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Reputational crisis at a Chilean University, resulting from a post on social media X (Twitter) about the controversial theses in the School of Philosophy and Humanities

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Due to the prominence of social networks since the second decade of the twenty-first century, online reputation has become essential for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The University of Chile, a public institution, faced a reputational communication crisis at the end of 2022 due to the disclosure on X (formerly Twitter) of two theses that relativized the concept of pedophilia. This situation raised questions about ethical integrity and permissiveness in academic research at the HEI. The research employed a qualitative methodological approach, complemented by descriptive quantitative data. The study unfolded in two distinct phases. Initially, a comprehensive review of comments on X related to the controversy was conducted. Subsequently, the comments were systematically compiled and organized in a table, and the content was downloaded from the Export Comments platform. From a pool of 4,680 messages, a representative sample of 500 comments was selected. In the second phase, the comments were meticulously categorized using the qualitative analysis tool Atlas.ti23, providing a robust and systematic approach to the research. The results showed high disapproval by X users regarding the content of the theses and the university's communication management. However, this did not directly alter the institutional reputation of the university, although it did influence the external public's perception of the professors and the organization's internal environment. The research concludes that the comments in X revealed a scarce presence of protocols on the part of the university for evaluating academic projects in the humanities.

KEYWORDS

reputation, social media, communication crisis, University of Chile, pedophilia thesis

1 Introduction

In recent decades, reputation has gained importance as an intangible strategic asset for universities, and with this, social networks play a significant role in reputation. Reputation, in this sense, refers to the quality of companies and how favorable reputations bring material benefits, which have an impact on attracting new talent and stakeholders (Gwebu et al., 2018; Gallardo-Vázquez et al., 2019).

Social networks are increasingly popular in everyone's life and have changed the way of communication, including students and researchers, by providing opportunities for the dissemination of academic work (Hu et al., 2024). Moreover, they provide unique insights into the behavior of public perception of higher education institutions (HEIs) and have become crucial tools for analyzing and understanding university reputation (UR) (Veh et al., 2018; Amado Mateus and Juarez Acosta, 2022).

In addition, the media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as pedophilia (McCartan, 2014). Thanks to extensive coverage and the rise of social media, the term pedophilia has moved from specialized sexological and psychological discussions into everyday parlance. Consequently, issues around pedophilia have triggered significant reputational challenges in a variety of settings, such as the luxury brand sector (Gárgoles and Ambás, 2023) and within the Catholic Church (Alexander, 2018). In educational settings, there is an ongoing debate about the potential for pedophilia to infiltrate the teaching environment (Ottaviano and Persico, 2019; Whelen, 2019; Moosa and Bhana, 2022).

In this sense, the research describes a reputational crisis in a public university in Chile. The situation arose from the publication of a post on X whose information revealed the recovery of an academic paper for the completion of a master's degree in Gender and Cultural Studies in the repository of the Digital Library of the institution, which addressed the issue of pedophilia. A few days after this publication, a new post appeared on the same social network, indicating a similar work that addressed the topic of pedophilia from education and pedagogy.

Two elements of social unrest toward the institution were identified in social network X. First, the problem was related to the published work's ethical integrity and methodological approach. Secondly, the criticisms pointed to a notable academic laxity in elaborating this type of research. Based on the above, the objective was to characterize the comments of X users and their perception of the institution after the fact of publication of the so-called pedophilia theses of the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities.

For this purpose, a qualitative approach was adopted using descriptive quantitative data to determine the scope of the research in the primary data and sample according to the model of Farné and Iranzo (2018). In addition, the main thematic trends, comments, and perceptions related to pedophilia theses in the content of X's publications were identified. X social media audience interactions were selected to discern recognition patterns and attitudes toward UCH. Finally, quantitative and qualitative results were contrasted to establish the perceived influence on UCH's UR.

Overall, the incident had some impact on the credibility and, in some cases, loss of trust of X social network users toward the educational entity.

1.1 The interplay of corporate reputation, university reputation, and citizen engagement

Corporate reputation is essential in organizational dynamics, influencing financial stability and market perception. From an

economic perspective, reputation is considered an indicator of the likelihood of future profits. Regarding marketing, communication, and strategy, reputation is intrinsically related to recognition and perception, which are the basis of intangible assets that generate value in companies (Chun, 2005; Chun and Davies, 2010).

As reputation has become more complex, so has the way companies approach its measurement. This is because reputation has a polysemic nature, and different reputations must be considered in the discussion (Rindova et al., 2005). Dowling (2016) identified at least 50 definitions to illustrate the diversity of concepts that coexist in the academic literature and reveal the natural evolution of corporate reputation (CR) over the years. Thus, "a causal reading of the definitions determined that there is no common meaning emanating from that corpus."

The conceptual consensus on CR in the academic literature is related to intangible and perception as critical elements. Fombrun (1996) understood it as "a perceptual representation of a firm's past actions and prospects, describing its overall attractiveness to all constituents compared to its rivals." Fombrun's contribution is linked to the incorporation of time by introducing the organization's future projections, such as expectations, admiration, and confrontation with competitors.

From this perspective, reputation is measured over time, evaluating the results in terms of the objectives proposed in strategic planning (Sarstedt et al., 2023). The association of subjects with general processes and communicational distribution, i.e., effective communication, enhances the development of corporate reputation (Capriotti, 2009).

Similarly, as historical and educational institutions, universities focus on research and teaching, offering spaces where individuals can explore and discover their talents, guided by intrinsic motivations (Irrázaval, 2020). University reputation (UR) is defined as the accumulated perceptions of stakeholders about the institution over time, being multidimensional and variable according to the social context (Rindova et al., 2005).

Public perception is fundamental in the construction of institutional reputation. With the prominence of social networks since the second decade of the 21st century, online reputation has become an essential element for higher education organizations. In other words, the impact of opinions expressed on virtual platforms is increasing and this information is relevant for the management of organizations. These opinions act as transparent feedback indicators (Lock, 2019). In addition, it is essential to take into account specific online stakeholder groups, such as influencers and well-informed consumers, whose perspectives can significantly influence the organization's reputation and strategic decisions (Gómez, 2018).

This trend highlights the transformative role of social networks in communication, as these platforms function as multidirectional spaces where users simultaneously receive and emit information, playing roles as senders and receivers. This active and bidirectional participation generates valuable information based on stakeholders' perceptions and feelings toward an entity, shaping the narrative and influencing public opinion (Sailunaz and Alhaji, 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Eniayejuni, 2023; Oliveira et al., 2023).

To address this valuable insight-based information, Communication for Social Change (CSC) presents itself as a powerful tool. This approach, from an interdisciplinary

field focused on social intervention, seeks to channel positive transformations in knowledge, attitudes, norms, behaviors, and social structures (Gee and Esteban-Guitart, 2019). This process includes the creation, implementation, and evaluation of communicative strategies and community participation (Martínez Roa et al., 2023). CSC is based on dialogue and permanent debates, built based on tolerance, respect, equity, social justice, and active participation (Gumucio, 2019).

