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How Organizations Control Narratives in the Public Defamation Process in Cases of Human Rights Violations

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Abstract

Violations of human rights and labor analogous to slavery remain serious problems in the private sector. When these scandals become public, a narrative dispute emerges between corporate communication efforts aimed at mitigating reputational damage and initiatives of denunciation, defamation, and boycott against the organizations involved. However, the online environment enables segments of the public to articulate defenses of these companies, even in the face of severe accusations. This study examines the influence of online narrative disputes on the normalization of cases of human rights violations. The research draws on Critical Document Analysis, employing inductive coding of organizational statements, open letters, news articles, and tweets about the scandal of labor analogous to slavery involving an outsourced company and three major Brazilian wineries. The wineries relied on mechanisms widely discussed in the literature, such as denial of the facts, outsourcing of responsibility, and, subsequently, attempts at reparation. The study argues that online narrative disputes contribute to the normalization of human rights violations by illustrating how organizational strategies shape the creation of narratives that seek to anonymize, relativize, selectively compare, and construct counter-narratives in defense of the organizations. Such strategies constitute a discursive mechanism aimed at neutralizing initiatives of denunciation, defamation, and boycott, thereby exerting control over the debate in the digital space. However, the tools mobilized by the companies' defenders ultimately distort the public debate without

effectively addressing the persistent and serious problem of human rights violations in business activities.

Keywords: human rights violation; public defamation; crisis committees; slavery; wineries.

Introduction

The protection of human rights (HR) has gained prominence in international forums over the past 70 years. Among the issues addressed, modern slavery stands out, which, although formally abolished in all countries and considered eradicated, still persists in sectors such as agriculture (UOL, 2023a) and services. Recent cases in Brazil, such as those involving coffee producers in Minas Gerais (Estado de Minas, 2023) and wineries in Rio Grande do Sul (Folha de São Paulo, 2023a), highlight the ongoing violations of HR and labor in conditions analogous to slavery, perpetrated by companies integrated into global value chains.

Organizations involved in corporate scandals suffer reputational losses, and individuals and activists mobilize to initiate the process known as naming and shaming, aimed at provoking changes and/or punishments for those responsible (Friedland & Cole, 2019; Scherempff-Stirling & Palazzo, 2016). In contrast, corporate responses are generally formulated in crisis committees (war rooms), composed of public relations teams, lawyers, and consultants (MacManus, 2016; Maritan & Oliveira, 2022). These strategies help contain reputational damage but do not effectively address the harm caused by corporate irresponsibility.

The understanding of how production models involving labor in conditions analogous to slavery integrate into large global trade chains is still limited in the management literature (Crane et al., 2022). In this sense, investigating these chains and the narratives derived from violation cases offers not only a deeper understanding of the interactions between society and organizations but also of how these issues are publicly debated. The characteristics of these online confrontations reveal that internet users tend to react negatively to irresponsible corporate behavior (Soltani et al., 2024), which leads consumers to engage in boycotts as a form of commercial punishment toward organizations (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). However, there are also individuals who align themselves with the involved institutions, normalizing or downplaying the severity of the allegations of modern slavery. In this context, social media becomes a forum for debate among both supporters and critics of the companies involved (MacManus, 2016; Schrempff-Stirling et al., 2016).

Corporate communication strategies seek to create controversies about the facts in order to minimize reputational damage through the construction of narratives (Benoit, 1997), while civil society organizes around strategies of naming, shaming, and boycotting (Hadiprayitno, 2017; Schrempff-Stirling et al., 2016), promoting criticism and “virtual cancellations” (Soltani et al., 2024). The literature on corporate crime also shows that even when affected by harmful practices, communities often request the resumption of operations as a way to mitigate local economic impacts (Alves, 2023). Although the literature has already identified some of the corporate strategies used to neutralize denunciations (Maritan & Oliveira, 2022), gaps remain regarding how civil society mobilizes around discourses that defend organizations involved in HR violations and how these companies manage to shape public adherence to such narratives.

Given this context, the present article seeks to answer the following research question: How do online narrative disputes unfold in cases of human rights violations in which civil society defends

the organizations involved? The general objective of the study is to discuss the influence of the narrative dispute process on the normalization of cases of human rights violations.

To achieve this objective, the study analyzed the case of three wineries located in Bento Gonçalves, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where 207 people were rescued from conditions analogous to slavery in February 2023 (Folha de São Paulo, 2023a). The empirical data collected include media reports, clarification statements and open letters of retraction issued by the wineries and by representative entities of the sector. The research also gathered tweets related to the case, published in the month the scandal became public. Based on these data, Critical Document Analysis (Sankofa, 2022) was adopted, with inductive coding, to identify relevant themes and assess the impact of corporate communications on controlling the online narrative dispute.

The selection of this case is justified by its wide national repercussions, considering the social and cultural recognition of the wineries involved, as well as the significant number of workers rescued in degrading conditions. In addition, the naming and shaming process had strong reverberation on social media through comments and memes, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the discursive dispute in relation to the communication strategies adopted by the companies. Given this repercussion and the objective of the study, the case constitutes a theoretically relevant context for the research (Stake, 1998).

The research shows that companies seek to steer the digital debate in their favor through strategies well established in the literature, such as denial, outsourcing of responsibility, and retraction. It also shows that online communities draw on the companies' own arguments to respond to public accusations, actively contributing to the defense of organizations facing reputational crises. Two main theoretical contributions emerge from this study. The first is the identification of discursive mechanisms mobilized by internet users in the defense of organizations, including practices such as anonymizing those involved, relativizing the severity of the accusations, using selective comparisons, and constructing counter-narratives in response to initiatives of defamation and boycott. The second contribution consists of describing how online narrative disputes can lead to the normalization of HR violations, especially in contexts marked by political polarization. The article demonstrates that such defenses do not arise in isolation but are rooted in a specific historical and political context, in which corporate discourses and ideological positions contribute to attenuating perceptions of corporate responsibility and legitimizing ethically questionable practices.

The text is structured as follows: first, recent approaches to online narratives, corporate communication, and virtual defamation are presented. Next, the mechanisms of corporate responses to HR violations and the narrative disputes that occur after this process on social media are described. This is followed by the presentation of the case studied and the research methodology, along with the analysis of the results and the proposal of mechanisms for creating narratives favorable to companies. The article concludes with final considerations and suggestions for future research.

Narratives, discourses, and corporate communication

According to Hajer (1993, p. 45), a discourse is a set of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is assigned to social phenomena or problems. Discourses can create realities

and generate material effects, influencing both the public and organizations, as in the development of public policies (Purkarthofer, 2018). Narratives, in turn, combine a large amount of information with normative assumptions and value orientations, assigning meaning to the discourse (Fischer, 2003, p. 87). The narrative reinforces the arguments that sustain a discourse and, in the online environment, is constructed and shared by individuals with similar opinions. During crises, communities react both rationally—assigning blame to those involved—and emotionally—expressing distrust not only toward the organization but also toward the sector and regulatory institutions (Zimand-Sheiner et al., 2021). This is a process in which facts and judgments feed the development of narratives.

