

Native advertising in Vale's reparation process after the dam collapse in Brumadinho

Publicidade nativa no processo de reparação da Vale após o rompimento da barragem em Brumadinho

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RESUMEN

El 25 de enero de 2019, la presa B1 de la minera Vale colapsó en la ciudad de Brumadinho (Minas Gerais), convirtiéndose en el mayor accidente laboral en Brasil en términos de número de víctimas mortales, además de un desastre socioambiental que afectó a 26 municipios a lo largo de la cuenca del río Paraopeba. Sus consecuencias todavía se sienten en las comunidades, tres víctimas aún están desaparecidas y existen litigios transnacionales contra las empresas corporativas involucradas. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo comprender cómo ocurre la comunicación institucional de Vale en el proceso de reparación de los daños causados por el colapso de la presa, con foco en el discurso de renovación adoptado por la empresa en cinco piezas de publicidad nativa publicadas en el portal del diario *Estado de Minas* entre los años 2020 y 2022. A través de un análisis de contenido cualitativo, se pudo observar que su estrategia al utilizar el periodismo de marca para comunicarse con sus audiencias mencionó temas relacionados con acciones de recuperación que la empresa está obligada a cumplir, y hubo ausencia de voces disonantes, una vez que la mayoría de las fuentes eran empleados de Vale. La única vez que Vale presentó una visión prospectiva fue cuando mencionó la descaracterización de otras presas. No se pudo ver una comunicación ética ni una retórica organizacional efectiva. Investigaciones futuras podrían cuestionar a los responsables de la comunicación de Vale sobre la opción de publicidad nativa en lugar de publicidad tradicional o trabajo de gabinete de prensa, así como preguntar a los editores de *Estado de Minas* sobre los riesgos y oportunidades de producir y/o publicar este tipo de contenido patrocinado.

Palabras clave: discurso de renovación; publicidad nativa; periodismo de marca; Brumadinho; análisis de contenido cualitativa.

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ABSTRACT

On 25th January 2019, the mining company Vale's B1 tailings dam collapsed in the city of Brumadinho (Minas Gerais), becoming Brazil's largest labour accident in terms of number of fatalities, as well as a socio-environmental disaster that affected 26 municipalities along the Paraopeba river basin. Its consequences are still felt by the communities, three victims are missing and there are transnational litigations against the involved corporate companies. This research aims to understand how Vale's institutional communication occurs in the reparation process of the damages caused by the dam collapse, with a focus on the discourse of renewal adopted by the company in five native advertising pieces published on *Estado de Minas* newspaper's portal between 2020 and 2022. Through a qualitative content analysis, it was possible to observe its strategy when using brand journalism to communicate with its audiences: it mentioned themes related to recovery actions the company is obliged to comply with, and there was an absence of dissonant voices, as most of the sources were Vale's employees. The only time Vale presented a prospective vision was when it mentioned the decommissioning of other dams. It was not possible to see an ethical communication nor an effective organisational rhetoric. Future research could question Vale's communication officers the option for native ads instead of traditional advertising or press office work, as well as ask *Estado de Minas*' editors about the risks and opportunities of producing and/or publishing this type of sponsored content.

Keywords: discourse of renewal; native advertising; brand journalism; Brumadinho; qualitative content analysis.

1. Introduction

On 25th January 2019, the mining company Vale's B1 tailings dam collapsed in Brumadinho, around 60 kilometres far from Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais state, in Brazil. With 272 deaths, the case is the country's biggest labour accident in terms of fatal victims (Souza & Souza, 2020), as well as a social-environmental disaster that affected 26 municipalities along the Paraopeba basin, as the mud travelled down through the river. After almost five years and three victims yet to be located, the full impact of the dam failure "is still uncertain" (Vale, 2023, p. 1, our translation) and there are transnational litigations in Germany, against TÜV Süd, the German auditor that had certified the safety of the dam months before it collapsed, and in the US, against Vale (Zaneti & Leite, 2023), as well as public civil action in Brazil. Vale is also involved in another dam collapse. In 2015, Samarco's tailings dam breached in Mariana, also in Minas Gerais, killed 19 people and the mud sludge down through Doce river up to the Atlantic Ocean. Samarco miner is a joint venture between Vale and BHP Group.