Likewise, the participation of social groups in communication for social change is not only passive but also autonomous. Their communication skills are not only recognized but empowered, enabling them to express their concerns and challenges on their terms (Sánchez-Saus Laserna, 2018). They use communication for social change in virtual spaces to make problems visible and raise awareness, becoming agents of change in society (Rodríguez, 2021). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a crucial role in access to information and as tools to overcome gaps, promote development, and facilitate social change (Padilla de la Torre and Mayagoitia, 2018).

Although discussions on social networks are diverse and address specific phenomena, when the topics are sensitive, the discursive approach can generate discomfort. Citizen participation in the network oscillates between accusations, opinions, and inferences, expressing dissatisfaction or concern according to cultural and social precepts. Moreover, moral outrage in these cases receives greater attention and feedback (Wei, 2014; Brady et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2022).

Thus, CSC participants assume the role of stakeholders within the organization. This approach includes any individual or group whose influence, directly or indirectly, can significantly impact the dynamics of the institution (Mahajan et al., 2023). Stakeholder ratings, reflected in virtual spaces, show their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the organization, promoting conscious and supportive participation and driving changes in the public sphere. Simultaneously, in the United Kingdom, evaluation contributes to organizational improvement in terms of internal and external contributions (Collins and Park, 2016).

2 Materials and methods

The research was meticulously conducted, based on a robust case study with a non-experimental approach of a transactional, non-probabilistic, and cross-sectional nature. The instrument for the analysis of quantitative data was carefully designed based on the model of Analysis and Communication for Social Change in Social Networks by Farné and Iranzo (2018), who proposed three dimensions: message characteristics, message themes, and attitudinal and argumentative capacity of messages in social networks. This model also offers a preliminary sentiment analysis focused on argumentative capacity (positive, negative, or neutral). The open-source statistical software JASP (version 0.18.1) was used to represent the descriptive data. This approach is based on a content analysis whose objective, according to Krippendorff (1997), is “to formulate, from given data, reproducible and valid inferences that can be applied to their context” (p. 28).

In addition, an inductive approach was used for the qualitative content analysis and, to reaffirm the sentiment analysis proposed

by Farné and Iranzo (2018) model, the qualitative software Atlas.Ti23 was used. This allowed the emergence of predominant themes directly from the raw data. Initially, the textual data were condensed into a brief and summarized format, extracting the essence without losing the meaning. Next, links between the findings and the research objectives were made, maintaining a clear and defensible logic. Finally, patterns found in the posts were interpreted to explain how and why certain behaviors occurred (Thomas, 2016).

The social network X posts were selected in stages (Figure 1). This process extended from December 2022 to March 2023, during which 4,680 units were examined. Subsequently, using the Open Refine tool, the data table was cleaned, eliminating duplicates and reducing the number to 3,560 units. To ensure representativeness and accuracy, the sample was designed considering a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error, resulting in an initial sample size of 347 units. However, the final sample size was adjusted to 500 units to cover the phenomenon studied.

Talkwalker was used to determine the extent of the controversy from a general perspective. This tool, which specializes in measuring social networks, makes it possible to capture the magnitude of the impact. Subsequently, using keywords, a detailed search was performed on the X platform. The search equations included: pedophilia thesis, University of Chile, pedophilia thesis, Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, thesis and media, thesis and ethics, thesis and pedophilia apologia, thesis and parliamentarians, thesis and controversy/politics, and thesis and reputation. From the X search, a dozen links related to the topic of the study were collected. It should be noted that each link contained an average of 390 entries. Finally, the Export Comments platform extracted the comments from the links and created a table with the data from the network users, considered freely accessible.

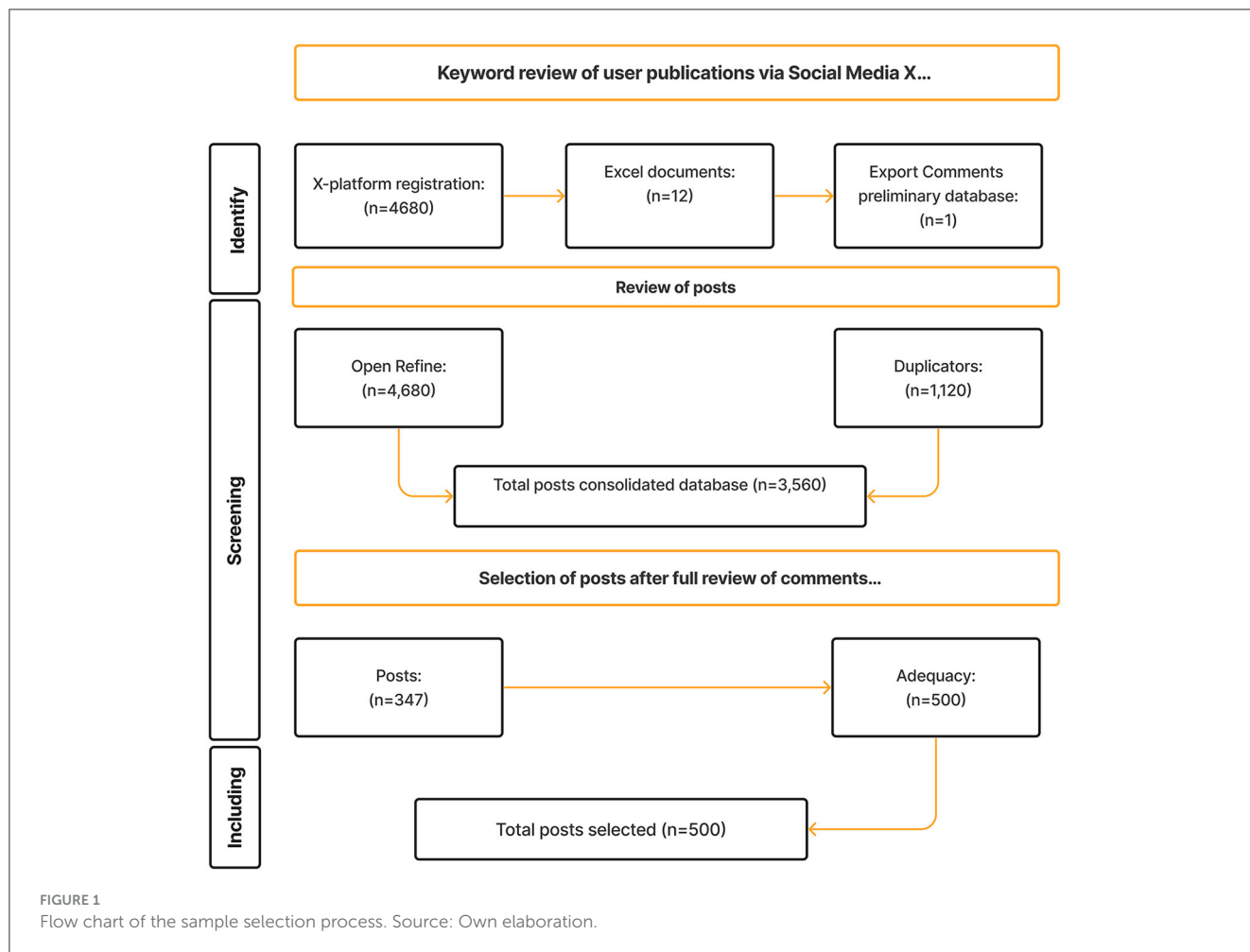
To consolidate a more holistic understanding, the qualitative findings were compared to the quantitative metrics obtained. Mixed methodological triangulation was used as an essential step to ensure the robustness and consistency of the interpretations (Forni and De Grande, 2020).

