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Special Issue Reprint

Geopolitics, Public Communication and Social Cohesion Facing the Crisis of Democracy

Risks and Challenges

Edited by
Concha Pérez Curiel and Rubén Rivas-de-Roca

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Geopolitics, Public Communication and Social Cohesion Facing the Crisis of Democracy: Risks and Challenges

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Contents

About the Editors	vii
Preface	ix
Concha Pérez-Curiel and Rubén Rivas-de-Roca	
Social Cohesion in Times of Crisis: The Role of Communication for Democracies—Editors’ Introduction	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 491, doi:10.3390/socsci12090491	1
Ekaterina Veselinovna Teneva	
Digital Pseudo-Identification in the Post-Truth Era: Exploring Logical Fallacies in the Mainstream Media Coverage of the COVID-19 Vaccines	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 457, doi:10.3390/socsci12080457	7
María Pallarés-Renau, Susana Miquel-Segarra and Lorena López-Font	
Red Cross Presence and Prominence in Spanish Headlines during the First 100 Days of War in Ukraine	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 368, doi:10.3390/socsci12070368	29
Adolfo Carratalá	
Disinformation and Sexual and Gender Diversity in Spain: Twitter Users’ Response, and the Perception of LGBTQI+ Organisations	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 206, doi:10.3390/socsci12040206	45
Ricardo Morais and Pedro Jerónimo	
“Platformization of News”, Authorship, and Unverified Content: Perceptions around Local Media	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 200, doi:10.3390/socsci12040200	64
Jarnishs Beltrán, Paula Walker and René Jara	
Hate and Incivilities in Hashtags against Women Candidates in Chile (2021–2022)	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 180, doi:10.3390/socsci12030180	80
Daniel Javier de la Garza Montemayor and Xunaxhi Monserrat Pineda Rasgado	
Relationship between the Use of Social Networks and Mistrust of Mass Media among Mexican Youth: A Mixed-Methods and NLP Study	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 179, doi:10.3390/socsci12030179	95
Alejandra Tirado-García	
The Negative Campaign on Telegram: The Political Use of Criticism during the 2021 Community of Madrid Elections	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 93, doi:10.3390/socsci12020093	108
Concha Pérez-Curiel, Ricardo Domínguez-García and Ana Velasco-Molpeceres	
Exploring the Political Debate over the COVID-19 Vaccination on Twitter: Emotions and Polarization in the Spanish Public Sphere	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2023 , <i>12</i> , 85, doi:10.3390/socsci12020085	122
Dolors Palau-Sampio, Rubén Rivas-de-Roca and Emilio Fernández-Peña	
Framing Food Transition: The Debate on Meat Production and Climate Change in Three European Countries	
Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2022 , <i>11</i> , 567, doi:10.3390/socsci11120567	139

Erika Jaráiz Gulías, Paloma Castro Martínez and Gabriel Colomé García The Emotional Dimension of the Spanish Far Right and Its Effects on Satisfaction with Democracy Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2022 , <i>11</i> , 475, doi:10.3390/socsci11100475	154
Fundiswa T. Khaile, Nicolette V. Roman, Kezia R. October, Maria Van Staden and Tolulope V. Balogun Perceptions of Trust in the Context of Social Cohesion in Selected Rural Communities of South Africa Reprinted from: <i>Soc. Sci.</i> 2022 , <i>11</i> , 359, doi:10.3390/socsci11080359	174

About the Editors

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Preface

In times of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, or financial crises, the social cohesion of democracies is threatened. The geopolitical battle for global influence and a public communication model that takes place in social networks encourage polarization and disinformation, having consequences for the public sphere. This reprint, “Geopolitics, Public Communication, and Social Cohesion Facing the Crisis of Democracy: Risks and Challenges”, contributes to understanding the communication of the main conflicts that put integrity and geopolitics at risk.

Leaders, the media, and citizens, as digital consumers, build stories on digital platforms that can revert to the unity of territories, consolidate extremist ideologies, or foster fragmentation between states. Conversely, reports and opinion polls, from electoral contests or otherwise, highlight audiences’ distrust in politics, citizens’ disaffection with the media, and institutions’ loss of credibility. On this matter, the articles included use innovative approaches based on mixed methods in different countries.

Our reprint aims to provide an academic overview of the role of communication by public institutions in crisis management and the responsibility of journalism and citizens.

Concha Pérez Curiel and Rubén Rivas-de-Roca

Editors



Editorial

Social Cohesion in Times of Crisis: The Role of Communication for Democracies—Editors' Introduction

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1. Introduction

Global crises are becoming a feature of our society. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and several financial crises are a few problems that have massively affected our wellbeing. These phenomena require a common response, involving the whole of society. However, the social cohesion of democracies is in decline as several groups feel that they are not represented (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This is linked to a geopolitical battle for global influence and to arise attention in a hyperconnected scenario.

In recent years, social media has emerged as the central infrastructure of public communication, triggering a transformation of the political system (Schroeder 2018). Despite the possibilities of better connecting with an audience, these digital media are also used to encourage polarization and disinformation (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). Prior scholarship has described how polarization is fueled by digital platforms (Overgaard and Collier 2023), leading to the development of conditions of populism. There is concern regarding the capability of democracy to survive the Internet since trust in government or voter turnout are both diminishing (Powers and Kounalakis 2017).

Bearing these trends in mind, research is needed to further understand these structural challenges and decide how to tackle them to ensure the social cohesion of our societies. The objective of this Special Issue is to examine the main conflicts that put social cohesion and global geopolitics at risk. Furthermore, it aims to analyze the strategies of governments and public institutions in favor of social welfare and offer insightful findings on perceptions regarding the media and digital audiences. In this Special Issue, three themes are addressed: the role of communication by public institutions, the contribution of journalism in verifying what is false, and the responsibility of citizens in rebuilding social cohesion outside and within social networks.

2. Public Communication in the Era of Disinformation

News media, but also opinion leaders and citizens as digital prosumers (Casero-Ripollés 2021), build stories on digital platforms that can impact the unity of territories, consolidate extremist ideologies, or foster fragmentation between states. On this political backdrop, reports and opinion polls target audiences which are distant to politics, citizens' disaffection with the media, and an increasing loss of trust (Pérez-Curiel and Rivas-de-Roca 2022). Therefore, this negative rhetoric impacts both political and media systems.

A new public communication model has been consolidated in which most communication takes place in social networks, generating disrupted public spheres based on the lack of restrictions and eco-chambers (Larsson 2016). This overlaps with the platformization of politics, understood as the dominance of digital platforms in shaping public discourse (Smyrnaio and Baisnée 2023). As a consequence, using social media is essential for political actors to be known, with an emphasis on self-promoting leaders. Public spheres, including transnational ones such as the European Public Sphere, are now marked by



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digital conversation (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2022), which is an opportunity but also a challenge for true communication between politicians and citizens.

