

## SHARING ECONOMY AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES IN TIMES OF COVID-19: SOCIAL BRANDS IN BRAZIL AND PORTUGAL

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### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the relationship between organizations belonging to the sharing economy and their practices, behaviors and postures in organizational communication due to the pandemic of the new coronavirus. We define the sharing economy (or collaborative economy) as the goods and services provided by the digital platforms of the network through the sharing of resources and trust. We take as a premise the compulsory digitalization that many businesses have been subjected to and we started the reflection from there. Our analysis, based on bibliographic and exploratory research, was located in brands chosen intentionally, in Brazil and Portugal, seeking to reflect on the context of covid-19 and its respective communication actions in their digital properties or in their social media profiles. We illustrated strategies for exposure and communicational visibility from March until August 2020, reaching a reflection on the urgency to act actively in social demands, characterizing them as social brands. In our understanding, a social brand has a strong presence in digital, stands out with good communication practices and, above all, has a performance strategy that goes beyond its business or direct profit not only during a period of crisis, but also aware of its social role and the impact that its responsible performance generates.

### KEYWORDS

sharing economy, organizations, covid-19, organizational communication, social brands

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## ECONOMIA DA PARTILHA E PRÁTICAS DE COMUNICAÇÃO ORGANIZACIONAL EM TEMPOS DE COVID-19: SOCIAL BRANDS NO BRASIL E EM PORTUGAL

### RESUMO

O artigo trata da relação entre as organizações pertencentes à economia da partilha e suas práticas, comportamentos e posturas de comunicação organizacional em função da pandemia do novo coronavírus. Definimos economia da partilha (*sharing economy* ou economia colaborativa) como os bens e serviços fornecidos pelas plataformas digitais da rede por meio do compartilhamento de recursos e da confiança. Tomamos como premissa a digitalização compulsória a que muitos negócios se viram submetidos e partimos para a reflexão a partir daí. Nossa análise, pautada pela pesquisa bibliográfica e exploratória, se localizou em marcas escolhidas intencionalmente, no Brasil e em Portugal, buscando refletir sobre o contexto da covid-19

e suas respectivas ações de comunicação em suas propriedades digitais ou em seus perfis de mídias sociais. Ilustramos estratégias de exposição e visibilidade comunicacional desde março até agosto de 2020, chegando a uma reflexão sobre a urgência em atuar ativamente em demandas sociais, caracterizando-as como *social brands*. Em nosso entendimento, uma marca social tem forte presença no digital, destaca-se com boas práticas de comunicação e, acima de tudo, possui uma estratégia de atuação que vai além do seu negócio ou do lucro direto não apenas durante um período de crise, mas também consciente de seu papel social e do impacto que sua atuação responsável gera.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

economia da partilha, organizações, covid-19, comunicação organizacional, *social brands*

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss the role of organizations in the face of the current hyper-digital scenario, which, due to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus in 2020, directly impacted actions, strategies, and branding results. We discuss their practices in crisis contexts, in the light of concepts related to the sharing economy, organizational communication and the consequent need to maintain presence and engagement in digital social media platforms because of covid-19. The predominant methodology is the bibliographic and exploratory research with examples chosen by an intentional sample of the sharing economy from Portugal and Brazil. According to Flick (1998/2009), a review of the theoretical and empirical literature on topics of interest helps in exploring new perspectives, in addition to the possibility of comparative studies. Exploratory research allowed us to build hypotheses, test insights that, in the end, could infer about organizational behaviors, in terms of communication, because of or increased by the pandemic.

By sharing economy or collaborative economy, we generally understand the goods and services provided by digital network platforms through sharing resources and trust. Gata (2016) reinforces that it consists of a new way of an old human practice: sharing, which takes place between economic agents of normally underutilized assets and is mediated today by an online platform. For the author, there is still no consensus on the concept of such practice, but it seems clear that it enables the meeting of both sides of the market — suppliers and consumers — with digitized and horizontal relationships in the form of collaborative consumption.

