

“NO CRIME, NO PUNISHMENT”: BRASKEM’S CORPORATE SOCIAL IRRESPONSIBILITY IN MACEIÓ

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines Braskem’s strategic responses to the damages caused in Maceió (AL), identifying recurring patterns of evasion regarding its responsibility for a public and criminological issue.

Methodology: A qualitative, interpretive methodology was applied to analyze Braskem’s responses to the 2018 environmental crime in Maceió. The corpus consisted of 229 pages of socio-environmental reports, corporate communications, and company documents, treated as organizational narratives and subjected to hermeneutic content analysis.

Results and discussion: Braskem’s responses revealed three distinct patterns: silencing (withholding information about the damages), denial (rejecting responsibility for negative impacts), and self-correction (emphasizing internal corrective actions). Collectively, these strategies operate as defensive mechanisms that obscure public recognition of accountability and reduce the likelihood of sanctions.

Contributions: This study advances the Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSIR) literature by examining the Maceió case and demonstrating how corporations may strategically evade scrutiny and sanctions for socially harmful actions. It contributes to critical management studies on corporate accountability by systematically identifying patterns and categories of responsibility avoidance. The implications of the study are both theoretical and practical: the findings contribute to the literature on attempts to evade responsibility and to the formulation of public policies, and support civil society organizations and regulatory bodies in identifying effective ways to prevent corporate irresponsibility. Additionally, the study highlights the social and environmental consequences of irresponsible corporate behavior, enforcing the importance of accountability and justice in cases of collective harm.

Keywords: Corporate Social Irresponsibility; Corporate Crimes; Braskem.

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Introduction

Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSIR) occurs when corporate operations intentionally cause harm to society. In such cases, it refers to illegal acts committed by companies that violate laws, regulations, and ethical codes of conduct, resulting in social harm. Corporations are aware of potential damages yet continue their activities (Clark et al., 2022; Coraiola & Derry, 2020). Despite this, corporations often employ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) discourses to persuade consumers and shareholders that they value the environment and surrounding communities (Armstrong, 1977). CSIR encompasses illegal and/or criminal actions and omissions, with these acts perpetrated during organizational operations resulting in social and environmental damage (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020; Mena et al., 2015).

When corporations face allegations, they often issue public denials and justify their actions through neutralization or avoidance of responsibility. These strategic responses, including apologies or denials, are intended to repair public image (Clark et al., 2022; Coraiola & Derry, 2020). Such tactics can minimize victims' experiences and misinform the public about the nature and urgency of the harm, ultimately affecting long-term well-being. Importantly, even severe social or environmental harms receive far less public attention than street crimes (Lynch et al., 2004).

This study examines the CSIR of Braskem, a petrochemical company that has issued sustainability reports since 2013 to communicate its sustainable practices to stakeholders (Braskem, 2023a). Despite this, Braskem was implicated in a CSIR case in March 2018, when tremors measuring 2.5 on the Richter Scale occurred in Maceió. Residents of the Pinheiros neighborhood soon reported structural damage, including cracks, soil subsidence, fissures, and street craters (Colen, 2018). In 2019, a report by the Mineral Resources Research Company (Companhia de Pesquisa de Recursos Minerais - CPRM) concluded that Braskem's rock salt mining operations were the cause of the ground instability affecting the neighborhoods of Pinheiro, Mutange, Bebedouro, Bom Parto, and Farol (CPRM, 2019).

However, Braskem's socioeconomic reports from 2019-2022 omitted information about the damages caused by its operations in Maceió. The company took no responsibility. On the contrary, the petrochemical company announced measures to reinforce its commitment to community safety (Braskem, 2019a). Given this context, this study's guiding question is: What patterns emerge in Braskem's strategic responses to the material and social damages caused by its operations in Maceió? To answer this, the research objective is to map Braskem's strategic responses to the damage in Maceió and identify patterns used to evade critical scrutiny as a responsible party in a public

and criminological issue. The research corpus consists of Braskem's official statements issued from 2019 to May 2023 and socioeconomic reports from 2019 to 2022 (Braskem, 2019a, 2020, 2021a, 2022a, 2023b). This empirical material was considered as narratives produced by the company and subjected to hermeneutic content analysis (Bergman, 2010; Vieira & Queiroz, 2017).

This research offers two main contributions. First, it bridges critical criminology and organizational studies, especially critical management studies, by examining corporate responsibility for harms produced through business operations. Such damages violate core principles of social and environmental justice, which should not be subordinated to managerial logics of accumulation and exploitation. Second, positing research and managerial practice as sites of political engagement, encouraging advocacy for social justice and support interventions to prevent corporate crimes, thereby challenging dominant patterns of corporate denial.

After this introduction, we present a literature review on Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSIR), corporate crimes, and attempts to evade corporate accountability. Next, we describe the research methodology, analyze the case of Maceió, Alagoas (AL), and examine Braskem's strategic responses in its post-event narratives. We conclude the article with final remarks.

2 Strategic Responses to Corporate Crime and CSIR

CSIR refers to corporate actions or omissions that cause social and environmental harm, including unethical corporate behavior (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020). These acts are often intentional, as corporations are aware of potential damages yet continue operating (Clark et al., 2022). According to Clark et al. (2022), the absence of CSIR cannot be interpreted as the existence of CSR, as the two concepts do not represent opposite poles.