On this matter, disinformation is a factor that explains weak social cohesion. Social media enables the wide spread of false information with the intention to deceive people (LETI). This phenomenon has become massive because social networks are used daily on smartphones, developing an information disorder that requires the collaboration of platforms (Facebook, Google, Twitter-X) in order to solve it (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). International institutions such as the Council of Europe have adopted public initiatives to fight fake news (Keen and Georgescu 2020), especially considering its relationship to hate speech. The focus is on human rights education since the problem is not only technological. Regarding the working of disinformation, many people trust those who send them information through mobile instant messaging apps (Valera-Ordaz et al. 2022), which is a chance for the acceptance of false information.

One of the movements that has taken advantage of this disinformation scenario is populism. Given the great generalization of this term, populism is not an easy phenomenon to understand, but its growth is an additional risk to the development of a full democracy. Popular sovereignty is a key value of populism, in the sense of asking to regain control of the territory (Gerbaudo 2017). Those involved in this consider themselves as outsiders against a corrupt elite, seeking to return to a mythologized past.

Moreover, populism is not only an ideology but also a style of communication that draws on the tools of digital media systems to promote its specific type of communication (Engesser et al. 2017). Since conventional media sources are seen as enemies to them, these populist leaders apply their ideology to social networks in order to introduce their messages without filters. It should be noted that we could be living in a new populist wave, attracting greater public interest whilst also maintaining the characteristics of pop politics (Battista 2023). Hence, it is worth exploring to what extent public communication contributes to social cohesion in a context of populist politics and disinformed citizens.

3. Special Issue Contributions

This Special Issue includes eleven research articles, divided into three sections. They all have in common a concern about current democracies and mass media, dealing with narratives, phenomena, and perceptions of a series of existing global crises. The increase in antidemocracy and authoritarian policing shows the need for a deep academic reflection on the roots of the communication of these ideas.

3.1. *The Role of Communication in Public Institutions*

First, there is a group of articles in this Special Issue that examine the role of political and public communication, ranging from crisis management to elections. Tirado-García (2023) addressed criticisms made to the adversary by political parties on Telegram during a particular polarized electoral campaign (the Spanish region of Community in Madrid in 2021). A quantitative content analysis was applied to the messages posted on Telegram by the main political parties. Although mobile instant messaging apps have become an essential political tool to communicate with citizens, they are still little explored in the existing literature. The results of this study show that criticizing the adversary is an emerging communication strategy on Telegram, especially by the parties in government, which is quite different to findings on other social media. Thus, Telegram seems to work as a helpful network for ruling parties.

Other digital platforms have also been studied, focusing on political leaders. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Pérez-Curiel et al. (2023) analyzed action on Twitter by the four main political leaders in Spain. These actors played a role not only in the debate on vaccination, but also in the perception of the crisis. Using a content analysis, the conclusions point to rising polarization. The electoral use of the vaccine or measures such as social distance were much more important than fostering awareness about the virus. Political interest, and not social values, was at the cornerstone of the management of the crisis.

Together with digital platforms, political parties were also considered in terms of emotional narratives. Jaráiz Gulías et al. (2022) describes the relationship between far-right political party (VOX) voters in Spain and the levels of satisfaction with democracy. They contribute to a budding literature on the success of right-wing populism, arguing that emotion is a factor that is added to the traditional variables of far-right voters. Drawing upon a multivariate analysis, the results reveal there is hope in the VOX leader (Santiago Abascal) to solve the problems of Spain. This feeling is made up of cultural elements, which are linked to identity-driven politics.

3.2. The Contribution of Journalism in Verification and Wellbeing

Digital technologies have transformed the public sphere, but journalism is still a professional sector with influence on setting the agenda or defining frames for social problems. Within a framework of disinformation, the commitment of journalism to truth is even more relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic was a milestone in the dissemination of hoaxes. On this matter, Teneva (2023) furthers our understanding of the concept of digital pseudo-identification, which was present during the pandemic, by supporting journalists' opinion with non-factual arguments. Based on a computer-aided content analysis, as well as critical discourse analyses, articles related to four COVID-19 vaccines were analyzed in the mainstream media of the United Kingdom and the United States. The findings show that some quality press sources included the opinions of pseudo-authorities, which were accompanied by a positive approach to European vaccines compared to non-European ones. These results have a strong implication in terms of credibility in the media system concerning health crisis.

Another international problem is the war in Ukraine. Western mass media devoted great attention to the topic at the beginning of the conflict. This is the timeframe selected by Pallarés-Renau et al. (2023), who identified the characteristics of the news coverage of the Red Cross during the first 100 days of the war in Ukraine. Based on a literature review of the strategic relationship between press and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the authors carried out a content analysis of the headlines. Their findings show that the Red Cross is not a usual focus of media attention but rather a lure for political communication and publicity of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Hence, the press has not promoted comprehensive coverage to the mission of this historical institution throughout the whole duration of the war, which makes it difficult to see its impartial approach towards protecting human life.

Regarding existing global crises, climate change has also been tackled by this Special Issue. As there is an increasing debate on the connection between meat production and climate change, Palau-Sampio et al. (2022) examined how this relationship is addressed by three center-left media outlets from Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain. Based on the assumption that news media shape public perceptions of nutrition, these authors developed an analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. Even though a scant number of articles combining climate change and meat consumption was found, there were some differences between the countries, indicating a greater awareness in the British sample. Most of the news items were from an environmental perspective, but the lack of frequent media attention suggests that there is not a good understanding of the threats caused by the meat industry.

Beyond specific crises covered by journalism in the digital age, media outlets are suffering from their own platformization. In their work, Morais and Jerónimo (2023) offer insightful findings on the perceptions on how platforms change newsroom routines and news distribution. It is noteworthy to examine to what extent digital platforms have altered news consumption and the structural conditions of the craft of journalism, but there is little evidence on how this phenomenon is linked to challenges such as disinformation or news authorship. Drawing upon an in-depth study of local media in the central region of Portugal and three focus groups with editors, journalists, and local media consumers, they reveal a concern about the inability of audiences to distinguish the content created by local

media from others that circulate online. This demands new actions and strategies in terms of media literacy. Nevertheless, local media professionals are still considered essential for digital news distribution infrastructures. The strong mission of local journalism, consisting of representing its area and building community ties, explains why its future could impact on social cohesion.

