

ARTICLES

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GUILTY OR INNOCENT? COMMENTS FROM INTERNET USERS ABOUT WHITE-COLLAR CRIME

Culpada ou inocente? Comentários de internautas sobre crimes corporativos

¿Culpable o inocente? Comentarios de internautas sobre delitos corporativos

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze comments from Internet users posted in news about white-collar crime found in the national electronic press. We focused our analysis on reports about a specific type of white-collar crime, slave labor, with the objective of identifying the conceptions surrounding the subject based on a dynamic inter-textual analysis woven in its production. As a result, we observe discourse, speech and ideologies imbedded in the analyzed comments, indicating the importance of understanding inter-textual production about corporate action.

KEY WORDS | *White-collar crime, ideology, slave labor, discourse, intertextuality.*

RESUMO

Neste artigo, analisamos comentários de internautas postados em notícias sobre crimes corporativos veiculadas na imprensa eletrônica nacional. Concentramos nossa análise em reportagens sobre um tipo específico de crime corporativo, o trabalho escravo, com o objetivo de identificar as concepções em torno do assunto, partindo da análise da dinâmica intertextual entrelaçada na sua produção. Como resultados, evidenciamos temas discursivos, discursos e ideologias imersos nos comentários analisados, sinalizando para a importância de se compreender a produção intertextual sobre a atuação das corporações.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE | *Crime corporativo, ideologia, trabalho escravo, discurso, intertextualidade.*

RESUMEN

En este artículo, analizamos comentarios de internautas posteados en noticias sobre delitos corporativos difundidos en la prensa electrónica nacional. Concentramos nuestro análisis en reportajes sobre un tipo específico de delito corporativo, el trabajo esclavo, con el objetivo de identificar las concepciones en torno del tema, partiendo del análisis de la dinámica intertextual entrelazada en su producción. Como resultados, evidenciamos temas discursivos, discursos e ideologías inmersos en los comentarios analizados, señalando para la importancia de comprenderse la producción intertextual sobre la actuación de las corporaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE | *Delito corporativo, ideología, trabajo esclavo, discurso, intertextualidad.*

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INTRODUCTION

The broadcasting of news and information in real time and in a wider scope contributes towards bringing to light issues that disturb society in general and stimulate the emergence of groups, movements and organizations (Greenpeace, Occupy Wall Street, Corporate Crime Reporter, Source Watch, among others). These aim at monitoring and denouncing corporations and governments, in manifestations that assume increasingly bigger geographic and social proportions. Nevertheless, practices of this sort have become part of our everyday activities, associating corporations to an “impressive amount of devastation inflicted on human life and the environment” (PEARCE, 1993, p. 135). In face of the accusations and denunciations, corporations act in diverse forms, either defending, or denying, founded on an ideological apparatus and using discourse that manufactures truths about their actions (BARLEY and KUNDA, 1992; FREITAS, 2000).

Unnever, Benson and Cullen (2008) explore the discussion of culpability and punishment of corporations and their agents by analyzing the evolution of regulation and criminal law focused on the corporate world in the United States. This functions as follows: a scandal of some kind is unveiled; public clamor demands government action; the latter reacts, formalizing an accusation or creating new laws and regulations. Other questions arise from this one, such as those that guide this study: How does society view white-collar crime in the news? How do readers of news broadcast in the press about the company accused of criminal misconduct react? Is the company guilty or innocent?

In the production of discourse that involves organizations, news broadcast by the press becomes a fundamental element, because they constitute everyday discursive practices that produce feelings about social phenomenon (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992; DJIK, 1998). In the case of news broadcast in online newspapers or web journals, readers interact, posting their comments, producing a text (discourse) based on other texts (discourses), which are always an inter-text in a chain of texts in dialogues (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992). This, the comments posted in news about corporations are discourses whose feelings are produced by the social interaction of players with other texts, including ideologies, world visions and relationships of power (DJIK, 1998; FAIRCLOUGH, 1992).

In this study, we focus our analysis on reports broadcast in domestic electronic media about a specific type of white-collar crime, slave labor, with the objective of identifying the conceptions found surrounding this phenomenon, analyzing the inter-textual dynamic interwoven with its production. The choice

of this type of crime is justified by its social and political dimensions and by its statistics. In 2005, the International Labor Organization (INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE, 2007) estimated that nearly 12.3 million people are forced into labor around the world; the setting outlined by the NGO Free the Slaves points out that 27 million workers in the world currently live in conditions analogous to slave labor, generating 40 billion dollars for companies, per year (REPÓRTER BRASIL, 2012).

We have organized the text in the following manner: we first introduce the context of ideological domain of corporations and white-collar crime; then, we introduce how we conduct the research and we describe the inter-textual approach adopted to analyze white-collar crime in comments by Internet users about slave labor; and, finally, we show the results and the final remarks.

