



“Forgive Me if I Was Misunderstood!”: Grupo Madero’s Attempts at Public Retraction During a Crisis

“Me Desculpem se Fui Mal Interpretado!”: Tentativas de Retratação Pública do Grupo Madero em um Contexto de Crise

“¡Discúlpennme si Fui Malinterpretado!”: Intentos de Retracción Pública del Grupo Madero en un Contexto de Crisis

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Abstract

Organizations tell their stories through advertising, corporate videos, and other media resources, including digital platforms, to reaffirm their organizational identity, values, and marketing strategies. This article examines how the public retraction by Grupo Madero's founder reconfigured organizational identity during a reputational crisis concerning the number of deaths during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020. The study used documentary research and narrative analysis. The research corpus comprised talks by entrepreneur Luiz Durski Júnior available on YouTube, corporate videos, and two statements about the COVID-19 pandemic posted on his Instagram account. The analysis identified an attempt to separate the entrepreneur's narrative from Grupo Madero's narrative through the following neutralization attempts: a culture of denial, partial acknowledgment and isolation, denial of intent, and, finally, an apology. Attempts to evade responsibility operated as a contested arena that reconstructed the meanings of organizational storytelling, allowing the entrepreneur to move between denial and accountability. As a contribution to organizational studies, the research highlights how social platforms can reconfigure organizational identity and how consumers engaged on social media can reject organizational narratives and engage in boycotts.

Keywords: organizational storytelling, antenarrative, Grupo Madero, neutralization attempts, COVID-19.

Resumo

As organizações contam suas histórias por meio da propaganda, de vídeos institucionais e de outros recursos midiáticos, como plataformas digitais, com o intuito de reafirmar sua identidade organizacional, seus valores e suas estratégias mercadológicas. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar de que forma a retratação pública do fundador do Grupo Madero reconfigurou a identidade organizacional em um contexto de crise reputacional, relacionada ao número de mortes na pandemia da covid-19, em 2020. Quanto aos procedimentos metodológicos, emprega-se a pesquisa documental com análise de narrativas. O corpus da pesquisa foi composto por palestras do empresário Luiz Durski Júnior, disponibilizadas na plataforma Youtube, vídeos institucionais e duas declarações do empresário, publicadas em seu Instagram, relacionadas à pandemia da covid-19. No decorrer da análise, identifica-se um movimento de desvinculação da narrativa do empresário da narrativa do Grupo Madero, com as seguintes tentativas de neutralização: cultura da negação, reconhecimento e isolamento parcial, negação de intenção e, por fim, o pedido de desculpas. As tentativas de abstenção da responsabilidade operaram como um campo de disputa que reconstruiu os sentidos do storytelling organizacional, permitindo que o empresário transitasse entre a negação e a responsabilização. Como contribuição à área de

estudos organizacionais, a pesquisa destaca como o uso de plataformas sociais pode reconfigurar a identidade organizacional e identifica como consumidores engajados nas redes sociais podem repudiar narrativas organizacionais e praticar boicotes.

Palavras-chave: *storytelling organizacional, antenarrativa, Grupo Madero, tentativas de neutralização, covid-19.*

Resumen

Las organizaciones cuentan sus historias por medio de la publicidad, de videos institucionales y de otros recursos mediáticos, como las plataformas digitales, con el propósito de reafirmar su identidad organizacional, sus valores y sus estrategias de mercado. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar de qué manera la retractación pública del fundador del Grupo Madero reconfiguró la identidad organizacional en un contexto de crisis reputacional relacionada con el número de muertes durante la pandemia de COVID-19, en 2020. En cuanto a los procedimientos metodológicos, se empleó una investigación documental con análisis de narrativas. El corpus de la investigación estuvo compuesto por conferencias del empresario Luiz Durski Júnior, disponibles en la plataforma YouTube, videos institucionales y dos declaraciones del empresario, publicadas en su Instagram, relacionadas con la pandemia de COVID-19. A lo largo del análisis, se identifica un movimiento de desvinculación entre la narrativa del empresario y la narrativa del Grupo Madero, mediante los siguientes intentos de neutralización: cultura de la negación, reconocimiento y aislamiento parcial, negación de la intención y, finalmente, petición de disculpas. Los intentos de eximirse de responsabilidad operaron como un campo de disputa que reconstruyó los sentidos del storytelling organizacional, permitiendo que el empresario transitara entre la negación y la asunción de responsabilidad. Como contribución al campo de los estudios organizacionales, la investigación destaca cómo el uso de plataformas sociales puede reconfigurar la identidad organizacional e identifica de qué manera los consumidores involucrados activamente en las redes sociales pueden rechazar narrativas organizacionales y promover boicots.