CSR addresses discourses on organizations and their relationships with the environment, and the ways they attain legitimacy and foster a positive reputation within society (Faria & Sauerbronn, 2008; Leandro et al., 2015). CSIR is not a part of CSR; instead, it refers to illegal or criminal acts committed by corporations. Thus, it is essential to understand corporate intentions and their consequences (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020; Clark et al., 2022), particularly when prioritizing shareholder expectations, even when they intentionally or unintentionally cause harm, especially to communities and the environment (Armstrong, 1977; Mena et al., 2015). In intentional cases, managers know their actions may cause harm yet

continue operating in pursuit of profit (Armstrong, 1977).

In line with CSIR, corporate crimes are defined as illegal acts committed by companies when they violate laws, regulations, and ethical codes of conduct, resulting in social harm (Baucus & Dworkin, 1991; Sutherland, 1944). Pearce and Tombs (2019) attributed the character of intentionality and/or negligence to corporate crimes, defining them as illegal acts or omissions, resulting from deliberate decisions or culpable negligence in pursuit of their formal objectives. These crimes are motivated by financial gains and capital accumulation. Although occurring within a legitimate operational context, their acts are illegal and/or irresponsible (Friedrichs, 2019).

According to Souza et al. (2017, p. 691), corporate crime occurs when "the corporation itself is the actor of the action," that is, illegal acts committed by employees for personal gain are not considered corporate crimes. Building on this understanding, corporate crimes can be interpreted as products of the globalization process, generating harm through the mechanisms of neoliberal policies. Such policies construct a social imaginary in which neoliberalism is normalized and accepted as a natural order—one that reinforces and intensifies the patterns of capital accumulation (Pearce & Tombs, 2019). Whyte (2019) argues that state regulation and the legal structure of the corporation are not accidental failures: they create conditions in which capital accumulation (and the resulting damage) are permitted or facilitated. As a way to curb corporate crime, he proposes corporate death as a severe punishment for criminal and irresponsible corporate acts.

When corporations face allegations of illegal or criminal activities, they experience corporate crises that demand strategic responses. Through public statements, they construct narratives to justify their actions, avoid responsibility or deeper investigation, and repair their image (Clark et al., 2022; Coraiola & Derry, 2020; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Medeiros & Alcadipani, 2013). Corporate narratives or discourses are considered strategic responses (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Medeiros & Alcadipani, 2013) aimed to convince the public that actions are being taken to mitigate the consequences of criminal events (Monod de Froideville, 2022), such as issuing official statements to communicate ongoing actions, without detailed disclosure of the events (Coraiola & Derry, 2020).

This strategy of promoting forgetfulness can be both short-term and long-term. In the short term, stakeholders are manipulated through actions that appear to minimize or repair the damage. In the long term, corporations fabricate evidence of improvement or destroy evidence (Mena et al., 2015). In practice, corporate actions diverge from their discourses, which is used to prevent negative public perceptions (Monod de Froideville, 2022), thereby maintaining legitimacy before the public and stakeholders (Mena et al., 2015)

while avoiding public scrutiny and legal consequences.

Another way to promote organizational forgetfulness is to take responsibility for the criminal event, whether through an apology or public statement, combined with symbolic or real corrective measures, creating the perception of concern. At the same time, practices remain unchanged (Mena et al., 2015). Like avoiding responsibility, neutralization attempts occur when corporations make public statements to legitimize their actions and maintain their image as socially responsible companies (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b). Similarly, impression management uses the perceptions of target audiences to shape public opinion through communication strategies and tactics that influence the organization's image (Mendonça & Amantino-Andrade, 2003).

Together, these strategies produced what can be described as evasion or neutralization of responsibility. Corporations like Exxon Valdez (1989) and Deepwater Horizon (2010) framed environmental crimes as unavoidable operational disasters, preserving legitimacy. Through discursive tactics, they deflect or minimize blame, using narratives to reshape public perception and reframe criminal negligence as technical failure or accident (Bradshaw, 2012; Fisher, 2009; Perry, 2010; Osofsky et al., 2012; Raucher, 1992).

After the Exxon Valdez spill, responsibility was individualized and attributed to a single operator, shifting accountability away from the corporation. By framing the catastrophe as an "accident," the company transformed a state-corporate failure into a human tragedy (Fisher, 2009; Perry, 2010). While thousands of Alaskans and Native communities lost their livelihoods, Exxon successfully lobbied to reduce punitive damages from \$5 billion to \$507 million, presenting itself as a victim of excessive punishment. It emphasized its \$2.1 billion cleanup spending to shift the discussion from ethics to cost accounting (Fisher, 2009; Perry, 2010).

In the Deepwater Horizon case, BP controlled information flow and used digital propaganda to recast the disaster as a reputational management challenge while manipulating images and the criminal case narrative (Bradshaw, 2012; Raucher, 1992). BP also used sustainability reports (2005 to 2009) as greenwashing, projecting safety and environmental stewardship that concealed persistent violations (Bradshaw, 2012; Osofsky et al., 2012). BP presented itself as a responsible actor, rather than the primary perpetrator of one of the worst ecological crimes in history. This dissonance between discourse and practice enabled the company to sustain legitimacy even as it breached fundamental safety standards (Bradshaw, 2012; Raucher, 1992; Osofsky et al., 2012).