Research about Vale's communication after the collapse in Brumadinho has focused on the company's first announcement via press statement and the speech of the former CEO (e.g. Mendes & Oliveira, 2019), sustainability reports (Carnielli, 2022), LinkedIn posts (Martino & Rivelli, 2019) or a reparation report published in 2020 (Scroferneker, Silva, Amorim & Oliveira, 2021). There are also studies about news media coverage of the ruptured dam in Brumadinho and about both cases. Regarding advertising content, Vilela (2020a; 2020b) analysed videos of Samarco's institutional campaign produced after the dam breach in 2015, featuring accounts of employees and affected people. "Relying on the 'social responsibility' discourse, the company sought to present its compensation actions as voluntary initiatives, capable of arousing affection in those viewers less informed about the legal impositions required to the company", concluded

Vilela (2020a, p. 328, our translation). Barroca and Oliveira (2022) examined another type of audiovisual content, a documentary produced in 2020 by Vale about its protective actions at the National Forest of Carajás, in the north of Brazil. The authors concluded that, through the documentary, the company tried “to transmit a message of proactivity in relation to ESG principles, in an attempt to change the perception regarding the society’s and investors’ image of Vale, as long as these receivers accept this contract” (Barroca & Oliveira, 2022, p. 179, our translation). Thus, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies about post-disaster native advertising content produced by Brazilian corporations.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to understand how Vale’s institutional communication occurs in the reparation process following the damages caused by the dam collapse in Brumadinho. More specifically, we intend to investigate the themes and sources present in Vale’s native advertising. This form of communication, with an appearance similar to that of journalistic material from news media outlets, is also known by other names, such as branded content, “ad-reportage”, brand journalism or “informercial” (Huf, 2022). With characteristics of news content, these advertising pieces are published in news media and aim to “merge” with the editorial content of newspapers, incorporating themselves into the news content (Assmussen et al., 2016; Fidalgo, 2019; Hardy, 2021; Harms, Bijmolt & Hoekstra, 2017; Lynch, 2018; Wojdyski & Golan, 2016).

This paper is structured as follows: in the theoretical framework section, we present concepts regarding crisis communication, the discourse of renewal theory, brand journalism, and native advertising. We then explain the steps we took to conduct a qualitative content analysis of Vale’s native ad pieces published on a news media outlet in Brazil. We discuss the results and conclude with limitations faced during this investigation and offer suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *Crisis communication and discourse of renewal*

Private organisations involved in issues of public interest should be held accountable before the society. In these situations, commonly known as ‘crises’, organisations need to communicate. “Crisis communication is about framing the interpretation of events and efforts to control meaning” (Coombs, 2018, p. 430). One of the crisis communication theories is the discourse of renewal, which focuses on an optimistic, future-oriented vision of moving beyond the crisis rather than focusing on legal liability or responsibility for the crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2019).

The discourse of renewal has four foundation elements that are essential regardless of crisis type: organisational learning (learning from failure), ethical communication, prospective versus retrospective vision, and effective organisational rhetoric (Ulmer et

al., 2019; Sellnow, Seeger & Sheppard, 2023). Organisational renewal is “a fresh sense of purpose and direction an organization or system discovers after it emerges from a crisis” (Ulmer et al., 2019, p. 385). In learning from the failure, the organisation recognises it had failed in some way by the actions it had taken or failed to take prior to the crisis, so it communicates to its stakeholders “a genuine willingness and capacity to change course to avoid making the same mistakes in the future that precipitated the current crisis” (Sellnow et al., 2023, p. 129). Ethical communication is essential to renewal discourse and begins before a crisis occurs, building symmetrical relationships with stakeholders. “Through fair-minded negotiation, conflict management, and effective listening, these relationships create a reservoir of goodwill” (Sellnow et al., 2023, p. 129), benefiting the organisation during a crisis. In addition, a crisis response that provides an optimistic, compelling, and future-oriented vision is at the heart of renewal discourse, based on experiences during the crisis and putting the future well-being of stakeholders first, instead of divisive debates about blame and responsibilities (Sellnow et al., 2023, p. 130). The effective rhetoric should be done by visionary leaders who serve as prime movers of the renewal enterprise by constructing the meaning of a prospective and compelling future that helps stakeholders make sense of the crisis (Sellnow et al., 2023, p. 130).

2.2. Brand journalism and native advertising

The use of journalism to build (or, in some cases, rebuild) a brand is not new: the brand journalism concept was created by Larry Light in 2004 and, from the 2010s onwards, several journalistic organisations began creating their own internal departments dedicated to branded content. The pioneer was the site BuzzFeed, followed by newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *El País* and others (Lynch, 2018). According to Brito and Carvalho (2021), structural changes in journalism production process and in the relationship between newspapers and their audiences, namely, the development and adoption of digital technologies, imposed a reconfiguration in the “way of doing” journalism, as well as to the profession itself, and Schmitz (2017) identified a migration of professionals trained in journalism to areas such as digital marketing and advertising.