Palabras clave: *storytelling organizacional, antenarrativa, Grupo Madero, intentos de neutralización, COVID-19.*

Introduction

Media resources, such as advertisements, promotional materials, corporate videos (Medeiros, 2009), and other formats, are used to tell organizations' stories. Also known as storytelling, these stories are narratives intended to reaffirm organizational identity, values, and marketing strategies (McCarthy, 2008; Mumby, 2016). The internet has expanded the potential of digital storytelling – stories told through digital media (Robin & McNeil, 2019) – and has contributed to the construction and reconstruction of organizational narratives (Boje, 2019).

Storytelling is a mechanism that, when used by a company to construct stories, develop an organizational identity, or overcome crises, promotes a new image of the organization (Kopp et al., 2011). Following adverse events, it can also be used to conceal particular incidents by reshaping the organization's history or reality, thereby constituting an antenarrative (Boje, 2011).

This article examines Grupo Madero's storytelling. The group was selected because of its visibility through online strategies. Throughout its history, the group has launched several brands, including Madero, Jerônimo Burguer, Vó Maria Durski, Restaurante Durski, and Sanduicheira do Júnior Durski, and has used digital media to attract customers' attention (Grupo Madero, n.d.). Its selection was also motivated by a widely publicized episode involving entrepreneur Luiz Durski Júnior during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the group's founder posted a statement on social media about the situation, referring to an alarming crisis, particularly regarding the number of victims. He argued that Brazil could not remain under lockdown "because of 5,000 or 7,000 people who are going to die" (Durski, 2020a),¹ given its adverse economic effects. After the negative reaction, the founder posted a second video as an apology, claiming that he had been misunderstood.

The guiding research question is therefore: how did the public retraction by Grupo Madero's founder discursively reconfigure the boundary between individual responsibility and organizational identity during a reputational crisis? Accordingly, this study aims to examine how the founder's public retraction reconfigured organizational identity during a reputational crisis concerning the number of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The methodological approach combined a documentary corpus with narrative analysis. The analysis identified attempts to separate the entrepreneur's narrative from Grupo Madero's narrative through neutralization mechanisms, including a culture of denial, partial acknowledgment and isolation, denial of intent, and, finally, an apology.

The article makes two main contributions to organizational studies. First, it highlights how digital platforms reconfigure organizational identity through the neutralization of narratives, demonstrating that the founding entrepreneur's

¹ For the purposes of this article, all direct quotations from the original sources have been translated into English.

political position affects organizational reputation. Second, it shows that strong consumer engagement on social media can bring organizational storytelling into conflict with the public during crises, leading consumers to express rejection.

The article is organized into five sections. Following this introduction, a literature review focuses on organizational storytelling and its relationship with neutralization attempts. The research procedures are then described. The analysis and discussion present Grupo Madero's narratives in three formats: Storytelling 1 – Grupo Madero's Memory; Storytelling 2 – The Episode; and Storytelling 3 – Retraction and Neutralization Attempts. The article concludes with final considerations.

Organizational storytelling: the construction and deconstruction of organizational narratives

This section discusses organizational storytelling as the central theoretical framework, examining the origins of the term and how organizations construct meaning, legitimacy, and reputation through narratives. In a networked society, examining digital storytelling, narratives created on social media, and antenarrative as a space for contesting, constructing, and reconstructing narratives becomes increasingly relevant. To advance the literature, storytelling is linked to attempts to neutralize narratives – i.e., discursive strategies used by organizations to evade responsibility for particular events.

Storytelling dates back to the beginnings of human society, when individuals shared stories and experiences. Over time, the term storyteller emerged to describe people who tell stories (Cogo & Nassar, 2011). These individuals possess skills such as control of voice tone, captivating language, and engaging detail (Czarniawska, 2011; Moore, 2012; Silva et al., 2001), which enable them to lead audiences to imagine a story and reinterpret the concepts presented in a richly detailed narrative (Silva et al., 2001; Moore, 2012).

The term storytelling describes stories told repeatedly, either by adding new details or reinforcing an earlier story (Boje, 1994), to make sense of relevant organizational aspects (Maclean et al., 2012; Moore, 2012). These stories are communicated through corporate videos, statements to internal and external audiences, internal policies, symbols, the creation of heroes, and advertising (McCarthy, 2008; Medeiros, 2009; Moore, 2012; Mumby, 2016; Robin & McNeil, 2019). Founders' narratives, used to create or maintain organizational reputation (Mumby, 2016), help construct accounts of an organization's founding, develop organizational identity (Boje & Smith, 2010), and produce narratives of success (Boje, 1991).

