Effects of disinformation on the brand image and the reaction of three companies in the food sector to a communication crisis: Starbucks, Mercadona and Burger King

Efectos de la desinformación sobre la imagen de marca y reacción de tres empresas del sector alimentario ante una crisis de comunicación: Starbucks, Mercadona y Burger King

Efeitos da desinformação sobre a imagem de marca e reação de três empresas do setor de alimentos frente a uma crise de comunicação: Starbucks, Mercadona e Burger King

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ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study investigates the communication strategies developed by three companies in the food sector: Starbucks, Mercadona and Burger King; in order to manage an image crisis caused by the dissemination of false or confu- sing information on the Internet. A descriptive analysis was carried out using a sheet of own elaboration as measure source. The results determined that the keys to this management were the preferential use of social networks, the speed and transparency of responses and

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the repeated use of the word "false" to deny the deception with which these companies had been related.

KEYWORDS

False information, Crisis management, Communication, Corporate image, Internet, Social network.

Resumen

Este estudio indaga en las estrategias de comunicación desarrolladas por tres empresas del sector alimentario: Starbucks, Mercadona y Burger King, con objeto de gestionar una crisis de imagen provocada por la difusión en Internet de información falsa o confusa. Se ha realizado un análisis descriptivo, empleando una ficha como instrumento de medida. Los resultados determinan que las claves de esta gestión fueron el uso preferente de las redes sociales, la rapidez y la transparencia de las respuestas y el empleo reiterado de la palabra "falso" para desmentir el engaño con el que se había relacionado a estas compañías.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Información falsa, Gestión de crisis, Comunicación, Imagen de marca, Internet, Redes sociales.

Resumo

Este estudo investiga as estratégias de comunicação desenvolvidas por três empresas do setor alimentício: Starbucks, Mercadona y Burger King, com objetivo de gerenciar uma crise de imagem provocada pela difusão na Internet de informação falsa ou confusa. Se realizou uma análise descritiva, utilizando uma ficha como instrumento de medida. Os resultados determinam que as chaves desta gestão foram o uso preferente das redes sociais, a rapidez e a transparência das respostas e o uso reiterado da palavra "falso" para desmentir as informações falsas com o que se havia relacionado estas empresas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Informação falsa, Gestão de crise, Comunicação, Imagem de marca, Internet, Redes sociais.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the years 2016 and 2017, the terms post-truth and fake news were designated as the words of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary. The rise of the internet, together with social networks, is helping these concepts to acquire a new dimension and a new meaning for all kinds of companies and institutions. The growing social complexity, together with the current technological revolution, favor the appearance of these phenomena that, among other things, deteriorate the credibility of business and institutional organizations. In these scenarios, crisis situations are generated that can put the financial stability of corporations at risk, deteriorating their structures and slowing down their social and business projection. Image and reputation, understood as the most important assets that organizations have, can be seriously affected (Capriotti, 2009; Carrió, 2013).

The object of study of this research is the analysis of three cases of crisis communication within the food sector that were marked by the dynamics of disinformation and post-truth. These cases, which had a notable impact on the Internet, affected the companies Starbucks, Mercadona and Burger King.

Regarding the term disinformation, the European Commission (2018) not only refers to false content, but to everything that is devoid

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of context and that has the intention of serving certain purposes through the production, propagation and consumption of inaccurate or misleading information that seek to cause public harm. This misinformation can occur through memes, captures, videos, audios, etc. (Maldita.es, 2019).

According to the academic literature consulted on the subject, during the next few years more and more companies will see their image and reputation compromised due to the proliferation of false content. As an example of this situation, the consulting firm Gartner (2017) points out that in the year 2022 there will be more false than true publications circulating on the Internet and that there will be no material and technological capacity to erase them. In addition, he has warned that companies must be prepared to defend themselves against disinformation.

Regarding its dissemination, some studies show that "fake news" spreads faster on the web than real news, especially through social networks like Facebook and Twitter (Martens et al., 2018). In this sense, the First Study on the Impact of Fake News in Spain (Europa Press, 2017) indicates that 86% of Spaniards have difficulties in determining the veracity of different information.

