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Research Paper

Analysis of the Communication Strategy of the Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro on the Social Network Facebook during the Pink October Movement: A Study from 2019 to 2023.

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ABSTRACT

In the context of non-profit organizations, the third sector has a crucial role in the face of social challenges and the promotion of social protection. This research focuses on the Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro (LPCC), an emblematic organization in this sector, and the analysis of its communication strategy on Facebook during the Pink October movement between 2019 and 2023. Non-profit organizations, especially in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, need to adapt their communication strategies to a constantly evolving digital environment. Understanding the effectiveness of LPCC online communication practices not only contributes to the academic literature on third-sector organizations but also offers practical insights into how to optimize the online presence and community engagement that are fundamental to the success of these organizations in today's world. This work is based on a case study methodology with qualitative analysis, anchored in ethnographic methodology, and aims to explore the changes in the LPCC's communication strategies in the context of online social networks, more specifically on Facebook (Pink October period) and to propose recommendations to strengthen its digital presence in the face of rapid changes in the online landscape. The LPCC saw a reduction in followers from 742,000 in 2019 to 727,000 in 2023. There was a preference for informational content, mainly in text with image formats, with an increase in video formats over the years. The engagement rate fell from 2.28% in 2019 to 0.60% in 2023, so it's recommended to use closer and more continuous communication, based on more motivational types of content, and to try to respond to the followers to increase engagement with them.

Keywords: COVID-19, Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro, ethnography, communication, social networks, Facebook

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1. INTRODUCTION

In December of 2019, the health authorities in the city of Wuhan, capital of the central Chinese province of Hubei, announced, to the world the existence of an unknown virus, which was later identified as SARS-CoV-2. In January 2020, the disease was named COVID-19 and the first cases outside of China were registered. The outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11th, 2020, after being declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. COVID-19 triggered a substantial economic and social crisis, placing the world on one of the century's most significant global health challenges (Barreto et al., 2020), affecting various aspects of human life and health systems around the world (Silva et al., 2023). Strategic measures to control the pandemic have been adopted such as the isolation of positive cases, hand sanitizing, respiratory etiquette, the use of masks, and progressive social distancing. The closing of schools, cancellation of events, travel restraints, and movement restrictions, except for essential needs, such as shopping and medical care, were also adopted. Aquino et al. (2020), to help reduce the extent of the virus effects as well as to preserve clinical care capacity (Oliveira et al., 2020). Faced with this scenario, and the need for social isolation, the internet has emerged as an important means of communication, enabling information sharing as well as relationships, also allowing tasks to be performed at a distance. Terms such as teleconsultation and teleworking have become a reality (Carneiro-Leão et al., 2020). Altice Portugal¹ reported a 20% increase in internet traffic during the pandemic, with historic highs reached in the week the WHO declared the pandemic and similar peaks during mandatory recall periods. According to DataReportal², in 2019 the Portuguese spent an average of 6 hours and 38 minutes online per day, with around 1 hour and 30 minutes dedicated to social networks, 18 of which were on Facebook. In 2020 the numbers changed: the Portuguese spent an average of 7 hours and 20 minutes online per day, with around 2 hours and 18 minutes dedicated to social networks, 20 of which were on Facebook. In 2023, this

¹ Available at <https://www.dnoticias.pt/2021/2/15/250830-trafego-medio-de-internet-sobe-20-desde-1o-trimestre-de-2020/>, accessed on 12/05/2023.

² Available at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-portugal>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-portugal>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-portugal>, accessed on 12/05/2023.

average time spent online increased slightly to 7 hours and 37 minutes, with approximately 2 hours and 25 minutes spent on social networks, 25 of which were on Facebook³.

Despite the remarkable speed of response and adaptation to the pandemic situation, the impacts and unplanned changes caused by the disease were primary for organizations to continue to exist (Parsells, 2017). Change can be a means of survival, but its impacts can be far-reaching and long-lasting in various societal sectors, particularly in healthcare where it has exposed the physical, mental, and emotional vulnerabilities of professionals (Pulinka, 2020). The pandemic caused delays in medical response to routine operations, as reported by the National Health Service in 2020, which registered 151,000 fewer surgeries and 1.3 million fewer consultations in public hospitals⁴ and local health centers.

The Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro (LPCC) has estimated that approximately one thousand cases of cancer were not diagnosed in 2020 because of screening delays. The decrease in the number of screenings, which was 500,000 fewer than originally planned at the beginning of the year, was caused by the lockdown as well as the population's fear of infection. As far as breast cancer is concerned, the LPCCA records show that 7,000 cases and 1,800 deaths have been registered. The European Cancer Organization⁵ estimates that more than one million cancers went undiagnosed in Europe during the pandemic and that one in two cancer patients did not receive the necessary treatment. Despite this challenging scenario, several health organizations have made significant efforts to overcome the difficulties in contacting and engaging with patients, using social media tools. This approach was recognized as having "a positive effect" by most general practitioners, as indicated by the inSIGHT⁶ study. To better communicate with its followers, the LPCC established a free telephone line to address any doubts and provide social, legal, and economic support to cancer patients and their families. Additionally, the LPCC increased the number of shared content on Facebook and organized online events that involve the entire community. This was done to ensure that cancer patients and their families received the necessary care and support they looked for. This article therefore seeks to answer the following question: Has the LPCC's communication on the Facebook social network during the Pink October

³ Available at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report> and <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>.

⁴ Available at <https://jornaleconomico.sapo.pt/noticias/covid-19-menos-13-milhoes-de-consultas-nos-hospitais-e-menos-151-mil-cirurgias-em-2020-706860>, accessed on 12/05/2023.

⁵ Available at <https://www.europeancancer.org/resources/343:2022-in-review-the-annual-report-of-the-european-cancer-organisation.html>, accessed on 12/06/2023.

⁶ Available at <https://noticias.up.pt/medicos-de-familia-defendem-que-pandemia-agravou-desigualdades-no-acesso-a-saude/>, accessed on 12/06/2023.

movement changed or remained the same in the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, i.e. from 2019 to 2023?

Faced with this question, the following objectives were set: to analyze the evolution of the communication of the Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro on Facebook during the Pink October movement, considering the changes that occurred in the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic contexts; and to identify the main engagement strategies used by the LPCC's on Facebook during the Pink October movement and assess how these strategies influenced public interaction in the different periods analyzed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Communication of Non-Profit Institutions

Non-profit organizations, known as Third Sector Organizations, bring together individuals with the common purpose of tackling social challenges, preventing risky behavior, and promoting social protection. The term "Third Sector" was first coined by Smith (1991), to refer to non-profit organizations that produce or distribute goods and services for the public benefit. Andrade and Franco (2007), define these organizations as having an impersonal heritage focused on a specific mission and characterized by not appropriating the surplus they generate.

The Third Sector refers to civil society organizations established by citizens to provide public services in various areas, such as health, education, culture, civil rights, housing, environmental protection, and human development (Salvatore, 2004). In Portugal, these organizations operate in various sectors, using fundraising, donations, and voluntary work to finance their activities. The Third Sector stands out for its democratic participation, preservation of traditions, and openness to new intellectual experiences, as emphasized by Rifkin (1997). An important characteristic of these organizations is their emphasis on creating positive outcomes for the community, and developing products and services that act as effective instruments in addressing various social needs (Arroyo, 1990).

Regardless of the typology or market, all organizations, whether profit-seeking or non-profit, must build and maintain relationships with their public (Kotler, 1994). This implicates adding value to the offer, maximizing benefits in relation to the efforts made, and meeting the stakeholder's needs. The importance of communication has become evident in the success of these organizations'

actions, from fundraising campaigns to transmitting messages that promote the desired values (Santos, 2018).