Organizations may also use storytelling to overcome crises, whether economic or otherwise. In such cases, the technique involves articulating narratives that promote a new organizational image in response to events (Kopp et al., 2011). When organizations use narratives to conceal events that have damaged their image by reshaping their history or reality, these are called antenarratives (Boje, 2011; Silva et al., 2018).

Antenarratives create new meanings while concealing the organization's current reality. New stories connect with previous narratives and assign new meanings to events (Boje, 2011). An antenarrative can also be understood as the boundary between past narratives and the future: understanding the past makes it possible to create narratives that change future meanings (Boje, 2011).

Unlike the narrative approach, which uses metaphorical expressions, discourse, symbols, and other elements to create meaning within the organizational plot, the antenarrative approach creates sense and meaning from a particular narrative. Unlike literary narrative analysis, "antenarrative analysis does not focus on fully formed stories"; instead, antenarratives "are conceptualized as fragments of organizational discourse that construct identities and interests in time and space" when new discourses are used to make sense of an organizational reality (Vaara & Tienari, 2011, p. 370). Antenarratives thus become a means of resisting the traditional approach and presenting new narratives as a web of facts, whether real or not, intended to create meaning (Gabriel, 2004). From a critical perspective, antenarrative is understood as a story's outcome and may be considered the opposite of the traditional approach because it exposes the consequences of narrative positions. It can therefore be viewed as a critique embedded in organizations' narrative practices (Svane, 2019).

Silva et al. (2018) identify a dark side of organizational storytelling. This occurs when storytelling changes listeners' perceptions of a past event, persuades them to accept new versions of events or false stories, or confuses them through information overload, diverting their attention from the story's focus, among other effects. When organizations use storytelling to create meaning, they approach the neutralization attempts discussed by Schoultz and Flyghed (2019).

Neutralization attempts are discursive strategies observed when organizations address the public to repair their image or divert attention from accusations. Companies may use neutralization in several ways, including apologizing, justifying their actions, or denying events (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013). Organizations may also use communication strategies to defend themselves (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020) or take other actions intended to compensate for their conduct (Sisco, 2012). Charts 1-5 present the forms of neutralization identified in the literature, grouped by purpose.

Chart 1

Denial

Type of neutralization	Description
Literal denial	Denial of the act of which the organization is accused (Gribas et al., 2018; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020, 2021; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
Denial of evidence	Denial of the validity of evidence supporting the accusation, claiming that it is not real but misleading, fabricated, or exaggerated (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Sisco, 2012).
Denial of involvement	Denial of participation in the unlawful act of which the organization is accused, without denying that the act occurred (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Denial of responsibility	Attribution of responsibility to another actor or a symbolic figure associated with the event (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020, 2021).
Technical denial of causation	Denial of criminal behavior through technical explanations justifying what occurred (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Denial of social harm	Denial of consequences or minimization of harm, claiming that events did not occur as described or that the damage was less devastating than reported (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020).
Denial of knowledge	Denial of sufficient knowledge to conclude that the acts were unlawful, or a claim that laws and regulations are unclear or open to ambiguous interpretations (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020).
Denial of deviance	Justification that operations were consistent with general market expectations and did not constitute unlawful acts or events (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Denial of intent	Reference to the event as an "accident," claiming that there was no intention to cause harm (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
Interpretive denial	Reframing events to change perceptions or interpretations of what occurred, while denying the full extent of the conduct or unlawful act (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020, 2021).
Denial of control	Denial of full control, or of any control, over the event, thereby refusing responsibility for unlawful conduct (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2021).
Denial of victims	Denial that victims were harmed, or a claim that those involved cannot be considered victims because they contributed to the criminal event (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).

Chart 2

Defensive narratives

Type of neutralization	Description
Defense of legality	Arguments justifying the acts by claiming that the accusation does not involve unlawful conduct (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Defense of necessity	Assertion of compliance with local laws and regulations, even when they may give rise to unlawful acts (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2021).
Trust-building transparency	Declaration of cooperation, associating the organization's image with another organization or an important, respected institution (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Justification through relativization	Claim that operations cause less harm than those of organizations offering the same products or services. The organization invokes its record of social responsibility to justify the claim that it has no history of violations, or asserts that its operations have brought economic benefits to the locality (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Temporal containment	Reference to the event as something that happened in the past and does not represent current behavior or conduct (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Contextualization	Claim that a specific or distinctive feature of the local context led to the unlawful conduct or act (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).
Spatial isolation of the event	Claim that the unlawful conduct or act was an isolated event that does not represent the organization's behavior or practices (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).