False content represents a concept that, in recent times, has been mainly linked to political activity. A fact that can be observed in recent events such as the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the United States or the triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom (McNair, 2018). However, there is growing interest in the business world in tackling the wave of misinformation affecting all private organizations. The review of the existing business literature shows an adequate theoretical foundation of the reputation of companies from a traditional pers-

pective, focused on conventional media. However, crisis management of online reputation is a relatively new topic, so it is necessary to promote its knowledge and application (Álvarez & Murillo, 2018).

For this reason, it is of interest to know the effects of these phenomena in the business world, as they can cause serious damage to companies. To do this, this research sets the following objectives: a) identify real cases of companies affected by false news, b) study the origin and reasons for these messages, c) investigate the impact that this information generates on the brand image of these companies, d) determine in each case the communication actions developed, in order to establish the key elements that are part of proper crisis management. It seeks to find out if there have been some common determining parameters for solving them that could allow companies to fight against misinformation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CRISES

Crisis communication, from a business point of view, has been the object of study by various researchers (Del Pulgar, 1999; Fita, 1999; Luecke, 2005; Saura, 2005). For Piñuel (1997) this concept represents:

> An unexpected change between two situations, a change that endangers the image and the natural balance of an organization because between the two situations (the situation before and the situation after the crisis) a sudden event occurs against which an organization has to react by compro-

mising its image and its internal balance (as an organization) and its external balance (as an institution) in front of its public. (p. 167)

Each crisis has its own nature. Therefore, there are no two identical crises that can affect companies in the same way (Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020). However, most of the crises exhibit a series of common elements: unfavorable impact on the brand image, direct involvement of the media, positive image of the victims, events develop quickly, the information in their beginnings is scattered and insufficient and the image and reputation of the organization are questioned (Cervera, 2008; Westphalen & Piñuel, 1993).

In relation to this last aspect, business reputation, identity and image are intangible assets that have a decisive influence on the financial capacity of companies. Currently, these terms are used without distinction, a fact that has led to some confusion around them. The reputation of companies is structural in nature. While the image has a more perishable nature. Another difference is that "the identity is built by the company as an integral part of the brand. On the contrary, the image is the result of the corporate effort that results in the public's perceptions of the brand" (Orozco & Ferré, 2013, p. 74). Ultimately, reputation is the end result of the continued conservation and construction of a positive brand image projected to the public (Álvarez & Murillo, 2018), in which perceptions about the brand, the company, its products or its most important performances are registered (Orozco & Roca, 2011).

2.2 ONLINE CRISES

The rise of the internet has caused companies to lose control of communication. Any user, who knows how to handle web 2.0 fluently, can spread messages through social networks that, in record time, "generate a possible image crisis for the company" (Enrique, 2013, p.117; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019).

The Internet has a transcendental role in crisis management, because as a medium, it can be used by various groups to present different points of view about an organization. At the same time, it is a very important tool for organizations immersed in a crisis (Neil, 2000). Companies are forced to check and monitor all aspects that are related to the online reputation of their brands against the potential damage that false information can cause. It is necessary to design strategies that allow foreseeing future reputational incidents (González, 2018).

According to Contreras (2006), some companies consider that communication crises cannot be planned before they occur as they are unexpected and poorly structured events. However, the author adds that multiple studies show that if preventive measures are taken before the crisis occurs, many of its consequences can be avoided. Once they have occurred, following what Villafañe (2013) said, online crises can be measured from a qualitative perspective (who says something) and a quantitative perspective (how many people say it).

Regarding its origin and diffusion, an online reputation crisis can originate in the physical world, "affecting events and creating versions on the Internet about this fact" or in the virtual environment, "which are those resulting, above all, from the use of digital communication strategies by people or groups interested in destabilizing the reputation of the company, such as rumors and orchestrated campaigns" (Victor, 2017, pp. 300-301).

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2.3 HOW COMPANIES SHOULD REACT TO FALSE INFORMATION

The phenomenon of disinformation, together with the role of social networks in the dissemination of content, is forcing the communication directors of companies to develop strategic containment plans to prevent and combat the reputational damage caused by publications or advertising campaigns based on fake news (Pardo Baldeón & Pardo, 2018).

The main objective of business communication "in the event of a breach of balance, is to seek the brake of the crisis as soon as possible and gain control of the information, in order to minimize the loss of credit and capital in image by the company" (Gil, 2013, p.28). Cortés (2019) explains that to manage a crisis marked by disinformation, it is necessary to set up a crisis committee, prepare a diagnosis of the situation, and draw up the strategy to follow. All these actions are intended to strengthen the affected company, and allow it the timely development of strategies to improve its positioning and levels of trust, credibility and reputation with its audiences (Martín, 2006; Salazar et al., 2016).