3 Results

3.1 Quantitative data description of the posts

From the analysis of the posts on X about the University of Chile (UCH) thesis controversy and pedophilia, several observations were obtained. Initially, a daily average of 5.2% of posts alluding to the controversy was observed, suggesting active participation and a marked interest of users during the period studied. Regarding temporal distribution, December stood out with 62% of the volume of posts, followed by January with 16%, February with 13.8% and March with 8.2%. This indicates that the highest citizen participation occurred in December, coinciding with the peak of criticism toward the institution.

The posts analyzed were predominantly written texts (99.8%), with 38.2% accompanied by images. The presence of videos was minimal (4%). In addition, 56% of the posts included links and 79% used tags that enriched the message. However, what stood out was the tone used, with critical language dominating (67.8%),



followed by satirical (20.6%). Neutral tone accounted for 9.6% and aggressive tone 1.8%, with criticism as the prevailing sentiment in the results, underscoring the negative tone of the discourse surrounding the controversy.

As for the predominant themes and the position adopted in the messages, the quantitative analysis revealed a marked preference for the UR crisis (31%). Discussions also focused on the erosion of trust (25.8%), the fragility of institutional accountability (23.8%), and both academic and professional ethical dilemmas (19.4%). However, what was most striking was the overall position reflected in the messages, which was a resounding rejection of controversial research by the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities (81%). Only a small fraction, 3.8%, supported these initiatives, while 15.2% remained indeterminate. This data underscores the strong public sentiment against the controversial research, as reflected in the messages.

As for the original entries, the conversational component predominated (85.4%) over the referential component (14.6%), revealing the inclination and urgency of the debates. The argumentative level was superficial primarily (70.8%), followed by the argumentative approach (27%) and, to a lesser extent, entries based solely on data (2.2%). This suggests that the quality of the dialogue among participants could have been more superficial, dominated by emotional expressions and poorly elaborated criticisms.

In terms of capacity for dialogue, the indicator imposes criteria (45%) that stood out, followed by seeks consensus (18.6%) and indistinct (36.4%). User attitudes reflected a marked negative inclination (84.6%), while positive and neutral attitudes represented 0.2 and 15.2%, respectively. These indicators were proposed by Farné and Iranzo (2018).

To illustrate the findings, Table 1 breaks down the analysis focused on UCH UR in the context of thesis publications.

In summary, the analysis of the comments on X revealed an intense discussion around UCH, driven by the dissemination of the pedophilic theses. December emerged as the month of most significant activity in these conversations, comprising a substantial proportion of the total number of messages (see Figure 2 chronology of controversy). The most prominent feature, however, was the critical assessment of the UR crisis that became the central focus of the debate. This review revealed a mostly negative stance toward research and, consequently, toward the institution.

3.2 Post's qualitative content analysis

In the context of the qualitative analysis of the selected corpus, the general review of the interactions on X revealed a marked disapproval of the so-called UCH pedophilia theses. The online

TABLE 1 Analysis of UCH's reputation in social media X (Twitter).

		Social media X (Twitter)
Message characteristics	Text	99.8%
	Image	38.20%
	Videos	4%
	Links	56%
	Tags	79%
The time frame of posts published during the controversy	December	62%
	January	16%
	February	13.8%
	March	8.2%
Posts language	Aggressive	1.8%
	Critical opinion	67.8%
	Satiric	20.6%
	Neutral	9.8%
Themes	Academic ethical integrity	19.4%
	Fragility in institutional responsibility	23.8%
	Wear confidence	25.8%
	University reputation crisis	31%
Author attitude	Support	3.8%
	Dislike	81%
	Undetermined	15.2%
Entry type (more than one answer)	Referential	14.6%
	Conversational	85.4%
Argumentative level	Simple	70.8%
	Argumentative	27%
	With data	2.2%
Dialogue capacity	Seeks consensus	18.6%
	Imposes criteria	45%
	Indistinct	36.4%
Attitude associated with controversy	Positive	0.2%
	Negative	84.6%
	Neutral	15.2%
Level of interactions (average number of posts published)	Likes	62.8%
	Comments	8.2%
	Sarde	28.9%

Source: Own elaboration.

controversy focused on the fact that such works openly suggest a normalization of physical contact between adults and minors, called a bodily dialogue.

Henceforth, the systematic examination of posts yielded the identification of 215 codes contributing to constructing six thematic axes and a semantic network for analysis. The identified themes initially covered the Institution University of Chile followed by the University of Chile's credibility and ethical integrity in research. In addition, the University of Chile image and the University of Chile trust were included and integrated as fundamental dimensions of CR. In addition to unfavorable perception university's reputation, Criticism of the institution, and Apologists for pedophilia. A key aspect in the analysis was the central axis of the problem: the Pedophilia Theses, which articulated the discussion and connected the different analyzed topics.

The category of pedophilia thesis was associated with the main subcategories. At the same time, the category University of Chile was related to University of Chile credibility, University of Chile trust, ethical integrity in research, and University of Chile image. From this association emerge the negative argumentative foundations toward the institution (Figure 3).