The difference between discourses and narratives lies in the fact that a discourse focuses on a broad and central problem or argument reflecting an underlying idea or position, while narratives are unique and chronological stories that can constitute a discourse (Marsen, 2020). The adherence of political actors—such as organizations, activists, and institutions—forms discursive coalitions, that is, a set of arguments promoted by actors who exercise power in constructing favorable subjective scenarios through meanings and actions (Fischer, 2003; Hajer, 1993; Metze & Dodge, 2016). The definitions of narratives, discourses, and discursive coalitions are fundamental because, in processes of virtual defamation, they sustain narrative disputes over dominant discourses. In this context, communities resort to naming and shaming strategies in an attempt to reshape or contest the prevailing narrative in the public debate.

The framing of political problems is a central aspect of discursive dispute (Hajer, 1993). The discursive power of organizations builds coalitions that reinforce narratives (Fischer, 2003; Hajer, 1993) through actions embedded in institutionalized fields (Barley, 2010; Levy, 2008). Fischer (2003) demonstrated that discursive coalitions influence public policies, while other narratives can alter environmental policies and be appropriated by private interests (Smith & Kern, 2009). In this context, actors mobilize narratives to give meaning to their reality (Freudendal-Pedersen et al., 2017) or even to shape what will be remembered or forgotten (Coraiola & Derry, 2020; Coraiola et al., 2023). Thus, discursive coalitions influence narratives in cases of HR violations.

Online platforms have become central sites for public deliberation by introducing new tools for public debate, contributing to the planning of decision-making processes and fostering conflicts and antagonisms (Potts et al., 2024). These spaces are accessible to users who can adopt positions within a community (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), promoting engagement. However, narrative construction can be strategically pre-formulated and disseminated by actors considered relevant by the public (Soltani et al., 2024). What were once merely ideas become narratives shared by individuals who find a sense of belonging as they identify with online communities (Sproull et al., 2007).

A recent phenomenon is the impact of fake news on consumers and the strengthening of scenarios of political polarization (Spohr, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The so-called virtual bubbles, formed by members who share common feelings about a given topic, reinforce values and meanings (Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009). In cases of HR violations, opinion leaders play a central role in defending the companies involved (Soltani et al., 2024). In this sense, organizations strategically create narratives to construct favorable discourses that respond to the accusations and mitigate potential reputational harm.

Virtual defamation amid narrative disputes on social media

Given the impact of the accusations, companies initiate actions to contain reputational damage through the organization of war rooms (MacManus, 2016; Maritan & Oliveira, 2022). In parallel, virtual communities begin the process of naming and shaming, as well as boycott movements aimed at commercially harming the companies involved (Friedland & Cole, 2019). NGOs, consumers, and activists also mobilize with similar strategies, seeking to pressure authorities to investigate the allegations (Hadiprayitno, 2017; Leopold et al., 2021; Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016).

Defamation is a term present in the Brazilian legal system and is considered a crime against honor, whether involving individuals or legal entities (Brasil, 1940). However, in this article, the concept is not addressed from a legal perspective but as part of the naming and shaming process faced by organizations. In this context, defamation is understood as the act of negatively exposing individuals and companies that, according to the legislation, social norms, and cultural values of a given society, have acted inappropriately (Leopold et al., 2021). This process may involve different strategies, such as encouraging boycotts, exposing the names of those involved, publishing letters and statements of repudiation, organizing protests, and attributing blame to offenders, in addition to questioning their compliance with social norms, values, and beliefs (Friedland & Cole, 2019).

Virtual defamation of organizations occurs when there is corporate involvement in scandals or episodes of irresponsibility and corporate crime, which may result in reputational and financial losses with significant impacts on the survival of companies. The emergence of accusations places the entire business sector under public scrutiny, since organizations belonging to the same industry tend to share similar values, processes, technologies, and market practices (Liao & Min, 2021). From a managerial perspective, corporate social irresponsibility compromises organizational reputation, hindering access to new markets and sources of financing (Clemente & Gabbioneta, 2017; Kölbel et al., 2017; Nardella et al., 2020).

Defamation also stimulates public debate about organizations and their practices through the construction of narratives (Daniels & Robinson, 2019; Kohm, 2009). In this context, the media functions as a tool for social action (Gerbaudo, 2012), and the advancement of digital technologies allows individuals to share political goals and engage collectively. The general public, digital influencers, and celebrities mobilize to construct and disseminate narratives that encourage social action (Fischer, 2003).

Although mechanisms of virtual denunciation are already well established, gaps remain in the debate on the strategies adopted by civil society to defend companies accused of HR violations. This article, therefore, is theoretically grounded in the narrative dispute triggered in cases of HR violations, as it advances the discussion on the use of corporate communication in mitigating reputational damage, with a specific focus on social mobilization in defense of organizational conduct.

Human Rights and the normalization of labor analogous to slavery

Initiatives such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Global Compact, and the Business and Human Rights Framework have fostered debate and the consolidation of the topic in

the management field (Ruggie, 2008, 2014). Therefore, the field of Business and HR (BHR) analyzes the obligations of organizations in relation to HR and examines the social impact and ethical implications of corporate activity. In Brazil, Law No. 10.803 of 2003 (Brasil, 2003) adds the term “analogous” to distinguish so-called “modern slavery” from the historical model adopted during European colonization (Moura et al., 2020). However, even with the advancement of discussions on HR in the management field and the recognition of the social role of organizations, there is still no binding international treaty that clearly delineates corporate responsibilities with regard to HR (Bilchitz, 2016).

The debate on corporate involvement in HR issues also intersects with the literature on corporate crime. Sociologically, corporate crimes refer to actions and omissions by companies that generate environmental, economic, social, and fundamental rights harms (Medeiros & Silveira, 2017). The absence of effective accountability mechanisms favors practices of corporate abstention in the face of HR violations. In this sense, Oliveira & Silveira (2023) argue that the BHR field is marked by tensions regarding the role of companies in respecting HR, especially when they engage in discursive practices aimed at avoiding accountability. Without an effective commitment to combating violations, organizations tend to develop defensive mechanisms against campaigns led by consumers and activists opposing irresponsible corporate practices, such as the use of war rooms (MacManus, 2016).

War rooms promote disinformation by co-opting prominent actors to defend organizations in crisis situations. Coraiola and Derry (2020) demonstrated how narratives of the past were mobilized in processes of remembering and forgetting, as in the case of the tobacco industry, which erased records about the harms of smoking in order to avoid regulation. Maritan and Oliveira (2022) mapped the organizational strategies adopted by multinational companies to deny responsibility in allegations of HR violations, even when those companies had publicly committed to strengthening HR standards.

