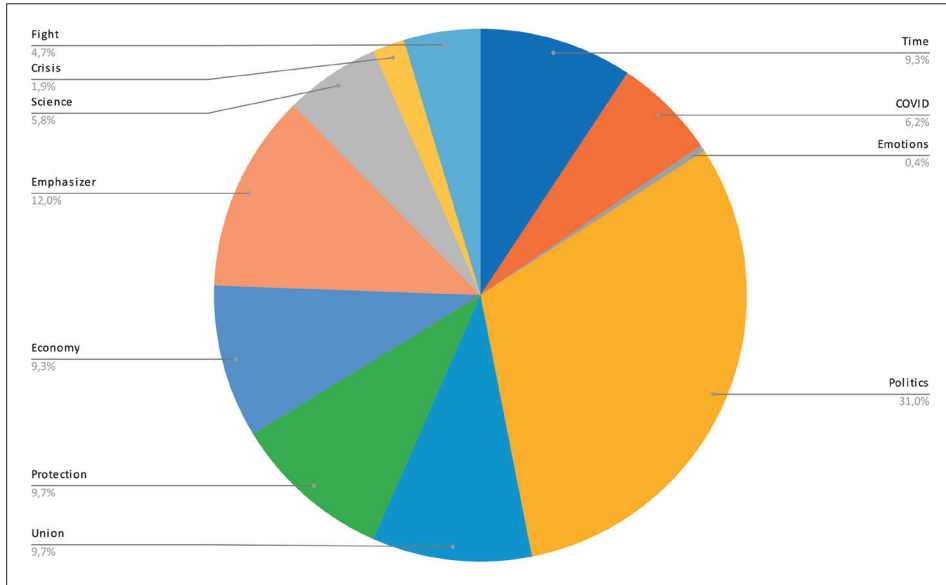
For his part, the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez emphasizes in his speech especially a vocabulary oriented to obey the measures imposed by his government ('Politics' 20 times) and helps himself, like Macron, through terms that imply the union of the audience (11). The terminology that involves the semantic fields 'Emphasizer', 'Time' and 'Protection' and that one to be grouped around the so-called 'Science', 'Covid', 'Economy', 'Emotions' and 'Fight' (Graph 2), have little prominence in the speech of the Spanish Prime Minister. Thus, these findings reveal that Sánchez is the protagonist of a message focused on health protection, almost bureaucratic and certainly cold from an emotional point of view.

Graph 2. Semantic fields used by liberal leaders

Source: Own elaboration.

ANALYSIS OF CONSERVATIVE LEADERS

The second part of this study shows that the interventions of politicians identified with the conservative axis, Angela Merkel (Germany), Boris Johnson (United Kingdom) and Donald Trump (United States), address the situation giving importance to the most tangible measures taken by their respective governments to contain the pandemic. In this sense, they talk about government management, as was already the case with the liberals. In this sense, the speeches offer lexicon that share common semantic features or are related to the field 'Politics' (31 %). In the same way, they introduce words classified as emphasizers (12 %) of the message, to arouse the emotionality of public opinion and their call for awareness concerning the seriousness of the situation. Finally, as can be seen in graph 3, these leaders give space, in their interventions, to certain terminology linked to the union ('Union' 9.7 %), with the more economic aspect of the pandemic ('Economy' 9.3 %), the protection against it ('Protection' 9.7 %) and its evolution over time ('Time' 9.3 %).

Graph 3. Semantic fields used by conservative leaders

Source: Own elaboration.