With the “decentralisation of news” in newsrooms (Brito & Carvalho, 2021), journalism is also being used as a strategic communication tool, not just in the source media (press releases, portals and profiles on social networks, for example), but also as branded journalistic content, produced to be broadcast in advertising space within the newspapers, whether printed, digital, or even on television, radio and podcasts. The relationship between the brand and the news organisation is now different: it is no longer a press officer who tries to “sell” his agenda or his sources to a journalist, but rather the company that buys that determined space inside the pages of the newspaper or website, so that the branded content, which has the immediate appearance of a news report, is produced by the newspaper team (which can be an internal team, or composed of freelancers), with the same language and editorial format adopted by the newspaper.

In this context, Carvalho (2022, p. 17, our translation) highlights the relevance of content marketing, “based on the audience’s expectations, a criterion for the production and dissemination of information woven, often, through journalism protocols and techniques”. In a research paper about formats and types of native ads in Spain, Zomeño and Blay-Arráez (2021) found the most used is the interactive format known as multimedia article or longform, as well as videos, and presented a list of types, such as ask me anything (AMA), reviews, ‘listicles’ and facts. Li (2019) investigated native ads published in US legacy and digital-only media and found native ads on legacy media explained trends and issues concerning a sponsor using sponsor-related sources, while the ones on digital-only media outlets provided how-to advice to consumers using anonymous sources (Li, 2019, p. 593).

In the case of crisis communication, this strategy is also used, and Lynch (2018) calls it “issue-based native advertising”, that is, campaigns produced by corporations with the intention to influence public opinion and enhance its image from a positive framing. One study was found about native advertising in a post-crisis situation. In an online experiment conducted among US residents, Wu and Overton (2022) investigated how crisis type (victim, accident, intentional) and ad identification influence the effectiveness of native corporate social responsibility (CSR) advertising as a post-crisis response strategy. They used three versions of a crisis news article of a fictitious bank and fake accounts: in the victim crisis condition, the fake account situation was described as a rumour started by a competitor, in the accidental condition, the piece described how a technical error in the system led to the creation of fake accounts; and in the intentional condition, the creation of fake account was described as an intentional effort where bank employees were secretly creating unauthorised accounts. After reading one of the versions, participants read the native CSR ad - with a disclosure label at the top of the article - about the fictitious bank assisting disadvantaged communities.

The authors found that crisis type, and ad identification are two influential factors. That is, “when a crisis is accidentally or even intentionally caused by a company, consumers seem to be more tolerant of the company buying native advertisements to present its CSR efforts, (...) participants’ responses were not influenced by ad identification in these two conditions” (Wu & Overton, 2022, p. 368). Therefore, we believe more research is needed to understand native advertising of corporate organisations in crisis context, especially in post-disasters. To fill this gap, we examined Vale’s native ad published in Belo Horizonte-based *Estado de Minas*’ website after the dam breach in Brumadinho.

3. Methodology

This paper has the main objective to comprehend how Vale’s communication occurs in native ads published on newspaper *Estado de Minas*’ website, focusing on themes and sources present in the company’s sponsored content. To do so, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014) involving three phases: preparation, organisation, and reporting of results. In the preparation phase we collected suitable data

for content analysis, made sense of the data, and selected the unit of analysis.

We did a purposive sampling, by manually collecting news about the dam breach on *Estado de Minas*' website (www.em.com.br), from 25th January 2019, using the keyword “Brumadinho”, as part of a broader and ongoing research being conducted by the first author. Founded on 7th March 1928, *Estado de Minas* was chosen because it is one of the oldest news media in Minas Gerais, it had an average print circulation of 11,128 issues in 2022 (Yahya, 2023) and has been covering both dam collapses, in 2015 and in 2019, and their consequences. The news articles were evaluated to see if they are related to the Brumadinho case and were saved on an Excel spreadsheet. Among these news were found five native advertising pieces¹ (Vale, 2020a; 2020b; 2021; 2022a; 2022b), which are the focus of this paper. In the organisation phase we developed a categorisation matrix² with the categories “themes” and “sources”, and all data were reviewed for content and coded for correspondence to or exemplification of these categories. That is, both authors read all Vale's native ad pieces published on *Estado de Minas*' website to identify the themes and cited sources and we discussed the adequacy of results throughout the analysis. In the reporting phase, results were reported by the content of the categories describing the phenomenon and are presented in the following section.