Communication, whether it's individual or collective, plays an essential role in society, Duarte (2009), as it is characterized as a complex process comprising elements such as sender, receiver, message, channel, feedback, code, and noise, whose main objective is to cultivate human relationships (Cooley, 1909). With the intensification of globalization, communication exchanges have become faster and more effective, boosted by digital channels in real-time, without time or geographical restrictions (Bauman, 2013). An effective communication strategy, according to Sousa and Azevedo (2014), must be carefully structured to increase public involvement and deal with eventualities, crises, or negative reactions.

Social networks have become powerful tools for promoting social causes (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009). Web 2.0 has enabled intense interactions and a two-way communication model. In recent history, we've seen significant moments generate massive engagement on social media. These include the Facebook fundraising campaigns for Barack Obama's election in 2008, the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, and social movements such as the Arab Spring protests against dictatorships on Twitter in 2010, the #MeToo movement against sexual abuse and harassment in 2017, and the Black Lives Matter protest against police violence in 2020. These actions reflect the empowerment of citizens with a more democratic participation in society, breaking down physical, geographical, and demographic barriers, illustrating the availability of new forms of expression through digital media (Di Maria & Rizzo, 2005).

According to Ellison and Boyd (2013), social networks have significant power to impact the public, enabling intense interactions and strengthening social ties. Originating from social relationships between individuals (Aquino, 2005), social networks are spaces for active participation and interaction, where different actors create and share content, building relationships mediated by technology (Barichello, 2014).

In non-profit organizations, the communication strategy is based on social marketing, conveying principles that promote trust, commitment, and leadership. Strategies that aim to raise social awareness through engaging experiences, positive emotions, and benefits (Cruz, 2014). Digital communication, particularly on social networks, has become a popular alternative due to the advancements of the web and the ease of interaction provided by Web 2.0. This has led to more intense interactions between users and brands, creating a two-way communication model with the

active and conscious participation of consumers (Kotler et al., 2021). This creates an environment conducive to active user participation, fostering the creation and sharing of content, and promoting dialogue and social change (Di Maria & Rizzo, 2005).

2.2 The Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro

The Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro (LPCC) is one of the most important organizations in Portugal dedicated to the fight against cancer. Its history dates back to 1941, when it was founded by Doctor Francisco Gentil, a pioneer in the field of oncology in Portugal. Dr Gentil was deeply concerned about the lack of resources and support for cancer patients and their families. The LPCC was established to offer comprehensive support to people affected by cancer, including medical assistance, emotional support, counseling and education to prevent the disease. Since its foundation, the organization has worked tirelessly to improve patient's quality of life and to promote scientific research about cancer.

Over the years, LPCC has expanded its activities and services to meet the community's ever-evolving needs. This includes the creation of patient support facilities in various regions of the country, where patients and their families can find practical and emotional support during cancer treatment. In addition, it plays a crucial role in raising awareness about cancer and in educating the public about methods of prevention and early detection of the disease. They organize awareness campaigns, fundraising events, and health education programs in schools, businesses, and local communities. The organization actively funds cancer research in Portugal, supports innovative projects, and collaborates with academic and medical institutions to advance cancer treatments. The LPCC is widely recognized for its unwavering commitment to helping those affected by cancer and for its vital role in the fight against this devastating disease in Portugal. Over the decades, the LPCC has been an indispensable pillar of support and optimism for numerous individuals and their loved ones who are battling cancer. The organization's primary objective is to become a leading national resource in aiding cancer patients and their families. The LPCC aims to promote good health, prevent cancer, and encourage training and research in the field of oncology. LPCC professionals and volunteers follow principles of humanization and solidarity. Over time, the organization has grown solidly and progressively, adapting itself to social, political, and technological challenges, and actively collaborating with the government to fill gaps in the healthcare system. Today, LPCC is the largest national organization in the field of oncology. It regularly communicates with its stakeholders through different means, including direct

communication, publications, events, online presence, support groups, and feedback. This communication is essential to keep stakeholders informed, involved, and supported in the organization's activities in the fight against cancer in Portugal.