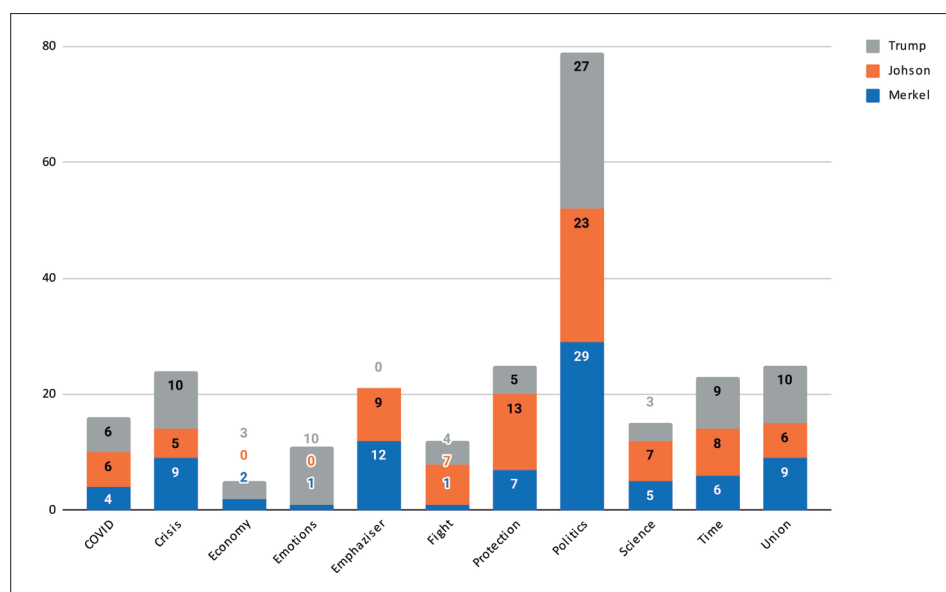
Specifically, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Graph 4), like the rest of her counterparts, used terms related to decision-making during a large part of her speech (29 times), being these terms essentially grouped around to the so-called 'Politics' field. In addition, the German leader also prioritizes in her speech the emphasizing vocabulary with which she seeks to raise awareness of the magnitude of the situation (12 times) and the terminology directly related to the crisis framework (9 times), something that did not occur in her liberal counterparts. However, the allusions in the discourse of the German ruler to concepts that appeal to care and assistance ('Protection' 7 times) and those that promote social cohesion ('Union' 9 times), mean that the message is perceived as truly close and balanced. The fighting terms and those that project emotions are not relevant in this case.

The President of the United States, Donald Trump, gives priority in his dissertation to the political action of his government ('Politics' 27 times) and combines it with terms related to the concept 'Crisis' (10 times) and 'Union' (10 times). To the same extent, he uses lexical resources that appeal to the unity of the audience and their response as a group and uses terms related to the temporal evolution of the pandemic on nine occasions. The American tycoon gives special importance to concepts that allude to the feelings of the audience, also applying them ten times. This connects him with the most sensationalist or gimmicky sphere of discourse, which could be understood as populist, identifying the idea of building a political border that divides society into two blocs (Mouffe, 2018). On the other hand, in his discourse there are few mentions of warlike concepts and terms encompassed in the semantic fields of economy, science or protection

(Graph 4). No emphaziser has been found within his speech. Donald Trump is the only leader who mentions the origin of the pandemic, putting China under the culpability of the situation and responsibility for it.

The British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, like the rest of his counterparts, prioritizes the political management of the pandemic with 23 references throughout his discourse. He also uses a vocabulary linked to the protection framework with thirteen mentions to refer to issues that call for care and assistance, in private or public sphere, or the use of emphazisers to contribute to this objective with nine mentions. From his intervention, it can also be extracted that he is the Prime Minister who most uses concepts from the semantic field related to science (7 times) and uses metaphors related to struggle and war (7 times). The British prime minister uses time frames eight times to refer to the evolution of the pandemic to which he refers up to six times. However, Johnson only mentions elements that appeal to unity on six occasions. In the other hand, he never talks about the economic consequences or concepts that might arouse feelings in the audience.

Graph 4. Semantic fields used by conservative leaders



Source: Own elaboration.

COMPARISON BETWEEN CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL

The joint analysis carried out on liberals and conservatives shows coincidences between the conceptual frameworks used by the liberal and conservative axis in the televised interventions of the announcement of the State of Alarm, but also discrepancies in terms of usage within some of the semantic fields examined.

The results reveal that both liberals and conservatives generally employ concepts related to the management of the situation in their speeches in which they highlight measures that have been put in practice or still to be implemented (liberals do so for 36.2 % of the total, while conservatives 31 %). It is understood that the objective pursued with its use in both cases consists in provoking public opinion to mobilize through the measures planned by governments to contain the virus. Thus, in this field we can find the main terms as *mobilize, maintain, request, continue, measures, law, test*, etc., words intended to show the tangible, to call for action and to put into practice protection measures against the pandemic. In addition, among the interventions of the international leaders examined, there are, to a large extent, words that belong to the so-called emphasize. Terms like *much, big, enormous, devastating*, etc. seek to improve or arouse the perception and awaken the emotionality of the audience. In this sense, it is inferred that these are argumentative strategies aimed at achieving the previous section, where the leaders, based on the call to action, intend to achieve the desired attitudes in the population.