CORPORATIONS, IDEOLOGY IN CORPORATIONS AND WHITE-COLLAR CRIME

The corporation as a mean of conducting business emerged in the 19th Century, more specifically under the American legal-institutional system, when the factory system replaced artisanal production. The particularities of the new production system and the quantity of capital needed to construct and operate factories drove the association of capital and modified the property mechanisms for companies, including within the legal scope. The corporation model became the standard for big capital to organize its companies (CLINARD and others, 1979).

The modern form of corporation, which Peter Drucker (1993) describes as the economic and social institution that runs big business in a free enterprise system is, according to Tragtenberg (2005, pg. 16), “a neo-capitalist ideology aimed at legitimizing the status quo as the only and the desirable one”. The majority of companies is comprised of conglomerates and, although they all have core business lines, they acquired other product lines through mergers and acquisitions, becoming stronger and more powerful as they protect themselves against fluctuations in business and take on greater geographic, cultural and social reach, while also obtaining greater profits (CLINARD and others, 1979).

Thus, the relation between the State, society and corporations in the contemporary context, took on other connotations. Weber’s (1991) interest in bureaucratic organizations and their forms of domination opened the way for the vision that the bureaucratic model constitutes a threat to the freedom of the

human spirit and the values of democracy. After all, in this process, controllers and managers (TRAGTENBERG, 2005) make use of administrative rationalization to subordinate the interests and well-being of the masses.

Inspired by the Greek philosopher and sociologist Nicos Poulantzas, Motta (1981) reasons that companies, as an apparatus of the State, are systems with the function of reproducing the class society, just like religious, military and educational institutions, which are of an economic, repressive and ideological nature. Alvesson and Deetz (2000, pg. 84) affirm that Administration and organizational studies produce legitimizing and reinforcing ideologies for social relations and specific organizational objectives. These ideologies aim at “cultural-ideological control at the work site level and provide a scientific aura to support the introduction and use of techniques for administrative domination.”

Various studies (TRAGTENBERG, 1974; 2005; MOTTA, 1981, 1992; BARLEY, MEYER, GASH, 1988; BARLEY and KUNDA, 1992; FREITAS, 2000; FARIA, 2004; among others) discuss the ideology at corporations, as well as how it is created, reproduced and transmitted. Wood Jr. and Paula (2006, pg. 94), for example, using the denomination of management culture to define “a set of assumptions shared by organizations and which, to a great measure, are imbued in the social fabric”, point out, among other assumptions: the belief in a free market society; the vision of the individual as an auto-entrepreneur; the cult of excellence as a form of individual and collective improvement; the cult of symbols and emblematic figures, such as “catch words” (innovation, success, excellence) and “hero managers”; the belief in managerial technologies that permit reasoning organizational activities.

Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988) and Barley and Kunda (1992), when referring to the same phenomenon, affirm that from 1870 to today, managerial ideologies have emerged, such as industrial improvement, scientific administration, capitalism of well-being and human relations, systemic rationalism and organizational culture, reinforcing the domain of companies in the economic, social and cultural spheres. This succession of ideologies, plus others (MOTTA, 1992; FREITAS, 2000; WOOD JR. and PAULA, 2006), including the very concept of corporation (TRAGTENBERG, 2005), significantly influence social life, being transmitted through messages, symbolic resources and other discursive manifestations.

Fairclough (1993) says the discourse is a political practice, since it establishes, maintains and transforms the relations of power and the collective entities in which these relations exist; however, it is also an ideological practice. The ideologies present in the discursive practices of corporations obscure the re-

flections of employees, consumers and society in general about their actions (ALVESSON; DEETZ, 2000), such as white-collar crime, which puts society at risk. White-collar crime or business crime aroused great interest in sociologists and criminologists in the 1930s and, until today, its concept is motive for controversy. Braithwaite and Geis (1982, pg. 294), for example, define corporate crime as “conduct by a corporation or individuals acting on behalf of a corporation, which is prescribed and punishable by law.” This is different from Braithwaite and Dworkin (1991, pg. 234), since, for these authors, white-collar crime can only be considered “violations of criminal law in which the courts have decided a firm committed a criminal act.” In the legal field, the term crime is a legal category, referring to a specific conduct that institutions recognize as criminal. For social scientists (sociologists and criminologists), however, this definition does not fit the complexity of the term, since they are oriented towards the description of standards for these behaviors, their cause and societies attitudes in face of the crime (PAYNE, 2012).

Alexander and Cohen (1999) and Simpson and Piquero (2002) associate business crime to the company’s previous performance and the pressures and barriers for obtaining a superior performance, being driven by structure, processes and culture. Their interests, regardless of what their consequences will be, motivate the choice of conducts taken at corporations. In carrying out their functions, executives, managers and workers act and make decisions according to the company’s set of norms, procedures, policies and regulations, resulting in cost savings for it. Corporations do not want to assume the costs incurred by white-collar crime (MOKHIBER, 1995). They prefer to adopt practices that harm society in general (CLINARD and others, 1979), generating collective nearsightedness (CHIKUDATE; 2009). A sociological perspective of white-collar crime thus expands the understanding of criminal behavior within the ambit of corporations, which cannot be analyzed only as a personal deviation, but rather as a product of the relations between certain members of the organizational systems.