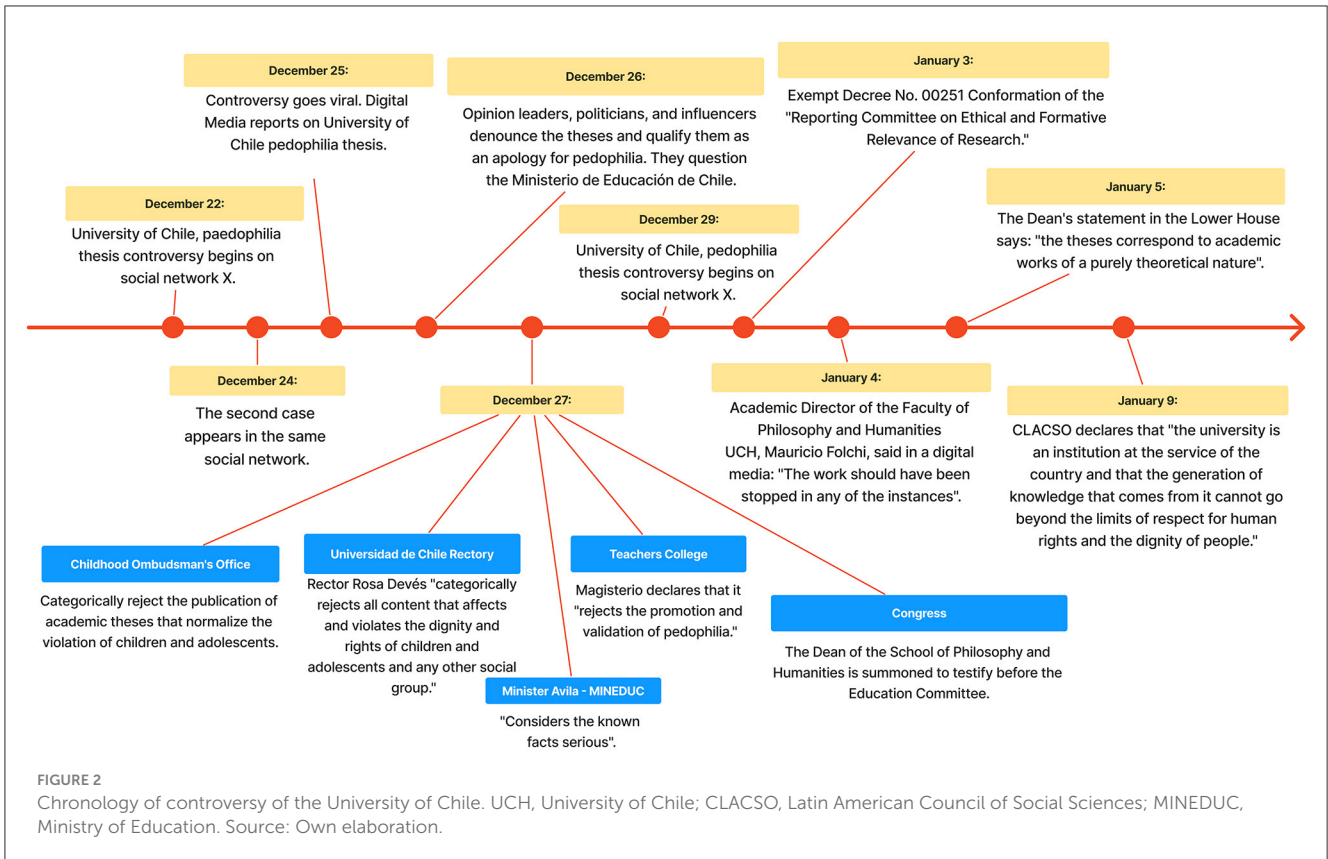
On the other hand, the content of the posts revealed the critical perception that was presented with the event of these publications, attributing the responsibilities of the case to the institution. Aylwin (2022) expressed in his X account a frank question to the HEI, highlighting the permissiveness in the elaboration of the work; he points out: "Why is the UCH allowing texts of apology of pedophilia and the development of a master's thesis where it openly calls to legitimize the *bodily dialogue* between adults and children?" This is how serious the fact is for the user to discuss the academic and ethical responsibility of the University about the supervision and approval of research. Additionally, he expresses concern about what he perceives as inappropriate material.



Translation of post: Why is the University of Chile allowing texts of apology for pedophilia, and the development of a master's thesis that it openly calls to legitimize the "body dialogue" between adults and children?

Example 1 of Screenshot of pedophilia thesis controversy publication.

In a similarly critical analysis, Norambuena (2022) addressed the problem of a thesis published by UCH, which, according to his interpretation, seems to promote pedophilia openly. His attention was focused on the dedication of the thesis, addressed to "boys and girls of restless desire, so that they may sometime touch and be touched without fear or guilt." This dedication, in his opinion, not only crosses the boundaries of what is academically acceptable but can also be seen as a validation of potentially abusive behavior. Norambuena intensifies his critique by sharing an image of the thesis and concludes with the interrogation,



“What is up?” This rhetorical question, posed at the end of his commentary, seems to seek to provoke a broader reflection on the responsibilities of the academic institution in overseeing the content it publishes.

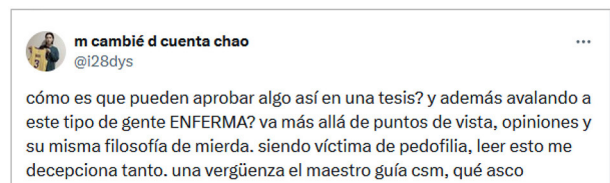


Post translation: this 2016 thesis for a master's degree at the University of Chile openly promotes pedophilia. In the dedication it says: “dedicated to the boys and girls of restless desire so that they can ever touch and be touched without fear or guilt.” How about that?

Example 2. Of Screenshot of pedophilia thesis controversy publication.

The focus of the controversy, while revolving around the University of Chile as an institution, extended further to address a perceived problem of academic permissiveness. Negative comments focused on the approval of these dealing with socially sensitive topics. This user, in particular, questioned how the University could approve such work, referring to the authors of the theses as “enferma (sick people)” and expressing profound disappointment and disgust toward the thesis tutor, using emotionally charged language “una vergüenza el maestro guía csm (sick), qué asco” shame on the director, disgusting (2022). These words reflect not only a concern about the subject matter

of the thesis but also a criticism of the lack of academic rigor in research supervision. In addition, the comment captures the intense emotional reaction that the research provoked in the community, particularly a sense of disgust, thus highlighting the emotional and ethical impact of academic decisions on society (Figure 3).



Translation of the post: how is it that they can approve something like this in a thesis? And endorsing this kind of sick people? It goes beyond views, opinions, and their philosophical bullshit. Their bullshit philosophies. Being a victim of pedophilia, reading this makes me so disappointed. Shame on the teacher guide CSM, how disgusting.

Example 3. Of screenshot of pedophilia thesis controversy publication.

Likewise, the comments of user Joni (2022) point to collaboration in the psychological damage, arguing that “even though it is theoretical research, the theses have a pro-pedophilia bias. By endorsing them, the U. de Chile becomes complicit in the psychological damage to the victim. It also disrespects the treatment that the pedophilia should receive.” This criticism highlights the concern for the possible psychological effects and the ethical and legal implications that may arise from such research. Along these

In this context, Curie highlights the situation's complexity, where the faculty recognized the adverse effects of the theses but simultaneously defended them as theoretical works. This stance generated a significant debate since, while the faculty seemed to consider the theses from an academic perspective, public criticism focuses on the ethical and moral implications of allowing theses that are perceived as a form of apology for pedophilia. Given the allegations' seriousness, some have viewed the faculty statement as insufficient or inadequate.

Nevertheless, the analysis revealed a strong condemnation of the UCH theses accused of relativizing pedophilia in their studies. This unease contrasted with the position of the University, which defended the theoretical nature of such research. This dichotomy between public criticism and institutional defense greatly intensified the debate (Figure 4).

3.3 Description of the controversy

The public debate has revealed that the pederasty-related theses at UCH have negatively affected its credibility, image, and trust. The attached Sankey diagram (Figure 5) illustrates how these issues are interconnected and influence public perception of the institution, resulting in a decreased trust during the period analyzed.