In more concrete terms, companies must face the crisis by promoting a transparent and fluid dialogue with their different audiences (González, 2018; Saura, 2005) through channels such as social networks, which allow the dissemination of all kinds of content on the organization (Cano, 2019). These tools have enormous potential in a crisis context, as they allow an immediate response to stabilize a dangerous situation (Calleja-Reina et al., 2018).

The response they adopt cannot arise spontaneously and uncoordinated. It is necessary to design accessible information channels that are continuously updated (Martínez-Solana et al., 2017). Micaletto-Belda et al. (2016) consider that organizations affected by a crisis should govern their communication actions through the following principles: take the initiative, repeat the position over and over again, communicate frequently, generate credibility and trust, assume responsibility, avoid any form lie, avoid distracting attention, avoid silence, do not blame the victims, communicate widely, speak with one voice and be present at the scene.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted around three concepts: misinformation, branding, and crisis communication. From these, other more specific aspects and problems are studied, such as the effects of false messages on the brand image and the reaction of companies to stop or remedy a reputational crisis caused by this type of content.

Regarding the methodology, the article presents a case study (Valles, 2000) based on qualitative content analysis (Abela, 2002); a technique that, according to Sánchez (2005), consists of:

> Systematically apply previously established rules that serve to measure the frequency with which elements of interest appear in the set of a mass of information that we have previously selected to study some of the aspects that seem useful to us regarding the purposes of our research. (p. 213)

To collect the data, an analysis sheet was designed as a measurement instrument that is composed of the following fields: affected company, country and date on which the events take place, headline and keywords that summarize and identify the case, channel and support of the information disseminated, source of the news, target to which it is addressed, effects or con-

sequences on the company's brand image and action plan or communication strategies adopted to manage the reputational crisis.

A directed sample was used (Glaser et al., 1968; Vinuesa, 2005). In this way, the study units were selected based on the objectives and the object presented, since one of the initial purposes was the identification of real cases where there was the problem of threat or damage to the brand image. Specifically, the sample consisted of three crisis communication situations derived from the public dissemination on the internet of false or unclear information in three companies from the food sector. The selection criteria for the sample were the two factors of having been affected by a disinformation process and belonging to the food sector. Two of these cases took place in Spain (Mercadona and Burger King) and the third (Starbucks) in the United States. As a whole, they constitute a field of study of special interest to the population, since they involve companies directly related to nutrition and people's health.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Following the methodology described above, three real cases were analyzed where the post-truth phenomenon negatively affects the brand image of a company, altering its normal activity and forcing it to act accordingly. In all these events, a communication plan was put into place with the intention of denying and stopping the spread of false information and avoiding a possible identity crisis.

4.1 THE STARBUCKS CASE IN THE 2019 EDITION OF THE OSCARS

Founded in 1971 in Seattle (United States), Starbucks is the world's largest international chain of coffeehouses with more than 17,000 stores in 50 countries, as detailed on its website. Starbucks sells coffee and other hot beverages, as well as snacks, whole-bean coffee, and merchandise such as mugs and thermos.

A recent post-truth case that affected the company was caused by a fake new published on social networks (Table 1).

Table 1

The Starbucks case in the 2019 Edition of the Oscars

The Starbucks case in the 2019 Edition of the Oscars	
Company	Starbucks
Country	United States
Date	February 2019
Headline	Lady Gaga fans create a Starbucks scam to boost the song Shallow on Billboard Hot 100 Music Charts
Keywords	Shallowbucks, Starbucks, coupon, free drink, Lady Gaga
Channel / Support	Messages on Twitter
Source	Little Monsters: Lady Gaga fan club
Target	Internet users
Effects on the image	The company is forced to apologize and deny a false promotion
Communication strategy	Denied by messages on Twitter

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Following the Oscars ceremony held on February 25, 2019, a fake poster (Figure 1) was posted on Twitter advertising a free drink in exchange for a photo where users showed that they had heard the song *Shallow* by Lady Gaga (Oscar winner) on Spotify or Apple Music, followed by the hashtag #shallowbucks. The tweet went viral and there were users who went to Starbucks stores to exchange the photo for the promised prize.