According to Schragger and Short Jr. (1978), the victims of white-collar crime are described in three categories: employees (high levels of risk, illegal work conditions, exposure to substances and conditions whose potential, long-term effects are unknown); consumers (harmful and hazardous products); and the public in general, which suffers the impacts of processes and products introduced to the environment. One of the types of crime committed by corporations with high social costs is slave labor. The condition analogous to slavery is defined by the Brazilian Penal Code as the employee’s submission “to forced labor or exhaustive shifts, whether subjecting the individual to degrading work conditions, or restricting, in any way, their

locomotion due to the debt contracted with the employer or agent” (INSTITUTO OBSERVATÓRIO SOCIAL, 2004, pg. 8). Forced or slave labor is understood as that in which employers or agents resort to physical or moral coercion and the privation of employee freedom, where it is common to retain documents and to have practices of servitude based on debt contracted for consumption in work, food, clothes, tools, lodging and transportation, which configures slavery by debt (MARTINS, 1994).

Disagreeing with the term “condition analogous to slavery”, because he considers it actual slavery, Martins (1994) discusses one of the slave forms of labor relations found in capitalist society, slavery by debt, as the extreme variation of salary-based labor in conditions of over exploitation of the worker, to the point of compromising the individual’s survival. Offering a sociological understanding of persistence and of revitalization of slave labor in Brazil, Martins (1994, pg. 2) shows how slavery by debt, found in different economic activities, constitutes a “practice by companies whose economic logic, characteristically capitalist and modern, leads to the assumption that slavery would be a contradiction and an irrationality for them”.

These practices, which configure a crime, found room to grow in face of public tolerance related to their occurrence. Historically, criminality in the streets has received greater attention on the part of governments, resulting in the adoption of public policy with more punitive control against crime. However, in relation to white-collar crime, despite the wave of scandals, proper attention was not given, resulting in a gap (UNNEVER, BENSON, CULLEN, 2008). According to Payne (2012), the general population considers business crime as serious only when the consequences are physical, substantial and relatively immediate. Furthermore, the ambiguity of public opinion in face of illegal corporate behavior makes the law ambiguous as well.

As Snider (2000) warns about the “disappearance of white-collar crime”, dominant groups (understood as capitalist interests) and a managerial elite (understood as executives from large corporations) were competent in developing discourse, or producing a truth, about what white-collar crime would be, which is more compatible with its interests. Thus, crimes committed in the name of rationality hide behind some assumed fate and, furthermore, are committed by human beings, against human beings, in the name of an entity, a corporation.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS STRATEGY

Our qualitative study focuses on comments made by Internet users about news of white-collar crime broadcast on national, electronic newspapers, specifically the accusations against

Zara, a company belonging to the Inditex group, of Spain, about the use of slave labor. In August 2011, the country’s main newspapers reported in an investigation operation by the Regional Labor and Employment Bureau of São Paulo, which found workers submitted to conditions of over exploitation of labor and slavery by debt, in that state, who were producing pieces of clothing for that international brand.

In face of the considerable number of web journals or on-line newspapers in Brazil, we decided to choose the electronic versions of two major newspapers in the state that made the accusations: *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo*. An analysis of their on-line versions revealed the existence of posts in the reported stories. First, we entered the expression “Zara slave labor” in the Folha.com search system. It returned 18 reports, 17 of which generated 715 comments from Internet users (Table 1) between August 18, 2011 and December 30, 2011. We repeated the procedure in the Estadão.com.br search system, which resulted in 20 reports, only 8 of which with posts, totaling 106 comments (Table 2). Thus, the body of research consisted of 821 comments posted by Internet users, in 25 reports, material considered sufficient for our purposes.

The fields of sociology, anthropology and communication have used Internet user comments (EFIMOVA and MOOR, 2005). In organizational studies, posts by Internet users are a rich source for analysis when you intend to learn heterogeneous and multifaceted opinions and conceptions about given aspects related to organizations and management. Internet users are readers and producers of texts and, although spread about various locations, they interweave to form a network of rich and heterogeneous interactions. In the case of web journals, readers interact with each other, participating in the construction of a news story. According to Rheingold (1996, pg. 156), “there is no single and monolithic on-line sub-culture, but rather an ecosystem of sub-cultures, some frivolous and others serious.” Thus, we considered the Internet user the ideal author and reader, that is, the one presupposed by the work.

The news reported in the media participates in the construction of world representations, social identities and construct versions of reality in accordance with given purposes (FAIRCLOUGH, 1993; LI, 2009), since the texts are organized, produced and transformed within a process of ideological construction. Thus, the news about corporations produces meaning about, among other aspects, what they are, what they do and how they do it, serving as a fragment for comprising other discourses. These, in turn, added to other already existing ones, reproduce and/or transform social representations, beliefs and values about corporations and the social-economic and cultural context of which they are part.