The management literature has highlighted the tolerance of production chains regarding HR violations and slave labor. However, there is still difficulty in exploring this topic, which contributes to its naturalization (Ferreira & de Oliveira, 2024). Moreover, the victims share characteristics related to social markers, vulnerability factors, and similar socioeconomic, geographic, and sociocultural conditions (Baptista et al., 2018).

These characteristics indicate an accommodation between the productivity demands imposed by neoliberalism and the generation of capital through the subjugation of workers and the restriction of fundamental rights (Marinho & Vieira, 2019). In this scenario, companies end up committing crimes driven by financial pressures, regulatory weaknesses, and a market logic oriented toward profit maximization (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020). Thus, productive management models that prioritize expanding profit margins and continually reducing costs tend to reinforce dynamics of labor exploitation and the normalization of rights violations (Gurgel & Marinho, 2019).

Normalization processes by perpetrators and organizations, related to other unethical behaviors such as corruption (Anand et al., 2004) and harassment (Mellgren et al., 2018), have already been the subject of studies. Normalization is the process through which perpetrators come to believe that their behaviors are not unethical or immoral, which leads them to continue such

practices. Among the mechanisms that support this process are selective comparison with behaviors considered more severe and the relativization of facts (de Klerk, 2017).

However, the field of HR still lacks investigations into how companies manage the involvement of internet users, as well as into the positive and supportive responses toward organizations by consumers and social media users. Online reputation management corresponds to the virtual positioning of an organization before its stakeholders, carried out through monitoring, measurement, and transparent and ethical communication (Jones et al., 2009; Kitchin et al., 2020). A corporate narrative is considered successful when it is capable of conveying particular meanings to the public, even when its factual accuracy is contested (Gabriel, 2000).

Organizational communications aimed at constructing narratives in crisis contexts are frequent, as they contribute to legitimizing objectives and behaviors (Ceni & Rese, 2020). These practices include strategies such as denial, outsourcing of responsibility, minimizing the severity of the offense, adopting corrective actions, and mortification. The purpose of these strategies is to preserve a positive organizational reputation, often regardless of the adoption of concrete initiatives to repair the harm caused (Benoit, 1997).

The most effective strategy when facing multiple audiences is minimizing the importance of the offense (Dardis & Haigh, 2009). Additionally, the use of narratives to rationalize harmful corporate practices often involves recourse to technicality, such as presenting technical reports and consultancy documents, with the aim of transforming corporate crimes into accidents, fatalities, or unforeseeable events (Alves, 2023). Another recurrent strategy to reduce reputational impact is the denial of violations (Marsen, 2020).

Generally, corrective actions are accompanied by statements indicating a supposed rectification of business processes, such as apologies with promises of readjusting organizational behavior, as well as the transfer of responsibilities to society or to institutions (Prahl & Goh, 2021), and the denial of harm and victims (Alves, 2023). In this sense, the next section explores the recent case of the wineries in Rio Grande do Sul, situated in a context of increasing reports of labor in conditions analogous to slavery, with a focus on the narrative disputes established in the virtual environment.

Methods

The case of Bento Gonçalves (RS) Wineries

Case studies must be theoretically interesting by offering a new perspective to existing theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), and their contribution occurs through the descriptive theoretical abstraction they provide (Stake, 1998). The selected case involves three wineries whose reputation was compromised due to their connection with an outsourced company that was accused of using labor in conditions analogous to slavery. Its relevance lies in the fact that it triggered institutional reactions and generated significant repercussions on social media, with particular emphasis on the narrative disputes that unfolded in the Brazilian digital environment.

The disclosure of the accusations regarding the degrading conditions faced by the workers required immediate responses from the organizations involved. The investigation by the Ministério Público do Trabalho do Rio Grande do Sul (MPT-RS) began after a complaint filed by workers who

managed to escape the situation. The inquiry revealed that 207 people were rescued from conditions analogous to slavery on a grape plantation managed by the company Fênix Serviços Administrativos e Apoio à Gestão de Saúde LTDA (hereafter referred to as Fênix).

The case gained wide notoriety because Fênix was an outsourced contractor for three well-known Brazilian wineries: Salton, Garibaldi, and Aurora. These companies are widely recognized for producing and commercializing grape juice and wine in the national market. Salton and Aurora are family-owned companies, while Garibaldi is a cooperative composed of 450 members.

Of the 207 workers rescued, 193 were from Bahia, one from Pernambuco, states in the northeast region of Brazil and 10 from Rio Grande do Sul, where the case occurred, with 95% self-identifying as Black (UOL, 2023c). They were recruited to work in the grape harvest under the promise of good housing conditions and a monthly salary that was never paid (UOL, 2023c). The accusation highlights a structural issue of regional and racial prejudice, revealing the persistence of traits of a slave-owning past that has not yet been overcome.

The case constitutes an HR violation, since the workers were recruited from other states to perform their functions without fair remuneration (UOL, 2023c). In addition, they were subjected to physical (Folha de São Paulo, 2023c) and psychological violence (Estadão, 2023a), without access to adequate housing conditions or personal protective equipment. They worked shifts of up to 17 uninterrupted hours and were forced to purchase basic necessities at abusive prices. Those who lacked financial resources were compelled to take out loans with exorbitant interest rates.

The accusations resulted in the suspension of the certification granted to Aurora, which highlighted the best places to work, and in the removal of Salton from the Global Compact, an initiative that promotes decent work (UOL, 2023d). The companies were also temporarily excluded from export fairs organized by the Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency (APEX-Brasil) and faced pressure from the Brazilian Supermarket Association to adopt measures in response to the case (Folha de São Paulo, 2023b, 2023d).

According to the MPT-RS, the wineries are legally responsible for the crime of labor in conditions analogous to slavery (Folha de São Paulo, 2023d). In addition to legal accountability, they faced significant reputational impacts, becoming targets not only of legal proceedings but also of public defamation campaigns due to their partnership with the outsourced company. This defamation process occurred mainly in the online environment, where an intense narrative dispute emerged among internet users regarding the legitimacy, responsibility, and moral integrity of these organizations.

Data collection and analysis

Three types of data were collected and analyzed in this study. The first consists of news articles published in national media about the case, used for contextualization purposes. The second type includes documents issued by the wineries or by entities related to the wine sector, prepared in response to the scandal. These materials were used to understand the discursive strategies adopted in corporate communication. The third type of data includes tweets posted by the general public on the digital platform X (formerly Twitter), which were analyzed with the aim of identifying

the online narratives constructed both in defense of and in criticism of the organizations involved in the case.