The credibility, image and trust of the University have been directly influenced by the pedophilia theses (Figure 6). This was reflected in user comments that included explicit references to the theses, expressions of repudiation, criticism of the institution, questioning its reputation, accusations of pedophilia apology, and feelings of disgust. The most affected aspect was the credibility of the institution, weakened both by the treatment of the topic in the theses and by the research methodology used, simultaneously affecting the image and trust of the University.

The category pedophilia thesis largely dominated the comments in the analyzed posts. However, subcategories such as apology for pedophilia and criticism of the institution emerged as factors that contributed to the credibility, trust, and image decline of the entity. These aspects, in turn, significantly affected the institution's reputation in the public sphere.

The discussion about the pedophilia theses at UCH triggered a notable loss of credibility, image, and trust in the institution. The analysis of the posts revealed widespread repudiation and severe criticism, contributing significantly to the degradation of the University's reputation. This reinforces the evidence of how the treatment and methodology of these theses devoted to the topic of pedophilia eroded not only the credibility but also the image and trust in the institution.

3.4 Description of the sentiment of the controversy

Given the above, a predominant atmosphere of disapproval was evident through the sentiment analysis of citizens in X (Figure 7). Negative tones and connotations characterized most interactions. These responses could reflect a diversity of emotions and opinions,

from outright rejection to concern or disgust. The content of these comments could reveal specific nuances about which aspects of the topic generated the most discontent or alarm in the audience.

Comments classified as neutral indicated a variety of positions. Some users may have sought more information or clarification on the topic, while others may have shared information without making a clear judgment. This category could also have contained more balanced discussions or detailed topic analysis. The small segment of positive comments introduced a different perspective. Although minimal in number compared to the other categories, these opinions suggested that some individuals may have had different interpretations or particular contexts that led them to express a favorable stance. These comments offered relevant aspects, given that aspects of the pedophilia theses were valued or defended by that minority. Therefore, the complexity of responses revealed that sentiment went far beyond simple categories of positive, negative, or neutral. The citizens' reactions in X provided a window into the underlying perceptions and concerns related to the issue.

4 Discussion

The study focused on the analysis of the period covered, with partial conclusions based on its temporality. Additionally, it focused on the comments that arose in X, so the digital and written media were not considered due to the low media interest that the controversy summoned. However, the posts examined revealed a deep discussion and active citizen participation, which significantly affected communication in X and UR perception, finding strong disapproval and decreased credibility in the institution. Scholars from various disciplines have investigated the role of sentiment in communication at different levels of analysis. A growing body of research is examining the relationship between sentiment in short text messages and various real-world events or phenomena. Developments in the social, political, cultural, educational, and economic spheres have a significant, immediate, and specific effect on the various dimensions of public mood, as reflected in Twitter messages (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2012).

In this sense, reputation is an element that can be contemplated in online and offline spaces, which allows the interaction of comments between users motivated by common or personal interests, where this interaction can be measured by electronic platforms and devices or in person (Heidari et al., 2023). Hence, the reputation of the University was affected online through comments on X. From this perspective, an organization's credibility is measured by how its public evaluates its competence and honesty in the performance of its functions and communications. Therefore, an organization that consistently demonstrates knowledge and skill in its area of expertise and honesty in its communications will likely be more credible to its public. Hence, an organization should display competence and integrity (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001).

Likewise, citizen outrage challenged the University in X to investigate the case. Again, the president of the educational institution, Devés (2022), expressed her rejection of the content of the theses in a letter published on the institution's website. Consequently, the Faculty involved reacted with a communiqué in