Beyond serving as an illustrative backdrop for this study, the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon cases demonstrate that responsibility-avoidance structures are

recurrent and deeply embedded in corporate responses to corporate crimes. These cases reveal the coexistence of multiple strategies (such as denial, silence, neutralization, apology, forgetting, and impression management) mobilized to deflect accountability and preserve organizational legitimacy. Importantly, these attempts at neutralization do not operate as hierarchical or sequential categories; instead, they overlap and intertwine within the same discourse, synthesizing for the public an interpretation in which irresponsible acts are reframed as outcomes of external circumstances, systemic constraints, or unavoidable acts rather than as consequences of corporate decision-making and structural negligence.

Table 1 describes and synthesizes the corporate strategic responses identified in the literature to avoid responsibility or repair their image. The table also includes other types of neutralization identified in the literature.

Table 1. Types of Responsibility Avoidance

Type of Responsibility Avoidance		Description
Promoting Forgetfulness	Cooling Discourses	Corporate statements issued in response to reported irregularities. These are appeasement strategies, particularly toward public opinion. These discourses create the illusion that something is being done, yet corporations either remain passive or manipulate their initiatives for their own benefit. They are primarily used in scandals that cause environmental damage (Monod de Froideville, 2022).
	Forgetting Discourses	Narratives aimed at promoting the forgetting of illegal acts challenge historical facts and foster public uncertainty through manipulated interpretations. As a result, the public forgets what occurred, silencing voices that demand new actions from organizations (Coraiola & Derry, 2020; Mena et al., 2015).
Silences	of Speech Acts	From a linguistic perspective, these corporate narratives avoid directly addressing the accusations, constituting what Huckin (2002) calls “illocutionary acts.” In this form of responsibility avoidance, silence itself becomes the corporation’s narrative.
	Presuppositional	Omission of information through presuppositional silence relies on context-based assumptions to hide key aspects of the narrative, obscuring those responsible for the event. Corporations use this strategic silence in official statements for manipulative purposes (Huckin, 2002).
	Discreet	Corporations issue statements but avoid providing detailed information about the event they are being accused of. Corporations use confidentiality to withhold the details about the event (Huckin, 2002).
	Manipulative	Corporations hide information relevant to the irresponsible event to preserve their legitimacy, manipulating public perception through silence in reports, press releases, and public speeches (Huckin, 2002).
	Gender-Based	Corporations withhold critical information related to gender, cultural differences, and ideological perspectives, following implicit norms rather than engaging in manipulative silence (Huckin, 2002).
Attack	on The Accuser	Corporations engage in attacks against the accusers to diminish the allegations regarding the CSIR (Schultz & Flyghed, 2020b, 2021; Sisco, 2012).

Self-Corrective Measures	Self-Correction	Through public statements, corporations avoid responsibility while implementing measures to neutralize the event or reassure the public that it will not happen again (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
	Apology	Corporations publicly acknowledge responsibility for the event and express remorse (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
Denial	Literal	Corporations issue statements denying the allegations (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).
	of Evidence	Corporations claim that the evidence used against them is illegitimate or false (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b; Sisco, 2012).
	of Involvement	Corporations deny any involvement in the event through public or official statements, acknowledging that the event occurred but rejecting their participation (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).
	of Responsibility	Like denial of involvement, corporations do not deny that the criminal event occurred but deny their participation; however, in this case, they shift responsibility to other agents, actors, or the public (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).
	Causal Technique	Corporations use technical explanations to state what occurred, denying their involvement and any knowledge of illegal actions taking place (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).
	of Social Ills	Corporations facing allegations of irresponsible conduct leading to Human Rights violations and/or Environmental Crimes deny or minimize the damages, claiming they are less severe than reported (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b).
of Knowledge	of Knowledge	Corporations argue that ambiguous laws left them unaware that their actions could cause harm or be illegal (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b).
	of Deviation	Corporations claim their operations complied with expected parameters and were thus not illegal (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).
	of Intention	Corporations frame criminal events as “accidents,” claiming they were unaware such harm could occur (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

Organizations’ strategic responses following cases of CSIR involve attempts to avoid or neutralize responsibility to legitimize their actions and repair their image before society. One of the main strategies involves promoting discourses to induce public forgetting and minimize the damage (Coraiola & Derry, 2020; Mena et al., 2015; Monod de Froideville, 2022). Discourses promoting silencing are used when corporations deliberately withhold important information to manipulate public perception by distorting the information they disclose (Huckin, 2002). Furthermore, when corporations remain silent in the face of accusations, this silence becomes a form of discourse that promotes silence (Huckin, 2002).

The attack-the-accuser strategy is used when corporations

seek to deflect attention from their operations and alleged misconduct by launching attacks to delegitimize the accusing institutions (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b, 2021; Sisco, 2012). However, self-corrective measures are implemented when corporations take action to mitigate the risks of irresponsible behavior and demonstrate remorse through apologies (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013). These measures aim to restore the public image. However, denial strategies are employed to deny involvement in criminal events (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013). All the strategies aim to evade accountability and public, material, or legal punishment.

This research focuses on the strategic responses companies use to deny responsibility, which naturalizes corporate crimes as accidents, leaving society in a state of anesthesia (Tombs & Whyte, 2020). These responses hinder corporate accountability, as the Brazilian legal framework focuses on the criminal liability of executives for environmental crimes, a focus that has proven ineffective in preventing such crimes (Cereser & Bechara, 2022). This research is particularly concerned with responses involving avoidance and denial of responsibility, which are attempts to mask indifference and disregard for the damage caused by the operations.