The use of different sources is justified by the difficulty of obtaining consistent data on specific cases of HR violations immediately after they become public. Moreover, resorting to different types of sources became necessary, even though such materials were not originally produced with the same objectives as this research (Bauer & Aarts, 2002). For example, journalistic reports reflect the editorial stance of the outlets that publish them, just as corporate statements express the organizations' point of view or the strategy adopted to address the accusations. These characteristics create important methodological implications, requiring critical reflection on the data and the grouping of sources with similar characteristics. In this sense, the sources were grouped based on their heterogeneity (Bauer & Aarts, 2002), and Critical Document Analysis was adopted as the methodological approach (Sankofa, 2022).

The process of gathering documents aligns with new forms of repositories, in which the internet has become established as an accessible archive for researchers regardless of their geographic location (Gill & Elder, 2012). The collection of news articles was conducted through a search for the word "vinícola" (winery in portuguese) on the websites of major newspapers such as Folha de São Paulo, Estadão, G1, and UOL Notícias. The results were filtered for the year 2023, the period in which the case occurred. After this filtering and reading, 12 articles were selected because they synthesized the main events and contributed most effectively to contextualizing the case.

The second data source comprised nine documents issued by the wineries mentioned in the news reports, including public statements, letters, and communications from institutions related to the region or the wine sector. These documents were obtained through the official communication channels of the three wineries, as well as through full reproductions published in the previously selected news articles.

Finally, 3,487 tweets from internet users were collected, covering the period from February 24, 2023 — the date when the first news about the case was released — to March 19, 2023, when the narratives favorable and unfavorable to the wineries became consolidated. The collection was carried out through the Application Programming Interface (API) of the X platform, searching for tweets containing the word "vinícola" or its plural form. The choice of this time frame was based on the initial disclosure of the case and the repercussions observed over the following month. After a preliminary reading, 3,188 tweets that directly addressed the case were retained, while those without a clear connection to the scandal were excluded. Table 1 presents and summarizes the data analyzed.

Table 1

Description of the material analyzed

Type	Source
Newspaper articles	Folha de S. Paulo (5); Estadão (4); UOL Notícias (2); G1 (1)
Press statements and open letters	Open letter Aurora Open letter Salton Open letter Garibaldi Press statement Garibaldi Press statement Aurora Press statement Salton CIC Bento Gonçalves statement UVIBRA statement Press statement Fênix
Tweets containing "vinícola(s)"	3188 tweets related to the case

Sources: Research data

The data analysis was conducted using the Critical Document Analysis (CDA) approach, chosen because it considers both the content and the producers of the documents, as well as the intentionality underlying the texts generated by different sources (Bowen, 2009). The analytical process followed four stages of CDA: (1) collecting and organizing the data to clarify the role of the researcher and define the object of study; (2) reading and coding of the texts in search of significant artifacts; (3) development of narratives from these artifacts; and (4) interpretation of the documents, relating the identified narratives (Sankofa, 2022).

The analysis considered the motivations of the authors of the documents, the content presented, and the narratives constructed by these agents, enabling a contextual interpretation grounded in the relationship between the researchers and the texts. This process included describing document authorship, thematic coding of the content, and, finally, interpreting the intentionality of the texts in light of the theoretical framework (Sankofa, 2022).

Coding was conducted deductively in the case of themes already discussed in the literature, such as organizational response strategies (MacManus, 2016; Maritan & Oliveira, 2022) and the naming and shaming process (Hadiprayitno, 2017; Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016). Conversely, for discourses favorable to the organizations—still scarcely explored in the literature—coding followed an inductive approach. This combination of deductive and inductive coding enabled the identification of nuanced discursive strategies mobilized by the different actors analyzed.

The news articles indicate that the outlets aimed to report the events, present the main actors involved in the case (workers, authorities, and the companies mentioned), and describe the conditions to which the workers were subjected according to the accusations. In turn, the open letters and press statements represent the official mechanisms used by the organizations cited to initiate their defenses and deny direct involvement in the events. The tweets, on the other hand,

express internet users' reactions to the accusations and, based on an initial reading, were grouped into two categories: tweets favorable to and tweets critical of the wineries, along with the identification of recurring keywords.

The categorization and classification of the identified elements emerged from abstract conceptual criteria. For the statements, letters, and news reports, the readings enabled the creation of categories that constitute narratives later analyzed. Comparative, line-by-line reading was essential for constructing the first-order codes of these data sources. Based on the identification of keywords that composed the elements of users' narratives, all tweets containing these terms were coded in first order, as proposed by Gioia et al. (2013).

Following the CDA approach, we began the analysis by creating first-order codes that describe the narratives identified in the empirical material. For the letters, statements, and news reports, we applied line-by-line coding; the tweets, in turn, were analyzed through the identification of recurring keywords mentioned by internet users.

Next, the data were grouped into second-order codes representing the main discursive strategies of organizational defense, as well as the positions adopted by internet users—both favorable and unfavorable to the companies involved. Finally, these second-order codes were organized into aggregate theoretical dimensions aligned with the literature on corporate communication and narrative disputes in contexts of HR violations. Table 2 details the coding structure (Gioia et al., 2013).

Tabela 2

Codes, categories and dimensions of analysis

Data sources	First-order codes (narratives)	Second-order codes (discursive strategies)	Theoretical dimensions
Letters, Notes and News	Entrepreneurial history	Retraction	Corporate Communication Process
	Praise of labor		
	Isolated nature of the crime	Outsourcing of responsibility	
	Blaming public policies		
	Non-responsibilization	Denial	
Lack of awareness			
Tweets	MST	Construct opposing narratives	Online narratives in favor of the organizations
	Lula		
	PT (Workers Party)		
	MPT		
	Lollapalooza	Selective comparison	
	Festival		
	Entrepreneurship	Relativize	
	Northeastern		
	Outsourced	Anonymize	
	name(s)		
Garibaldi	Naming	Online narratives against the	

	organizations
Salton	
Aurora	
Vinegar	
Blood	Shaming
Boycott	Boycott

Source: created by the authors based on Gioia et al. (2013)

With the methodological explanation and the detailed presentation of the case, it becomes possible to advance to the findings and describe the aggregated dimensions constructed from the data. The analysis is based on the categories and the first- and second-order codes, allowing the identification of patterns in the narratives produced both by the organizations and by internet users. The aggregated dimensions represent the central themes emerging from the analysis and offer a broadened understanding of the narrative strategies and discursive dispute processes surrounding the case.

Findings

Corporate communication process

This theme analyzes and highlights the organizational response to the involvement of the wineries in the scandal of labor in conditions analogous to slavery in the wine industry, as well as the impacts of this response on the construction of narratives by internet users. The coding of the letters, statements, and news reports generated three initial codes related to the discursive strategies adopted by the companies, which together outline the corporate communication process: denial, retraction, and outsourcing of responsibility.