Communication plays a key role in building close relationships with all stakeholders (patients, employees, volunteers, partners, funders, donors, authorities, the media, and the citizens), to meet the needs of the organization and the public. The promotion of transparency, commitment, respect, fairness, and responsibility in civil society is a crucial aspect of communication-related to health. This type of communication aims to reach a broad range of audiences, including health professionals, the public, specific groups, communities, and political authorities. The goal is to share relevant health-related information and engage influence, and help these audiences. According to Drucker (2012), strategy plays a vital role in achieving an organization's goals and reaching its target audience. To achieve this, organizations must identify their audience's needs and convey their values and objectives through effective communication. Information is valuable, and the means of distributing it should be carefully considered. Efficient communication is vital to inform and mobilize society about the importance and relevance of health (Ramos & Jerónimo, 2021).

2.3 The Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro and its presence on the social network Facebook

The LPCC employs both offline and online communication strategies to disseminate its message. Online, it maintains an institutional website that provides general information about different types of oncological diseases, existing support systems, advances in research, fundraising, and motivational activities, news about oncological issues, risk factors, symptoms, as well as diagnosis and treatment methods. In addition to the website, the LPCC has a presence on Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Additionally, the organization has six pages (one official page for the LPCC and five pages representing each of the five Regional offices - Azores, the Central Region, Madeira, the Northern, and the Southern Region)

According to Martins (2015), larger organizations tend to have a more organized online presence. They keep their websites up to date, publish content frequently, maintain a consistent brand image across different digital channels, and have a larger number of followers. Meanwhile, Lourenço (2011), asserts that organizations cannot afford to not have a presence on social networks. DataReportal (2023) reveals that YouTube leads the social media podium in Portugal with 7.43 million users, while Facebook follows in second place with 5.90 million users. Facebook offers a

range of features such as content sharing through photos, texts, videos, lives, stories, and gifs, as well as group/community creation and participation, events, fundraising, and advertising. In the case of the LPCC, its presence on the Facebook social network is spread across its five Regional Centers, previously mentioned, with different content. At a national level, the official LPCC Facebook page (Figure 1) was created on 19th October 2010 and had 727 followers in October 2023.



Figure 1. Facebook Page

Source: LPCC Facebook⁷

The LPCC runs various campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of early cancer diagnosis for a more successful treatment. October is an important month due to the Pink October (figure 2) movement, which started in the United States during the 1990s. This movement is marked by two significant days: World Breast Health Day on the 15th and National Breast Cancer Day on the 30th.

⁷ Available at <https://www.facebook.com/ligacontracancro>, accessed on 12/19/2023.



Figure 1- Pink October publication

Source: LPPC Facebook⁸

The Pink October movement is a global initiative that aims to raise awareness about breast cancer and promote early detection and prevention of the disease. For the past 13 years, this movement has been observed annually in October, with a Pink Wave of breast health-related content being shared throughout the month. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social isolation, the internet emerged as a crucial means of sharing information, with an increase in its use across various platforms, including social media.

It is therefore important to understand how the LPPC changed its strategy on the Facebook social network during the month of Pink October between 2019 and 2023, this way it's possible to make a comparison between the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, analyzing the type of content, the number of posts and even the variations in engagement. According to Verhoef et al. (2016), social networks have focused their relationship on transactions outside the commercial sphere, and this is where engagement⁹ gains importance for organizations looking to promote interaction with their content.

⁸ Available at <https://www.facebook.com/ligacontracancro>, accessed on 12/19/2023.

⁹ Calculation formula: $[(\text{reactions} + \text{comments} + \text{shares}) / (\text{number of page fans})] * 100$. Source: RivalIQ.

3. METHODOLOGY

Therefore, given the purpose of the study, we analyzed and compared LPCC communication on the social network Facebook during the Pink October movement in the time before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic, from 2019 to 2023. For this LPCC case study, exploratory qualitative research based on ethnographic methodology (Kozinets, 2010) was chosen as the methodological solution to answer the research question: has LPCC communication on the Facebook social network changed or remained the same during the Pink October movement in the pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic periods, i.e. from 2019 to 2023?