3 Methodology

Qualitative research investigates and explores complex phenomena to gain deeper insights through documentary materials and visual methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). This study adopts this approach, employing analytical and interpretative procedures to examine Braskem's strategic responses to the irresponsible event in Maceió, while contextualizing the phenomenon and incorporating reflective observations from the field (Flick et al., 2004). The case is described in Topic 3.1. Empirical context.

The research corpus consisted of official statements published on Braskem's website regarding the March 2018 criminal event, as well as socio-environmental reports from 2019 to 2022. Braskem's socio-environmental reports have been available on its website since 2013. However, to meet the objectives of this study, four reports (2019-2022) published after the event, totaling 92 pages, were analyzed.

The search for official statements found no records for 2018. Therefore, the corpus comprises official statements issued between January 2019 and May 2023, the data collection period for this investigation, which extended until May 2023 and corresponded to the period before the decision of the Court of Justice of the State of Alagoas. This totaled 186 documents. A preliminary analysis of the empirical data, excluding official statements unrelated

to the criminal event, yielded 137 statements (Table 2). Regarding social and environmental reports, only the company's statements about the event in question were analyzed to achieve the research objective, excluding all other report items. The empirical material for analysis totaled 229 pages.

Table 2. Collected official statements

Year	Official statements collected	Official statements analyzed
2019	82	59
2020	49	30
2021	28	25
2022	18	17
2023	9	6
Total	186	137

Source: Created by the authors

The empirical material submitted for analysis regarding the case is limited to May 2023; however, the corporate crime committed by Braskem is still ongoing and has social and environmental consequences that are not yet fully understood. Therefore, it is essential to present information from after 2023 to provide context and demonstrate that the crime is still ongoing.

The empirical material was analyzed as a corporate narrative, constructed around a specific topic (Flick, 2002): the description of the event that occurred in Maceió. Hermeneutic content analysis (HCA), a mixed methodology that combines content and hermeneutic analysis (Bergman, 2010; Vieira & Queiroz, 2017), was employed to address the following questions:

- (1) What narratives did the company construct about the event?
- (2) What narratives did the company provide to justify what happened?
- (3) What narratives did the company provide regarding its actions and responsibilities?

HCA's primary responsibility is to understand the meaning of the analyzed material. Therefore, it goes beyond content analysis by considering the more profound significance of the material. Thus, if the researcher chooses to conduct a reflexive analysis, as suggested by Vieira and Queiroz (2017, p.12), "the combination of both approaches enables understanding with a spirit of objectivity and hermeneutic circle, along with data reduction, systematization, and flexibility."

Following Bergman's (2010) proposal, this study employed

Hermeneutic Content Analysis (HCA) through a three-step process. First, a qualitative content analysis of the empirical data was conducted to identify and code narratives related to the case. The analytical categories initially used were drawn from Table 1; that is, we sought to determine, in the empirical material, the types of neutralization attempts employed by Braskem. Secondly, the neutralizations identified in Braskem’s narrative were examined to identify patterns and similarities. This allowed the identification of three main strategies for neutralizing responsibility: denial, silence, and self-correction. Thirdly, the identified responses were synthesized, and the narratives were recontextualized and interpreted, taking into account the texts and their specific contexts. This enabled a discussion of how the categories manifest in corporate discourse and revealed the organization’s strategies for managing responsibility.

3.1 Empirical Context

In March 2018, Maceió experienced tremors measuring 2.5 on the Richter Scale, following heavy rainfall. Following the tremors, the residents of the Pinheiro neighborhood observed structural damage to buildings and streets, including cracks in buildings, fissures and craters in streets, and ground subsidence (Colen, 2018; Menezes et al., 2018). Maceió’s Civil Defense requested the Geological Survey of Brazil (SGB/CPRM) to investigate the causes of the phenomenon (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019b).

In June 2019, Mineral Resources Research Company (Companhia de Pesquisa de Recursos Minerais - CPRM) issued a report regarding the factors that led to ground instability in the city. The study covered 62 wells in the region, of which Braskem owned 45 for rock salt mining. Based on this, the SGB/CPRM concluded that the 2018 tremors were caused by Braskem’s irresponsible mining operations (CPRM, 2019). Following confirmation, the Federal Prosecutor’s Office (MPF) filed an injunction requiring Braskem to develop a mine closure plan (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019a). The petrochemical company began the process of shutting down the mines in 2019; however, in the same year, it questioned the veracity of the information, citing “inconsistencies in the methodologies used in preparing the Report” (THN1, 2019), and initiated independent studies to contest its responsibility (Braskem, 2019i).

Braskem was legally compelled, through lawsuits filed by the MPF and other public entities, to bear the costs of evacuation and compensation for the residents and businesses in areas affected by its irresponsible actions in Maceió-AL (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019b, 2019c). To this end, in December 2019, the Financial Compensation and Relocation Support Plan (henceforth, the Plan) was signed by the Federal and State Prosecutor’s

Office, the Federal and State Public Defender’s Office, and Braskem. The plan outlined the petrochemical company’s mandatory actions for evacuating and relocating the residents from high-risk areas in Pinheiro, Mutange, Bebedouro, and Bom Parto neighborhoods (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019c).

The Plan stipulated indemnities for those affected by the company’s criminal actions, including provisions for social worker guidance, support, and relocation allowance. According to Braskem (2021a), the residents were eligible for a relocation allowance of R\$5,000 and monthly rental assistance of R\$1,000. The Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF] (2019c) established a compensation payment of R\$81,000 per property, though property owners retained the right to seek different compensation amounts through legal proceedings. After residents of the affected neighborhoods signed the agreement, Braskem became the landowner.