Saturnino (2018) believes that today brands such as Airbnb, Uber, Glovo, among others — are the biggest representatives of this economy — validating and reinventing capitalism, now in platforms (De Stefano et al., 2017; Huws, 2014). It is also called “gig economy, sharing economy, on-demand economy, next industrial revolution, surveillance economy, app economy, attention economy” (Srnicek, 2017, p. 25). They are new forms of organization, new ways of consumption, and new business models based on cooperation and reliability among unknown people. On the relationship between sharing and communication economy, Filgueiras and Antunes (2020) reinforce that they are linked by

typical ICT [information and communication technologies] identities: 1) on-line contacts between producers and consumers; workers and companies; 2) use of applications or platforms for computer access or mobile communication tools; 3) comprehensive use of digital data for the organization and use of these activities; 4) relationships established by “demand” (i.e., resulting from arrangements for each product, devoid of legal certainty capable of ensuring its continuity). (p. 31)

We have idealized the term “social brands” because we understand that organizations fit today into a concept that goes beyond the practice of social responsibility, something already consolidated in literature and respected by us. Because digital has become even more central during covid-19, we idealized the concept to say that a social brand is a brand with a strong presence in the digital realm, with good communication practices and, above all, with a strategy that goes beyond business or direct profit during a period of crisis. It means being an organization that adapts to the context — especially to the coronavirus — and, consequently, seeks to modify the ecosystem in which it is inserted. Such behavior is not unique to the sharing economy brands, but we intentionally sought examples from this market to try to understand how such companies — which are directly connected to the ICT (Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020), and were on the front line during the pandemic — communicating with their stakeholders, whether consumers or the civil society in general.

As a way to support the concept, we rely on Sarkar and Kotler (2020) in the book *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, which highlights that today brands no longer have the right to choose in which causes they should or can engage. And there isn't the possibility of being neutral, either. The authors point out that future consumers are taking the streets and protesting against social injustices. And the role of organizations now is to help solve and not aggravate the world's biggest problems. In the notes section to the reader, the authors also reinforce that now, whether we like it or not, we are all brand activists.

Another question that collaborates with social brands falls upon the study of Edelman (2018b), which points out that brands are currently compelled to position themselves on social causes and, often, even from other spheres such as politics:

the study also reveals that consumers believe that businesses are a more effective force of change than the government. In Brazil, 63% of respondents say that brands can do more to solve social problems than the government, and 62% believe that it is easier to make brands solve social problems than to get the government to act. “Consumers trust companies for change”, says Marcília Ursini, vice president of Marketing Engagement at Edelman. “Increasingly, companies are going beyond their traditional businesses to position themselves on issues relevant to them and their audiences, and this has occurred from consistent positioning to the defense of current issues and advocacy”, she concludes. (para. 3)

Tenderich (2020), in USC's *Annenberg Relevance Report 2021*, which maps and predicts trends for communication annually, notes that more and more brands engage in purpose-based conversations, and such behavior has been enhanced by several events in 2020 such as covid-19, the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the climate crisis. For the author, "brands and organizations of any kind are increasingly taking advantage of the opportunity, but also feeling the pressure – to engage in complex conversations" (Tenderich, 2020, p. 96). In the same study, Harrington and Smith (2020) point out that such crises are transforming the way we interact with each other and our expectations about the organizations and leaders from today's society. For both, brands are today's agents of change, bringing challenges to the field of communication and also to their professionals:

as communicators and marketers, we have an expanded license to "do the right thing" and are authorized to trigger change and help address today's inequalities by creating deeper connections with our employees, customers and stakeholders. (Harrington & Smith, 2020, p. 18)

Thus, the term "social brands" has its origin in purpose communication (Tenderich, 2020) and, in a certain way, in social responsibility, gaining new contours, needs, and obligations for organizational action also as an agent of change. Added to this, we have brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020) and public expectations about the role of organizations in taking positions and creating solutions to problems not covered by governments (Edelman, 2018a).