Chart 3

Discrediting narratives

Type of neutralization	Description
Condemnation of the condemner / Attack on the accuser	Attack on those accusing corporations to minimize the allegations (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

Chart 4

Transfer of Responsibility

Type of neutralization	Description
Diffusion of responsibility / Transfer of blame	Distribution of decisions across the corporate structure: decisions are attributed to several actors within the organization rather than to a single actor (Gribas et al., 2018; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
Scapegoating	Transfer of responsibility for the unlawful act or conduct to a specific actor within the organizational structure, such as a CEO, executive, or manager. This strategy avoids detailed investigations of the production chain or reduces the event's complexity by attributing responsibility to a single actor (Gribas et al., 2018; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020, 2021; Sisco, 2012).
Shifting expectations	Denial of awareness that products or services were being used to facilitate unlawful conduct or acts, redirecting responsibility to other actors involved in the criminal behavior (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019).

Chart 5

Retraction

Type of neutralization	Description
Partial acknowledgment	Acknowledgment of partial involvement in the criminal event (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020).
Self-correction	No acknowledgment of guilt or responsibility for what occurred. However, the organization states through narratives or notices that it will take action to neutralize the event or prevent the criminal event from recurring (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
Apology	Regret about the criminal event or remorse for actions, accepting responsibility or blame for the event (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
Culture of denial	An individual accepts responsibility and states that their actions were undertaken on behalf of the organization. This type of neutralization resembles diffusion of responsibility or scapegoating, but the organization does not accept responsibility, even when its representative claims to have acted on its behalf (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2021).

Neutralization attempts are therefore organized ways of denying responsibility for accusations. Through such attempts, organizations seek to maintain business legitimacy and repair their image before the public. These strategies may be used before an event, by denying knowledge of the facts, or afterward, by denying accusations. The use of neutralization techniques indicates that an organization's actions have been rejected or have prompted public reactions and that its responses should correspond to the seriousness of the events (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

Research procedures

The literature on qualitative methods informed by contemporary social theory recognizes both the possibility and the need to combine interpretivist, constructionist, and critical approaches (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This combination does not constitute epistemological inconsistency; rather, it is a reflexive analytical strategy that seeks to understand the production of meaning while questioning its social and ideological effects. The interpretivist, constructionist, and critical approaches adopted in this article are supported by contemporary qualitative research literature, which recognizes paradigmatic pluralism as a legitimate analytical strategy.

As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue, different epistemological traditions can be used in complementary ways. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) advocate a reflexive approach integrating interpretive and critical levels of analysis, allowing both the reconstruction of meaning and its ideological interrogation. Combining these perspectives is therefore a methodological choice consistent with paradigmatic pluralism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), in which established traditions connect understanding and critique in the investigation of complex social phenomena.

The study employed documentary research using Grupo Madero's public documents as its corpus, focusing on textual aspects and individuals' reinterpretation of narratives (Flick, 2009). The founder's statements are considered organizational documents because they express the values, beliefs, and practices that constitute organizational identity. Grupo Madero was created and consolidated through the founder's life narrative (Perez, 2022).

The research corpus comprised statements by Grupo Madero's founder, Luiz Durski Júnior, including news reports, interviews, and corporate videos available through different media, as well as statements about the COVID-19 pandemic collected from his Instagram account and published on March 23 and 24, 2020 (Chart 6). The empirical material was transcribed, producing four pages of text.

Chart 6

Empirical Material

Type of Material	Description	Duration	Available from
Talk	ExpoGestão 2017 – Talk by Júnior Durski	00:52:42	ExpoGestão channel (YouTube)
Talk	Entrepreneurship lesson – How Restaurante Madero began	00:18:27	Escola de Criatividade channel (YouTube)
Corporate video	Madero launches new positioning	00:02:26	Grupo Madero corporate website
Group history	Madero launches new positioning	–	Grupo Madero corporate website
First statement by entrepreneur Júnior Durski	"This is what we will face in 2021 unless this INSANE LOCKDOWN ends. 300,000, 400,000, 500,000 PEOPLE will die in Brazil over the next two years as a result of the economic damage caused by the LOCKDOWN"	00:04:26	The entrepreneur's Instagram account
Second statement by entrepreneur Júnior Durski	"Please forgive me if I was misunderstood!"	00:06:31	The entrepreneur's Instagram account
	Total	01:24:32	

An extensive search of the organization's website did not yield sufficient material to reconstruct the narrative of its founding, so talks delivered by the entrepreneur were used instead. The empirical material was selected because it encompassed different sources of organizational narratives, covering both the history of the organization's founding and the founder's statements about the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the research was conducted during this health crisis, only documents and narratives available online were used. Following the entrepreneur's statements and during the preparation of the study, no official communication from the group about the episode was found.