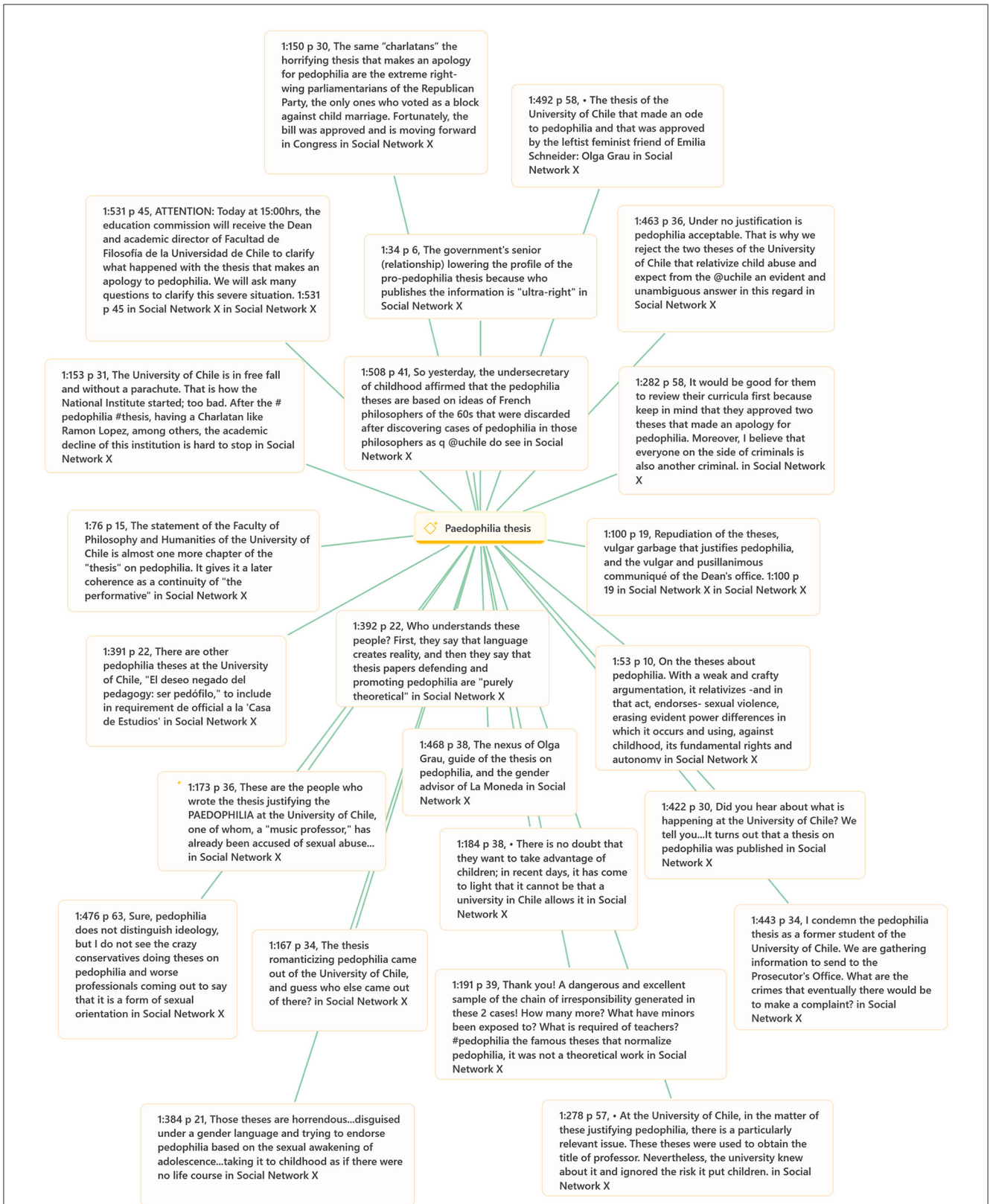
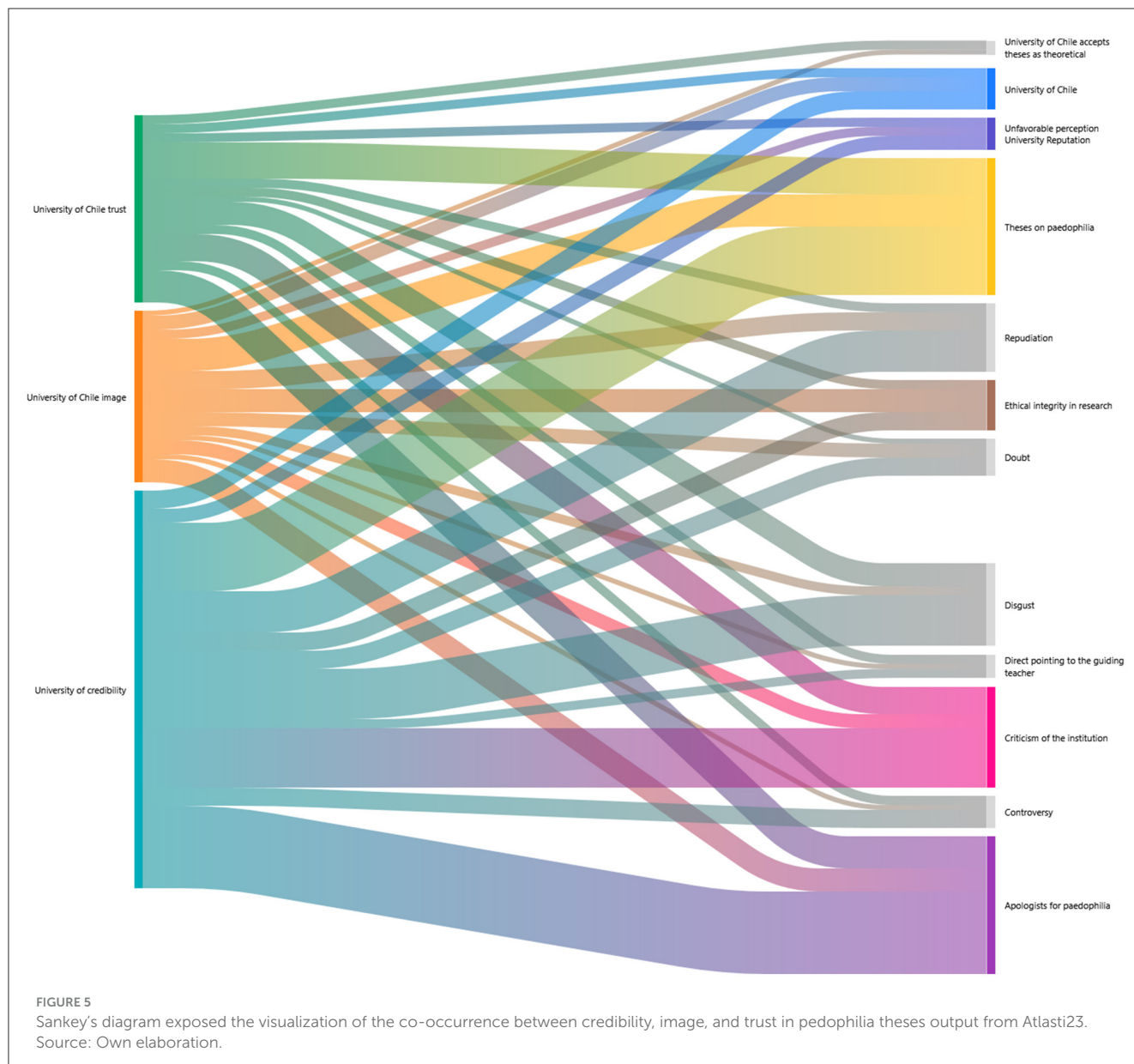


FIGURE 4
 Quotes from posts about UCH thesis and its association with the promotion of pedophilia output from Atlasti23 (Supplementary material). Source: Own elaboration.



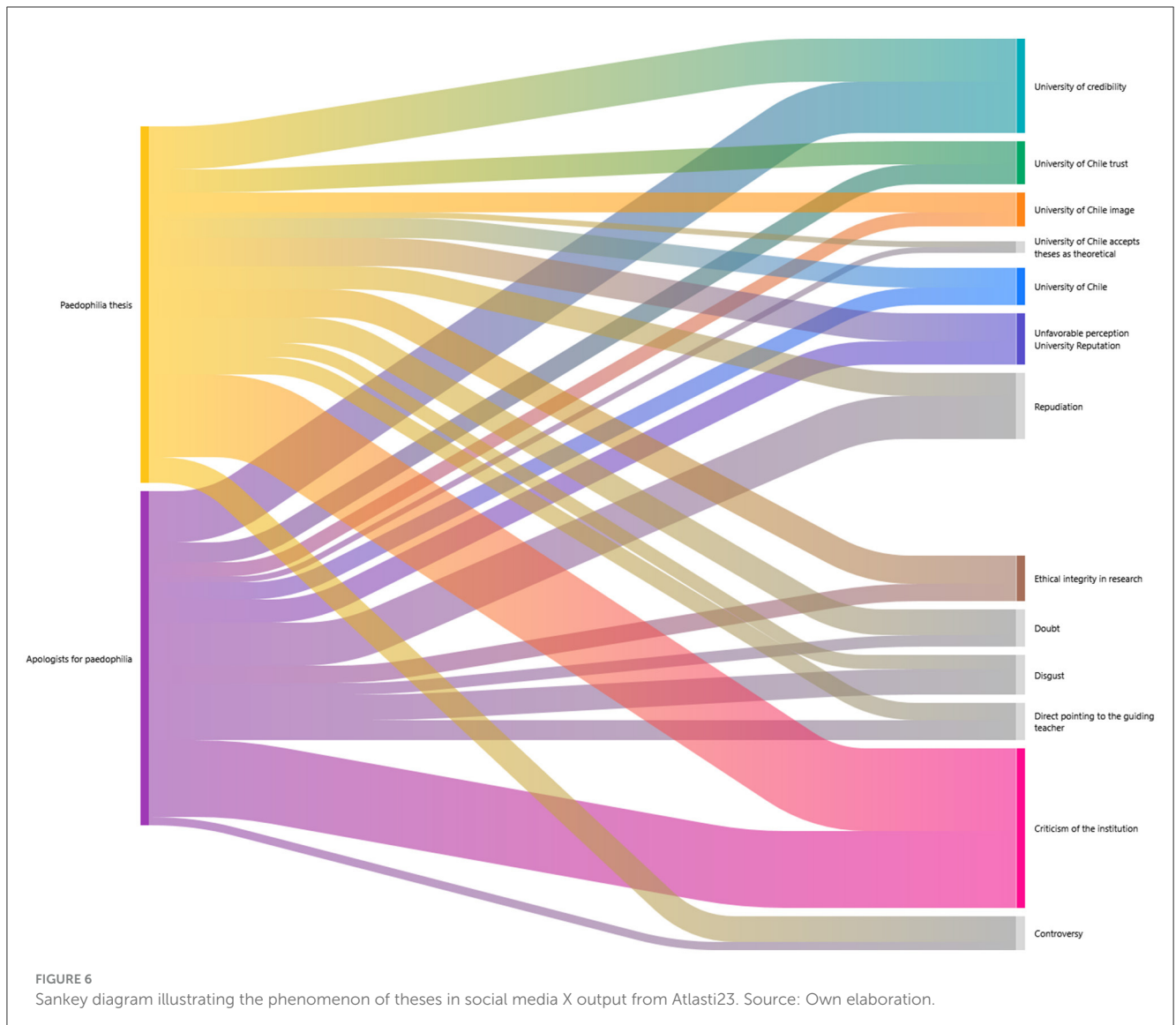
which they recognized the high sensitivity of the topics addressed but described them as purely theoretical.