Figure 1

The Starbucks case: tweet with fake coupon

As reported by the American news portal Buzz-Feed, focused on monitoring viral content, this tweet was a campaign promoted by fans of Lady Gaga in order to raise the song *Shallow* to the top of the Billboard Hot 100 chart of musical hits. To make this fake news even more convincing, some of these fans published direct messages with a coupon on their social networks that were supposedly sent from Starbucks to users, but those were equally false (Mack, 2019).

Faced with this situation, which the US media described as fraud and deception (Hannan, 2019; Mack, 2019; Maicki, 2019), the company reacted quickly. For this, Starbucks used the same channel and the same format of the false news: messages on their social media profiles of their Twitter accounts @starbucks and @starbuckshelp, clarifying that said promotion was fictitious and that it was not valid in any of its shops. Likewise, the company interacted with users, apologizing and answering their questions about the false promotion. Some of the messages were:

• "Of course, #Shallowbucks is not real and Starbucks is not complying with the fake promotion."

• In response to a user (@enigmapopstr) (Figure 2): "Hello, I'm so sorry for any confusion, but this is not a valid Starbucks offer. This post is completely false. We are investigating to determine how this fake post was created and circulated. Thank you."

Figure 2

The Starbucks case: tweet with denial
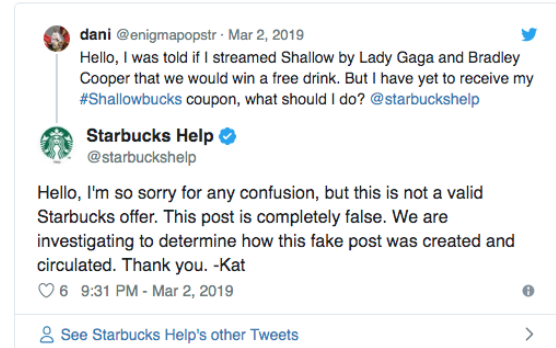
In conclusion, it can be said that the brief messages published on Twitter by Starbucks were a quick and direct strategy to stop the circulation of the false news and make users see that it was a hoax that they should not pay attention.

4.2 MERCADONA CASE IN RELATION TO THE ORIGIN OF ITS PRODUCTS AND SUPPLIERS

Mercadona, a family-owned company, is one of the main physical and online supermarket companies in Spain. Founded in 1977 by the Cárnicas Roig Group, it currently has 1,629 stores throughout Spain and a staff of 85,800 people.

During the years 2015 and 2016 it had to face a hoax, according to which Mercadona had transferred purchases or suppliers out of Spain (Table 2).

Table 2

*Mercadona case in relation to
the origin of its products and suppliers*

Mercadona case in relation to the origin of its products and suppliers	
Company	Mercadona
Country	Spain
Date	2016
Headline	Mercadona eliminates more than 1,800 Spanish products for other low-quality foreign products
Keywords	Mercadona, hoax, products, origin, suppliers, oil, milk
Channel / Support	Messages on social networks, forums and blogs
Source	Unknown origin
Target	Real and potential clients of Mercadona
Effects on the image	Denies one of the main values of the company: its commitment to national products
Communication strategy	Denied: report published on the web and messages on its Facebook profile

It was accused of having diverted the production abroad of 1,800 products, including oil, oranges and potatoes. According to the allegedly false news, they now came from Morocco, Argentina and Israel, respectively. This information belied one of the main values of the company: its commitment to national production. Consequently, it negatively affected its brand image, positioned as one of the best valued by Spanish citizens (Metroscopia, 2017). The message was distributed, shared and viralized through different digital platforms: forums (ForoCoches or the forum area of the Meristation website), social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and blogs (boycott market, imagine65 …).

Following one of the maxims in creating and maintaining a good corporate reputation, the company did not ignore this information. On the contrary, it opted for communication and transparency, publishing on its website a complete report aimed at consumers on the commitment to Spanish products where it explained who manufactures the articles of its private brands such as Hacendado or Bosque Verde. As presented by the newspaper El País, along with the denial it also provided "a panel with the brands of the integrated suppliers and details about the origin of products questioned because they have a new origin such as oil or milk" (2016).