Fênix, although contracted by the three wineries, was not a publicly known company and only gained notoriety after the scandal. In a press statement, it declared that the events should be clarified judicially and reaffirmed the integrity and recognized the reputation of the entrepreneur involved, as shown in the excerpt below.

It is worth mentioning that the entrepreneur involved in the accusations is an entrepreneur whose work is recognized and respected, not condoning any disrespect toward employees or their inherent rights (Fênix press statement).

Fênix appeals to a lack of awareness of the accusation, does not mention whether the rescued workers were recruited by its representatives, and affirms that the founder has a recognized history; thus, initially, there was no “Retraction,” and the company, in a certain sense, engages in “Denial” by not mentioning the events. The excerpt moves the investigation away from public scrutiny by emphasizing the history of its management instead of responding to the accusations.

The mechanism of online narrative construction adopted by Garibaldi indicates “Denial” by stating, “Cooperativa Vinícola Garibaldi clarifies that it was unaware of the reported situation” (Garibaldi press statement). However, considering that such outsourced companies follow strict

oversight in order to remain suppliers, it is unlikely that there was no monitoring of the partner company, making an emphatic “Denial” of the accusations impossible.

The same applies to “Outsourcing of Responsibility.” To exempt themselves from responsibility for the conditions in which the workers were found, the wineries relativize the accusations and thus avoid accountability. Salton stated in a note that the responsibility lay with Fênix.

The employment relationship is established through the contracted company for the purpose of providing labor. At the time of contracting, the responsibility inherent to each party is formalized. (Salton press statement)

The excerpt shows that Salton transfers responsibility for the precarious working conditions to the partner company. However, outsourced companies typically follow strict delivery and reliability standards in order to be integrated into supply chains and have their services accepted by contracting firms.

Online narratives in favor of and against the organizations

Regarding the mechanisms of online narrative construction, the data revealed the existence of opposing discourses. On one side, internet users positioned themselves in favor of the companies; on the other, those who were against the organizations spoke out. The opponents argued that the companies should be “Named” in the news reports so that they would face the consequences of their irregular practices, such as “Defamation,” reputational and financial losses, and the application of “Boycotts.” The disclosure of the scandal triggered immediate reactions, with some demanding the public exposure of the companies as a form of commercial punishment: “Good to know which wineries they are. Boycott them!” (User 1583). In contrast, there were internet users who sought to preserve the image of the organizations, resorting to the anonymization of those involved, as seen in the excerpt below.

In the meantime, reporting the CRIME that was being committed by a third-party company is one thing. Mentioning the wineries just for the sake of mentioning them, when they are not responsible for the hiring, is completely different. It’s that old saying: 100 years to build a reputation, one news story to destroy it. (User 4334)

The excerpt highlights a position aligned with the defense of the organizations involved. In light of the reputational consequences, the companies quickly released public statements with the aim of interrupting the negative coverage and denying any prior knowledge of the working conditions imposed by Fênix. Aurora’s position is reproduced in the following excerpt: “Furthermore, every service provider receives quality meals during the work shift, such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” (Aurora press statement)

The urgency to take a stance becomes evident on social media, where narratives about the case begin to consolidate. On one side, internet users continued to publicize the names of the wineries involved — “Aurora, Salton, and Garibaldi. It’s important to make the names of the companies clear” (User 1097) — while demanding greater regulation, accountability from both the public authorities and the companies, and promoting a boycott movement. On the other side, some

internet users suggested waiting for institutional statements: “Look there, folks. Let’s leave these wineries aside until they take a stance” (User 5279).

The wineries turned to newspapers to publish explanatory statements. The reach of the press outlets facilitated the dissemination of the corporate messages. The newspaper *Estadão* (2023b), for example, published in full the statements of the three wineries involved. These notes generated a new wave of reactions among internet users, who began to question the companies’ stance. The excerpt below illustrates this dissatisfaction: “[The wineries] have already started releasing statements washing their hands, saying they have nothing to do with the enslaved workers who work in their wineries, or are they going to take responsibility for the police report?” (User 4167).

The data also revealed internet users who were satisfied with the explanations provided by the wineries and who expressed indignation regarding the damage caused to the companies’ reputations. These users argue that, in light of the public clarifications, the media should rebuild and repair the image and reputation of the wineries.

Publishing the statements in full is not enough when the companies’ image is already affected. Just go to their pages and watch the mass boycott. Full support for criminalizing those who directly caused this. But it is not a shared responsibility with the wineries. (User 4334)

After the accusations became public, the three wineries issued open letters. Aurora highlighted its “entrepreneurial history” and its “appreciation of labor,” reaffirming its ethical commitment. The excerpt below illustrates the strategy of using the entrepreneurial past as a resource to relativize the accusations, reinforcing positive messages about the company’s trajectory.

At the beginning of the last century, a few Italian families crossed the Atlantic in search of better days. In their suitcases, a few pieces of clothing, one or another faded photograph, great courage, and a dream: to rebuild their lives in a foreign country. Vinícola Aurora was born from this dream. From this dream and from a great deal of work. The work that always ran in the veins of our founders soon blended with this land, spread through the vineyards, and nourished each plant with a non-negotiable sense of respect for the hands that sowed it, harvested it, and helped it become, from grape, wine — and to earn the world’s recognition and, more importantly, a place at the table and in the hearts of Brazilians. (Aurora open letter)

The use of the entrepreneurial narrative presents the company’s history as a sufficient element to justify the “isolated nature of the error,” in which the self-promotion of the organizational past relativizes the event by diminishing its relevance. This narrative contributes to the construction of a counter-narrative that opposes the advocates of boycott and virtual defamation. Such a strategy echoes the practice of recalling the past in order to promote a favorable version of the memory constructed about the present event (Coraiola et al., 2023). In this context, the exemption of responsibility aims not only to minimize the severity of the violation but also to highlight the importance and relevance of the organization to the community. In other cases,

invoking the company's founding history plays a central role in forming a collective memory that fosters the community's identification with the organization (Foroughi, 2020).

The strategy of reparation was also adopted by the wineries, with particular emphasis on Salton, which committed itself to not being negligent and stated:

We have not adopted and will not adopt a negligent position. Immediately, we took internal measures concerning the improvement of work throughout our entire production chain. We can list actions that are being intensified and others that will be carried out with the urgency that the seriousness of the issue demands: Review of all supplier selection and contracting processes, with the implementation of stricter criteria that prevent any type of violation of legal provisions, including HR and labor rights; Structuring of a schedule for conducting audits on labor practices with suppliers and service providers on a recurring and systematized basis; Hiring of an external independent audit firm to certify social responsibility practices; Expansion and dissemination of our reporting channels and broad dissemination of our codes of conduct and ethics within our production chain; Adherence to the National Pact for the Eradication of Slave Labor. We will also adopt additional measures based on new recommendations from public and private entities and regulatory agencies. (Salton Open Letter)

The open letters have as their central objective the control of the online narrative. The first discursive resource used is the invocation of the organization's Entrepreneurial History, with the aim of exempting the companies from direct responsibility for the scandal, which is framed as an isolated episode (Coraiola et al., 2023). Next, the wineries present a description of the actions that will be taken to remedy the situation. Despite these statements, the companies received support from internet users in constructing favorable narratives. As noted in the literature, online narratives tend to incorporate arguments from social actors who are not directly involved in the case (Freudendal-Pedersen et al., 2017; Sproull et al., 2007).