This methodology was chosen because it is relevant to the study of behavior in this era of online and offline complexity mediated by technology. It also allows us to respond to the objectives set. Data was collected manually and then processed using the Microsoft Excel tool, using the structured participant observation method to analyze and record the type of digital content and the different interactions of the public, using an observation grid. What would be observed, how it would be recorded, and the time frame was determined (Primo, 2007). Therefore, the number of posts their format, and the topics covered were studied, taking into account the level of reaction and/or reciprocal interaction, recording the number of reactions, the number of comments, and the number of shares during the above period. This grid was divided into the types of information, entertainment, promotion, and social responsibility, in line with previous studies by Mesquita et al. (2020), as well as the format of the content: video, photo, and text (Grassi & Marques, 2018).

4. RESULTS

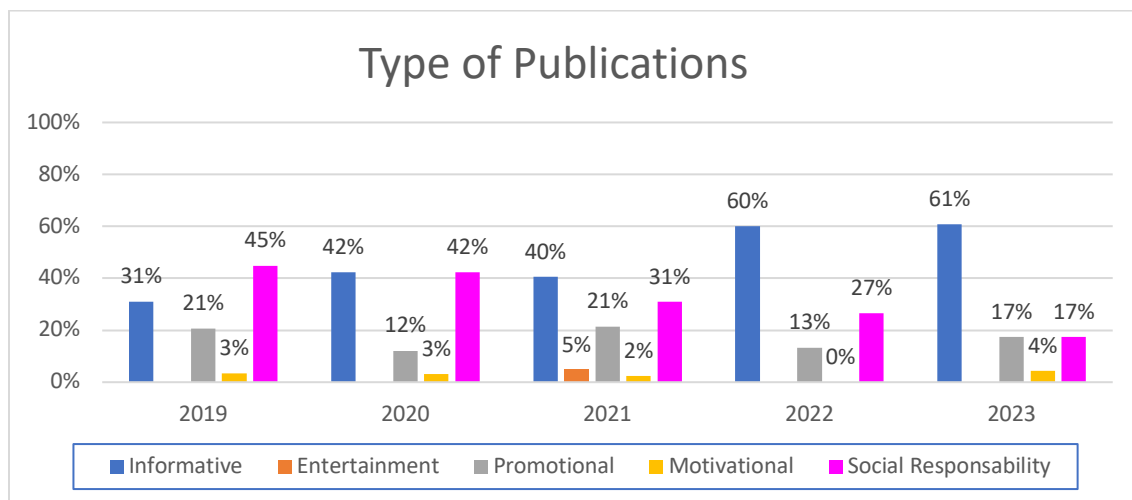
In the years 2019 (pre-Covid) to 2023 (post-Covid) the LPCC used the Facebook platform to communicate with the different stakeholders, from the general public to the partner organizations of the different initiatives promoted by the Pink October campaign.

Table 1 shows that the LPCC was more active in the pandemic years i.e., 2020 and 2021, publishing more on its page. In 2023, the LPCC published almost 50 % less than in 2021.

Table 1. Number of publications

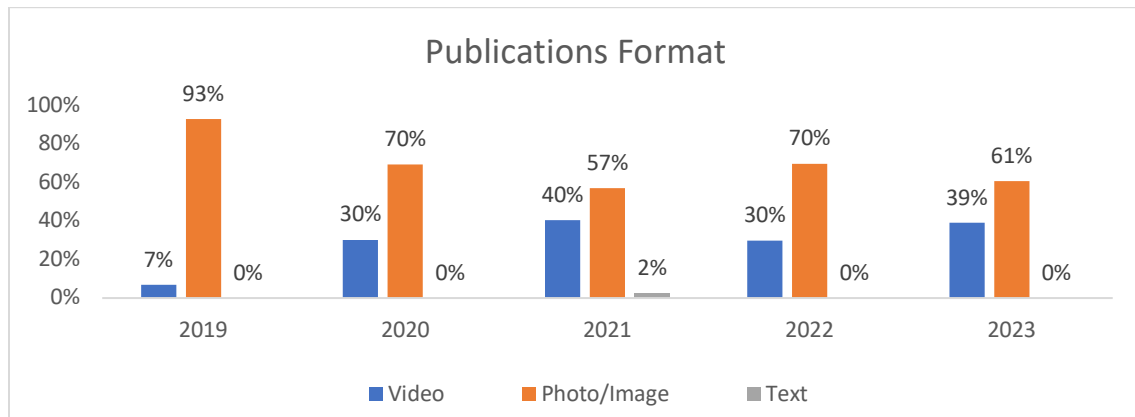
Year	Total number of publications	Average number of daily publications
2019	29	0,94
2020	33	1,06
2021	42	1,35
2022	30	0,97
2023	23	0,74