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The initial fragment of this statement is: "Sometimes the rumor circulates through social networks that Mercadona eliminates Spanish products in favor of foreign products in Mercadona or that Spanish products are withdrawn from Mercadona. If you have also heard this, we assure you that this information is completely false. We disassemble this hoax product by product in the publication on the commitment to Spanish products in Mercadona". And it continues: "This information is completely FALSE. We show you with facts".

The company "is usually sparing in its press releases" (El País, 2016), but on this occasion, and with the clear intention of dealing with these fake news, it was prolix in figures and specific data regarding the number of manufacturers and providers it works with. Likewise, this information is expanded with extensive studies published on its website on the traceability of the origin of purchases made for olive oil and milk from its Hacendado brand. Being these two of the products whose origin is in doubt in the "false messages" published in social networks.

It is worth highlighting the development of specific non-textual material for this crisis communication campaign. Specifically, we highlight a graphic (Figure 3) that represents and summarizes the panel of products mentioned in the report and a photographic montage (Figure 4) with the message "This is false" in red on the text of the alleged hoax published on the Internet.

Figure 3

Mercadona case: report graph

Figure 4

Mercadona case: photo montage

One of the achievements of this communication campaign aimed at avoiding an image crisis was to get a good number of headlines to echo the denial disseminated by Mercadona. So these media, including El País, ABC, El Correo, La Vanguardia, etc., published the statement as a

news item where the company is presented as the victim of a hoax that is dismantled based on the data that was supplied by the company itself. Ultimately, the verdict is favorable, the marketing and communication strategy worked well, and the company managed to stop this news and most of the associated comments. Proof of this is that as of the year 2017 there are very few references to this topic on the internet, with some exceptions such as the Alerta Digital (2017) web portal.

4.3 BURGER KING CASE: FALSE JOB OFFER IN A MARKETING CAMPAIGN

In December 2017, the fast food chain Burger King in Spain faced an image crisis whose origin was a false job offer published on its Facebook profile (Table 3) and on the back cover of the newspaper 20 Minutos.

With this advertisement (Figure 5), delivery men were requested who, in addition to the necessary driving licenses, needed to have knowledge of literature, mathematics, politics, and even "video game skills" or "musical skills"; that they would have to demonstrate in a placement test. This was not actually an actual offer, but was part of a company marketing campaign titled "Play for the Whopper," as indicated in a small-print disclaimer at the bottom of the image. It would be a case of what has been called "fake advertising news" (Jiménez, 2017), which in an "advantageous-opportunistic" way seek to attract the attention of the user and make noise in the face of a statement or action of the company, while promoting the brand.

Tabla 3

Caso Burger King: campaña de marketing con falsa oferta de empleo

Caso Burger King: Falsa oferta de empleo	
Empresa	Burger King
País	España
Fecha	Diciembre de 2017
Titular	Falsa oferta de empleo perjudica la imagen de marca de Burger King
Palabras clave	Oferta de empleo, falsa, Burger King, repartidor, salarios, campaña, publicidad, broma
Canal / Soporte	Redes sociales / medios de comunicación
Órgano emisor	Usuarios particulares / Comisiones Obreras / medios de comunicación
Target	Usuarios de internet
Efectos sobre la imagen	Críticas negativas hacia la campaña / críticas negativas hacia las condiciones laborales de la empresa
Estrategia de comunicación	Declaraciones en medios / mensajes en redes sociales / canal de atención al cliente

Figure 5

False job offer in a Burger King marketing campaign

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Hundreds of users, not realizing the falseness of the message or not understanding its humorous intention, felt offended. And they manifested this by publishing multiple messages on their Twitter and Facebook profiles, where they criticized or made fun of the working conditions of Burger King workers, as can be seen in the following examples:

- Is this ad to work at Burger King or to be a sociocultural entertainer at NASA? (@mariorm86)

- They ask more to work at Burger King than to be a politician (@ranadictadora)

- Living with the fear of having a college education and not being hired even by Burger King (@Ana_sabe_volar)

The politicization of the issue was one of the factors that contributed to magnifying the crisis. We refer to the fact that Iñigo Errejón, a deputy for the Podemos party at that time, and the Comisiones Obreras union joined in the criticism, believing that it was a real job offer. In the case of Errejón (Figure 6), his tweet where he demanded that the company begin to "pay living wages" was shared 2,000 times, received 3,000 "likes" and accumulated almost 600 comments. For its part, Comisiones Obreras issued a statement demanding that Burger King stop its "mockery of the precariousness that prevails in home delivery".