TABLE 1. News reported on slave labor at Zara in Folha.com.br (2011)

Date	News	Q*
8/17	1. Zara recognizes irregular labor at 3 clothing manufacturers in SP	140
	2. Internet users attack Zara after accusation of slave labor – social media	24
8/18	3. Fashion editor comments on irregular labor at Zara clothing manufacturers	21
	4. Returning to Bolivia is not an option, says victim of exploitation in SP	27
	5. Zara will revise supplier labor conditions in Brazil	3
	6. Labor fines incurred by Zara total R\$ 1 million	108
	7. Six more brands will be investigated for irregular labor	160
8/19	8. Inditex, which owns Zara, shares fall 4% after accusations in SP	26
	9. 35 more clothing brands will be investigated for irregular labor	74
8/28	10. Assembly will call Zara to explain degrading labor	1
8/31	11. Zara's absence at assembly could result in CPI	7
9/15	12. Zara announces the creation of tip line	19
	13. Zara awaits Attorney General's Office to compensate workers	5
9/21	14. President of Zara denies he knew of irregular labor in SP	17
10/15	15. Attorney General's Office proposes Zara pay R\$ 20 thousand	39
11/30	16. Agreement fails between Zara and Attorney General's Office	18
12/19	17. Attorney General's Office stops seeking R\$ 20 thousand in compensation against Zara	26
		715

*Q = number of comments;

Source: research data

TABLE 2. News reported on slave labor at Zara in Estadão.com.br (2011)

Date	News	Q*
8/17	18. Inspection uncovers slave labor at Zara workshops in SP	28
8/18	19. Zara is involved in accusations of slave labor	11
8/19	20. After Zara, slave labor is investigated in 20 brands	14
8/29	21. Deputies call Zara to explain slave labor	1
8/31	22. Accused of slave labor, Zara does not appear at hearing	11
9/14	23. After getting caught, Zara creates a tip line for slave labor accusations	5
12/20	24. AGO gives an 80% 'discount' on Zara's fine for slave labor	19
12/30	25. Ministry includes 52 new names on the list of slave labor	17
		106

*Q = number of comments;

Source: research data

In this study, we adopted intertextuality, according to Fairclough (1992), which defines it as the property texts have to consist of fragments of other texts, which can be delimited, explicitly or not, and to transform previous texts and restructure existing conventions. Fairclough (1992) proposes intertextual analysis in two aspects: (1) manifested intertextuality – the texts which the author used are explicit in the analyzed text; and (2) constitutive and interdiscursive intertextuality – the types of discourse that enter in its production.

In relation to manifested intertextuality, Fairclough (1992) discusses it in five aspects: (1) representation of discourse – that discourse reported by the author, distinguishing itself from indirect discourse by explicitly representing what the other said; (2) presuppositions – propositions made by the author of the text as established, which could have a manipulative intention or not; (3) denial – contestation of other texts, seeking to contradict them; (4) irony – disparity between one enounced and one echoed; and (5) meta-discourse – distancing of the author through evasive expressions, metaphors and other resources.

We add a third topic to these two: manifested ideologies, in this case, of the corporations. For Fairclough (1993), ideologies are meanings or representations of reality generated among relationships of power that are implicitly manifested in discursive practices, in all instances and social contexts, contributing towards establishing, maintaining and changing social relations, and they are subjected to manifested and discursive intertextuality.

By considering the intertextual nature of selected comments, we try to analyze them focusing on specific texts to which Internet users can resort (manifested intertextuality), the type of discourse (constitutive intertextuality) and, finally, the ideologies. We underscore that, given the qualitative nature of the study, we are concerned about identifying the elements of analysis, without being bogged down in quantification.

In order to operationalize our proposal, we created a file for each of the reports and their comments to which we attributed a number for identification in the report (for example, C1.1 refers to comment 1 of news report 1). Then, we analyzed the comments, trying to identify the elements of intertextual analysis, which we present in the next section.

INTERTEXTUALITY IN COMMENTS BY INTERNET USERS ABOUT A TYPE OF WHITE-COLLAR CRIME, SLAVE LABOR

In this section, we present the results in three aspects of intertextual analysis.

Manifested intertextuality: fragments

Comments by Internet users about slave labor are comprised of fragments from other texts that dialogue with each other. These texts express the world representations of Internet users about the subject in question and, woven with other texts, form the fabric of the text that can, according to Fairclough (1993), be recognized by the representation of discourse, presuppositions, meta discourse, denial and irony.