3.3. *The Responsibility of Citizens in Rebuilding Social Cohesion*

The massive use of digital technologies had led to initial optimism about the possibilities of interaction and conversation on the Internet. Despite the fact that this kind of dialogue has not been confirmed yet by the literature, the proliferation of disinformation puts the focus on citizens once again. A lot of fake news is directed towards vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQI+ community, as stated by Carratalá (2023), who performed an analysis of the social audience's reaction to four messages of pseudo-information against LGBTQI+ people posted on Twitter. Based on user comments to news items assessed as "fake" by well-known fact-checkers and in-depth interviews with representatives of Spanish LGBTQI+ organizations, the management of disinformation was explored. It is outstanding how many responses consider disinformation against this social group to be true, but there were also comments that reject these messages. For its part, the interviewee activists believe pseudo-media and social networks are mostly responsible for this kind of disinformation, although collaboration with other groups, including citizens, was evaluated as key to fight fake news.

Another highly vulnerable group are women. Beltrán et al. (2023) investigated violence on social networks towards female politicians in Chile. Specifically, the analysis pays attention to the Chilean constitutional process (2021–2022). The authors used a tracking database, "Women and Politics", composed of Twitter posts mentioning women candidates. The hashtags were examined, showing that there were a lot of messages containing hate speech, which can be better understood under the concept of incivilities. These contents were present not only in the presidential election, but also in the constitutional plebiscite. Within the discussion, the article suggests that social networks have increased the violence suffered by women in politics, which is employed in a strategic way by their opponents.

There is a relationship between the use of social media and the mistrust of mass media, being a consolidated line of research that is here expanded on by de la Garza Montemayor and Rasgado (2023). These authors focus on another social group (youths) by using a mixed methodology. As trust could affect consumption, they carried out a survey of young Mexican university students in order to find out which media sources are most trusted and used. On the other hand, a set of interviews was conducted with university professors. The purpose of this study was to collect their observations of the media behavior of students. The results highlight that trust is not a key variable for youths as its level does not impact the consultation of a specific media outlet. Likewise, media sources which are mistrusted have a high rate of usage. This finding is concerning since it fuels the scope of disinformation.

The last article in this section (Khaile et al. 2022) explores the perceptions of trust in terms of social cohesion. This paper is one that more largely deals with the notion of social cohesion, seen through the lens of social cooperation. In countries such as South Africa, this concept is more an ideal than a reality. This is the reason why two rural communities of South Africa were selected to assess the knowledge gaps and level of trust. A qualitative methodology was conducted through semi-structured interviews, showing limited trust. Participants who know each other are more likely to trust and develop social cohesion, which overlaps to the two-step flow communication theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970).

4. Conclusions—Reconfiguring the Crisis of Democracy

The eleven contributions to this Special Issue offer an exciting and renewed vision of the challenges of social cohesion in a digital and polarized scenario. These investigations use different contexts, media outlets, and networks to show how public communication is

managing ongoing problems, with a special focus on global crises such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or the rise of populism. The survival of democracies based on trust and high-quality information is a challenge, in a context where digital technologies have become relevant infrastructures for the public sphere.

This set of articles portrays a changing field of research that aims to understand the transformations affecting current democracies. The central question is still how to ensure social cohesion and integrity through communication, especially regarding vulnerable groups. Taking these contributions together, we argue that ameliorating media literacy would enhance the use of news media and social media. Future research may consider focusing on theoretical insights that reinforce this background, generating an understanding of the structural conditions that support the flow of disinformation.

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List of Contributions

- (Beltrán et al. 2023) Beltrán, Jarnishs, Paula Walker, and René Jara. 2023. Hate and Incivilities in Hashtags against Women Candidates in Chile (2021–2022). *Social Sciences* 12: 180.
- (Carratalá 2023) Carratalá, Adolfo. 2023. Disinformation and Sexual and Gender Diversity in Spain: Twitter Users' Response, and the Perception of LGBTQI+ Organisations. *Social Sciences* 12: 206.
- (de la Garza Montemayor and Rasgado 2023) de la Garza Montemayor, Daniel Javier, and Xunaxhi Monserrat Pineda Rasgado. 2023. Relationship between the Use of Social Networks and Mistrust of Mass Media among Mexican Youth: A Mixed-Methods and NLP Study. *Social Sciences* 12: 179.
- (Jaráiz Gulías et al. 2022) Jaráiz Gulías, Erika, Paloma Castro Martínez, and Gabriel Colomé García. 2022. The Emotional Dimension of the Spanish Far Right and Its Effects on Satisfaction with Democracy. *Social Sciences* 11: 475.
- (Khaile et al. 2022) Khaile, Fundiswa T., Nicolette V. Roman, Kezia R. October, Maria Van Staden, and Tolulope V. Balogun. 2022. Perceptions of Trust in the Context of Social Cohesion in Selected Rural Communities of South Africa. *Social Sciences* 11: 359.
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Article

Digital Pseudo-Identification in the Post-Truth Era: Exploring Logical Fallacies in the Mainstream Media Coverage of the COVID-19 Vaccines

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Abstract: Because of China's new wave of COVID-19 in May 2023, the issue of tackling COVID-19 misinformation remains relevant. Based on Lippmann's theory of public opinion and agenda setting theory, this article aims to examine the concept of digital pseudo-identification as a type of logical fallacy that refers to supporting journalists' opinions with 'false' arguments that lack factual evidence. To do so, the study applied computer-aided content analysis, as well as rhetorical and critical discourse analyses, to examine 400 articles related to four COVID-19 vaccines ('Oxford-AstraZeneca', 'Pfizer-BioNTech', 'Sputnik V' and 'Sinovac') published on the online versions of two major British and American mainstream media sources between August 2020 and December 2021. The results of the study show that journalists of the 'The New York Times' and 'The Guardian' used similar logical fallacies, including the opinions of pseudo-authorities and references to pseudo-statistics and stereotypes, which contributed to creating distorted representations of the COVID-19 vaccines and propagating online misinformation. The study also reveals political bias in both of the mainstream media sources, with relatively more positive coverage of the European vaccines than non-European vaccines. The findings have important implications for journalism and open up perspectives for further research on the concept of digital pseudo-identification in the humanities and social sciences.