Figure 6

Iñigo Errejón's tweet about the Burger King campaign

In order to avoid controversy on issues as sensitive to public opinion as wages and respect for employees, the company was quick to clarify that it was a false message and an advertising campaign, and that the real hiring requirements are different from those exposed. In addition, the company considered that the reactions of users would not have a negative impact on its brand image and assured that they were responding, through their customer service channels, to all the people who had believed that it was a real advertisement. They even said they were happy with the results. Thus, in statements to the *Verne* supplement of the newspaper El País (Sánchez, 2017), the head of Marketing for Burger King Iberia, Bianca Shen, pointed out that the ad "is causing noise and was what we expected. We are trending topic and it is going fairly good".

Despite these explanations, the ad went viral and continued to generate interactions, some of which contained a clear negative sentiment towards the company and the aforementioned advertising:

- The Burger King thing was indeed a campaign that I suppose was trying to be funny. The conditions of its workers are not (@Guille_UHP).

- Just because it's marketing doesn't mean it's not insulting (@julianlopezz).

- What kind of creative applauds that no one understands their campaign and that it also creates a reputation crisis for the brand? Explain it to me, please (@Zurdo).

Even the politician Iñigo Errejón joined a Twitter thread related to this controversy with the following message: It is not important because it is part of an advertising campaign but because it actually happens. Both at the curricular and salary level (@ierrerjon).

The media themselves published critical comments about the campaign considering that this action had turned against them (Álvarez, 2017), and that it could end up doing a disservice to the business (La Vanguardia, 2017). They also described it as dishonorable for "playing to tell jokes" at the cost of job insecurity or "using the clumsiness of readers to build a viral campaign" (Jiménez, 2017).

On the contrary, there were other users who praised on Facebook and in cybermedia the creativity, the wisdom and the sense of humor of those responsible for this campaign like the example of Figure 7 that expresses: What a good marketing strategy! What they wanted was advertising and they have had it at a reduced price. Congratulations to the director of the company.

In most cases, the firm's community manager responded to these comments.

Figure 7

Opinion published in La Vanguardia
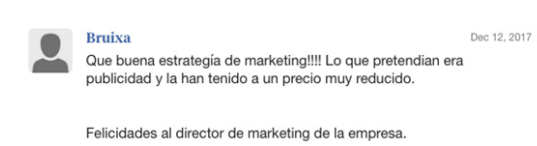
Ultimately, Burger King reacted quickly to the image crisis generated by the false job offer. In order to stop negative comments about their wages and working conditions, it offered the corresponding clarifications through the media, contacting the unions and resolving the doubts of users through its customer service channels. However, the firm did not give explanations on social networks but instead replied to the comments humorously but indirectly, with somewhat ambiguous responses as can be seen in the examples from Figure 8 translated below:

- Alberto Hernández Sánchez: April Fools' Day is not December 28? There are more requirements to enter here than to be part of GEOS! To which it was replied: GEOS are not as cool as BK.

- Rodrigo Andrés Puebla: Let's be honest, all those who meet these onerous requirements aspire to have a better job than being a motorcycle delivery man for a fast food chain and apart from that, being fooled as my colleagues say. There is still a lot for the 28 of this month. To which they replied: Now, being a Burger King delivery guy is going to be cool.

Burger King responded in a way that it did not encourage the proliferation of these messages, but neither did it try to stop them in order to create conversation and publicity around the brand, the campaign and its home delivery service, in particular.

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Figure 8

Burger King Facebook Posts and Responses

5. CONCLUSIONS

After having analyzed three real and recent cases of companies in the food sector affected by the publication of hoaxes, fake news or confusing information on the internet, we present below the conclusions of this work.

The existing literature on crisis communication is quite extensive and abundant (Álvarez & Murillo, 2018; Castillo, 2010; Del Pulgar, 1999; Enrique, 2013; Fita, 1999; González, 2018; González Herrero, 1998; Luecke, 2005; Saura, 2005; Villafañe, 2013; Victor, 2017). The documentary review has made it possible to understand that in those works that study online crises, marked by the dynamics of disinformation, it is appreciated that the variables to control in the Internet environment are more numerous and difficult to manage. Smolak and García (2020) point out that, due to the rise of Social Media, online communication crises are acquiring a greater role in conventional media. However, "it is considered a marginal field within the academic, media and professional world" (p.18); despite the communicative, social and economic damage that they can acquire in companies.