The representation of discourse is manifested several times in the analyzed comments. The A Liga program, on Rede Bandeirantes, is mentioned in various comments due to its two reports on the subject: “Hey, Pholha! You are late! ‘A LIGA’ broadcast this story yesterday, in an exclusive report, and it even covered the action by labor and internal revenue agents. What a late small newspaper!” (C39.1) and “I wonder if ‘A Liga’ had not shown the workers, would the directors of that Zara brand have recognized the irregular work at the clothing plant?” (C35.1). The Internet users resort to another text, in this case, a television program, to comment on Folha.com’s news report, indicating that the fact is already of their knowledge.

Besides that program, other discourses are represented. The Internet user mentions reporting that the practice of slave labor occurs in other places, as in the case of the Brazilian Textile Industry Association, whose electronic address: “In Cambodia, workers at a shop that produces pieces for Zara passed out during their shift. The incident occurred on July 25 and it affected nearly 100 factory workers. You can check it out at www.abit.com.br (C12.1) and on Rede Globo’s *Jornal Nacional*: “According to yesterday’s report on *Jornal Nacional*, the Bolivians make twenty cents per piece sewn. That is exploitation; it is slavery!” (C.78.1), where the Internet user interprets worker exploitation as slave labor.

We also identified a reference to Karl Marx, represented in C10.25: “And then they try to say good ol’ Marx’s precepts are outdated!”, in which an Internet user makes reference to the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist as something current, contrary to other texts (not identified) that preach that Marxist ideas are outdated.

The religious text is also represented in an explicit manner: “The Bible LEGITIMIZES slavery! Leviticus 25:44: And with regard to your slave, they will be of those nations that neighbor you; from them you will buy slaves” (C3.25). Internet users also use sections of the news to reinforce their opinion, not about slave labor, but about system inefficiency, as in the case of C5.12: “it is because they contracted blind, deaf and dumb auditors. That is why they knew nothing. They learned quickly from our ex” (highlights in the original). The comment gains the

extension of other facts in the national political scenario, using irony. Internet users comment ironically (for example): “It’s like they discovered gun powder (C1.1)” that this should not be surprising to the population, because accusations of slave labor in Brazil are common.

The comments from Internet users about accusations against Zara for practicing slave labor reveal various facets, when analyzed by intertextuality (FAIRCLOUGH, 1993). The slave labor, which is the object of accusation against the company, is slavery by debt (MARTINS, 1994), a contemporary form of slavery, which also is a type of white-collar crime, in accordance with the vision of several authors, such as Braithwaite and Geis (1982), for which white-collar crime is a violation “punishable for law”.

In comment C3.3, the Internet user reports the discourse of an interviewed party who, while making a denial, also points out that what the party had said “is absurd”, suggesting she knows the definition of slave labor. “Since when is paying little for a lot of work a definition of slave labor? What the Fashion Editor said is absurd,” and meta-discourse: “So, most workers in Brazil, and in other parts of the world, are slaves (maybe there are even some at Folha/UOL!)” (C3.3).

In the comments by Internet users, we have identified several presuppositions, such as disgust for the company because of what happened: “Wow... those guys (Zara) just don’t give a damn...” (C3.25) and slave labor as something common in the policies of Spanish companies, where profit is “most important”.

All this talk for those Spanish [*sic*] is just BS. Their intent, their vision of America, was always to exploit and colonies [*sic*]. They are going to let things cool down until no one remembers any more (that is, corrupt a few). The policy of that country’s companies [*sic*] has always been to despise [*sic*] South Americans, where the most important is to make maximum profit, regardless of whomever it hurts. That gang should be told off and invited to leave the country (C20.5).

In comment C23.2, the Internet user’s presupposition concerning big fortunes is that they are won at the expense of exploiting labor and, furthermore, he recalls a crime committed recently by another company.

Behind every big fortune, there are big secrets, Dirt [*sic*]. Theft, dishonesty, trickery, manipulation, lies, fooling, exploitation and every sort and

style of robbery and illicit enrichment [*sic*]. Sometimes they are in collusion with justice and public authorities... Or did everyone already forget about Daslú [*sic*] (C23.2).

Analyzing the manifested intertextuality in the Internet user comments, we identified explicit fragments from various other texts. The representation of discourse from associations, television and electronic news, the Bible, among others, indicates the Internet users express their perspective of the world, specifically in relation to a type of corporate crime, slave labor, based on other texts to which they had access; however, these are not academic texts.

By expressing their vision of the world, Internet users employ irony, which, according to Fairclough (1993), occurs when there is dissonance between text meaning and the context in which it was inserted. In relation to denial, Internet users mainly contest the news when it refers to action by the State. Meta-discourse, which is characterized by own expressions, where the author is able to distinguish his own text (FAIRCLOUGH, 1993), we identified several times when the Internet users present their conclusions.

The Internet users express their conceptions about slave labor, the main ones being: (a) multinationals exploit the worker; (b) slave labor should be fought by the state; (c) slave labor is common in Brazil and around the world; (d) slave labor is the fruit of a long history of slavery.