Back to the sharing economy, with the article magazine *CEO*, edited by PWC ("Avanços e Dúvidas no Caminho do Compartilhamento", 2016, p. 12), the segments that depend the most on sharing economy are: peer to peer<sup>1</sup> accommodation (such as Airbnb or WeWork), car sharing (such as Uber, 99, Cabify), audiovisual streaming (Netflix, Spotify, Prime, Soundcloud, etc.) and services such as rental, purchase/sale or deliveries, among others. For the consultancy company, by 2025, US\$300,000,000,000 will be generated in new business worldwide, with a series of changes and regulations in shared models that should be 100% consolidated by then.

A study by BPI Research (Banco BPI & CaixaBank, 2018) also pointed out that the pace of growth in recent years of sharing economy has increased significantly in the world, with transactions tripling in size between 2013 and 2015, while revenues quadrupled. The research also showed that the emergence of such an economy is the joint result of the 2008 global crisis, the hyper digitization of the world — with digital platforms offering more and more services based on the information (data) of users — and the new expectations of the consumers, who are now seeking lower prices and less time to perform day-to-day tasks.

<sup>1</sup> Network architecture in which each of the points (or nodes) acts both as a client and as a server, allowing sharing of services and data without the need for a central server.

Kotler et al. (2010/2012) pointed out that for some time brands no longer see their audiences as mere targets. For the authors, they go far beyond a simple external packaging or ads that are now called to represent themselves and position themselves in a more authentic, true, and real-value way, because consumers are grouped in online communities where they discuss their love and hate for organizations, products, and services. Thus, the relationship between audiences and brands becomes horizontal and, in times of crisis, they are also able to offer answers and hopes to meet public expectations. They become active not only for their consumers, but for the entire social environment, changing their processes more quickly for new demands.

In the coronavirus pandemic context, it is possible to perceive how brand communication also turns to values, instead of a simple sale of products or the satisfaction of consumers' dreams. Through digital technology, they begin to see the human being in a more complex way, seeking a proposition of emotional value through interaction with audiences and the collaboration of one for many (Kotler et al., 2010/2012).

Koch (2020), based on Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) and Stoeckl (2014), shows that organizations today exercise a sort of activism behavior. The author understands that brands' activist conduct is within the universe of cultural construction, which is also part of a market strategy. That is, being an activist brand and, in our sense, present in the digital environment in a relational, well-exposed, and genuine concerns in the ecosystem to which it belongs, is part of a broader role to build organizational image and reputation.

On the one hand, brands are increasingly forced to position themselves in relation to socioeconomic or ecological problems, thus entering a variety of political conversations. On the other hand, some brands position themselves deliberately and proactively in political contexts, becoming "activists" of some kind. (Koch, 2020, p. 601)

From the references and observations above, we outline four assumptions that support and characterize the actions of brands and organizations in the contemporary context.

First, to legitimize themselves, organizations need an organizational communication strategy, with emphasis on spontaneous media (whether online/digital or not), that evidence them. This would happen if the press and social media agents (users) generate conversations about organizational actions in a positive way.

Terra (2019) reinforces the need for organizations to have proprietary strategies for presence and engagement in the digital environment so they don't depend only on the visibility "given" by social media platforms. Faced with a massive crisis scenario, due to the pandemic of the new coronavirus, organizations had to position themselves, especially on what they are doing to minimize the situation and uncertainties that have

reached not only communication, but society as a whole. And the consequence of such actions eventually leads to earned media. We will explore this scenario in our practical examples later.

Second, the organizations that are influential and remembered by the audiences are those that also use communication devices related to real time and immediacy, inherent in post-digital communication.

With regard to the immediacy applied to communication, called real time marketing, Terra (2015) signaled: “thus, demands arise for the participation of organizations in digital networks in real time. When a theme emerges, organizations are forced to find thematic ‘hooks’ with their brands so that they can legitimize themselves with their audiences” (p. 208).