Keywords: COVID-19; logical fallacies; digital pseudo-identification; pseudo-authorities; pseudo-statistics; stereotypes; Walter Lippmann; agenda setting; online misinformation; mainstream media



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1. Introduction

In recent years, global issues such as fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and tackling the sustainable development goals have become some of the major challenges of our times (Pan and Zhang 2020; Yurak et al. 2020). Nevertheless, it is the spread of online misinformation, disinformation and malinformation about COVID-19 that has caused a shift in the form of communication processes and poses a serious threat to modern media and their role in the democratic system (Zarocostas 2020; Muhammed and Mathew 2022; Casero-Ripollés et al. 2023). Although all these concepts generally refer to the proliferation of false information, prior studies revealed discrepancies in their definitions. For instance, Floridi (2013) defined disinformation as misinformation that is purposefully conveyed to mislead the receiver into believing that it is information. Brennen et al. (2020) considered malinformation as 'reconfigured true information', whereas Aïmeur et al. (2023) viewed 'reconfigured' information and 'totally fabricated' information as misinformation. Overall, most studies base the taxonomy of these concepts on such criteria as truth and intentionality. Thus, Wu et al. (2019) distinguished disinformation, which is information that is fake or misleading and spreads intentionally, from misinformation, which is an umbrella term for all false information that is spread unintentionally on social media. Nevertheless, some researchers claim that it is not sufficient for researchers to define misinformation as 'false information' (Baines and Elliott 2020), since 'false information', or 'pseudo-information', is a counterconcept to information and, therefore, misinformation should not be regarded

as information at all (Floridi 2013). A study by Kim and de Zúñiga (2021) suggests that pseudo-information is not contrary to information but is 'an umbrella term for all types of false and inaccurate information (including misinformation and disinformation) that has harmful consequences or social externalities that affect information subscribers. Following this approach, the present study views misinformation as a type of pseudo-information that is spread unintentionally in the media.

The spread of COVID-19 misinformation has accelerated because of several factors, including the rise of citizen journalism (Obama 2023) and the pace of the digitalization of both public and private life (Bylieva et al. 2022; Jaumotte et al. 2023). On the one hand, the strengthening of public discourse, which provided the public more power to express their attitudes and personal opinions, has resulted in excessive public reliance on digital and social media and public misperceptions about COVID-19 (Lee et al. 2023). On the other hand, digitalization has led to various media-related changes, which are commonly referred to as the process of 'deep mediatization' (Hepp 2019). It is a new stage of mediatization in which digital media are embedded into meaningful units of everyday practice so that they are no longer regarded as an 'independent' and discrete social domain (Hepp 2022a). Furthermore, the 'total visualization' of modern media content (Dorofeev and Tomaščíková 2021) has also contributed to misleading audiences about COVID-19, since it has misunderstood some of the most common COVID-19 visualizations (Adkins 2023). Thus, the entanglement of our social world with media technologies has led to a rethinking of the influence of mediated communication on constructing reality (Hepp 2022b) and contributed to the information crisis.

Most recent studies on the information crisis, or the 'post-truth' crisis, where people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs rather than one based on facts (González-Méijome 2017), have dealt with analyzing the content and spread of fake news. According to Hepp (Hepp cited by Kumar Putta and Anderson 2021), what we know about the coronavirus is communicated to us through the media. Chavda et al. (2022) revealed that during the COVID-19 crisis, people started to believe false news, took home remedies and believed fraudulent health claims on social media. Muhammed and Mathew (2022) also found that misinformation stems from a lack of information from official sources such that people tend to fill this gap with 'improvised news'. Other researchers have gone further and examined the effects of fake news exposure on citizens' behavior (Ognyanova et al. 2020; Casero-Ripollés et al. 2023), revealing that the information crisis is largely due to public distrust towards media (Van Scoy et al. 2021). For instance, Ognyanova et al. (2020) found that fake news exposure was associated with a decline in mainstream media trust among respondents. Likewise, the findings of Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023) showed that disinformation generates an increase in mistrust towards both the media and politicians, which questions the credibility of these two traditional actors in the public sphere. Nevertheless, this has a lower impact on changing the opinion of citizens and their voting decisions, which means that citizens are either becoming used to living in post-truth circumstances in which truth is at risk, or they may be unaware that they are consuming fake news that shapes their attitudes. Thus, the rapid spread of fake news and the confusion concerning the opinions, beliefs and facts about COVID-19 have prompted researchers to readdress the concepts of science and pseudo-science.

According to a study by González-Méijome (2017), science relies on evidence, which is defined as the available body of facts or information, properly collected and analyzed. These facts indicate whether a belief or proposition is true or valid. On the contrary, pseudo-science relies on beliefs, exaggerated or unprovable claims, confirmation bias, lack of openness to evaluation by other experts, and absence of systematic practices when developing theories. Following this approach, the present study suggests that misinformation on COVID-19 in news reporting refers to pseudo-scientific information that is used by journalists unintentionally and lacks scientific and factual evidence. Although the majority of recent studies on COVID-19 have focused either on purely linguistic (Goncharova et al. 2022; Teneva and Bykov 2023) or political features of the COVID-19 discourse (Hart et al.

2020; Van Scoy et al. 2021) and detected COVID-19 misinformation mainly on social media (Wu et al. 2019; Ferrara et al. 2020), less attention has been paid to the issues of tackling COVID-19 misinformation in the mainstream media, which remain under-researched in the context of COVID-19. In contrast to social media, they are regarded as more reliable and have traditional gatekeepers, who crosscheck information sources before publication (Muhammed and Mathew 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to filling this gap by studying the specific logical fallacies that contribute to propagating online misinformation concerning COVID-19 vaccines in mainstream media from rhetorical, linguistic and journalistic perspectives.

2. Theoretical Context

Since the study aimed to detect ‘false’ information in the COVID-19 vaccine coverage, it was essential to understand the nature of ‘false’ argumentation and its significant role in our interpretation of the world.

2.1. An Overview of Fallacy Studies

Studies of ‘false’ argumentation or ‘logical fallacies’, which can simply be defined as defective arguments containing logical errors, date back to Aristotle, who first defined them as hidden arguments which give the illusion to an argument being sound (Hansen 2020). For Aristotle, the art of persuasion is a combination of three main components: appeals to reason (‘logos’), emotions (‘pathos’) and credibility (‘ethos’). To convince the listeners, a good speaker should craft his (her) message using not only facts but also emotional appeals, which Aristotle considers to be a means of persuasion (Aristotle cited in Coelho and Huppess-Cluysenaer 2018). Thus, Aristotle highlights the importance of an argument’s emotional aspect and overcomes the dualism of rationality and emotionality in argumentation. This approach to the role of emotions in argumentation is reflected in modern media studies, which consider emotions as a means of both persuasion and manipulation that journalists deploy in news production (Glück 2018). Thus, these fundamental appeals to ‘logos’, ‘pathos’ and ‘ethos’ can be viewed not only as a way to persuade the audience but also as a way to manipulate public opinion, depending on the author’s intentions. Emotional fallacies play unfairly on emotional appeals, such as those we see in antivaccination campaigns that prey on parent’s fear of vaccine-induced damage to their child, despite overwhelming evidence of vaccine safety (Kuchel and Rowland 2023). Ethical fallacies overplay the authority, credibility or character of the messenger, whereas logical fallacies rely on those facts and evidence which are favorable to the author’s arguments. The latter finding is significant to our study, which views logical fallacies as a means of manipulating public opinion.