This resulted in an adverse reaction from online users, reinforcing distrust toward the institution. Furthermore, it exposed an evident communicational crisis -characterized by a rupture of balance-. Moreover, the Faculty's communiqué did not seek to stop the crisis in the shortest possible time or to take control of the information to minimize the loss of credibility and image (Gil, 2013). Contrary to what Capriotti (2009) pointed out, which emphasizes effective communication between subjects to preserve reputation, there was a lack of communication distribution, conditioning a climate of uncertainty and surprise both in the citizenship and the academic community.

Indeed, social networks are well-defined actors—individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and global societies—linked to each other through a relationship or a set of social relationships

(Lozares, 1996). However, extending the definition to the digital era, networks constitute an expansion of these social relations and interactions, mediated by technology, in a virtual space. This, in a way, favors interpersonal discussion and promotes the exchange of information and ideas (Chaves Montero et al., 2020). In this case, the effect produced by the publication of these radiated widely across the communicational spectrum, extending the content to all latitudes nationwide. Citizens, in this sense, organized themselves spontaneously to debate the controversy, i.e., as the discussion gained momentum, the comments turned into denunciations, and the opinions into demonstrations directed at the University that validated the work (Asún et al., 2020).

This type of online organization has been called citizen empowerment, understood as the set of strengths, skills, and resources that lead to significant changes, from a citizen agenda to addressing injustice or an event that affects citizen integrity



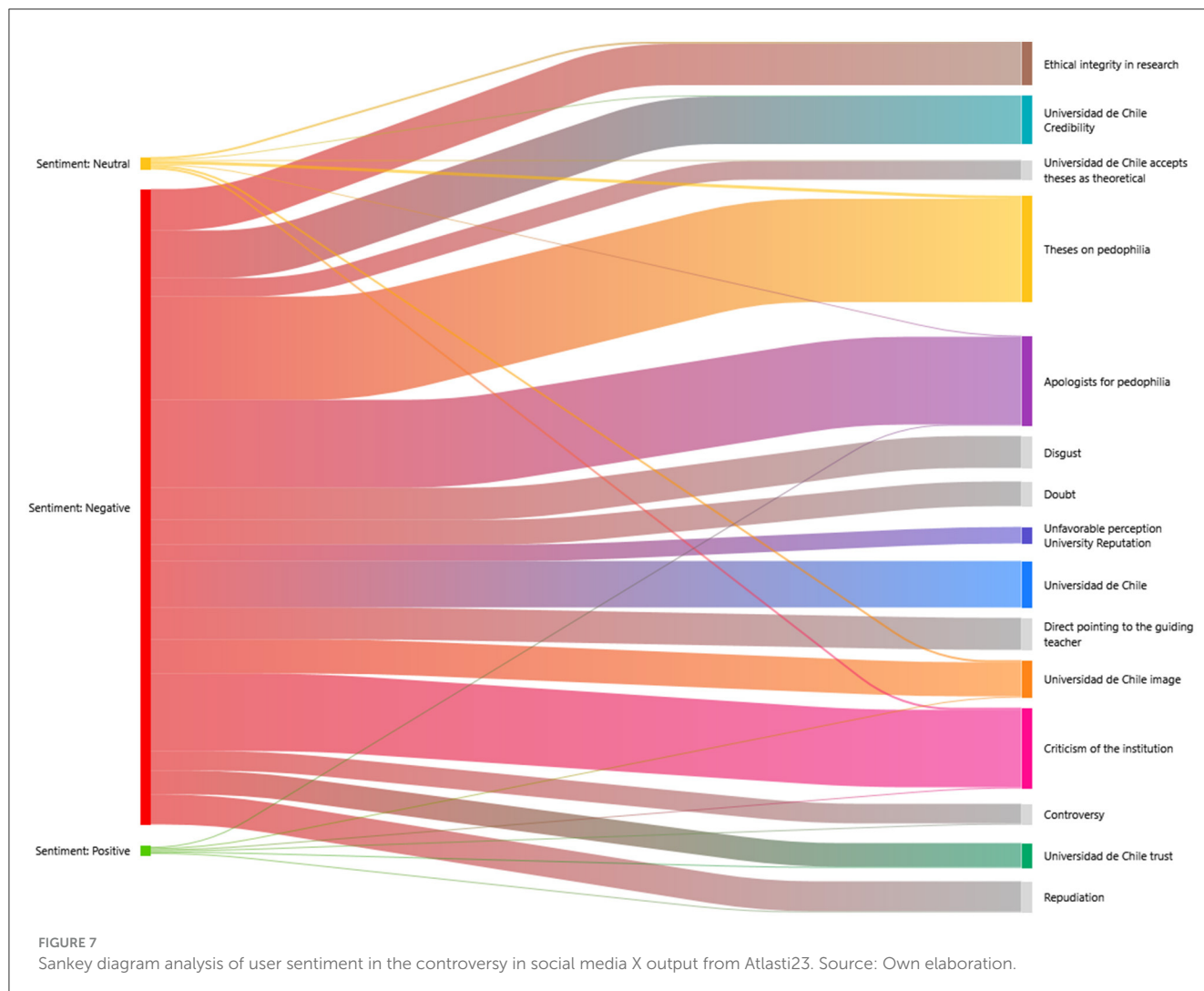
(Martínez Roa et al., 2023). Furthermore, as part of a process of dialogue and debate, active participation in networks promotes “social change” for the benefit of the community (Gumucio, 2019).

From this, the accumulation of negative opinions based on a lack of professional ethics in research by allowing the elaboration of works that compromise the community’s sensitivity degrades the credibility and trust of the University. This means, in reputational terms, that the public was not recognized as the main generator of value due to the fragile preparation to face this type of circumstances on the part of the University (Villafañe et al., 2020).