Narrative analysis was used to examine the empirical material. According to Pentland (1999), this approach explains how stories are constructed by identifying the sequence of events, the main actors, the narrative, and the characteristics of events. It is essential for understanding the interpretations underlying a story and was used here because it offers a critical, constructionist analytical lens on organizational narratives, recognizing that organizational storytelling involves contests over meaning and strategies of legitimation.

The structure follows Bastos and Biar's (2015) proposal: it begins by contextualizing the topic, introduces the actors involved in the narrative, presents the chronological sequence of events, and concludes with a thematic evaluation addressing the study's objective, including neutralization attempts. In the first analytical stage, following the criteria for introducing the actors and establishing the chronology, attention focused on statements by the entrepreneur about Grupo Madero's characteristics and formation. This produced Storytelling 1 – Grupo Madero's Memory, which presents the company's trajectory through the entrepreneur's narrative.

Storytelling 2 – The Episode then addresses the entrepreneur's statement about the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Storytelling 3 – Retraction and Neutralization Attempts presents his apology as an antenarrative and treats it as a neutralization attempt. The interpretation of retractions as neutralization mechanisms was not assumed a priori; it emerged from recurring discursive features associated with reputational damage containment, the displacement of responsibility, and the symbolic redefinition of the episode. The analytical categories used to identify neutralization attempts in the documents were those found in the literature and presented in Charts 1-5.

These attempts are neither hierarchical nor rigid categories and may overlap within organizational narratives. The thematic analysis therefore sought to identify neutralization attempts and relate the charts to the narratives. The apology by Grupo Madero's founder is considered a neutralization mechanism because, before the episode, his narratives were organizational, whereas after it there was an attempt to separate his statements from the organization.

Storytelling 1: Grupo Madero's memory

Grupo Madero's history is directly linked to that of its founder, entrepreneur Luiz Durski Júnior. The business began in 1999 with the opening of the first Restaurante Durski in Curitiba, following the entrepreneur's various professional experiences. He began investing in gastronomy through Restaurante Durski, a themed restaurant with Polish and Ukrainian roots whose menu featured family recipes (ExpoGestão, 2017). In 2005, he opened Restaurante Madero next to Restaurante Durski, specializing in cheeseburgers (ExpoGestão, 2017; Madero, 2017).

The entrepreneur then began expanding the Grupo Madero brand. In 2008, he opened a second Restaurante Madero at Shopping Palladium in Curitiba, which did not achieve the expected profitability. At the insistence of another entrepreneur, who later became Luiz Durski Júnior's business partner, they opened a third franchise at Shopping São José dos Pinhais in the metropolitan area, which also failed to generate the expected profits. In another attempt, he opened a fourth restaurant in Balneário Camboriú in 2011. It performed well during the high season, but profits declined afterward. The fifth Restaurante Madero, located at Shopping Estação in Curitiba, had the poorest performance (ExpoGestão, 2017).

The entrepreneur's storytelling about Grupo Madero links its history to his own, emphasizing the obstacles encountered in establishing the businesses. This strategy reinforces a sense of identity, belonging, and organizational values (McCarthy, 2008; Mumby, 2016). The narrative includes elements identified by Silva et al. (2001) and Moore (2012), such as voice tone and captivating language, which attract audiences' attention and lead them to imagine the story, emphasizing events that enhance its appeal.

Storytelling contributes to the creation of an organizational hero. Here, the entrepreneur's personal history of overcoming challenges in establishing the group – including authenticity, growth based on innovation and standardization, and tensions during crises – turns the founder's trajectory into a marketing tool (Medeiros, 2009; Mumby, 2016; Robin & McNeil, 2019). Both personal and organizational histories form part of organizational storytelling (Boje, 1991; Boje & Smith, 2010).

The history of an organization that offers "the best burger in the world" or "makes the world better" is associated with the entrepreneur's history, creating an important connection for attracting customers. Vendelø (1998) argues that organizational reputation determines a company's continued presence in the market; when the entrepreneur's reputation is affected, the organization's image is also affected.