Francis Bacon also contributed to studies on fallacies. He identified the four ‘idols of human mind’ that prevent people from attaining a true understanding of things, including ‘tribe’ (our human nature, which distorts our view of the world), ‘cave’ (our experience, which affects how we interpret the world), ‘marketplace’ (language as the source of our mistaken ideas) and ‘theatre’ (false philosophies that rule men’s minds) (Hansen 2020). Based on Aristotle’s and Bacon’s classifications of fallacies, The Port-Royal Logic (cited by Hansen 2020) considered fallacies that are associated with scientific subjects and those that are committed in everyday life. This work is worth mentioning, since it contains the earliest statements of the modern appeals to ‘false’ authorities (pseudo-authorities), which are discussed further in this paper. Furthermore, John Locke made a significant contribution to the development of rhetoric and fallacy studies by inventing three main kinds of ad-arguments: ‘ad verecundiam’ (appeal to authority), ‘ad ignorantiam’ (appeal to ignorance), and ‘ad hominem’ (appeal to person) arguments (Hansen 2020). Based on Aristotle’s classification of appeals, he identified their hierarchy, discerning ‘valid’ appeals (appeals to evidence and reason) from ‘fallacious’ ones (appeals to the speaker’s authority and the audience’s ignorance) (Longaker 2014). This approach to argumentation provided a basis for modern studies on the criteria used for fallacy identification (Stapleton 2001),

which include arguments supported by claim, reason and evidence; conclusions made from claim and reason; recognition of opposition; and refutation (Khoiri and Widiati 2017).

Overall, it should be noted that fallacies can be broadly put into two main categories: ‘formal’ fallacies (identified by argument’s form) and ‘informal’ fallacies (identified through the analysis of the argument’s content). The latter category may also exploit the emotional weaknesses of the audience and, thus, is often used to enhance the emotional effect of information and manipulate public opinion, which is a central issue in our work. Copi et al. (2018) developed this category by presenting eighteen informal fallacies, including the following three fallacies:

1. ‘Argumentum ad verecundiam’—appeals to people that may have no expertise in the given area or ‘pseudo-authorities’;
2. ‘Argumentum ad numerum’—appeals based on the number of people who hold a particular belief or ‘pseudo-statistics’;
3. ‘Argumentum ad populum’—appeals to popular opinion rather than authority or ‘stereotypes’.

These three fallacies identified by Copi et al. (2018) serve as a basis for our further classification of logical fallacies (identification with pseudo-authorities, pseudo-statistics and stereotypes) used in the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 vaccines.

2.2. Digital Pseudo-Identification through the Lens of Lippmann’s Theory of Public Opinion and Agenda Setting Theory

With the recent information crisis, the issues of the media and government relationship have become of special interest to many scholars. Early works related to these issues date back to John Stuart Mill’s ‘*On Liberty*’, which emphasized absolute press freedom and independence from the state and laid the foundation for our modern understanding of the news media as a ‘watchdog’ of the state. This libertarian theory, or the free press theory, is in contrast to the authoritarian approach to the media, according to which the role of the state is to control the press in order to protect the interests of society. In the authoritarian theory, there is no feedback allowed from the public, whereas in the Soviet media theory, there is two-way communication and, at the same time, the whole control of the press is under the dictatorship of the country’s leader. The social responsibility theory lies between these two approaches and allows the press to have total freedom, but its content should be discussed in a public panel. Another approach, developed by Gramsci, highlights the role of media ‘as a key apparatus of the state to produce hegemony’ (Yüksel 2013). The ‘propaganda model’, by Herman and Chomsky ([1988] 2008), considers the media to be dominated by political and business elites, who use the press to ‘manufacture consent’ in mass public opinion. For the ‘indexing approach’, elite disagreement is central: if elites agree with each other, news coverage will reflect this consensus; in case they disagree, media are free to cover the range of their opinions but should not go beyond it. Nevertheless, it was Walter Lippmann ([1929] 2021) who first noticed the tendency of the media to serve the state and shape public opinion. His notable book ‘*Public Opinion*’ (Lippmann [1929] 2021) provides a broader lens through which to study the current information crisis caused by COVID-19 and, in particular, the concept of digital pseudo-identification as a means of public opinion manipulation.

According to Lippmann ([1929] 2021), each person has a different perception of reality and social events based on the stereotypes which he or she has. These individual stereotypes, or the pictures inside the heads of these human beings, are their public opinions. People construct their own reality which is, in fact, their own subjective representation of the actual environment. This ‘pseudo-environment’ is an accumulation of their individual stereotypes or subjective and distorted images of the external world that often mislead them in their judgments. As a result, by attaching emotions to these images, which often do not coincide with reality, people form symbolic pictures of facts on which they base their political actions and public opinions (DeCesare 2012). Thus, fictions become a part of human interactions. Lippmann’s ([1929] 2021) ideas refer to the current media crisis when

mass media transmit biased, emotionally charged news stories that often have no relation to scientific knowledge and real facts (Teneva 2021). By embedding emotional elements into news reports, journalists create an illusion that the readers share their opinions and feelings. Hence, modern news-making becomes a process of identification of journalists' opinions with personal beliefs and feelings.

Kenneth Burke (1969), in his famous book *'A Rhetoric of Motives'*, considers identification as a key principle of communication that is more important than persuasion. We are all different from each other. In order to overcome this division and become a member of society, we persuade others by getting them to identify with our ways and by speaking their language (Andres 1992). Thus, we are 'both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another' (Burke 1969, p. 21). In this regard, identification may be viewed as a general communication principle of identifying the author's opinion with the readers' opinions to make his or her viewpoint acceptable to them and thereby persuade them by using 'valid', verifiable and accurate information (Teneva 2021). Following Burke's theory, Hess (2014) studied how digital devices fundamentally altered the nature of identity. He defined digital identification as a process of technological unconscious consubstantiality, through which users are provided and believe in information and argument based upon their digital substance. Zamparutti (2023) examined how consubstantiality is constructed rhetorically through mass usage of terminology, which has implications for understanding societal connectivity in times of stress and trauma. Thus, the circulation of knowledge in the modern media serves as an echo chamber of personal desire and opinion rather than providing users with diverse perspectives, which corresponds to the abovementioned Lippmann's ([1929] 2021) ideas.