In relation to another of the key concepts of the study, for the Royal Spanish Academy, post-truth is the deliberate distortion of a reality that manipulates beliefs and emotions in order to influence public opinion and the attitudes of citizens. It is common to identify this concept with politics and social issues. However, it also involves the business sector, as this study shows. A false, malicious and strategically published and viralized news on the Internet can damage the public image of a company with corporate grievance and the economic losses that this entails.

Based on the objectives, it is detected that the origin and distribution of false news are located on the internet, with different sources being: the media, the users themselves, associations (such as a fan club in the Starbucks case), organizations (a labor union in the Burger King case) or even of unknown origin (Mercadona case). While in all the cases analyzed, the recipients of these messages are the general public present on the Internet, therefore, the actual or potential consumers of these brands.

For its part, the impact of this information on the brand image is manifested in different aspects such as being involved in a deception (Starbucks case), denying the company's values (Mercadona case) or receiving negative criticism around the company's working conditions (Burger King case).

The main interest of the study has focused on knowing the communicative actions developed by companies, which has made it possible to meet the objective of identifying common patterns of action in the face of the threat posed by false information circulating on the internet. In the analyzed cases, the firms Starbucks, Mercadona and Burger King reacted by publishing content that denied or clarified the false information with certain speed through a transparent dialogue with their public, as recommended by authors such as Saura (2005) or González (2018). For this, different channels and formats were used. Starbucks posted mes-

sages on their Twitter accounts, and also interacted with users apologizing for the confusion and telling them they were being scammed.

The situation described determines that social networks play a transcendental role in the massive transmission of false information and also in its control and neutralization by the affected companies, which use them as an effective communication channel (Martínez-Solana et al., 2017) to generate responses that allow stabilizing the situation (Calleja-Reina et al., 2018).

The communication strategy of Mercadona was broader and more elaborate. In addition to the messages on its Facebook profile, it also published a detailed report on its website in order to stop the spread of information and dismantle the hoax about the foreign origin of its products. This document was addressed to consumers and to the media as a press release that was finally published by several Spanish cybermedia.

In contrast, Burger King did not use social media to resolve the confusion generated by posting a false job offer. Its tools for this were press releases and customer service channels. In its networks, the community manager replied with discretion and humor to the comments of the users, taking advantage of the situation to promote public conversation about the brand and thank the favorable opinions.

Regarding the content, the repetitive use of the words false or fake is appreciated in order to categorically deny the deception with which these firms had been related. The term is even written in capital letters, taking into account its connotation on the internet as it is identified with screaming. In relation to style, it is a direct and precise communication that addresses the controversy with messages that are directed to the user or consumer whom they greet and approach in a more personal way. Both strate-

gies are present in the external communication of the studied companies as noted in the Mercadona report: "This information is completely FALSE. We show you with facts." And also in the Starbucks messages published on Twitter: "Hello, we are sorry for any kind of confusion (…). The message is completely false." Finally, considering the non-textual content, a specific material in the form of a graphic and a photographic montage is prepared in the Mercadona case to address the falsity of the hoax.

Another of the guidelines detected is the transmission of positive and reassuring messages in order not to lose the trust of the public and not to provoke an alarm or controversy around the firm or brand. This was the case from Burger King, even pointing out that the campaign was "going quite well", just as they expected. In addition, the communications of these companies were based on data and arguments to justify their actions and support their defense against attacks from public opinion or the media. This is what Mercadona did with its report and Burger King in its press statements.

In the cases analyzed, the communication campaigns worked in such a way that the responses of the companies managed to stop the spread of false information and diverted public attention from the words deception, fraud, falsehood and mockery; undoubtedly damaging to their brand image. As proposed by Xifra (2020), these companies managed crisis communication clearly, directly, quickly and efficiently.

Finally, despite having achieved the objective of identifying guidelines in the action plans of the companies studied, the limitations of working with a small sample were understood. And in this sense, it is suggested to continue analyzing similar and recent situations with the intention of guaranteeing a greater extrapolation of the data.

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