According to Elo et al. (2014, p. 2), one of the main issues with this method lies in the preparation phase, and it's the “trustworthiness of the data collection method, sampling strategy, and the selection of a suitable unit of analysis”. The authors offer a list with questions so researchers who conduct studies using this methodology can check if they are attempting to achieve trustworthiness. In this study, we have five units of analysis: the only five native ads we identified from a larger database, and we believe that these pieces offer what we need in order to identify how Vale used native advertising as a strategy to renew its image and to communicate with its audience.

4. Results and discussion

The type of native advertising used by Vale on *Estado de Minas*' website, when communicating after the dam breach in Brumadinho, can be classified as “facts”, that is, “informative content aimed at highlighting a specific fact using a brief, precise text” (Zomeño & Blay-Arráez, 2021, p. 540). A summary of the results is presented in Table 1.

¹ Vale also publishes on *Estado de Minas*' website other native advertising articles, such as the ones available at <https://www.em.com.br/patrocinado/ofuturoemconstrucao>. Besides, due to the high volume of news published in 2019, the year of the dam collapse, the evaluation of the articles was still undergoing at the time of writing this paper.

² The categorisation matrix is available at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1y917jAZvjhij7tN4-UKNI6QeITHGuF2GKg4tj4BC0yY/edit?usp=sharing>.

In the first native advertising (Figure 1), Vale informed the donation of 55 thousand kits of Covid-19 rapid tests and personal protective equipment (PPE) items, such as goggles, gloves and masks, to ten hospitals in Minas Gerais that serve through Brazil's public health system SUS. The piece also mentioned Vale was doing expansion works and made a financial donation to two hospitals in Belo Horizonte, and supported the project "Masks for all" - in partnership with Yara Tupynambá Institute and Association of Regional Talents - in Brumadinho (Greater Belo Horizonte), in which local seamstresses produced masks for Vale's employees and outsourced staff. The project also offered technical and legal consultancy for the formalisation of individual micro entrepreneurs. The only source interviewed was Vale's occupational health manager and labour doctor, Daniel Penna, who stressed the importance of collective responsibility during the pandemic. The native ad also had a YouTube video³ embedded, which repeated the article's information.

Table 1. Summary of the content analysis of Vale's native advertising on *Estado de Minas*' website

Themes	Sources
Donation of Covid-19 rapid tests and personal protective equipment (PPE) items and financial donations to hospitals; support of "Masks for all" project and individual micro entrepreneurs	Vale's occupational health manager and labour doctor, Daniel Penna
Project "Strengthening the competitiveness of the tourism private sector"	Vale's reparation executive manager, Gleuza Jesué; Hora do Doce's partner, Tiago Henrique; Bistrô Casa do Rei's partner, Reinaldo Mendes; president of Brumadinho and Region's Tourism Association (ATBR), Leonardo Esteves
Tracking system of water supply to directly affected cities	Analyst from the agricultural coordination of the reparation directory, Josué Ferreira; agricultural coordinator of the reparation directory, Marco Furini; owner of a property in Betim, Edmar Amorim; rural producer Alexandre Souza Cruz (picture)
Payment of indemnities; development and social well-being actions; integral reparation agreement; environmental recovery actions; compensation actions in evacuated municipalities; program of dams' de-characterisation	None
Change in dams management; de-characterisation of a dam	None

Source: authors

³ Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F11qBaIolB4>.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Vale’s native advertising addressing the donation of Covid-19 rapid tests

Source: Vale (2020a)

In the second native advertising (Figure 2), also published in 2020, Vale communicated the project “Strengthening the competitiveness of the tourism private sector”, which sought to foster tourism in the region directly affected by the dam failure. Carried out by Veredas do Paraopeba Tourist Circuit, the initial stage of the project focused on five municipalities. Sources cited were Vale’s reparation executive manager, Gleuza Jesué; Hora do Doce’s partner, Tiago Henrique, a micro-business located in Juatuba (Greater Belo Horizonte); Bistrô Casa do Rei’s partner, Reinaldo Mendes, a restaurant in São Joaquim de Bicas (Greater Belo Horizonte); and the president of Brumadinho and Region’s Tourism Association (ATBR), Leonardo Esteves. According to Gleuza Jesué, “it is necessary to rebuild, repair and transform territories in search of a long-lasting and positive legacy in the social and economic areas. These are short, medium and long-term actions. The work should last for the next five years and, in case of more profound changes, the duration could be even longer”. The ad piece also mentioned that, according to the World Tourism Organisation, one in ten jobs in the world is directly or indirectly linked to the tourism sector.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Vale’s native advertising addressing consultancy for small businesses