The irresponsible operation had severe consequences. Four neighborhoods were evacuated, 60,000 people were left homeless, 15,000 families lost their homes, over 30,000 workers became unemployed, 4,500 local businesses were shut down, and 15,000 properties were abandoned (Poder Judiciário do Alagoas, 2023; Portal Nacional do Direito do Trabalho, 2019). In a Public Civil Action filed by the MPF, Braskem was held liable for the events that occurred in the neighborhoods of Maceió-AL. In addition to Braskem, the MPF held the National Mining Agency (Agência Nacional de Mineração - ANM) and the Environmental Institute (Instituto do Meio Ambiente - IMA) responsible for the environmental damages. Both ANM and IMA were accountable for overseeing Braskem’s operations and verifying compliance with mining safety requirements and environmental licensing. However, they failed in their supervisory duties. Consequently, both public institutions and Braskem were obliged to implement actions to mitigate, recover, and compensate for the damages caused by this irresponsible act (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019b).

In October 2023, the 16th Civil Court of Maceió ordered Braskem S.A. to compensate the State of Alagoas for damage caused by subsidence linked to its rock salt extraction. The decision acknowledged that the State suffered losses from damaged public facilities, expropriated properties, and lost tax revenue, and determined that Braskem would be responsible for the repairs, with an expert assessment to determine the exact amount of the fine (Poder Judiciário do Alagoas, 2023).

In December 2023, the Federal Senate launched a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) to investigate the 2018 subsidence in Maceió. The

CPI examined omissions and irregularities involving Braskem, public agencies, and regulatory bodies, analyzing CPRM reports, mining contracts, and the company's accounting records. Hearings with company representatives, authorities, victims, and experts reinforced the link between rock salt extraction and the socio-environmental damage. The final report, approved in May 2024, held Braskem directly responsible for the geological disaster that displaced around 60,000 people, recommended the indictment of executives, and suggested remedial measures for environmental and social impacts. Furthermore, the document highlighted flaws in government oversight and deficiencies in corporate accountability mechanisms, demonstrating collusion between public and private interests to maintain corporate impunity (Senado Federal, 2024).

In November 2023, new tremors occurred, prompting Alagoas state's Civil Defense to declare a risk of collapse and the possible formation of a crater in Maceió-AL. These latest developments led to further evacuations of residents and institutions, including hospitals, and on December 10, 2023, one of the mines collapsed into the Mundaú lagoon. The collapse made headlines, signaling a potential complete mine cave-in that could create a crater in Maceió-AL (Galvani, 2023; Rodrigues, 2023). The case has unfolded, but this research has set 2023 as the endpoint and has not considered subsequent events.

4 Denial, Silence, and Self-Correction in Braskem's Narratives

The qualitative content analysis of the research corpus revealed three distinct narratives constructed by the company: "We are not guilty," "No crime was committed," and "We will act differently." These narratives correspond to the strategic response patterns of denial, silencing, and self-correction. The collected responses were analyzed and presented, with interpretations accounting for the texts and the specific contexts in which they were produced, as outlined by Hermeneutic Content Analysis (Bergman, 2010).

Before the SBG/CPRM report was published, Braskem claimed it was taking steps to identify the causes of the "seismic event," a term the company used to deny responsibility for the 2018 occurrence (Braskem, 2019b). In a series of official statements, Braskem stated that it would take responsibility if the "seismic event" stemmed from its operations.

Braskem reaffirms its ongoing cooperation with authorities since the **beginning of the events** in the neighborhood of Pinheiro to determine their cause, noting that no conclusive evidence has yet established a

link between Braskem's operations **and the events observed in the neighborhood**. Braskem reaffirms its commitment to society in Alagoas and to responsible business conduct and continues to contribute to the identification and implementation of solutions (Braskem, 2019d; authors' emphasis).

Since last year, when problems in the Pinheiro neighborhood worsened, Braskem has been cooperating with authorities **to identify the causes of the occurrences in the neighborhoods**. The company is waiting for the studies to be completed. **If it is proven that its activities caused the events in Pinheiro, it will take responsibility for the society of Alagoas, as it has done throughout its more than 40 years of operations in the State of Alagoas** (Braskem, 2019e; authors' emphasis).

Following the release of the SBG/CPRM report, stating that the criminal event in Maceió-AL in 2018 was a consequence of irresponsible rock salt mining, Braskem suspended its operations (Braskem, 2019g) and issued official statements claiming it was using its own sonar equipment to identify the causes of the problem, criticizing the report issued by the SBG/CPRM. Despite criticism, Braskem issued a series of official statements highlighting the measures taken to mitigate the event's consequences, while avoiding taking responsibility for them:

Braskem opened a Self-Service and Information Center today (10th) for the residents of the protected area in the Pinheiro neighborhood. Through it, the community will be able to clarify doubts and receive guidance about the next steps of the Financial Compensation and Relocation Support Program (Braskem, 2019j).

After the completion of Braskem's internal studies in 2020, the company did not issue any official statement on its website. Following the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, Braskem issued official statements regarding the health measures implemented in the affected neighborhoods. In 2021, they announced a series of measures to mitigate the consequences of the criminal event, including the Plan (Braskem, 2021b) and cleanup efforts in affected neighborhoods to control pests and remove debris (Braskem, 2021c). In 2022, they issued official statements regarding the actions of their Plan (Braskem, 2022b). In 2023, another phase of the drainage work and vegetation cover on the Mutange slope was completed (Braskem, 2023c). Following the conviction in October 2023, Braskem did not issue any official statement accepting responsibility for the

irresponsible act. Furthermore, after further developments, the company did not issue a statement either.