Storytelling 2: the episode

Presenting Storytelling 2 requires a brief account of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. In Brazil, the pandemic was marked by the spread of the virus from March 2020 onward and became a health, social, and political crisis because its effects were unevenly distributed across the population. Public health measures were adopted to contain transmission, including social distancing and isolation, also referred to as lockdown (Moraes et al., 2021).

At the social level, Brazil faced significant challenges concerning the capacity of the Brazilian Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde [SUS]). At the political level, related denialist discourses opposed public health and social isolation measures. These included minimizing the severity of the disease, undermining preventive measures, underreporting deaths and infections, promoting treatments without scientific validation, and disputes over vaccination nationwide and the economic effects of lockdown (Morel, 2021; Rathsam, 2021).

As the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world, Luiz Durski Júnior posted a statement on Instagram on March 23, 2020 – when lockdown was decreed as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus (Kharroubi & Saleh, 2020) – about potential deaths. The entrepreneur invoked Brazil's economic circumstances to justify his position:

I know we have to mourn, but let us mourn every person who is going to die from coronavirus; let us take care of them, let us isolate older people, let us isolate people with health problems, such as diabetes. Let us do it! *It is our duty, but we cannot, because of 5,000 or 7,000 people who are going to die [...]* [emphasis added] (Durski, 2020a).

I know it is very serious, I know it is a problem, but what already happens in Brazil is much more serious... [...] And now 5,000 people are going to die from COVID-19, *and we cannot prevent it, we cannot prevent it; there is no way to close everything, hide from the enemy, and stop working* [emphasis added] (Durski, 2020a).

To provide figures supporting his statement, the entrepreneur referred to COVID-19 mortality and compared the number of deaths with those caused by other diseases. He argued that Brazil could not halt its activities because of "5,000 or 7,000 deaths." However, by October 8, 2023, three years after the statement, Brazil had recorded 705,962 confirmed deaths from the virus (Coronavírus Brasil, 2023). The latest update of the Coronavirus Dashboard in 2025 – the official communication channel for Brazil's COVID-19 epidemiological situation – reported 716,626 confirmed deaths from the disease (Coronavírus Brasil, 2023).

The entrepreneur's narrative was not unique and reflected a denialist discourse already circulating in Brazilian society. Other entrepreneurs expressing similar views included Alexandre Guerra, owner of Giraffas; Luciano Hang, owner of Havan; and Roberto Julius (Correio Braziliense, 2020; Soares & Schiavi, 2023). Luiz Durski Júnior should

therefore be understood as part of a group of entrepreneurs whose denialist discourses align with neoliberal and meritocratic rhetoric. He constructs the image of a popular hero offering the best burger in the world while criticizing discourses that challenge capital accumulation (Grupo Madero, n.d.; Soares & Schiavi, 2023).

Grupo Madero's marketing strategy established a direct relationship between the entrepreneur's life story and organizational storytelling (Boje, 1991; Boje & Smith, 2010; Vendelø, 1998), emphasizing the difficulties he faced before launching the brand and his subsequent recognition within Brazilian entrepreneurship, supported by a strong digital presence (Grupo Madero, n.d.). After the statement, Grupo Madero's image was damaged, prompting customer dissatisfaction on social media because customers disagreed with the entrepreneur's political position. On Twitter, the hashtag #BoicoteMadero featured numerous comments opposing his statement and calling for a boycott of the restaurant. In response, he issued a second statement apologizing.

In this setting, the entrepreneur's statements require contextual attribution to be considered organizational narratives. Understanding his speech as organizational narrative does not violate freedom of expression on social media, since all his statements before the episode were linked to that narrative. These statements can move between personal and organizational spheres depending on their impact and public reception. Durski's statement began as a personal, denialist position and subsequently became a Grupo Madero business narrative when appropriated by the brand, creating ethical contradictions by connecting discourse with corporate practices (Soares & Schiavi, 2023).

Storytelling 3: the retraction

Following the negative reaction to his first statement, Luiz Durski Júnior posted another statement on March 24, 2020: We are living through a difficult time, a time when we even have to be careful about what we say. I do not want to be misunderstood; I want to make my position clear. I am troubled, I am deeply concerned about every person who is going to die and is already dying from coronavirus. I am concerned; I am troubled by the thousands of people who are going to die from coronavirus. I have absolutely no doubt that we cannot leave anyone behind. I will have to take care of everyone, but these coronavirus containment measures cannot be disproportionate; they have to be proportionate (Durski, 2020b).