Initially, LPCC opted for social responsibility publications. However, informative publications have been dominant in recent years, followed by social responsibility and motivational publications (Graphic 1). There is no entertainment content at all.



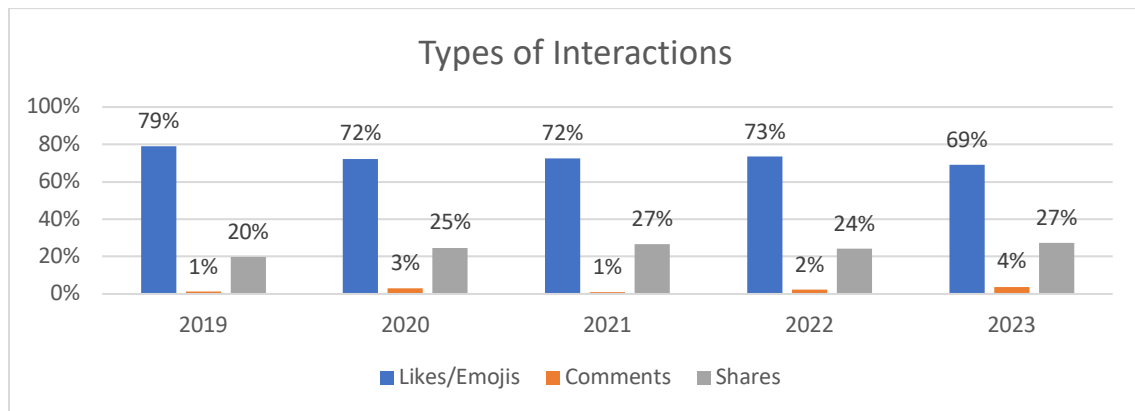
Graphic 1. Type of Publications

In terms of formats (Graphic 2), the LPCC has always preferred the text format with photo/image, followed by the video format in 2021 and 2023. The text format has no expression.



Graphic 2. Publications Format

In terms of types of interaction (Graphic 3), the majority are "likes", followed by "shares".



Graphic 3. Types of Interactions

Comments are very rarely used by users/fans of the LPCC, but they are positive (Table 2). In terms of engagement, the results have been negative. Year after year, the engagement rate has fallen from 2.28% in 2019 to 0.60% in 2023, a decrease of more than 100%.

Table 2. Engagement Rate

Year	Engagement Rate
2019	2,28%
2020	2,17%
2021	1,04%
2022	0,72%
2023	0,60%

The post with the most interaction in 2019 received 6800 likes, 123 comments, and 819 shares. It was a photo calling for volunteering, featuring footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, an LPCC ambassador. In 2020, the post with the most interaction got 2,800 likes, 124 comments, and 407 shares, with the same type of post as in 2019.

In 2021, the post with the most interaction got 349 likes, 4 comments, and 198 shares and announced the partnership between Vimeiro Water and the LPCC, and was in photo/image format. In 2022, the post with the most interaction got 303 likes, 11 comments, and 233 shares and consisted of a publication, in photo/image format, informing about the number of women diagnosed with breast cancer, and curiously it was the first publication of the Pink October campaign.