It is worth noting that prior studies considered identification as not wholly deliberate but also semiconscious. For instance, Quigley (1998) viewed Burke's identification within the context of the understanding of language as one way of acting in the world, revealing that in the process of identification, a speaker may use language and other symbols without being fully aware of doing so. Thus, Burke's approach to identification suggests that we should consider the impact of those messages that we do not fully intend to send. According to a study by Kuchel and Rowland (2023), rhetoric is a powerful tool for facilitating an open, two-way exchange of ideas, but it can also be used to confuse and mislead an audience. This idea is significant to the present study which views 'false' identification or 'pseudo-identification' as a type of fallacy that is not recognized by journalists themselves and, therefore, is used unintentionally in vaccine reporting. Regarding the concept of pseudo-identification, prior studies defined it as an explicit and realized falsehood within a cultural context, including false consciousness, implicit attitudes and latent effects (Xiang 2011). In contrast to this approach, the present study views digital pseudo-identification not as a complete falsehood but as inaccurate information that is opinion-based and lacking in factual evidence.

Lippmann ([1929] 2021) reflected on how the media can mislead an audience and serve political interests (Arnold-Forster 2023). Based on his theory of public opinion, McCombs and Shaw (1972) developed agenda setting theory, which highlights the media's influence on public opinion through emphasizing certain agendas and increasing the amount of its coverage in the news. Providing constant and repetitive reporting influences public opinion and moves people to act based on the limited information accessible to them. This limited judgment of an audience concerning events creates a distorted image of the world, thus contributing to the spread of online misinformation. Therefore, Lippmann's ([1929] 2021) theory of public opinion and agenda setting theory are closely related to the present research which views logical fallacies in the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 vaccines as a means of manipulating public opinion and propagating online misinformation.

2.3. Coverage of the COVID-19 Vaccines in the Mainstream Media

During the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists served as mediators between the government and the public, taking responsibility for coverage of the vaccines (Perreault and Perreault 2021). The rapid rollout of the world's first registered vaccines against COVID-19 caused skepticism and hesitancy concerning their effectiveness such that some scientists started to view them as health diplomacy tools aimed at enhancing the image of their producing countries rather than as a means of disease prevention (Vargina 2020; Giusti and Ambrosetti 2023). It is worth noting that scholars distinguished two main approaches to developing and promoting the COVID-19 vaccines: vaccine diplomacy and vaccine nationalism (Kirgizov-Barskii and Morozov 2022).

The term 'vaccine diplomacy', conceptualized by Peter Hotez (2014), is neutral by nature. According to Liu et al. (2022), it is a means of achieving national security and an indispensable part of international cooperation in biosecurity. From this stance, vaccine diplomacy is considered as a type of 'corporate diplomacy'—a term that refers to activities related to establishing and maintaining cordial and cooperative relationships either among firms or between firms and national governments, with the aim of pursuing industrial and commercial policies of governments (Strange 1992). As for 'vaccine nationalism', it can be described as putting the interest of a single nation first, above others, for economic or security reasons, when each vaccine-producing country seeks to secure vaccines for its own population and signs deals with pharmaceutical companies directly, limiting the stock available to others. Because of vaccine nationalism, media coverage of COVID-19 has become highly politicized, which contributes to escalating political confrontations between Western and non-Western countries (Kirgizov-Barskii and Morozov 2022).

Recent studies on COVID-19 have revealed misinformation and political slants in the vaccine coverage. For instance, Hart et al. (2020) pinpointed politicization and polarization in COVID-19 news in US newspapers and televised network news. Chipidza et al. (2022) also revealed that COVID-19 coverage was not predominantly health-related, which allowed researchers to identify misinformation both in traditional and social media. Kim (2021) and Ng (2021) examined how the issue of misinformation concerning COVID-19 vaccines affected anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments. Christensen et al. (2022) conducted a thorough analysis of articles on COVID-19 vaccines, concluding that although the mainstream online media were positively polarized towards the vaccines, the coverage of some vaccines was negative. For instance, the 'Oxford-AstraZeneca' vaccine garnered largely negative coverage compared to the 'Johnson and Johnson' vaccine. Notably, Dahlstrom (2021) pointed out that vaccine storytelling frequently contained personal testimonies that contributed positively or negatively to vaccine's images, thus increasing the spread of scientific misinformation. Soares and Recuero (2021) also found that mainstream media coverage can promote the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 when journalists skip a stage of information processing and reproduce false or misleading information. Thus, prior studies have detected misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines in the mainstream media.

3. Research Aims, Hypothesis and Methodology

3.1. Research Aims

The aim of the present research was twofold: first, to provide insight into the understanding of the concept of digital pseudo-identification as a type of logical fallacy employed in the manipulation of public opinion and propagating online misinformation in the mainstream media and, second, to show its close relationship to Walter Lippmann's and Kenneth Burke's theories, highlighting the relevance of their views in the post-truth era, when the boundaries of what information can be labeled as 'true' and 'false' are blurred. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

1. To consider the concept of digital pseudo-identification as a type of logical fallacy within the framework of Lippmann's theory of public opinion and to discern it from Burke's concept of identification;
2. To detect the use of pseudo-identification and measure its frequency in news articles of two major British and American mainstream media sources during the examined period;
3. To classify the types of pseudo-identification and analyze their role in the vaccine coverage;
4. To describe the ideological language means deployed in creating distorted representations of the COVID-19 vaccines and in manipulating public opinion.

3.2. Research Hypothesis

The study aimed to test the following hypotheses:

1. News stories about the COVID-19 vaccines contain logical fallacies that are used by journalists unintentionally as proof of their opinions about the vaccines;
2. Journalists of the mainstream media sources use similar logical fallacies and language means in the vaccine reporting;
3. Coverage of the European and non-European COVID-19 vaccines is politicized and contains political bias.

3.3. Methodology

To achieve the research aims, the study utilized a mixture of research methods, including computer-aided content analysis, as well as rhetorical and CDA analyses. The research process involved several stages.

Firstly, to collect the material, the study utilized Lexis Newsdesk as a data collection tool. Using the search queries 'Oxford-AstraZeneca', 'Pfizer-BioNTech', 'Sputnik V', 'Sinovac' and 'CoronaVac', it became possible to collect a sample of 400 news articles from the online versions of the two major British and American mainstream media sources, including 200 articles from 'The New York Times' and 200 articles from 'The Guardian', respectively. Four COVID-19 vaccines that were developed during the first and second COVID-19 waves and had geographically different producing countries, including two European vaccines (Britain's 'Oxford-AstraZeneca' and Germany's 'Pfizer-BioNTech') and two non-European vaccines (Russia's 'Sputnik V' and China's 'Sinovac' ('CoronaVac')), were selected to make inferences regarding the political bias in the news coverage. To avoid any sampling bias, the study applied a consecutive sampling method, which is regarded as one of the best nonprobability methods, since it seeks to include all accessible subjects as part of the sample. The research timeline between 11 August 2020 and 31 December 2021 was defined by the official registration of the world's first coronavirus vaccine 'Sputnik V' on 11 August 2020 and the approval of the other three vaccines during the following 16 months.