It cannot be this way, with no thought given to the economic consequences that will follow [...]. So, please, do not misunderstand me; I do not mean, I would never say, that a life is unimportant. Every life matters, but we have to take care [...] but we have to care for the rich and the poor with the same intensity (Durski, 2020b).

The entrepreneur's public apology was a neutralization attempt aimed at repairing the organization's image, which had been damaged by the antenarrative consisting of a statement that devalued lives lost during the pandemic. When Storytelling 2 – The Episode is treated as narrative and Storytelling 3 – The Retraction as antenarrative, a wager on the future and the tension between health and the economy, the entrepreneur's statement becomes consolidated as Grupo Madero's narrative.

Mapping the narrative trajectory reveals that, at the individual stage, the antenarrative is fragmented and contradicts the entrepreneur's performance as a popular hero. He is instead perceived as a denialist, generating performative chaos. The antenarrative then contests discursive territory and meaning with different voices, including those of other entrepreneurs who produced similar narratives. Finally, the new narrative stabilizes and becomes part of the business narrative, resulting in reputational rejection and defining a new identity for Grupo Madero (Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

The entrepreneur's antenarrative and neutralization mechanism were used to reinterpret organizational identity. However, he invoked economic considerations as a justification in both the original statement and the retraction. He was concerned about the food service sector, in which Grupo Madero operated – one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic (Bridi, 2020).

Luiz Durski Júnior's neutralization attempts occurred after the episode, constituting an antenarrative. The retraction was motivated by the negative reaction on social media. This supports the findings of Smithson and Venette (2013) and Schoultz and Flyghed (2019) concerning organizations' responses to more serious events, which follow a similar pattern. The entrepreneur's responses followed the media reaction, suggesting that an apology would suffice as a retraction.

To address the study's objective – examining how the public retraction by Grupo Madero's founder reconfigured organizational identity during a reputational crisis concerning the number of COVID-19 deaths – the analysis identifies the neutralization attempts used by Luiz Durski Júnior in his apology on March 24, 2020. Such attempts occur when organizations seek to reconstruct their image through new narratives, with apologies representing one way to justify their actions (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020). The following neutralization attempts were identified:

a) Culture of denial

A culture of denial seeks to assign blame separately (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2021): the entrepreneur's narrative does not represent the organization's narrative. Grupo Madero therefore does not accept responsibility for its founder's attitudes and positions, even when expressed on behalf of the organization.

This strategy for avoiding organizational accountability acknowledges the event but refuses organizational involvement by asserting that the entrepreneur's narrative does not represent the organizational narrative. However, this separation is possible only because he was referring to an organizational position. It was therefore a selective separation intended to avoid reputational contradictions. Used during reputational crises, this mechanism demonstrates a form of narrative impunity that invokes denialist discourse, such as communication failures, rather than addressing practices of accumulation during crises (Oliveira & Botinha, 2024; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2021).

b) Partial acknowledgment

Partial acknowledgment of the account can also be considered a neutralization attempt by the entrepreneur. It is apparent in the statement, "We are living through a difficult time, *a time when we even have to be careful about what we say. I do not want to be misunderstood; I want to make my position clear* [emphasis added]" (Durski, 2020b). The entrepreneur recognizes that he has been criticized and offers a partial apology within the narrative (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020). Although the founder is symbolically associated with the organization, his statement seeks to establish a discursive distinction between his personal position and organizational identity to limit the episode's reputational impact on the company.

Beyond providing an incomplete apology, the entrepreneur's discursive strategy moves within an interpretive space. By stating, "I do not want to be misunderstood," he acknowledges problematic content in his speech but qualifies it by shifting attention to public reception. He thereby preserves his legitimacy and position without fully repairing the discourse (Oliveira & Botinha, 2024; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

c) Partial temporal isolation

The statement can also be understood as partial isolation. This device is used when an event is presented as isolated and not reflective of the organization's image (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019). The neutralization attempt appears when the entrepreneur states, "[...] *I want to make my position clear* [emphasis added]" (Durski, 2020b).

The neutralization attempt characterizes the discourse as a particular episode, seeking to establish discontinuity with the business narrative presented up to that point. Selective temporalization reconstructs an idea of the past that has no continuity with the current statement. Isolating the event reduces the possibility of compromising organizational legitimacy and reputation. However, this isolation contradicts previous discourses and narratives and merely describes the event as a way to contain negative outcomes (Oliveira & Botinha, 2024; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

d) Apology

The entrepreneur's statement can also be characterized as an apology expressing regret or remorse through speech (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013). He apologizes in the following passage: "*So, forgive me if anyone misunderstood me. I do not think I would ever speak badly of, or belittle, even a single life; I would never do that. Forgive me if I had that [...], if I seemed, if I was misunderstood* [emphasis added]" (Durski, 2020b).