To address the study's objective of analyzing Braskem's strategic responses to the criminal event in Maceió-AL, the narratives constructed by Braskem were examined to identify patterns for categorization. The first response pattern identified was "silence," which manifested in various forms.

a) Manipulative and presuppositional silences

Braskem referred to the criminal event as a "seismic event" (Braskem, 2019b, authors' emphasis) and did not provide detailed information about the investigations and possible damages. By employing a discursive strategy, Braskem not only avoids accountability for the crime but also reshapes the public's perception of it as a natural phenomenon. The corporation's strategy is not neutral and reproduces organizational processes that normalize the damage it causes, thereby legitimizing its operations (Huckin, 2002).

b) Discreet silences

Braskem's narrative employed discreet silence when referring to an unspecified "event," without clarifying its nature, causes, actors, or responsibility. It is evident in the following statement, "Braskem publicly expresses its solidarity with all **families affected by the events in the Pinheiro neighborhood in Maceió**" (Braskem, 2019f, authors' emphasis). In this case, the organization projects empathy and solidarity to maintain a moral appearance. Such silences are not incidental but rather part of a communicative repertoire that normalizes illegality and sustains impunity. By depoliticizing the event and diverting attention from accountability to compassion, Braskem reinforces the broader structural conditions that allow corporate actors to evade responsibility for social and environmentally destructive practices (Huckin, 2002).

When Braskem uses silence strategies, the company not only conceals its responsibility for the crime but also continually seeks to reframe its causality and redefine its morality, while demonstrating to society that there is no cause for concern about the "event" (Huckin, 2002).

The second response pattern was denial, which manifested in different forms.

a) Denial of involvement and literal denial

Among Braskem's narratives, denial of involvement appeared in public and official statements, yet it acknowledged the event. The main denial attempts occurred after the first SBG/CPRM report in 2019, such as "**Should it be proven that [the company's] activities caused the events in Pinheiro**, it will assume its responsibility to the society of Alagoas" (Braskem, 2019e, authors' emphasis).

This rhetorical strategy separates the acknowledgment of harm from the admission of guilt. By invoking conditional liability, "if proven", Braskem projects openness while deferring moral and legal responsibility. Such denial functions as a mechanism of impunity, reframing the criminal act as uncertain and undermining victims' claims. In doing so, the corporation uses communicative power to reshape the meaning of harm and reinforce systemic patterns that allow corporate actors to evade accountability (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

b) Denial of intent

Braskem repeatedly labeled the criminal event as a "seismic event" (Braskem, 2019b), "neighborhood occurrence" (Braskem, 2019e), and "subsidence phenomenon" (Braskem, 2021e). This rhetoric constitutes a strategic practice that obscures criminality, transforming acts of corporate negligence or recklessness into socially acceptable accidents. Consequently, the company not only evades moral and legal responsibility but also reinforces the structural conditions that allow similar harm to be repeated without proportionate sanctions, highlighting the interaction between corporate discourse, the production of harm, and impunity (Smithson & Venette, 2013; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).

c) Denial of evidence

These are denial attempts observed in the following statement: "Braskem reaffirms its ongoing **cooperation with authorities since the beginning of the events in Pinheiro district to identify the causes and emphasizes that, to date, there is no conclusive evidence linking Braskem's activities to the observed events in the neighborhood**" (Braskem, 2019c, authors' emphasis).

Braskem stated that there was no evidence linking it to the criminal event. Another way to deny their involvement, due to a lack of evidence, involved attacking the SBG/CPRM report, claiming insufficient grounds to assert that Braskem committed the 2018 crime (Braskem, 2019h). Such tactics allow the corporation to deny involvement while appearing cooperative. By questioning evidence and delegitimizing investigative findings, Braskem minimizes perceived culpability and reinforces conditions of impunity, enabling harmful practices to persist without appropriate sanction (Sisco, 2012; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).

d) Technical denials of cause and deviation

The following excerpt from the report shows technical denial: "Braskem's rock salt mining operations **follow international standards and do not leave wells 'empty' during mining or after operations cease**. The wells are filled with brine (a mixture of water with

high salt concentration), which is an incompressible fluid, thus ensuring their integrity” (Braskem, 2019b, authors’ emphasis). In addition to being a technical denial, the excerpt can be classified as a deviation denial. Braskem constructs a narrative that dissociates corporate agency from harm, portraying the criminal event as either unforeseeable or externally determined. Such technical and deviation denials neutralize perceptions of culpability and demonstrate how corporations employ regulatory and technical discourse to avoid responsibility for socially and environmentally harmful practices (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).

Within Braskem’s narrative, different types of denial coexist in more than one aspect and not only reinforce the contradictory strategy between the company’s actions and its narrative, but also question the evidence corroborating the crime, the regulatory and investigative agencies, and assert that there is no causality between the crime and its practices. The denial strategy is adaptive to the various environments in which the company is exposed, such as institutional pressure to assert its sustainability through CSR reports, technical reports and accounts, corporate narratives, and other channels (Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b).