On the other hand, the semantic field linked to time-related concepts with which to refer to the evolution of the pandemic are more common in the speeches of liberals, who use them by 11.6 %; than in those of conservatives (9.3 %), although in this case with a percentage also of 9.3 the categories related to protection and the economy are detected. The former appeals to private or public caretaking and assistance through words such as *help, save, care*, etc. The latter refers to the economic impact and the context in which the measures are taken by governments with concepts such as *trade, losses, prices*, etc. These results lead us to affirm that, even though they both brought it up with equal frequency, the liberals have a more pragmatic vision, making greater use of temporal references that make it possible to locate the situation spatially, while the conservatives assume a more paternalistic and protective State position by also using lexical resources related to security and economy.

Liberals resort more frequently to terms such as *community, society, together, all, solidarity*, etc. to generate a feeling of community, union, responsibility and response as a group (16.1 %), while the conservatives do so on 9.7 % of occasions. Other references of both axes to issues such as 'Science' (*vaccines, antibodies, treatments, experts*, etc.) appear, in the case of the conservatives, in 5.8 % of the total semantic fields observed, while the Liberals do so in only 3 %. Possibly, the initial stage of the pandemic in which the examined interventions are emitted is the main factor explaining the low importance given to the role of science.

The nomenclature with which the virus was baptized ('covid') is hardly used in any of the political speeches (6.2 % used by conservatives and 2 % by liberals). However, it is striking that conservatives make the most usage of the concept and that it appears marginally in its ideological opponents. In addition, both sides avoid referring to the population with a terminology directly related to the 'Crisis' framework (*urgency, emergency, alarm, risk*, etc.), the liberals doing so in 2.5 % of the semantics fields analysed and the liberal axis in 1.2 %. It would perhaps be a common preference of the leaders in order to prevent society from holding them responsible for such a dramatic and worrying situation.

The category fight ('Fight'), alluding to the belligerent context of the health crisis addressed through terms such as *enemy*, *fight*, *combat*, *war*, etc., is more typical, in global terms, of conservative leaders (4,7 %) than in the liberals (1 %). In this sense, the warlike mental frameworks of the conservatives could, also affect the failure to stay at home in these moments of expansion of the virus. Finally, the semantic field of emotions does not stand out in any of the axes (it appears in 2 % of the liberals' and 0.4 % of the conservatives'), evidencing the preference of the leaders analysed for more practical frameworks that seek to provoke the acceptance of the protection measures imposed on the audience.

While concepts related to protection predominate among left-wing politicians, right-wing politicians make more reference to concepts related to the fight, with the exception of Angela Merkel. In fact, given the characteristics of the German chancellor's discourse, her patterns are more similar to those used by liberal leaders.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Within the field of Political Communication, this research presents novel results regarding the ways of acting and the worldviews that appear established by all those involved, based on ideology. Likewise, it serves as a basis for future studies in this line, since the described behaviour of the governments themselves can be contrasted with other non-verbal communication aspects. In this sense, logic would lead to point out that there is a congruence in those interventions, in the context of a health crisis, made by conservative and liberal leaders, between the verbal and non-verbal channel.

In general, we may affirm that the conservatives assume a more paternalistic position in their discourses, focusing more recurrently on issues that have to do with the economy and protection, when compared to the liberals, who adopt a more pragmatic approach, tending to provoke the acceptance and assumption by the audience of all the protection measures imposed. In specific cases, terms that allude to the feelings of the audience are also detected, which suggests the presence of a populist political discourse in both the right and the left. This is a phenomenon linked to crises, transitory and exceptional, whose objective is to "promote action" (Torre and Peruzzotii, 2008) and follows the line of other research that ensures that carefully posed arguments "are less useful than aesthetic effects, impressive images and emotional appeals" (Álvarez Junco, 1990, p. 234).

Moreover, the study reveals the widespread use of the institutional dimension, through concepts that appeal to the actions and political administration of the disease, in the speeches of the announcement of the State of Alarm by liberals and conservatives. They also rely on emphasizees when expressing ideas and concepts, in order to lead society into the assumption and acceptance of the political guidelines proposed to contain the virus. Instead, there is a refusal by leaders to refer to the pandemic as a 'Crisis'. Instead, they prioritize soft terms over harsh words, as well as euphemisms in their speeches to avoid being held accountable by society. That is, they prefer to present themselves as "saviours of

the situation". Their support for science is far from occupying a prominent role in these speeches.