At the same time, there were expressions of indignation from internet users who criticized both the entrepreneurial discourse adopted by the wineries and the recurring lack of oversight over suppliers in global production chains. The excerpts below illustrate these positions.

The modus operandi of high-performance entrepreneurship is enslavement. Whether Brazilian wineries, Apple, or Zara, the entire construction of capitalism is based on maintaining a model of human exploitation rooted in slavery. Nothing new in this obscenity. (User 1246)

What is common among the cases of labor analogous to slavery on farms in Minas Gerais, in the wineries of Rio Grande do Sul, and the precarious conditions of those who provided services at a municipal kennel in Joinville? OUTSOURCING. (User 2106)

The initial attempt to deny the facts, followed by the reduction of the severity of the violation through emphasizing the companies' historical trajectory, was accompanied by institutional statements within the wine sector. The Brazilian Union of Vitiviniculture (UVIBRA) positioned itself in support of the wineries, shifting the focus of the discussion from labor analogous to slavery to the need for greater oversight in the contracting of outsourced services.

Although the companies were not the ones contracting the services that created the degrading conditions experienced by these workers, but rather the employer, there is broad agreement that the vitiviniculture chain must be more vigilant and stricter regarding the contracting of outsourced services. (UVIBRA statement)

Through a public statement, the Industry and Commerce Center (CIC) of Bento Gonçalves, the city where the case occurred, blamed social assistance programs as a way to justify the occurrence of labor analogous to slavery, attributing responsibility to society and the State (Prah & Goh, 2021). This stance contributes to the construction of narratives aligned with the politically polarized environment manifested on social media. The CIC's statement seeks to justify the actions committed based on the limitations and characteristics of the institutional environment in which the companies operate. "There is a large portion of the population with full productive capacity and yet inactive, surviving through an assistance-based system that is in no way healthy for society" (CIC Bento Gonçalves statement).

The discourse reverberates on social media through discursive arguments such as comparing the wineries' case with similar events, with the aim of reducing the severity of the accusations. This strategy constitutes the mechanism of "Selective Comparison," which occurs when condemnable acts are relativized based on similar practices committed by other actors, but here it is intensified by the mobilization of public opinion (Anand et al., 2004). A recurring example is the comparison with the Lollapalooza music festival, which was the target of similar accusations in 2022 and 2023. Internet users who defend the wineries use this analogy to question the coherence and morality of their opponents, as illustrated in the excerpt below.

Funny that all the little celebrities who were criticizing the wineries for slave labor are staying quiet about the people who are working like slaves at Lollapalooza — what a little money in the pocket and some VIP wristbands can do, huh? (User 1687)

Other discursive arguments fit into a broader political discussion by suggesting that the companies involved were victims of persecution by institutions such as the MPT, political parties, and social movements. The excerpt below exemplifies the narrative according to which the wineries' case represents a dispute between antagonistic institutions seeking to consolidate their positions of power and influence in the market.

PT [workers party] wanting to destroy the wineries with the help of a sold-out media... MST [Landless Workers' Movement] promoting its products with several little shops [...] spread around, it's so obvious it's almost funny. (User 1510)

Following that logic: The wineries of Bento Gonçalves make a lot of money and must know what they're doing when they use labor analogous to enslaved workers. Who are we to judge? Besides the taxes they pay, the MPT keeps making entrepreneurs' lives difficult by 'grandstanding' (mockery and sarcasm). (User 1053)

The use of selective comparisons and broader discourses—such as the ideological clash between different political positions—shifts the focus away from the discussion on HR violations and labor analogous to slavery. These normalization mechanisms, frequently used by perpetrators of unethical practices (Anand et al., 2004; de Klerk, 2017), are also reproduced by internet users. As

a result, the debate moves away from the situation of the rescued workers and begins to revolve around the ideological convictions of those who defend or criticize the wineries. This rhetorical shift contributes to the normalization of HR violations and transforms a corporate problem into a polarized conflict between groups of internet users.

The construction of opposing narratives on the topic goes beyond the comparison between specific cases and becomes consolidated through discourses marked by racism and prejudice. There are tweets that reinforce stereotypes by claiming that slave labor is an exclusive reality of states in the Northeast, used as a strategy to defend the wineries involved.

For those who commented that it was slave labor, there has never been slave labor. I find it amusing that the MPT goes after the wineries, knowing that slave labor is on farms in BA and others in the interior of the NE. The outsourced company was the one that placed its people in a space where they should not have been. (User 1228)

Other actors introduce arguments that shift responsibility for the violations from the private sector to the State, blaming welfare programs and the actions of social movements. This strategy contributes to generating public distrust toward state regulation (Zimand-Sheiner et al., 2021). The discursive elements promoted by these organizations are appropriated by internet users in the creation of new narratives, such as the aforementioned comparison with the Lollapalooza festival and the claim that the scandal was part of a left-wing strategy or of social movements to promote their own products. The excerpt below reproduces a comment suggesting that the accusations were a boycott tactic against the wineries in order to benefit an ideologically antagonistic organization.

Consume products from these wineries! It's clear that this is an orchestrated campaign by the left to harm national wineries. The MST is launching stores and promoting their grape juice right at this moment — convenient, isn't it?" (User 1588)

The discursive dispute begins to ground itself in the context of political polarization between the left and the right that has marked the Brazilian scenario in recent years. The literature indicates that narrative disputes are historically contextualized (Barros & Wanderley, 2019). HR, as a universal concept, is frequently contested by right-wing currents with a neoliberal bias, in addition to facing resistance in concrete cases of violation, such as labor analogous to slavery. Even in the face of the wide dissemination of the case and the formalization of terms of conduct adjustment by the wineries, the narrative of the "entrepreneurial history" employed by the organizations involved, echoes the current political debate and enables the defense of practices that constitute HR violations.

The conduct of the employers reveals greater severity toward migrants and Black individuals, who suffered harsher punishments than other workers due to their origins (Folha de São Paulo, 2023c). According to accounts from the rescued workers, this situation was aggravated by the market pressure imposed by the companies themselves, as indicated by the following testimony: "the owners only said that demand was high and that customers were in a hurry" (Estadão, 2023a). The relentless pursuit of profit and intense market competition impose on managers and companies the need to generate constant positive results, even if this occurs at the expense of human rights and dignity (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020; Marinho & Vieira, 2019; Maritan & Oliveira, 2022; Medeiros & Silveira, 2017). Based on the analysis of the documents and tweets, it is possible to

describe the discursive dispute between corporate communication and online communities, both in defense of and in criticism of the organizations involved.