Constitutive intertextuality: discursive themes

Constitutive intertextuality or interdiscursivity occurs when the author of the text resorts to others in an implicit manner. In this section, we present the recurring discursive themes in Internet user comments, observing that these are not the only ones.

Theme 1: The State, inefficient and corrupt, is to blame for the companies practicing slave labor.

This is a recurring discourse. The State is the one to blame, and not the company, because it favors these practices by regulating outsourcing. [...]

Accusing these companies of slave labor is, in the minimum, precipitated. [...] What is truly wrong is not Zara’s initiative, or that of other companies, but rather the possibility that the law creates through outsourcing. [...] THE STATE IS THE TRUE VILLAIN IN THIS SITUATION and I didn’t even mention the so-called work cooperatives (C3.18).

It is also common to find comments that condemn Zara, but the crime committed by the company is produced in a network of agents, between companies and governments, making it hard to avoid.

Jail time for ZARA, slave fashion multinational. It probably learned from the Brazilian slave elite; jail for those corrupt entrepreneurs and corruptors of workers and public services. [...] Those corrupting capitalists are the sponsors of the corrupt, paying bribes to get double the amount from the STATE, generating corrupt public and private persons (C2.9).

Theme 2: The population should boycott companies that use slave labor and commit other abusive practices. In many comments, we identified other implicit texts, such as the “conscientious consumer” discourse.

Let's be conscientious consumers. Do not buy anything from companies that use slave or child labor. Show your indignation. Reject those brands. Inform all your contacts. Spread this news. Let's make our rights heard. Whoever does not act correctly must be denounced (C9.1).

Clients and consumers are called to react, boycotting the brand. The customer power discourse is also evoked: “Let's set the example and boycott this company. We do not need to wait for formal justice. Each of us can boycott this company, which will help show how unacceptable this is. Greater justice will be having the store close its doors due to a lack of consumers. This power is in our hands.” (C2.2)

Theme 3: The companies are “social psychopaths”; their profits are so high they compensate any fine.

This topic gathers comments that agree with the idea that entrepreneurs act to serve the interests of accumulating capital, in the same sense of the arguments by Motta (1981; 1992), Tragtenberg (2005) and Morgan (1996), regarding the fact that the fines are insignificant compared to the profits verified. The corporations take on a psychopath personality in C12.14, when the Internet user employs texts on savage capitalism, and, in C1.14, the Internet user questions whether “Entrepreneurs of the Year in Brazil” care about their employees' work conditions.

Multinationals in general are social psychopaths. They care very little for the social. They

use the unprotected population to achieve profit in whatever way possible [*sic*]. They lie saying they are not to blame, but that is just another symptom of their psychopathy. They also show no remorse or any other feeling in relation to damage caused the other [*sic*]. They are fruits of savage capitalism. They know how to use the media very well to make us believe in a false democracy. Unfortunately, their false values fool many (C12.14).

See the examples of the Entrepreneurs of the Year in Brazil, who run enormous Chains, move millions of products, employ thousands of people, but they do not cut profits to improve the conditions for their employees. They pay minimum wages. Do they really care? (C 1.14).

Theme 4: The companies are victims: businesspersons do not know what their suppliers do, and the taxes and fees are so high it is impossible to deal with them.

For C1.1, Zara is the victim, but he does not exempt it from guilt for buying “from these companies”. “BECAUSE IT IS ZARA, THEY ARE MAKING ALL THIS NOISE. OBSERVE THAT ZARA IS A BUYER OF THESE COMPANIES, SO IT IS A VICTIM TOO. THAT DOES NOT EXEMPT IT FROM BLAME. THERE ARE WORSE THINGS” (C1.1).

Theme 5: Society is hypocritical, because slave labor is a common practice.

In many comments, the interdiscourse is that “That is not news for anyone. Inditex (Zara) is not the only one to do that” (C4.1). Slave labor is a common practice, and it can be seen by anyone who wants to open his or her eyes.

Just go to José Paulino and neighboring areas and look up at the upper floors over the stores. They are prison cells for Koreans, Chinese, Bolivians who in exchange for food and shelter subject themselves to work that even reaches prostitution of minors. Just go there and look. But... (C1.1).

In addition, in the comment by C2.1, the Internet user talks about the continuity of this practice and questions whether anyone will stop buying: “But aren't the clothes and other accessories (electronics, sneakers, etc.) sold on Zepa (R. José Paulino) and 25 de Março also from slave labor? And does anyone stop buying?” (C2.1).

Ideologies in corporations

To finalize our analysis, we have identified that the interaction between meanings and visions of the world expressed in the comments of Internet users, although not reproducing corporate ideologies, is used as a reinforcement to understand and explain why slave labor is a practice adopted by the companies. Among the manifested corporate ideologies, we present below the two most significant, which are part of the presuppositions for the “culture of management” (WOOD JR. and PAULA, 2006).

Managerial technologies, such as outsourcing, permit rationalizing organizational activities.