The use of real-time content is a strategy that forces organizations to have teams, structure, and resources and, in times of crisis, the issue becomes even more latent and necessary. Terra (2018) emphasizes contextual communication and its particularities: “the use of contexts – although volatile, ephemeral – and real-life events is a form of legitimacy by organizations with their audiences, especially on social media” (p. 3).

Thus, there seems to be a need, albeit subtle, for organizations to react to the present context, transforming it into content, generating buzz for their digital properties and, mainly, actions that impact their audiences. The public seems eager for the positioning of organizations, hoping that they will play a role that was once a responsibility of the State and other traditional institutions. We see examples of companies donating financial resources, materials and services to fight the virus: all to collaborate in the scenario; to gain positive visibility and conquer the so-desired share of heart<sup>2</sup> of their audiences.

Third, organizations have not depended exclusively on the press to make themselves heard or appreciated. They can directly reach their audiences through their digital properties. For this, we use the concept of “deintermediation”.

By deintermediation, we understand the fact that an organization/agent/entity/individual can now directly reach audiences of interest in the networked sphere. Terra and Sousa (2020) reflect on the concept, regarding to brands, and propose:

they create and make their own media vehicles that will “speak directly” to their audiences, discursively elaborating, unmediated content. But in this case, they play the role of empowering the public with information and influencing the formation of an opinion that is in favour of their institutional or commercial interests. (p. 173)

We believe that the mediatization<sup>3</sup> of relationships — whether individual or corporate — also makes organizations use their own digital channels — websites, blogs, apps,

<sup>2</sup> Share of heart means the creation and/or maintenance of an affective bond between the organization and its stakeholders.

<sup>3</sup> By mediatization, we understand the expansion and omnipresence of different technical means and their interrelations with communication and sociocultural fabric.

among others — to communicate and interact with their consumers, in addition to being able to sell, without traditional media vehicles in the process. Something that brands in the sharing economy also do by combining actions in their own earned or paid media.

Terra and Sousa (2020) correlate mediatization with deintermediation:

we also observe that the mediatization of society implies in deintermediation. That is, the fact that organizations behave as media vehicles and publishers in their sectors of activity, makes them able to directly address their audiences, no longer depending on traditional media vehicles – TV, newspaper, radio, magazines, etc. – for this function. (pp. 174-175)

The fact that brands use strategies to aid and combat coronavirus makes them also use their own channels of public dissemination, not being held hostage by legacy media to achieve earned media. It is worth remembering that, according to Lusk (2014), there are three elements of media: earned media (i.e., mentions, reviews, posts, and shares achieved on social media); paid media (characterized by ads on social media platforms, retargeting, pay-per-click ads, paid influencers and affiliate programs); owned media (represents brands digital properties: websites, blogs, email, social channels, mobile site, whose content is responsibility of the organization).

They take advantage of the direct repercussion they get on their digital channels and rely on the broadcast from there.

In the sharing economy, one of the most impacted by the pandemic and social isolation, the reinvention of the economic system through the direct supply of services or products provides a space to grow with the crisis because we are at a time of rethinking the concept of the common (in the sense of what is shared) and community. And this happens via digital media, not only by providing services and selling products, but also with the direct sharing of actions and content that may be able to contribute to the social body as a whole.

Fourth, organizations are demanded in addition to traditional sales and relationship communication activities, and organizational communication becomes even more strategic.

For Kunsch (2014), due to the constant transformations of society, isolated actions of marketing communication and public relations become insufficient and unable to stand out in new scenarios and in extremely competitive markets, especially with regard to relationships with audiences or interlocutors from various segments. The author believes that they are today very demanding and attentive, requiring responsibility from organizations and also transparent attitudes, ethical behaviors and respect for planetary preservation, among other contributions to society.

Digital connectivity turns consumers into vigilantes — who are also aware — in the networked sites, transforming, especially in a context of crisis, organizational

communication into a key and strategic part for organizational actions, beyond the simple ad in a society-changing panorama. Brands belonging to the sharing economy are not excluded from this rule. On the contrary, they end up using social media platforms and their digital properties (websites, apps, and blogs) as strategic tools of reputation, interaction, and consumption.