In practice, the apology avoids full accountability for the episode while suggesting a "misinterpretation." The entrepreneur's statement therefore does not express genuine remorse but functions as a rite of passage intended to reduce possible adverse effects on organizational reputation. The apology was thus used as a tool for organizational repair (Oliveira & Botinha, 2024; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

e) Denial of intent

The statement can also be understood as a technique of denial of intent (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019; Smithson & Venette, 2013). In this form of neutralization, the entrepreneur seeks to deny that he intended to argue that the deaths of "5,000 or 7,000 people" (Durski, 2020a) would be necessary to keep the economy operating. This attempt is illustrated by the following passage: "*I am concerned; I am troubled by all the thousands of people who are going to die from coronavirus. I have absolutely no doubt that we cannot leave anyone behind* [emphasis added]" (Durski, 2020b).

The denial of intent shifts a potential moral judgment toward intentionality. By asserting concern for people's lives, the entrepreneur seeks to reconstruct his image and reduce the seriousness of the earlier statement. The strategy moves the narrative's intention into a moral context, allowing blame to be qualified (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2019, 2020; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

The analysis of Luiz Durski Júnior's attempts to neutralize narratives reveals a discursive configuration of crisis management in which different mechanisms mitigate reputational harm. Individualizing blame; selectively refusing to connect the organization to the narrative through a culture of denial; admitting responsibility in a controlled manner through partial acknowledgment; decontextualizing the event through partial isolation; and expressing conditional regret through an apology operate sequentially and overlap (Oliveira & Botinha, 2024; Santos et al., 2020; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

The analysis gains theoretical depth when attempts to neutralize narratives are related to organizational storytelling. This form of storytelling is not a linear narrative but a dynamic arena of discursive contestation and socially constructed, organized meanings in which different resources may be mobilized to legitimate and preserve the organization. Neutralization attempts create tension between organizational narrative and antenarrative, allowing the entrepreneur to move between denial and accountability. Beyond avoiding accountability, they construct and reconstruct meaning during a crisis. Maintaining organizational reputation therefore depends on strategic discursive management (Oliveira & Botinha, 2024; Santos et al., 2020; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

Final considerations

This study examined how the public retraction by Grupo Madero's founder reconfigured organizational identity during a reputational crisis, specifically concerning the number of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In a statement posted on Instagram, Luiz Durski Júnior argued that Brazil could not implement a lockdown to contain the spread of the virus "because of 5,000 or 7,000 people who are going to die" (Durski, 2020a). He invoked economic justifications, prioritizing concern for profits over human life.

Following the negative reaction, he issued a retraction, an apology, claiming that he had been misunderstood. His narrative prompted reactions among consumers and culminated in a boycott of Grupo Madero products. Consumers active on social media purchase products or services from organizations that share their individual values (Trindade et al., 2020).

The entrepreneur's retraction operated as an antenarrative, and forms of responsibility neutralization were used to reinterpret organizational identity. Organizations generally use narrative neutralization to justify their actions before the public, preserving their image and legitimacy (Schultz & Flyghed, 2020, 2021). Retraction attempts involved partial acknowledgment and isolation of the narrative: the impact of criticism following the negative response to #BoicoteMadero on Twitter was acknowledged, and partial apologies were offered on the grounds that this was an isolated event that did not represent the organization's image. A culture of denial also emerged, separating organizational speech from personal speech. The entrepreneur additionally resorted to an apology when expressing remorse and to denial of intent when claiming that he had been misunderstood.

The research contributes to organizational studies in two ways. First, it highlights the use of digital platforms to neutralize organizational narratives after negative public reactions. It reveals the political position of a restaurant chain entrepreneur who foregrounds profits while, contradictorily, devaluing lives. Second, it identifies organizational storytelling during a crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – when consumers were strongly engaged with social media, resulting in a reinterpretation of the brand. Madero's slogan, "Madero's burger makes the world better," contrasts with the episode analyzed, which prompted expressions of rejection and consumer boycotts.

Future research could theoretically connect CEO activism in digital media – a contemporary development of narrative dynamics in politicized settings – with anti-management activism. Empirical investigations on social media could identify the forms and effects of boycotts and confrontations between these two types of activism. Organizational studies could benefit from investigations focusing on user comments on digital video platforms, which were outside this study's scope but may yield interesting findings. Another suggestion is to expand the study of retractions and apologies to identify patterns in executives' construction of these narratives.

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