Ação é realizada pelo Circuito Turístico Veredas do Paraopeba e conta com apoio da Vale

As latas de leite condensado que seriam descartadas após a produção de brigadeiros servem como embalagem para os brownies. Este é um dos diferenciais do Hora do Doce, micronegócio sediado em Juatuba que faz parte dos 50 empreendimentos associados ao turismo que estão recebendo consultoria do projeto Fortalecimento da Competitividade do Setor Privado de Turismo.

A iniciativa busca fomentar o turismo na região diretamente atingida pelo rompimento da barragem, em Brumadinho. "Estamos recebendo muitas informações sobre as melhores técnicas para gerenciar nosso negócio. Mas, principalmente, sugestões simples que passam despercebidas no dia a dia, como separar conta física e jurídica, margem de lucro. Tudo tem sido um aprendizado muito importante", conta Tiago Henrique, sócio da empresa.

O projeto é uma realização do Circuito Turístico Veredas do Paraopeba, organização sem fins lucrativos que tem por objetivo viabilizar a consolidação do turismo de maneira competitiva e sustentável. Inicialmente, a iniciativa contempla projetos em cinco municípios na área atingida: Brumadinho, Igarapé, Juatuba, São Joaquim de Bicas e Mário Campos.

Source: Vale (2020b)

In the third native advertising (Figure 3), published in 2021, Vale highlighted the real-time tracking system for water delivery to residents of 16 affected municipalities, which could not collect water directly from Paraopeba river. According to Vale, tracking the fleet and deliveries of drinking water led to more predictability and transparency for those who received the water, as well as more precision for those who worked to make it reach the properties located between Brumadinho and Pompéu, in the central region of Minas Gerais. The native ad piece explained everyone who collected water directly from the Paraopeba river was eligible for the benefit, regardless of the distance of the property in relation to the river, in addition to those who collected underground and were up to 100 metres from the river bank, on both sides. Vale said the definitions of water supply were in accordance with the technical note issued by the Water Management Institute of Minas Gerais (IGAM) and the process was followed by an independent auditor of the Public Ministry of Minas Gerais. Vale also informed they delivered animal feed products (corn silage, hay, corn grain and animal feed) to rural producers, and cited the execution of definitive works, such as water supply and treatment systems. Sources interviewed were the analyst from the agricultural coordination of the reparation directory, Josué Ferreira; the agricultural coordinator of the reparation directory, Marco Furini; and the owner of a property in Betim (Greater Belo Horizonte), Edmar Amorim. There was also a photo showing Ferreira and rural producer Alexandre Souza Cruz, from Esmeraldas (Greater Belo Horizonte). According to Josué Ferreira, “the robustness of the system gives us great peace of mind in saying that all eligible residents are receiving water with adequate quality and quantity”, while Marco Furin said “we have the responsibility to bring quality water to the people. For this reason, we created a process to do so in the most transparent possible way”.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Vale’s native advertising addressing water supply



Source: Vale (2021)

In the fourth native ad (Figure 4), published in 2022, Vale highlighted part of the reparation duties in Brumadinho, such as payment of R\$ 3 billion in individual indemnities, the offer of psychosocial assistance through the program “Reference of the family”, the improvement of the primary healthcare network through the program “Health cycle”, investment in infrastructure - refurbishment of a sport complex, day care centres, family health unit and the police battalion - and in the project “Strengthening the competitiveness of the tourism private sector”, in partnership with Rede Terra institute. The piece also mentioned the integral reparation agreement, signed by Vale in February 2021 with a total amount of R\$ 37.7 billion, as well as environmental recovery and compensation actions in evacuated municipalities, that is, in areas where there are other tailings dams and for this reason families had to leave due to the increase of the emergency level of these structures. In the end of the native ad there was information about the program of dams’ de-characterisation, which intends to eliminate all 30 upstream dams, the same construction method used in the structures that bursted in Mariana and in Brumadinho, and is part of a commitment agreement signed with the government of Minas Gerais, regulatory agencies and state and federal public prosecutors. There were no cited sources in this piece.