Based on these premises, we name as social brands those organizations that make use of such stratagems — and end up playing various roles, whether charitable, supportive, or related to social transformation — to achieve positive visibility, exposure, and reputation.

### **SOCIAL BRANDS AND CAUSES**

We understand as social brands organizations that act in crisis contexts in favor not only of themselves, but also of the society to which they belong, whether by necessity, obligation or other reasons. They become proactive in a macro context and beyond simple consumption, and such actions end up shaping and reconfiguring their communication, which is the object of analysis in our article.

It has been a while since organizations have begun to pay attention to and communicate about social, economic, ethical, and even environmental purposes, being increasingly demanded over their responsibilities by hypermodern individuals (Dhanesh, 2020). But in the current context of crisis, there is a reinforcement and a great transformation in the relationship with the public, which transfers their focus from the self to the group, from a material experience to a more emotional one, and from the present to the future.

Thus, it seems clear that there is an expectation by the audiences for brands to take actions about the ecosystem to which they are and be empathic not only to them, but also to a macro context of society and culture. Whether it is a global pandemic, or any other transformative situation of the moment, audiences already have the need of having the organizations providing services to the collective as a way not only of adding value, but also of emotional connection between them. A perspective of activism that, according to Koch (2020), is more associated with consumers than with organizations. If we look at it from an organizational perspective, corporate activism can be seen as political, as we can see in the term “polity-brands” (or political brands), by the same author. Of course, there are brands that will be criticized for choosing such a path. Others will be obliged to take action on causes and positionings. In the study by Edelman (2018a), there is a highlight about the increase in the number of organizations that work beyond their traditional businesses to position themselves with relevance with their stakeholders, with actions such as the defense of current issues and cause activism.

But the big brands of sharing economy, digital natives par excellence, have been heavily criticized for their platform work policies, with little regulation, low wages and services classified outside the provisions of labor laws, since they use non-standard assets.



The “Fairwork” project (<https://fair.work/>), from the University of Oxford, seeks to discuss and pressure digital platforms for better working conditions, using the concept of decent work, linked to the International Labor Organization, asking for better conditions and the end of precariousness, also called “digital slavery” (Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020).

The topic is not the scope of our article, but it is impossible to make any reference today to the large organizations of the sharing economy without critically considering such aspects, still of few laws, but of growing discussion. And during the covid-19 pandemic, they are also able to humanize themselves with actions and communication further than buying and selling. Emotionally aligning with a cause can be a beneficial factor in the communication and relationship process of these organizations and their audiences, especially in a global crisis like coronavirus. We believe that their extensive work in digital communication during the pandemic may be a way to balance their reputation and image to the detriment of the issues of legislation and regulation already mentioned. On this strategy, Gata (2016) confirms that

online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, QZone can be used as additional sources of relevant information sharing about participants’ profiles, complementing the information already provided by online systems explicitly dedicated to building reputations, thus increasing the likelihood of achieving an appropriate separator balance. (p. 202)

We have listed examples below — intentionally chosen — of brand behaviors in the sharing economy of Brazil and Portugal during the coronavirus pandemic and classify them into groups according to specific characteristics. It is worth noting that the actions were not necessarily digital, but they eventually reverberated on social media platforms or online media.

#### **THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 AND THE MOVEMENT OF “BRANDS OF SHARING” IN BRAZIL AND PORTUGAL**

Lotto (2020) notes that, from the classification of coronavirus as a pandemic made by the World Health Organization (Who), the conversational content of digital social networks began to gain great importance. The consumption of information and the search for videos on YouTube about the subject, for example, have gained new paths and new interests. Thus, in a scenario of uncertainty, brands began to position themselves and adapt their speeches to the pandemic situation. Topics such as decreasing human contact, distribution of alcohol gel, quarantine to employees after international travel, payment via apps, and work in home office for administrative tasks have comprised a long list of measures adopted by organizations, especially those working with deliveries or transport via digital platforms (Pichonelli, 2020).