The rationalization of processes permits companies greater productivity, bringing consequences (TRAGTENBERG, 1974; 2005; MOTTA, 1981; 1992; MORGAN, 1996, among others) to the worker and society. The rationalization of corporate processes is a managerial ideology (BARLEY, MEYER, GASH, 1988; BARLEY and KUNDA, 1992) and, as such, it is used to explain why these practices (poor working conditions) persist in companies and, furthermore, points to its naturalization.

Today, the word of order is to exceed goals, earn more and spend as little as possible. Someone inside ZARA knew very well of these things, but since we live in a country of impunity, it is advantageous to continue saving on labor. Don't worry; soon everyone will forget all this (C15.9).

All outsourcing has imbedded the potential to generate precarious work conditions. [...] The big boys get million-dollar contracts from governments to provide safety, cleaning, transportation, etc. services. These big boys outsource services to false “contractors”, and these hire “slaves”, who are paid humiliating wages and given sub-par working conditions. [...] (C20.8).

Several comments, such as C20.8, give the idea that slave labor is characterized by the exploitation of workers and the work conditions unto which they are submitted.

Free market society

In the comments, we identify that the belief in a free market society is used to explain (without justifying) the company's actions: “Incredible what economic power, with the clear consent of pub-

lic authorities, still does to the worker in the 21st Century” (C5.1), referring to the power of corporations before the State. This power is analyzed by Motta (1981), who considers it a device of the State, which has the function of reproducing the society of classes, just like the religious, military and educational institutions.

This belief is also present in the comment C3.3, which questions the duties of the State and the transfer of its functions to the private sector: “Does that mean that now the inspection work regarding compliance with labor laws is up to the private sector too? Is that yet another public function that being transferred to the private? [sic]” (C3.3).

White-collar crime is committed by corporations in the search for superior performance (ALEXANDER and COHEN, 1999; SIMPSON and PIQUERO, 2002), producing victims such as consumers, workers and society in general, which incur social and material costs stemming from these crimes (SCHRAGER and SHORT JR, 1978). In this sense, Internet users made their comments regarding the motives for which this type of crime occurs, including the search for higher profits in the form of work rationalization and cost reductions on the part of corporations and inefficiency, disregard and corruption on the part of the government and inspection agents. They also comment on the fact that companies transfer costs to society, since, even though their practices result in fines and other expenses, they are still profitable (MORGAN, 1996; MOKHIBER, 1995).

For the Internet user who posted C5.7, exploitation is part of the capitalist system and it expresses recognition of how corporate ideologies obscure reflection:

It is all hypocrisy! Whoever heard of capitalism without exploitation? We are forced to run after all these things, without any right to defense. The brainwashing that makes us chase after all this foolishness occurs daily, without our even noticing. If today a poor person who lives with less than one dollar per day can also have an iPod, mp4, cell phone and Adidas, it is thanks to those countries called India and China. Because it makes no sense to me for someone to place a plate of food in front of me, every day, without being able to taste it (C5.7).

Also regarding this issue, consumer society is referenced: “The difference in price only shows how society has become a fool in terms of consumption. [...] we are victims of our own values” (C25.8) (highlights in the original).

With regard to the conception of slave labor, we have reproduced a comment posted in which the Internet user con-

tests the use of the term “slavery” to refer to the conditions denounced in the case.

The term “Slavery” that is being used is ridiculous. The workers may be irregular because they are not registered and earn poor wages, but the factory owner owns none, and if they are there, it is because they need the money from their work, even if it is a little. The doors are open and they have the freedom to work anywhere else. Now, ask them what they prefer. “Slave” labor, as they are calling it, or unemployment?

The manifestations by Internet users are divided in terms of what slave labor actually is. Several Internet users alluded to slavery by debt, which, according to [Martins \(1994\)](#) is a variation of salaried work and, as such, re-emerges in the over exploitation of the worker to the point of compromising his survival. However, there are several comments that consider the worker “free to work anywhere else”, revealing a historical concept of slavery, where the slave was chained. This vision hampers and distorts the understanding of the current situation in relation to the exploitation of slave labor, where the ties are not thick chains.

In relation to slave labor as a type of white-collar crime, comments are also divided. Although we have not identified the use of the term “white-collar” crime as a reference to slave labor, the expressions “criminal company” and “a crime like that”, “criminals”, among other terms, recall the conception of slave labor as a crime produced, in the case studied, by corporations, a term also referenced in comments. Since this type of crime has not received the same attention of governments as street crime ([UNNEVER, BENSON, CULLEN, 2008](#); [PAYNE, 2012](#)), society in general see corporate crime as something serious only when the consequences reach greater proportions.