The third response pattern was self-correction. Braskem signed corrective action agreements with the MPF, including the Risk Area Evacuation Agreement (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019c), the Plan (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019c), the Socio-Environmental Agreement (Federal Prosecutor’s Office [MPF], 2019b), neighborhood cleanup initiatives (Braskem, 2021c, 2021d), and drainage works and vegetation cover for the Mutange slope (Braskem, 2023c).

These actions serve a dual function: although they may reduce immediate harm, they also operate as strategic tools to manage public perception and restore legitimacy. Rather than signaling genuine accountability, they reflect organizational practices that neutralize responsibility, protect reputation, and preserve operational continuity without addressing the structural conditions that enabled the criminal event (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

While denial shifts corporate practices toward corporate responsibility, acts of self-correction shift toward managing the damage caused, allowing the corporation to declare itself repentant for the crime committed. All the categories identified in Braskem’s narrative, silence, denial, and self-correction, are not sequential. The types of narrative neutralization are superimposed on corporate narratives; there is no sequence of how such narratives should behave. However, corporate discourse adapts to stakeholder interests to avoid accountability

for reporting the crime (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

The corporation simultaneously mobilizes technical rationality, moralized expressions of empathy and responsibility, and the conditions imposed by national and international norms and laws to reshape narratives of intent and accountability. This dynamic reveals that the neutralization of responsibility is not a static repertoire, but a relational strategy, continuously adjusted in response to investigative findings, public scrutiny, and institutional pressure (Mena et al., 2015; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b; Sisco, 2012; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

4.1 “No crime, no punishment”

The title of this section was initially used by The New York Sunday Review in its August 25, 2012, Editorial, during the U.S. economic crisis, as cited by Whyte (2019). It is appropriate here because it highlights how Braskem sought to evade responsibility for the crime and its penalties, including reputational consequences. This study did not examine strategies related to business model changes, such as containment, preservation, innovation, exit (Wenzel et al., 2021), or renewal (Kozachenko et al., 2022), since these focus on maintaining returns rather than avoiding CSIR. Instead, the analysis identified patterns in the company’s responses aimed at evading responsibility, even when Braskem acknowledged that the event resulted from its own operations.

The analysis identified three response patterns in Braskem’s narratives across its official statements, communications, and reports: silence, denial, and self-correction. Braskem’s actions constitute CSIR, as the company knew that rock salt extraction could generate environmental harm yet continued its operations (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020; Clark et al., 2022). Despite promoting CSR in its reports, the company’s deliberate practices caused social and environmental harm. This behavior aligns with corporate crime, involving illegitimate actions within an otherwise legitimate activity (Friedrichs, 2019). By breaching environmental standards to pursue profit, Braskem generated private gains at public expense (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020; Souza et al., 2017; Sutherland, 1944).

In October 2023, the Alagoas State Court held the company liable for environmental and social damage in Maceió (Poder Judiciário do Alagoas, 2023). The harm caused fits both corporate crime and CSIR, as it violated laws, norms, and ethical standards, produced social injury (Baucus & Dworkin, 1991; Sutherland, 1944), and was driven by capital accumulation (Friedrichs, 2019).

In this case, an environmental crime occurred, which, as conceptualized by Tombs and Whyte (2020, p. 19),

refers to crimes that “victimize the natural environment, including illegal emissions into the atmosphere, water, and soil; hazardous waste disposal; and illegal manufacturing practices.” Environmental crimes cause immeasurable damage and encompass broader impacts, including the destruction of homes, heightened vulnerability, and the loss of materially and emotionally built living spaces, as evidenced in this case. The affected families received solidarity, as documented by the company in its official statements and communications. Braskem neither assumed responsibility for the harm done nor for future consequences, thereby evading critical public and criminological scrutiny.

Braskem provided strategic responses that normalized corporate crime in public debate, leading people to become anesthetized and fail to recognize its harm (Tombs & Whyte, 2020). Similarly, in other criminal cases, like those involving Exxon and BP, BP disputed investigative findings by citing technical or environmental constraints, while Exxon emphasized compliance with industry standards to frame deviations as acceptable. These forms of denial illustrate how corporations strategically manipulate evidence, technical narratives, and regulatory frameworks to reduce perceptions of illegality and limit accountability, even when their actions cause significant social and environmental harm (Tombs & Whyte, 2020).

The combination of various types of Responsibility Avoidance reflects a consistent organizational repertoire that preserves corporate legitimacy while sustaining impunity. This pattern highlights the systemic difficulties of regulating and holding transnational corporations accountable for social and environmental harm. Such strategies reproduce impunity and structural damage while normalizing, concealing, and rhetorically reframing harmful acts to protect the organization (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020; Tombs & Whyte, 2020; Clark et al., 2022).

Despite the crime, Braskem reported growth of approximately 1.6% in its accounting reports between 2018 and 2020. Its share price rose from 2015 (R\$11.29) to 2018 (R\$61.66), fell between 2018 and 2020 (R\$15.62), peaked in September 2021 (R\$67.20), and has declined since (Poder Judiciário do Alagoas, 2023; Senado Federal, 2024). While still registered in the B3's ESG (environment, society, and governance) index for years, it was removed in December 2023 after being condemned by the Alagoas State Court in October 2023 (Matos, 2023).