In its most recent 2020 *Global Communication Report* (USC Annenberg, 2020, p. 35), the decline in confidence in politics and the lack of action by governments around

the world fomented brands and organizations to assume social functions, and the digital ambience has a paramount and structuring function in this process. The report also states that such activity may be able to directly favor the reputation of those brands, making them able to obtain an important perspective on how to use their influence to bring significant social change. With the rise of increasingly conscientious and connected consumers, organizations that position themselves can also gain a greater competitive advantage.

Given the discussion above, we highlight below some communicational brand actions during the covid-19.

### COMMUNICATION BEYOND COMMUNICATION

Castro (2020) recommends that, in times of crisis, it is necessary to be strategic in terms of communication, and that consistency can be the watchword. In addition, the author reinforces that, in such a context, “to communicate means to remain present and to show itself as a socially relevant, responsible and bona fide company” (Castro, 2020, para. 6). And completes: “in the face of serious events, more than ever becomes relevant the strategic importance of communication that helps make your company present and perennial, that correctly evidences the values, mission and positioning of brands and corporations with their stakeholders” (Castro, 2020, para. 4).

In Brazil, 99, a transport app company, created a special fund of R\$10.000.000 to help drivers (Pichonelli, 2020) and suspended shared cars. Its site brought measures called “99’s protection package” to impact society and collaborate in the fight against covid-19 by donating masks and alcohol gel, in addition to placing protection shields in its vehicles (99, n.d.). The brand also created a special edition of their podcast *Papo de Motora* to inform 99 drivers about the pandemic of coronavirus.

In Portugal, the app company Uber announced in a statement 12,000 free trips, up to the value of €10 each, aiming to collaborate with Portuguese health professionals, in addition to offering 5,000 meals up to €15 for the National Health Service team via Uber Eats (Lusa, 2020). With this, the brand has gained visibility in local media vehicles and comments on social media platforms. That is, their cooperation actions with society eventually gained earned media. In Brazil, Uber removed its shared cars between several people with the same driver, and released, on its website, a measure of temporary suspension of accounts of users or partners of its employees, after the confirmation that they were exposed to covid-19 (Pichonelli, 2020).

Glovo, a Spanish delivery company that left Brazil in 2019, but has a strong presence in Portugal, has carried out several actions that culminated in dissemination in traditional and digital Portuguese media. On the website Grande Consumo (“Visa Junta-se à Glovo Para Incentivar o Pagamento com Cartão”, 2020, para. 5), for example, Glovo’s country manager in Portugal, Ricardo Batista, pointed out that he has partnered with the global payment brand Visa to support the population during the confinement phase and, consequently, align with new consumption habits with payments made by cards and without human contact.

Olivetto, interviewed by Scheller (2020), brought to a close the question by reinforcing the importance of organizations becoming aware of the market communication that runs away from the traditional marketing we already know: “it is time to inform the customer, and not to persuade him to buy, to try to sell something” (para. 5).

### **EMPATHETIC BRANDS AND DIGITAL INFLUENCERS**

Some organizations took agile initiatives in relation to the pandemic and proved to be empathetic, such as the case of Brazilian digital e-commerce platform, MercadoLivre, which changed its traditional logo, known as a handshake, to a touch of elbows, the new greeting endorsed by the WHO for covid times.

On its website, in a blog focused on its partners called *Central de Vendedores*, the brand has created unique content tagged “covid-19” (<https://vendedores.mercadolivre.com.br/tag/COVID-19>), with tips to help them to maintain and follow up with their online stores during the pandemic. Topics ranged from good practices to receive and send packages to how to improve finances and receive the emergency aid from the Brazilian government, among others.