Similarly, this event in the virtual space highlights the lack of preventive protocols, such as the existence of an ethical-scientific committee that previously validated research projects, to safeguard the institution’s academic integrity. Moreover, they lack updated procedures for the management of communicational crises according to the magnitude of the event; this is because HEIs do not take advantage of social networks for their benefit (Snoeijers et al., 2014; Omilion-Hodges and McClain, 2016).

Several studies have explored reputational crises in academic institutions, providing a valuable context for our findings. A notable example is the adverse reaction faced by the University of Toronto in the late 1990s when a professor published research on the biological underpinnings of pedophilia. This case attracted considerable media attention and public outrage, leading to protests and calls for the university to distance itself from the research (Rind et al., 1998).

More recently, Vogler (2020) examined the aspects involved in the reputation of Swiss universities on Twitter. Reactions to tweets, such as retweets and likes, reflect the attention they have garnered. The response to content on social networks is believed to hinge on its presentation, with emotions playing a pivotal role in predicting virality. Additionally, Vogler’s findings indicate that university reputation is a complex construct evident across different levels. The study demonstrates that a university’s reputation on Twitter is shaped by both stakeholders and the reputation dimensions analyzed, as these factors influence evaluations and the volume of reactions to tweets.



On the other hand, [Mora and Moreno \(2020\)](#) analyzed the crisis management of the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos concerning the alleged falsification of a master's degree in Autonomous and Local Public Law, where the student was a politician in office at the time. They concluded that the university's communications lacked a clear and defined strategy and failed to adopt preventive measures to manage the crisis effectively.

[Peng et al. \(2024\)](#) conducted a socio-cognitive analysis of how the University of Sussex responded publicly to a crisis involving gender controversy surrounding a staff member. Their analysis showed that the university's Twitter posts employed a strategy of simultaneously decontextualizing and recontextualizing the incident. They argued for freedom of expression, aiming to create a more favorable communicative environment for their crisis responses.

It should be noted that universities are vital in the path of social responsibility. In terms of [Azizi and Sassen \(2023\)](#), this contribution is based on three pillars: (1) research and education, (2) the reduction of their adverse effects on society, and (3) the knowledge and skills they provide to students who represent future leaders. Consequently, it is essential to

consider the opinions of external audiences through periodic reputational monitoring to acquire perceptions that are collated about the institution and, in this way, mitigate the adverse effects emanating from internal stakeholders in an untimely manner ([Veh et al., 2018](#)). Social networks have become essential tools for the strategic management of institutional communication in universities. Therefore, universities must leverage digital platforms to organize their public participation through dialogue with their audiences. The university sector needs to develop strategies in the digital sphere that promote good institutional visibility, as well as dialogue and interaction with their audiences, thereby contributing to the achievement of their organizational objectives ([Capriotti et al., 2023](#)).

As we pointed out at the beginning of this study on the controversy of the academic papers that dealt with pedophilia, it is pertinent to indicate at least two fundamental ideas that can contribute to the analysis. First, it was noted that the comments in X mainly had a negative perception that somehow disrupted the credibility of the University at the time due to the publications of the theses. Secondly, a deteriorated confidence of the external public—and to a lesser extent of the internal public—was revealed

in the dimension linked to the category of academic and professional ethics as a result of the professors' academic approval of these theses. This could suggest that, with adequate university management, these contingencies could be protected through a substantive improvement in university management. However, the momentary absence of protocols favored the controversy experienced by UCH.

Overall, this study focused exclusively on X to analyze UCH's UR, excluding other social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and even TikTok-which could have offered additional insights into the controversy. In addition, it was confined to a specific period, December 2022 to March 2023, which might only reflect changes in public perception within this timeframe. In addition, direct sources such as interviews with the actors involved were not considered, given that this work seeks to describe the situation in a social network. This suggests expanding methodologies in future research related to this topic to contribute to the general UR field.

5 Conclusions

The study delved into a significant episode of controversy that concluded in 2022 at the esteemed University of Chile. This event, triggered by the publication of two theses on the sensitive subject of pedophilia, ignited a reputational crisis. The crisis raised numerous questions about ethical integrity and the limits of academic freedom and underscored the profound impact such events can have on the reputation of a prestigious institution like the University of Chile. Content analysis revealed several significant consequences for the University, reflected in the comments on X through a primarily negative tone.

The adverse reaction of public opinion in the digital sphere toward the institution suggests the need for a profound reflection on the principles of research ethics. Therefore, it is evident that academic research fosters critical thinking and exploration of ideas, and it should be aligned with social norms and consider cultural sensitivities.

Similarly, the reputational analysis underscores the urgent need for effective communication management at the institutional level. The unfavorable public perception of the University of Chile worsened after learning of the inadequate response of the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, contrary to the expectations of users, as revealed in X. This deterioration is attributed to a deficient and reactive communication strategy on the part of the University, exacerbating the damage to its UR. Therefore, the development and implementation of proactive and assertive plans to deal with unexpected situations is not just important, but imperative.

In addition, this research highlighted the considerable influence of social networks in the development and change of a university's reputation. This process, characterized by its complexity and dynamism, encompasses academic effectiveness, student and alumni achievements, effective communication, and online visibility. The rapid spread of information and opinions on digital platforms changed public perception in a short period. As a result of this phenomenon, universities need to monitor their presence in virtual spaces actively and strategically engage in digital discourse to shape and protect their reputation.

Likewise, this study illustrated the complexity and multifaceted nature of reputation management in the digital age. While an institution's reputation is built over time through academic achievements and contributions to society, it can also be quickly compromised due to isolated incidents. This study serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting how a single reputational crisis can have long-lasting effects on an institution's standing. Therefore, proper reputation management requires a holistic approach integrating academic excellence, social responsibility, and effective communication.

Last, the case offers valuable insights into CR management in an era defined by the active participation of networked citizens and the rapid dissemination of information. The results obtained in this study offer critical insights for universities that generate value and navigate the winding intangible currents of reputation.

Our study offers valuable insights into how media coverage can affect the reputation of universities, particularly in sensitive areas like pedophilia. However, it has several limitations:

While necessary for understanding media influence, our focus on Twitter may only partially represent public sentiment toward universities.

We should have analyzed how institutions respond to media coverage and public reactions extensively. Future research should delve into universities' crisis management strategies, official statements, and public relations efforts to understand their impact on reputation during controversies better.

Our study's limited timeframe may not capture long-term effects or changes in public perception.

A longitudinal approach to tracking how reputations evolve and whether initial reactions have lasting effects could benefit future research.

Finally, we advocate for a nuanced approach that considers the challenges and opportunities inherent in studying and treating social issues. Going forward, it is critical to deepen our objective perspective, considering the multifaceted nature of reputation dynamics and diverse stakeholders. Research on sensitive issues can contribute to a better understanding of complex problems and support evidence-based policies and interventions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed

in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

TA-L: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DR-G: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1380764/full#supplementary-material>

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