Secondly, to avoid any bias in the content analysis, the collected material was analyzed automatically with the help of the computer-assisted tools. To analyze the lexical content of the articles, the study applied semantic web technologies (Murzo et al. 2022). The growth in computing power and the increase in availability (Kryltcov et al. 2021) made it possible to perform text mining of the collected material. According to Wu et al. (2019), a content-based approach can be very helpful in detecting misinformation. The underlying assumption of this method is that misinformation may consist of certain keywords or combinations of keywords so that a single post or news story with enough misinformation signals can be classified. With the help of <https://www.wordclouds.com> (accessed on 29 June 2023), we generated two word clouds from the articles of both papers, which allowed us to visualize and measure the frequency of the top 200 keywords in each paper. The occurrence of these keywords allowed for the identification of scientific and pseudo-scientific types of information in the vaccine coverage. To analyze these types of information, we utilized Nexis Newsdesk as a media intelligence tool that allowed for the measurement and classification of mentions related to scientific evidence (opinions of health experts

and statistics with a specific amount of data) and pseudo-scientific evidence (opinions of ‘pseudo-authorities’, including celebrities, politicians, anonymous experts and vaccinated people; references to generalized statistics or ‘pseudo-statistics’; statements, containing metaphors and overgeneralizations about a particular country, which we commonly referred to as ‘stereotypes’). Based on these analytics, we proposed a classification of logical fallacies (types of pseudo-identification).

Finally, to describe these fallacies and their ideological language means, we applied Van Dijk’s (2006) approach to the CDA analysis, which considers language as a form of power abuse. This approach suggests that most manipulation takes place by text and form, which allowed the researchers to analyze the fragments of the vaccine discourse in a social context and to detect the specific language means used for public opinion manipulation. These fragments included statements about the selected COVID-19 vaccines made by politicians, celebrities and vaccinated people, as well as journalists themselves. To assess the persuasiveness of these discourse fragments, we utilized rhetorical analysis, which made it possible to analyze the elements of a rhetorical situation, including the text, the journalist, the audience, the purpose and the setting, and we evaluated the role of logical fallacies in creating distorted images of the COVID-19 vaccines and manipulating public opinion in the mainstream media.

4. Results and Discussion

Using <https://www.wordclouds.com> (accessed on 29 June 2023), we generated two word clouds from 200 articles of ‘The Guardian’ and 200 articles of ‘The New York Times’ concerning the four COVID-19 vaccines (‘Oxford-AstraZeneca’, ‘Pfizer-BioNTech’, ‘Sputnik V’ and ‘Sinovac’ (‘CoronaVac’)). The size and color of each word in the clouds highlight its frequency of occurrence, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1. The word cloud generated from the articles of ‘The Guardian’.

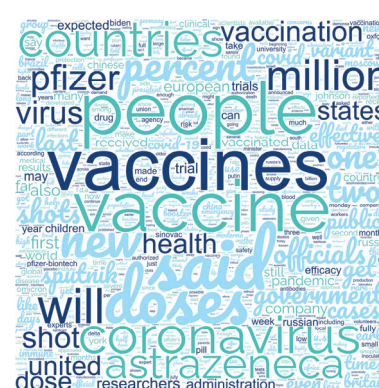


Figure 2. The word cloud generated from the articles of ‘The New York Times’.

As Figures 1 and 2 show, the articles contained words that are related to scientific and medical information, including ‘dose’, ‘vaccine’, ‘virus’, ‘shot’, ‘health’, etc. Notably, the word ‘vaccine’ appeared to be the most frequent word in the articles of both papers. The names of the vaccines (‘Astrazeneca’, ‘Pfizer’, ‘Sputnik’ and ‘Sinovac’) and the name of the disease (‘coronavirus’ or ‘COVID’) were also among the most frequently used words. These findings illustrate the increasing media attention on the COVID-19 vaccines that was aimed at promoting their images in the eyes of the newsreaders, which is in line with agenda setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Furthermore, the occurrence of such keywords as ‘effective’ and ‘good’ reveals that the vaccines were mainly positively portrayed, which is consistent with similar findings by Malik et al. (2023). Nevertheless, Figures 1 and 2 also illustrate the presence of nonscientific words mainly related to politics, including such words as ‘government’, ‘officials’ and ‘President’. The occurrence of these words indicates that politics seems to dominate the discussion of the vaccines (DeLay 2021), which underpins the research hypothesis on the politicization of the vaccine coverage.

To detect the types of nonscientific information, we generated a list of the top 200 occurring keywords in each paper based on the two word clouds from Figures 1 and 2. Table 1 presents the ranking and frequency of the most significant keywords that were manually selected and indicated the presence of both scientific and pseudo-scientific information in the articles of ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The New York Times’, accordingly.

Table 1. The most frequently used words detected in the articles of ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The New York Times’.

The Guardian		The New York Times	
Keywords	Mentions	Keywords	Mentions
1. vaccine	1768	1. vaccine	2578
3. COVID	442	4. doses	743
5. Astrazeneca	403	6. coronavirus	590
6. doses	386	8. percent	492
13. data	222	10. Astrazeneca	480
15. Sputnik	215	11. Pfizer	410
16. government	211	22. government	304
21. Pfizer	172	33. Sputnik	283
27. million	149	36. many	262
33. many	133	42. Russia	248
38. Sinovac	106	52. China	214
41. Johnson	100	54. Johnson	213
45. President	91	59. Britain	181
50. Russia	88	60. researchers	178
51. China	86	63. Sinovac	171
60. scientists	73	67. President	169
70. Germany	67	68. experts	168
102. experts	55	74. administration	161
111. Putin	54	116. Putin	123
113. Bolsonaro	53	169. Biden	97
148. researchers	48	180. nearly	91
191. several	42	181. federal	90
199. Kremlin	35	198. doctors	81