Magalu, one of Brazil’s largest retail chains with strong digital presence, launched in late March 2020 a free sales platform for micro retailers and local self-employed professionals to maintain their business during the covid-19 crisis (*Magalu Cria Plataforma Onde Pequenas Empresas Podem Anunciar Produtos*, 2020). The initiative transformed the brand into a marketplace with characteristics of the sharing economy in order to collaborate, in an empathetic way, so that millions of Brazilians could work in the e-commerce trade, having the brand as a platform and without leaving home or taking risks during the pandemic. In *Blog da Lu* (<https://missaodigital.magazineluiza.com.br/?s=COVID-19>), the company produced content of interest about prevention and information of the coronavirus, which Terra (2021) classifies as an organizational activity of digital influence through unmediated content to “provide the public relevant information and influence the formation of an opinion that favors its institutional or commercial interests” (p. 70).

### **ORGANIZATIONS CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR INNER PUBLIC**

In addition to reverberating customer actions, organizations are also concerned about their internal audiences. Terra (2021) points out that the employees of organizations are “the first army of dissemination of a brand and, if well stimulated, can be a valuable asset in content spreading” (p. 49), acting as a type of organizational micro influencers. Perhaps this explains today the importance of the role of the employee, not only within the corporate ecosystem, but (and especially) outside it, since he is able to directly influence the reputation and image of organizations, which are already aware of this.

The Brazilian delivery company iFood, one of the largest in the country and Latin America, created, in partnership with an insurance enterprise, the action “Seguro de Vida Covid-19” (Life Insurance Covid-19; iFood, n.d.) for the families of delivery workers who might have confirmed cases of the disease. The measure reinforces the care and protection with its “collaborators” by the organization, after protests of the category throughout Brazil requesting better working conditions, including “pandemic aid” for family members (*Entregadores de Aplicativos Fazem Manifestações Pelo País*, 2020).

The CEO of Airbnb, who was forced to make significant resignation around the world, sent his fired employees a letter explaining the brand’s reasons and also offered services to help with relocations to the labor market. The open letter, available on the company’s website (Airbnb, 2020), was marked as an honest and transparent attitude, even in the face of such an unpredictable situation and a major crisis not only economic, but also for the brand’s image.

### **BRANDS PROVIDING SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY**

Kantar presented in a study (Gambarro, 2020) that the population expects companies to be useful in the new daily life and inform what are their efforts to face the current situation, in addition to the simple announcement of products or services. The public interviewed suggested that they also expect brands to serve as an example.

Glovo has created on its Portuguese website a page containing a series of educational measures for the prevention of covid-19 for both couriers and customers. And in respect for its delivery partners, it has promised to help anyone who might be infected with the disease during the recovery period required with medical care (Glovo, n.d.).

The sharing economy has suffered huge impacts in many sectors, such as hosting, for example, but it has gained in others, such as coworkings. The CEO of Avila Spaces, Carlos Gonçalves, highlighted on its Instagram account that, as in the 2008 crisis, the

reinvention of companies often involves changing their work model. In the current context, there are thousands of companies adopting the virtual office, not only for ration costs (from 55 Eur/month +VAT, in the centre of Lisbon), but also for efficiency and agility. (Avila Spaces, 2020)

The Portuguese company Lacs, which offers flexible workspaces and corporate experiences, used its blog to mix the context of the pandemic with its usual content, attracting the attention of potential stakeholders in its services and networking. In a post on coworking beyond startup organizations, it signaled: “the new way of working, imposed by the pandemic caused by covid-19, has revolutionized how large companies, from different areas, look at their workspaces” (Lacs, 2020, para. 1). It added:

physical spaces for many employees and remote work combined, compliance with safety measures, hygiene and distancing, adding networking, are

the future of normal. This way of working, driven by startups, entrepreneurs and freelancers, is spreading more and more to medium and large companies, who are beginning to realize the benefits of a shared workspace and flexible workspace. (Lacs, 2020, para. 2)

It is possible to see how brands and organizations are increasingly assuming social roles for themselves that were once attributes of government institutions. We therefore question whether there is no other option for organizations than to become social brands today. In the sharing economy, this is no different. Many have moved forward with donations and communication to position themselves as cooperative and supportive brands in relation to the current pandemic situation.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND NOTES FOR THE FUTURE

We believe that adapting and taking advantages of the present scenario can be considered forms of image legitimation by brands with their audiences, especially digitally. For Kunsch (2017), organizations do not change because they want to, but by social and market pressures, and it constantly transforms the thinking, planning, and strategical execution of organizational communication on a daily task.