Another facet present in the conceptions of Internet users concerns the discursive practices of corporations in general ([ALVESSON and DEETZ, 2000](#)), not limited to the case reported. Many comments reveal that the authors recognize multinationals as a business model that, by exploiting consumers, workers and the environment, becomes stronger and more powerful ([CLINARD and others, 1979](#)). This business model, in the conception of many Internet users, is “neo-capitalist ideology” ([TRAGTEMBERG, 2005](#)) that wrapped in a network of agents, corrupts and dominates governments and society in general. These Internet users also recognize what [Wood Jr. and Paula \(2006\)](#) and [Barley, Meyer and Gash \(1988\)](#) call the culture of management and managerial ideologies, respectively, when referring to

the discourses of corporations as “just [...] a lot of BS” and the managerial techniques as the rationalization of work.

If, for many Internet users, discursive practices by corporations are ideological, aimed at hiding the real intentions of profit, exploitation and domination, as the referenced authors ([MORGAN, 1996](#); [MOTTA, 1981, 1992, among others](#)) in this paper suggest, for other Internet users, Zara is the favorite brand and, since many companies are doing the same thing (slave labor), they prefer to remain faithful to it. This conception indicates how companies reach the social imaginary ([FREITAS, 2000](#)), reinforcing their domain in the economic, social and cultural spheres.

FINAL REMARKS ABOUT THE CONCEPTIONS OF WHITE-COLLAR CRIME IN COMMENTS BY INTERNET USERS: GUILTY OR INNOCENT?

In this study, we analyze the comments by Internet users about white-collar crime, specifically in relation to accusations of slave labor against Zara. White-collar crime occurs in the context of organizations and their inter-relations with society. Therefore, discussing it in the field of organizational studies expands knowledge of its causes, the process through which they occur and public opinion in relation to these happenings.

We go back to the title of this paper, in the attempt to outline a reply as to whether the company is guilty or innocent, as per the conceptions found in comments by Internet users. In general, the company in the case in question is guilty and a victim. However, in a few comments, the Internet users have declared it innocent or have remained neutral, because they like the brand’s products. When they consider it guilty, they use the following explanations: the capitalist system itself; the State, due to its benevolence and inefficiency; and, in some cases, the consumers and workers, for accepting such conditions. When considered a victim, the most common explanation is that the company by using outsourced services does not have the obligation to inspect the work process.

In the analysis of texts and intertexts, the conceptions that involve white-collar crime, in this case illustrated by slave labor, can be summarized as follows: (1) white-collar crime financially compensates the corporation – thus, it should be punished not only with fines but also in a more severe manner; (2) corporate crime should more intense inspection on the part of the State; (3) white-collar crime is inevitable, because what counts is making more profits; (4) white-collar crime will continue to exist,

because the population accepts it to happen, purchasing the company's product and ignoring this type of fact. White-collar crime is inevitable, but at a cost that corporations do not want to assume (MOKHIBER, 1995), adopting practices like slave labor, whose cost belongs to society in general (CLINARD and others, 1979), generating what Chikudate (2009) calls collective nearsightedness, which does not associate the term crime very much to the business environment.

Many Internet users manifested the understanding of a historical concept of slave workers, where the stereotype has the slave in chains, revealing a misconception of the contemporary form of this phenomenon, according to Martins (1994). Today, the employer chains the worker offering minimal conditions for survival since his replacement entails no major cost.

This study has practical and theoretical implications. With regard to the former, results indicate, for managers and those responsible for the organizations, that society accompanies the actions, assuming positions that can lead to other movements, such as boycotts, using the great availability of on-line tools, such as social media. This study also brings contributions for managerial practice by pointing out the need for companies to implement serious and effective organizational policies for conducting business without putting profits over human dignity.

In relation to implications of a theoretical nature, we underscore that we began this study considering it a starting point for other field work on organizational studies, since white-collar crime is an obscure territory. This study thus contributes by calling attention of field researchers to the need to advance knowledge about white-collar crime in general, and in particular, slave labor, in relation to its antecedents and motives as well as the social-historical context in which they occur. The knowledge generated from that can clarify questions still marginalized in organizational studies, such as: Why and how do corporations become criminal? In face of that, we envision other possibilities that can expand this study, such as: (a) consider other types of white-collar crime for analysis; (b) establish comparisons between the comments by Internet users in relation to other types of white-collar crime; and (c) create a schedule of research studies, considering the multiple approaches of organizational studies, especially critical approaches.

By considering journalistic news about organizations, we point to other players in the construction of discourses about corporations, such as newspapers, which also consists of a contribution by this study to the field of organizational studies, by adopting intertextual analysis. In this sense, we suggest: (a) considering news text that stimulates comments; (b) analyze the conversations between Internet users; (c) make comparisons between comments broadcast in the different vehicles.

It is also necessary to underscore the limitations of research by using posts from Internet users as sources of research. These are anonymous, heterogeneous and virtual subjects, and therefore, they could be many, taking advantage of countless options from several paths and from the ability of forming diverse conceptions. Another limitation of a methodological nature refers to the impossibility of generalizing this case to other types of white-collar crime, and even other types of slave labor, like that involving child labor.

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