Discussion

This research analyzed the corporate communication process with the aim of understanding online narrative disputes in cases of HR violations, examining both the narratives critical of and those favorable to the organizations in the digital environment. It is counterintuitive to imagine that civil society might defend organizations involved in HR violations; however, it was possible to observe the construction of this type of narrative emerging from online disputes, showing how this process contributes to the normalization of HR violations and corporate crimes.

Throughout the process, the organizations resorted to three discursive mechanisms widely discussed in the literature: denial, outsourcing of responsibility, and retraction. Denial occurs when the company attempts to distance itself from the outsourced organization involved in the violation. The three wineries issued public statements assigning responsibility to the partner company and disassociating themselves from its practices. This strategy aligns with the BHR literature, which identifies omission and silence as forms of corporate response that avoid acknowledging responsibility and fail to provide support to victims (Ruggie, 2008, 2014; Wettstein, 2013). It is a rapid response aimed at preserving the organizational image.

The wineries had their image associated with Fênix's practices. Liao and Min (2021) note that companies within the same sector tend to be perceived as likely to adopt similar behaviors, which can lead to the stigmatization of an entire sector as a result of the misconduct of a single organization. In the released statements, the wineries emphasize that the case occurred within Fênix, which enables the transfer of responsibility. Both strategies — denial and outsourcing of responsibility — are recognized in the literature as effective for minimizing reputational damage, especially when adopted quickly after the outbreak of a scandal (Benoit, 1997; Dardis & Haigh, 2009).

With their image linked to the corporate crime, the organizations sought to make amends, mentioning initiatives aimed at preventing similar cases and reaffirming their commitment to the cause, in an attempt to confer legitimacy to their actions (Maritan & Oliveira, 2022; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Wettstein, 2013). The companies chose to publish open letters as a form of response to the incident. The apology functions as an appeal to society, placing the organizations at the disposal of the competent authorities. They also mentioned reparative actions directed toward the workers who had been recruited. Finally, the use of discursive arguments aims to regain control of the narrative and prevent further reputational damage. The use of the founders' entrepreneurial history, as a demonstration of commitment to decent work and professional ethics, seeks to reinforce an image of institutional honesty, suggesting that corporate irresponsibility and the accounts of the rescued workers do not align with the organizations' trajectory.

Other entities also entered the debate, such as the CIC of Bento Gonçalves, by stating that the conditions imposed on migrant workers were a consequence of a welfare-based system that contradicts the values of the associated companies. In this sense, labor in degrading conditions is

interpreted as the result of a policy external to business activities, exempting the organizations from direct responsibility. This practice, anchored in the neoliberal discourse of productivity, functions as a justificatory mechanism for illicit acts already observed in other contexts, such as corruption and corporate crimes (Alves, 2023; Couto et al., 2023).

While the companies involved adopted communication mechanisms to contain reputational damage, the narrative dispute intensified in the online environment. Internet users critical of the wineries mobilized strategies of naming the involved parties, defaming the organizations, and, ultimately, calling for boycotts. The naming process began because the first news reports on the case omitted the companies' names, which generated pressure for the accusations to be made public. The public debate triggered a defamation process (Friedland & Cole, 2019), associating the wineries with labor analogous to slavery on social media. The boycott campaigns had concrete effects, such as the removal of the accused companies' products from supermarket shelves (Folha de São Paulo, 2023b). The use of social media in defamation processes involving organizations engaged in unethical practices and HR violations is recurrent, as these spaces have become accessible to the public, allowing individuals to evaluate, question, and judge organizational behaviors (Leopold et al., 2021).

In summary, the contracting companies adopted a stance based on three communication processes: outsourcing of responsibility, denial, and retraction. The online community critical of the organizations responded to these strategies through mechanisms already established in the literature, such as naming, defamation, and boycott. However, this study is also able to identify the process of defending the organizations by the public on social media. Based on the corporate communication strategies and the opposing reactions, internet users began employing defense mechanisms grounded in the companies' own arguments, using resources such as anonymization, relativization, selective comparison, and the construction of opposing narratives as ways to protect the organizations. Figure 1 synthesizes the online discursive dispute process arising from cases of HR violations.

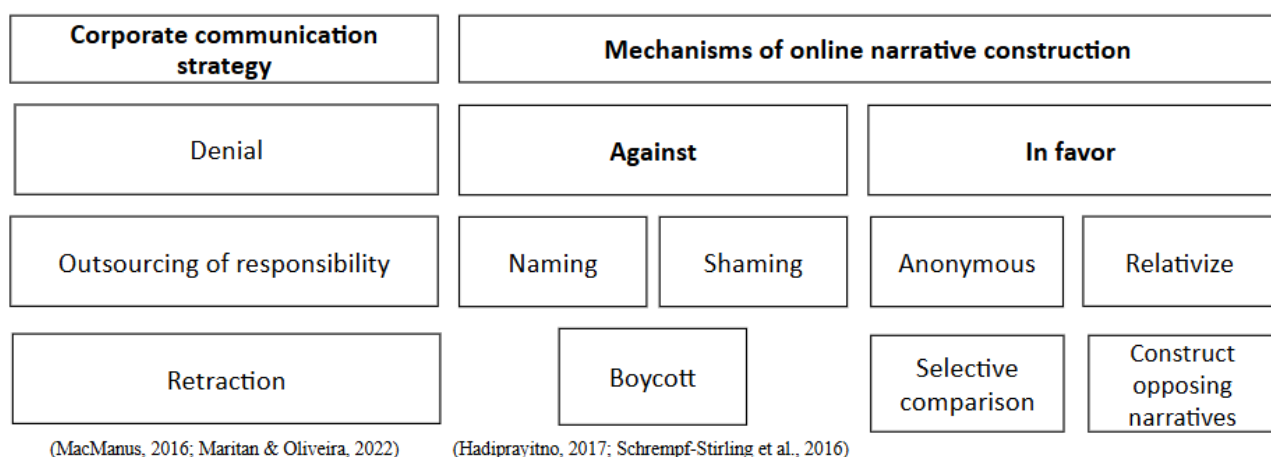


Figure 1. Online discursive dispute process in cases of HR violations
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The organizations engaged in the discursive dispute with the goal of redeeming themselves and minimizing the impacts on their reputation, as well as responding to subsequent investigations (Fischer, 2003). The discursive arguments focused on valuing entrepreneurial history, praising labor as a form of redemption, and emphasizing that the situation was an isolated episode. These arguments provided the basis for internet users to adopt four strategies in defense of the companies: anonymization, relativization, selective comparison, and the construction of opposing narratives.