In the sharing economy, organizations live what Saturnino (2018) called “overvaluing of the digital reputation” through its own system that he called “bilateral review” (p. 3), creating reliability and self-regulating peer surveillance — in this case, partners and consumers of their services. Thus, we understand that actions such as social brands are also a reputational work through cooperation, sharing, in its broad sense, and network collaboration, crucial strategies in times of transparency, crisis, relationship, exposure, and visibility.

According to Lotto (2020), the time is to invest in alternatives for brands to make themselves useful to their audiences, avoiding opportunism and offering comfort and help in new demands. Organizations that adapt themselves to the context of unpredictable situations survive. During the pandemic of the new coronavirus, they were forced to use new strategies and communications in relation to their social ecosystem. Thus, we consider that these brands acted as true agents of influence through empathy, informative content, and actions for the collective.

We resume here two thoughts from Terra et al. (2019, p. 17), which we consider essential for understanding the communication of organizations in the contemporary digital sphere:

- The digital environment, especially social media platforms, is now essential in terms of skills for brands, and its domain is a new and structuring ability to make contemporary communication. In times of covid-19, it is established as central and functional, not only in the transmission of information, but also in its uses for entertainment, services and social interaction. Organizations that master its language and rules may be able to stand out, especially digital natives such as the sharing economy brands.

- During the coronavirus pandemic, due to the centrality of digital media, it is possible that more and more data have been generated on the network and digital platforms, enabling brands to use data-driven methods to (re)adapt and propagate their communication. The examples discussed in this article serve as a proof of the hypothesis that organizational communication, especially digitally, is capable of functioning in beta mode, adapting strategically and constantly to the sociocultural context — in this case, the pandemic of covid-19 — to continue its relationship work as influential agents of the community. And all of the earned media coming from these brand's actions due to the coronavirus becomes, thus, a mix of what the organizations are doing and what they need to report/disseminate/propagate for reputational objectives. We believe that this has a unique value for the sharing organizations, criticized for legal and labor issues, as already mentioned.

This said, we understand that, to be a social brand, it is necessary to have the ability to readapt, empathize, and to go beyond what is planned with agility, especially with regards to communication. Something that we believe is no longer a choice, but a must-have in a post-covid-19 world, especially for large organizations and brands from whom they are expected to play an additional role beyond advertising and sales. We also think that organizations of the future should be prepared to manage unexpected events and controversial issues, often outside their comfort or performance zones.

The sharing economy, even with all the changes in the broken world by the coronavirus — especially with regards to consumption — can be a bet for the future and its “new normal”. We do not put away all their need to labor and competition regulations, whether in Brazil or Portugal, so that these companies make a commitment beyond crisis communication, especially in the pandemic. On the contrary: we believe that it should be applied to a social, ethical and cultural/organizational commitment beyond opportunism and the simple “speech of causes” at specific times, the so-called “social washing”<sup>4</sup>.

Crises are capable of bringing threats and opportunities at the same time, and we hope that social branding may indeed be incorporated into the brands' purpose and culture — holistically and not only during the covid-19 crisis — in the search for more social transformations and more “sharing” with society in addition to capturing the attention of audiences and selling products and services. Our essay does not claim to finish the topic, reduce it, nor create a new terminology for the field of studies. We also do not seek to make predictions or futurology. We understand that the world is no longer the same, as well as the brands communication and, from what we have seen, the demands of their audiences, are increasingly rigorous and connected.

**Translation: Carolina Frazon Terra and João Francisco Raposo**

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<sup>4</sup> We understand this concept as the attempt of brands to report/propagate the inclusion of agendas in their strategic actions with the objective merely of promoting the public image.

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