The discrepancy between Braskem's accounting results and its public narrative reveals a typical pattern of corporate crime and social irresponsibility. While the company reports economic gains for shareholders, it continues to deny its socio-environmental responsibility for the crime in Maceió. This pattern aligns with Alcadipani &

Medeiros (2020), Clark et al. (2022), Armstrong (1977), and Mena et al. (2015), who argue that corporations knowingly harm communities and the environment in pursuit of profit. As highlighted by Alcadipani and Medeiros (2020), such conduct persists because corporate narratives lack transparency, normalizing the idea that sacrifices are necessary for profitability and sustaining an image of sustainability despite severe negative impacts.

Braskem employs a classic repertoire of impression management, projecting compliance, responsibility, and competence within its institutional and social environment. However, from the perspective of corporate criminology and Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSIR), there is a gap between this crafted image and the reality of damage, liabilities, and sanctions (Mendonça & Amantino-Andrade, 2003).

This normalization leads to corporate crimes being viewed as isolated, unique, and atypical events that will soon be forgotten. Tombs and Whyte (2020) refer to this as an “imaginary disappearance” of the crime, which will be (re)produced again, conforming to neoliberalism’s “imaginary social order” in which corporate crimes are considered inevitable and necessary, rendering them invisible and ambiguous. Whyte’s (2019) perspective on crimes produced by corporations, which consist of a form of business organizations that enjoy corporate personhood, limited liability, and other privileges. The author advocated for a “corporate death penalty,” that is, the removal of corporations’ rights and privileges, along with those of their owners and shareholders, while challenging the power structures that support corporations.

5 Concluding Remarks

This study mapped Braskem’s strategic responses to the damages caused in Maceió and identified the patterns used to evade critical scrutiny as the party responsible for a public and criminological issue. It identified the main strategies corporations employ to communicate their involvement in irresponsible acts, as well as the patterns in the petrochemical company’s responses aimed at avoiding accountability and restoring its public image.

Frequently, companies involved adopt strategic responses, confuse the issue, discredit evidence, and belittle victims to deny responsibility. From a critical management studies perspective, with social justice at its core, the challenge lies in exposing the severity of the harm and the denials that sustain it, and in deconstructing them. Therefore, it is essential to disclose the denial tactics used, as shown in studies on corporate responsibility avoidance. In organizational studies, revealing such tactics remains critical, as numerous investigations of

corporate responsibility avoidance have highlighted.

Rather than offering normative prescriptions, the findings contribute to understanding the limits of contemporary accountability approaches in the neoliberal context by demonstrating how state and corporate devices operate jointly in the management of harm. In this sense, the implications of this study lie in the analytical and theoretical domains, as they shed light on the mechanisms by which corporate violence is rendered governable, legitimate, and socially acceptable.

The findings can support scholars and practitioners seeking to address a critical issue in contemporary society: establishing a social order in which corporate criminal responsibility is recognized, assumed, and appropriately sanctioned. Within the literature on strategic responses to corporate crime and CSIR, including responsibility-evasion tactics, this study also contributes by identifying key groups and types of reactions.

Among the theoretical contributions of this study, we highlight: (a) the proposal of an analytical typology of discursive mechanisms of corporate evasion, developed from the analysis of the case under investigation, which systematises and organises the existing literature by identifying recurring patterns of responsibility displacement, naturalisation, and dilution; (b) the articulation of management and critical criminology debates through an interdisciplinary analytical framework that enables responsibility evasion to be understood as a routinised organisational practice situated at the intersection of corporate management, state regulation, and discursive production; (c) a contribution to critical management studies and critical accounting by reconceptualising evasion strategies as organisational defensive mechanisms, empirically demonstrating how these mechanisms operate to shape public perceptions, manage reputational risks, and mitigate legal exposure in contexts of collective harm; and (d) the advancement of debates on accountability and organisational justice by demonstrating the specific role of institutional communicative practices, including technical, legal, and managerial narratives, in obscuring responsibility and normalising harm, thereby providing analytical insights into discussions on management, transparency, and the limits of contemporary regulatory regimes.

A limitation of this study is its focus on company documents, which, although diverse, do not reveal internal disputes, decision-making processes, or other elements that could deepen understanding of organizational motivations. Including testimonies from residents, social movements, public authorities, or workers would also expand insights

into the effects and perceptions of corporate strategies.

As a future research agenda, and drawing on the reviewers' comments, to whom we are grateful, we suggest further deepening the analysis of accounting devices, ESG indicators, and market signals as organizational technologies of legitimacy construction and responsibility avoidance in contexts of state–corporate crime. Examining financial reports, sustainability metrics, and market ratings not merely as instruments of measurement but as discursive and performative practices could illuminate how they contribute to the normalization of harm, the depoliticization of human rights violations, and the maintenance of corporate hegemony. Such an approach would require a specific theoretical–methodological framework that integrates critical perspectives from accounting, organizational studies, and political economy, which lies beyond the scope of the present article but represents a promising avenue for future investigation.

Additionally, there is a research gap regarding how different stakeholders (consumers, community members, governments, and experts) interpret, contest, or incorporate such responses and corporate responsibilities. The findings may contribute to the development of prevention and accountability mechanisms, while encouraging public scrutiny and sustained attention to corporate crime and its harms. Given the need for multidisciplinary and in-depth analysis, future research could incorporate additional document types, stakeholder perspectives, and varied analytical techniques, especially by examining post-trial and sentencing processes to identify patterns of impunity and accountability. A promising direction is to investigate how Braskem sought to shape media coverage and how counter-narratives emerged in the public sphere. Finally, we suggest investigations into how denial and silencing affect perceptions of justice, institutional trust, and the well-being of affected communities.

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