The scarce use of warlike terms in both ideological spheres, result in moderate political discourses in this regard. On the contrary, at the beginning of this crisis a common spirit was promoted to talk about group unity, responsibility and cohesion in such a delicate context for public health (Alegre-Agís, 2020). This absence of belligerent mental frames could be due to a conscious act by the examined leaders to promote group response without causing anxiety. On the other hand, these findings disagree with what has been revealed in other studies carried out in the framework of COVID-19 (Jing and Ahn, 2021; Pérez *et al.*, 2021; Solís, 2021; Paredes and Sánchez-Prieto, 2021 Mintrom *et al.*, 2021), which point to the fact that the terminology used in political interventions is characterized by being fundamentally combative, metaphorical and symbolic. These are opposite results whose explanation could derive from the context of the speeches analysed, that is, it may be due to the initial moment of the pandemic on which the present investigation is focused. As these were the first interventions, a more moderate tone would be established in which a 'friend-enemy' dialectic was not sought, but rather the exposition of the measures to be applied and the awareness of their importance. This would explain the tone of some interventions and the recurring references to implemented measures and policies.

Regarding the hypotheses proposed: the first indicated that the topics most used in the speeches of the leaders analysed allude to the speed of transmission of the virus and the restrictions to preserve public health (H1). This statement is partially verified, since the leaders in their interventions do focus on the protection of citizens through a terminology similar to the 'Politics' framework, aimed at provoking the mobilization of public opinion through the measures projected by governments to contain the virus, but hardly make allusions to the spread of the pandemic, according to what has been detected.

The second hypothesis indicated that the conservative leaders present in their television speeches a line of argument oriented towards paternalism and a protective State, while the liberals refer to restrictions as a measure to protect the economy (H2), a proposition that is partially confirmed. The results show the use of a paternalistic vocabulary by the conservatives, but the use of an economic terminology in the case of the liberals has not been identified. In both cases, concepts related to the protection of society in the context of a health crisis predominate. The use of a paternalistic vocabulary in the conservative leaders is fulfilled, but not the affirmation on issues related to the economic impact and the context in which the measures are taken by the liberal governments.

The third hypothesis pointed out that the leaders associated with the conservative axis use warlike language to refer to the virus and the liberals express themselves using other narrative frameworks (H3), an assumption that is also partially validated. The study on this occasion reveals, at a general level, a greater use of terminology related to the framework of struggle in conservatives (4.7 %) except for Angela Merkel. This fact is not found in liberal leaders (1 %). However,

the second part of the premise is not validated, since liberal rulers move away from the expected pragmatic and impartial lexicon, favouring in their discourse a language that alludes to emotions and another one that evokes meanings of unity and group feeling.

The fourth hypothesis held that ideology is not a determining factor in the degree of optimism or pessimism in the face of a health, social and economic crisis of the dimensions of COVID-19 (H4), an assumption that is corroborated. In both ideologies, discourses of an eminently political nature are projected, although other features typical of a positive and negative vision are glimpsed. Thus, it is observed that the leaders with liberal ideology prefer to refer in their interventions to more positive issues associated with social issues and group unity. While the conservative leaders give priority to issues of an economic and security nature, associated with a colder, and therefore negative, attitude in the context of the health crisis.

As previously stated, this research does not intend to analyse the socio-political contexts of each country or its healthcare system, but rather to scrutinize the features of the speeches delivered by their leaders during the early stages of the COVID-19 health crisis. The methodology is appropriate as it collects the first speeches of the selected countries. It would be interesting to expand the sample to later interventions to compare messages and styles, however, this methodological modification would respond to other research objectives.

It would be interesting to complete this study with a comparison of nonverbal data such as the staging of speeches, gestures, or facial communication. Furthermore, the study compares the data in its entirety, dividing it into two groups: liberals and conservatives. This approach aims to identify differences in their narratives. However, a more granular analysis, examining each speech individually, could be informative. This approach has been employed in other studies (e.g., Hernández *et al.*, 2022) and will be taken into account in other phases of the work.

In summary, the contributions listed help to draw similar behaviour patterns between rulers of one ideology and another, although there are features found in each intervention that are assumed to be classifiable as typical of liberal ideologies in certain cases, while conservative in others. Likewise, it would be interesting if in future lines of research other international leaders were incorporated and the sample was expanded to include countries with different political cultures, but also with great international weight, such as Japan, Italy, Argentina, India or Australia.

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