The anonymization strategy seeks to prevent the naming of the organizations involved. While news media had not yet revealed the names of the wineries, internet users mobilized to protect the companies' reputations. Many attributed to the press a hasty conduct in disclosing the names and denied the facts reported in the explanatory statements in order to exonerate the wineries.

Relativization aimed to diminish the severity of the problem. The emphasis on the isolated nature of the incident, present in the press statements, functions as a strategy to reduce the importance of the case. This approach also seeks to shift responsibility to other actors, such as social assistance programs, supported by sector entities, and resorts to blaming the victims themselves (de Klerk, 2017). Internet users who defend the organizations employ arguments that highlight the entrepreneurial trajectory and praise the work of the business owners. The use of this discourse relativizes the companies' involvement, claiming that they were victims of circumstances and that their reputation was being unfairly compromised due to failures attributed to third parties.

Selective comparison aims to frame the HR violation as a less severe offense. It is frequently used by the perpetrators themselves, as already observed in cases of corruption (Coelho, 2023). In this context, internet users compare the wineries' case to occurrences considered more serious or that did not receive equivalent attention, such as the accusations related to the Lollapalooza festival.

Finally, the construction of opposing narratives is supported by broader arguments linked to entrepreneurship, contributing to the formulation of discourses favorable to the organizations with the active participation of internet users. These narratives are also fueled by ongoing political and social discussions, such as the clash between the left and the right, which has intensified in the Brazilian context (Barros & Wanderley, 2019). One example is the narrative that the case was orchestrated as an MST strategy to promote and sell its products, with the aim of discrediting the boycott against the wineries.

The four strategies used to defend the organizations occur simultaneously throughout the unfolding of the case. With each new action taken by the companies, new discursive arguments emerged that fueled the disputes on social media. The strategies adopted by the organizations play a dual role: on one hand, they seek to respond to the case in order to preserve their reputation; on the other hand, they aim to control and strengthen a favorable narrative on social networks. This narrative construction is intended to redirect the focus of the debate, minimizing both individual and sectoral reputational damage, often without effectively addressing the central issue of the HR violation. As a result, observers of the case begin to engage in broader discussions related to political and ideological discourse, distancing themselves from the concrete reality of the violations committed.

Although they declare their willingness to cooperate with the authorities in clarifying and remedying the case, the companies demonstrate a greater interest in reducing damage to their own reputation. Actions aimed at eradicating labor analogous to slavery are mentioned only as future possibilities, without an evident ongoing ethical commitment. This low level of engagement reveals a primary concern with controlling public narratives, to the detriment of solving, remedying, and preventing new violations. In this sense, narrative control becomes essential in contexts of reputational crisis and is strategic for shaping public perception, especially considering that corporate crimes typically attract extensive negative coverage and directly impact the reputation of organizations (Clemente & Gabbioneta, 2017; Kölbel et al., 2017; Nardella et al., 2020).

Moreover, the online narrative reactivated the national history of forgetting and the lack of reparation for the slaveholding past, highlighting its consequences for racial and regional inequalities. This legacy is reflected in the social exclusion of Black people in the labor market and in urban occupation (Baptista et al., 2018; Marinho & Vieira, 2019; Moura et al., 2020).

Thus, the study demonstrated that the dispute initiated by the organizations through their narratives, and amplified by the reactions of internet users, leads HR violations to cease being the central focus of public debate. This process contributes to the normalization of corporate crimes, shifting attention toward ideological and political disputes. The discussion begins to revolve more around the political orientation of internet users than around the investigation and accountability for HR violations. Internet users who defend the cooperatives attempt to redirect the focus of the narrative dispute through comparisons with other events, relativization of the facts, and the creation of opposing narratives, thereby weakening engagement with the severity of the violation.

Furthermore, the study showed that corporate communication instruments, in crisis contexts, provide discursive arguments that help construct and control a narrative favorable to the organizations. These resources are used strategically to confront processes of naming, defamation, and boycott on social media, acting as mechanisms for containing reputational damage.

Conclusions

The analysis of the case revealed that organizations follow a pattern when responding to public shaming processes resulting from scandals involving HR violations. The initial response is rapid and aims to deny any direct involvement, seeking to immediately contain damage to corporate reputation (Bilchitz, 2016; MacManus, 2016). As public attention and social pressure increase, organizations begin to issue more elaborate statements, drawing on the valorization of their success stories as justification and presenting the incident as an isolated event. These responses focus on controlling the online narrative and institutional image, without necessarily establishing an effective connection to resolving the HR violation.

The use of online narratives allows civil society to engage actively in the discursive dispute (Kitchin et al., 2020; Leopold et al., 2021), questioning the prestige and reputation of organizations. The positions adopted by the companies and by sector associations reveal a tendency to outsource responsibility for violations of fundamental rights, as well as an alleged inability to adequately monitor partner companies. In a globalized context, organizations establish strict standards of production, delivery, and quality for their suppliers; however, when confronted with reports of

working conditions, they resort to arguments of unawareness or the impossibility of exercising effective control over their partners.

The contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how online communities construct narratives favorable to organizations involved in HR violations. These communities employ strategies of anonymization, relativization, selective comparison, and the construction of opposing narratives, based on the very arguments provided by the organizations. The narratives are politically contextualized, intensifying disputes in the digital environment that divert attention away from measures of reparation and accountability. In doing so, organizations avoid acknowledging their responsibility, while directing public attention toward arguments intended to restore their reputation.

The public sanctions received by organizations function as visibility mechanisms for reports of HR violations in the business context (Kitchin et al., 2020; Leopold et al., 2021; Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016). However, punishments and remediation initiatives still fall short of social expectations. Cases are frequently treated as isolated episodes, which hinders the adoption of deeper structural changes (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020).

It is evident that cases of HR violations, which should be rejected and punished according to the law, may be reframed as narrative disputes in online communities. This process tends to relativize and minimize the severity of the facts, enabling the construction of opposing narratives that weaken the accountability of the companies involved. The general public, especially consumers, must remain attentive to these narrative disputes, as the construction of favorable online versions cannot be considered a legitimate substitute for effective remediation processes. Such violations require punishment of those responsible and appropriate compensation for the victims, and it is essential that public authorities remain vigilant to prevent the perpetuation of impunity.

Future research may deepen the analysis of how these arguments are used in public debate, especially on social media and in different sectoral contexts. Studies with consumers and analyses of public perceptions of corporate communication strategies also represent promising avenues for understanding whether these approaches lead to rejection or complicity. Additionally, an aspect that was not extensively explored in this research is the influence of external actors in shaping the narratives created about the event. A broader approach is needed to understand how central figures—such as mainstream media, digital influencers, celebrities, and other opinion leaders—impact the virtual public debate surrounding cases of human rights violations.

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Inclusive language

The authors use inclusive language that acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.

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