The most popular post in 2023 received 1460 likes, 93 comments, and 679 shares. It was a video post that highlighted the significance of contributing to the Pink October campaign and how this effort was making a difference for cancer patients.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it is possible to draw some theoretical and managerial implications. First of all, we should remember that online social networks are a communication tool that has an edge over traditional media: they attract and motivate consumers, involve them in brand activity, encourage the sharing of opinions and critiques (Zook & Smith, 2016), and generate good or bad word of mouth (Libai, 2011). However, it takes time and technical knowledge (Jhajharia, P. & Kaur, 2015) to optimize this presence, as it requires a well-defined strategy and objectives. The right marketing strategy for online social networks will allow for greater consumer involvement with the brand, possible sharing, and promotion of the brand on their profiles and personal networks, increasing brand awareness, increasing visits to the website, or even increasing sales or

donations (Pacheco, 2023). This involvement with the consumer is one of the key points in creating a relationship between a brand and its audience, reducing its susceptibility to crises (Grunig et al., 2003). Brands should see this presence as an opportunity and not just a threat.

In terms of the management of the LPCC, and looking at the figures, it is possible to see that initially, there was a decline in the number of page followers, which decreased from 742k in 2019 to 727k in 2023. This could be due to Facebook users migrating to other social platforms like Instagram and TikTok. However, it is worth noting that the Facebook audience is consistent with the average age of the LPCC page. Abandonment rates may be higher due to a 50% decrease in the number of posts, compared to pre-pandemic years.

The LPCC primarily focuses on creating informative publications, but it would be interesting to explore content that also serves its social purpose. As for the format of the content, the LPCC has always preferred text with photo/image format, followed by video format. Currently, the video format has gained more popularity on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and it is also the format that has experienced the most growth in the LPCC's typology of formats. The LPCC can use the growing trend and expertise in creating content for TikTok to increase its visibility on the platform. This will help them reach out to the younger generation and inform them about their activities. Additionally, they can improve their Instagram presence by posting stories and reels since they currently only have 10k followers.

In terms of interaction, most of the activity on LPCC (a social network) is in the form of "likes", followed by "shares", while there aren't many comments, especially in the last year as analyzed by a recent study. As a social network, LPCC should endeavor to invest more in publications with strong CTAs (call-to-action) to encourage their community to participate more. LPCC should also consider responding to comments faster as this type of strategy could increase engagement levels. From 2019 to 2023, the engagement rate has fallen from 2.28% to 0.60%.

Informative communication is relevant, but it is equally crucial for organizations to be observant of their audiences, seeking to establish interactions to create, or strengthen, lasting relationships. According to Primo (2007), relationships are built and maintained over time through continuous interactions, suggesting that it would be beneficial to increase the number of posts and interactions between users of the LPCC's pages.

Online communication needs to be two-way, and the LPCC should make use of all the platform's features. Cancer is a complex subject with different types requiring different approaches.

Therefore, LPCC needs to strengthen its relationship with its community through closer and more frequent communication. This means moving away from the traditional approach of sharing only informative posts and focusing more on creating varied and engaging content that responds directly to comments, including motivational and entertaining posts, as highlighted by Mesquita et al. (2020).

6. CONCLUSION

The number of posts increased during the pandemic period, there was a considerable decrease in the post-pandemic period. The drop in the number of followers, engagement rate, and volume of posts highlights the need to re-evaluate the social media strategy. This implies creating ways to stimulate the participation of current and potential consumers, encouraging the recommendation of services, participation in forums, comments, etc. Having a presence on a social network or other online platform is not enough for the LPCC and the next few years will be challenging, not only for the LPCC but for all brands, because audiences and platforms are changing and transforming the way they behave. Realizing, accepting, and adapting could be one of the ways for the LPCC to make the most of this new way of living.

This work only presents one side of the story, and this is one of the limitations of this study, as an analysis with the LPCC would certainly bring many more insights, and the study could be extended to the users and understand their point of view. It could also be extended to include other institutions that are also taking part in the Pink October campaign.

These are humble conclusions, because the Liga Portuguesa Contra o Cancro has done an excellent job, which deserves our attention and respect, and we want to thank them publicly.

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