Figure 4. Screenshot of Vale’s native advertising addressing development and well-being actions



Source: Vale (2022a)

In the fifth native ad (Figure 5), also published in 2022, Vale informed the improvement of the safety conditions in its dams, through actions such as the new management system, based on learning with the dam breach in Brumadinho, and in accordance with guidelines of the Global Industry Standard on Tailings Management (GISTM). The piece also informed the de-characterisation of a dam in Nova Lima (Greater Belo Horizonte), which resulted in the reduction of its emergency level, and the implementation of the Emergency Action Plans for Mining Dams (PAEBMs) in Minas Gerais and in Pará. Since 2019, Vale has invested more than R\$ 5 billion in the program of dams' de-characterisation and five dams were eliminated in 2022. There were also no cited sources.

Figure 5. Screenshot of Vale's native advertising addressing changes in dams management

Source: Vale (2022b)

Using qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014), we were able to identify the themes and sources in the advertising pieces. The themes of the pieces focused on the organisation's recovery actions after the collapse of the dam in Brumadinho, as well as the decommissioning of other dams owned by Vale. In the published native ads, we also identified, without surprise, the absence of dissonant voices: the sources cited were mostly official Vale sources, such as managers, coordinators and analysts, a result that goes in line with Li's (2019) findings.

5. Conclusion and limitations

Vale's organisational learning has been mandatory after two dam collapses, in Mariana and in Brumadinho. The qualitative content analysis allowed us to collect and examine the units of analysis in a systematic way, and to report the results accordingly. The company used native advertising pieces to communicate actions after the dam collapse in 2019. According to Ulmer et al. (2019), the organisational renewal is a fresh sense of purpose and direction the organisation discovers after it emerges from a crisis. However, from the analysed native ads, we understand Vale mostly presented recovery actions it is obliged to comply with, instead of a proper prospective, future-oriented vision (Ulmer et al., 2019). The only time Vale presented a prospective vision was when it mentioned the decommissioning/de-characterisation of other upstream dams. It was not possible to see an ethical communication, as the native ads did not mention how Vale communicated before the dam breach. We also did not find an effective organisational rhetoric, as the quotes presented on the native ads pieces were attributed to operational

leaders, and not to visionary leaders (Sellnow et al., 2023), that is, to Vale's directors.

In this sense, we noticed Vale's goal was more of a reparation of its own image before society, mentioning some actions to repair damages the dam collapse caused to its own workers, to Brumadinho's population and the whole affected region. It was a choice made by the company, and, even though brand image is definitely important, one could argue that it would be more effective if Vale focused more on actual reparation than on its own image. To present an adequate discourse of renewal, Vale should communicate structural changes in the management of its tailings dams and in the safety of its own employees. By choosing *Estado de Minas* as the channel for its native ads, Vale also made a careful decision: with 95 years of existence, it is one of the most traditional newspapers in Minas Gerais; it is also well known and respected in the whole country – according to the latest data from IVC (Instituto Verificador de Comunicação, a non-lucrative entity focused on media audit), the newspaper was one of the two that showed sales growth in 2022, alongside *Folha de S.Paulo*, one of the main Brazilian newspapers (Yahya, 2023).

Regarding the native ads pieces, all of them were identified as sponsored content, and *Estado de Minas* newspaper has a special layout for the paid content, which helps the reader differentiate it from actual news. It is important the news outlet points out the content is, indeed, paid for, not only because of ethical reasons, but also because of media and “brand literacy”. This concept is defined as the ability the consumer has to decode marketing strategies used by brands to introduce, maintain and formulate brand images, and how they enable the consumer to engage with them in their own cultural setting (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006). When it comes to journalism, studies show the importance of media literacy not only for journalism students and professionals, but also the audiences (Van Der Linde, 2010; Maksl, Ashley & Craft, 2015; Negreyeva & Prasad, 2012). As a skill, media literacy enables people to look at media in a more critical way, “so that they can protect themselves from unsuitable messages, have a better understanding of the media and experience enhanced enjoyment” (Potter, 2008, p. 11).

Still, native ads in newspapers and digital news outlets can be interpreted as actual news, even though they're correctly identified as sponsored content, which leads to another question: how is this type of ad impacting journalistic credibility? In this article, we decided to focus on the qualitative analysis of published ads, but future research could go further and question Vale's communication officers why it chose this dissemination strategy, instead of using traditional advertising or press office work, as well as ask *Estado de Minas'* editors about the risks and opportunities of producing and/or publishing this type of sponsored content. Among the limitations of this research, we mention the focus on only one newspaper outlet and the qualitative analysis of the published ads. Yet, we believe this research can be a starting point to examine native ads of corporate companies in Brazil involved in issues of public interest.

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