The occurrence of such words as ‘scientists’, ‘experts’, ‘researchers’, ‘million’, ‘data’, and ‘percent’ in Table 1 shows that scientific frames dominated the coverage of the COVID-19 vaccines, whereas mentioning the names of British, American and Russian politicians (‘Bolsonaro’, ‘Johnson’, ‘Putin’ and ‘Biden’), political institutions (‘Kremlin’, ‘government’ and ‘administration’), political titles (‘President’), countries (‘Russia’, ‘China’ and ‘Britain’) and quantifiers that do not denote the exact amount of data (‘many’, ‘nearly’ and ‘several’) indicate the presence of nonscientific information in the vaccine coverage. Overall, it is evident from Table 1 that politicians and political organizations were relatively more

popular in the vaccine coverage than health experts. For instance, Boris Johnson was mentioned 100 times in ‘The Guardian’ and 213 times in ‘The New York Times’, while the government was mentioned 211 times in ‘The Guardian’ and 304 times in ‘The New York Times’ compared to scientists, who appeared only 73 times and 142 times in each paper, respectively. Based on the analytics from the word clouds (Figures 1 and 2), it is revealed that the names of the vaccine-producing countries also spiked in frequency with 248 mentions of Russia, 214 mentions of China compared to 181 mentions of Britain in ‘The New York Times’, as well as 88 mentions of Russia and 86 mentions of China compared to 67 mentions of Germany in ‘The Guardian’. Thus, the analysis of the data from Table 1 allowed for the detection of more media attention on the producing countries of non-European vaccines than European vaccines, which supports our hypothesis concerning political bias in both newspapers. It is also worth mentioning that the surname of the Russian President appeared 123 times, whereas the surname of the US President appeared less often with only 97 mentions in ‘The New York Times’. This finding indicates the politicization of the vaccine coverage, which is consistent with recent studies (Hart et al. 2020; Abbas 2022; Teneva and Bykov 2023). Overall, the results from Table 1 reveal the presence of nonscientific information in the vaccine coverage.

To measure and visualize the frequency of the types of information mentioned in relation to the COVID-19 vaccines, the study utilized Nexis Newsdesk as a media intelligence tool. Figures 3 and 4 show the frequency of information detected in the articles of ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The New York Times’ on the four COVID-19 vaccines from 11 August 2020 to 31 December 2021.

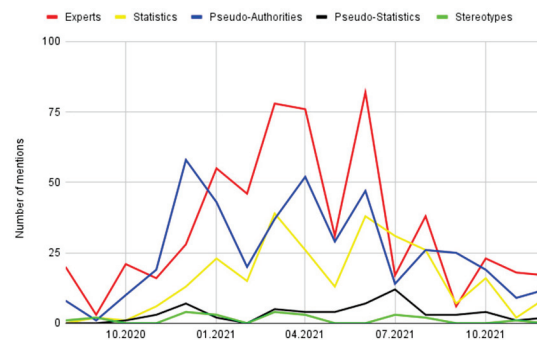


Figure 3. Frequency of information detected in the articles of ‘The Guardian’.

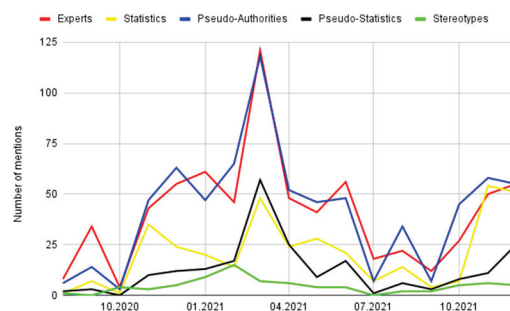


Figure 4. Frequency of information detected in the articles of ‘The New York Times’.

As is evident from Figures 3 and 4, there were several increases in the frequency of information that were due to the clinical trials and approval of the four selected COVID-19 vaccines between August 2020 and December 2021. Overall, Figures 3 and 4 allowed for the detection of the presence of scientific (1, 2) and nonscientific types of information (3, 4, 5) in the vaccine coverage, including:

1. References to the opinions of health experts, such as reputable scientists, health authorities and scientific journals (‘experts’);
2. References to statistics (‘statistics’);

3. References to the opinions of nonexperts, which included political actors and institutions, celebrities, vaccinated people, and anonymous or ‘implicit experts’ whose names were not mentioned or hidden from the public eye—‘argumentum ad verecundiam’ (Copi et al. 2018, p. 120) (‘pseudo-authorities’);
4. References to generalized statistics that lack an indication of the specific amount of data—‘argumentum ad numerum’ (‘pseudo-statistics’);
5. Statements containing metaphors or overgeneralizations about a particular vaccine-producing country—‘argumentum ad populum’ (‘stereotypes’).

Based on the analytics from Figures 3 and 4, we generated Table 2 which presents the types of mentions and their maximum number of mentions in each paper.

Table 2. Types of mentions detected in the articles of ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The New York Times’ and their maximum number.

Types of Mentions	The Guardian	The New York Times
Experts	82	121
Statistics	39	48
Pseudo-authorities	58	118
Pseudo-statistics	12	57
Stereotypes	5	15

A comparison of the data presented in Table 2 reveals the discrepancies in the vaccine coverage of the two major British and American mainstream media sources. The articles of ‘The New York Times’ contained more references to the opinions of health experts (121 maximum mentions) than pseudo-authorities (118 mentions), as well as more appeals to pseudo-statistics (57 mentions) than statistics (48 mentions). In contrast, the articles of ‘The Guardian’ contained more references to the opinions of experts (82 mentions) than pseudo-authorities (58 mentions), as well as more appeals to statistics (39 mentions) than pseudo-statistics (12 mentions). References to stereotypes were the least common in both papers, with 5 peak mentions in articles of ‘The Guardian’ and 15 peak mentions in the articles of ‘The New York Times’. Overall, the findings from Tables 1 and 2 show that the articles of ‘The New York Times’ contained more pseudo-scientific information than the articles of ‘The Guardian’. Thus, based on the data from Table 2, we proposed our classification of logical fallacies, which includes identification of journalists’ opinions with pseudo-authorities, pseudo-statistics and stereotypes.

4.1. Identification with Pseudo-Authorities

When reflecting on factors contributing to the spread of online misinformation, Froehlich (2019) distinguished between ‘honest authorities’, whose knowledge is based on verifiable knowledge, and ‘pseudo-cognitive authorities’, who appear to have credibility and expertise but on critical examination fail in these qualities and strive to impose a partisan agenda irrespective of truth, evidence, logic or facts.

The discourse analysis of the news stories on the COVID-19 vaccines revealed that journalists of both papers identified their opinions with the opinions and feelings of pseudo-authorities who do not possess in-depth knowledge and sufficient competence to form fully informed judgments concerning the scientific matters but whose opinions seemed to be more trustworthy and authoritative to the public than the opinions of real experts and scientists. The articles contained frequent references to the opinions of reputable politicians, for example:

1. *'I trust AstraZeneca, I trust the vaccines,' Ursula von der Leyen, the top European Union official, said at a news conference in Brussels (Cohen 2021).*
2. *The prime minister went on: 'But we're working together on the AstraZeneca it's a great vaccine. I have AstraZeneca.' (Walker and Phillips 2021).*
3. *Xi Jinping, China's leader, called it [CoronaVac] a 'global public good' (Wee 2021).*
4. *In France, President Emmanuel Macron talked to Mr. Putin recently about possible deliveries of Sputnik, which Mr. Macron's foreign minister derided as a 'propaganda tool'. [...] Mr. Matovic faced a revolt from his own ministers, [...] succumbing to what his foreign minister, Ivan Korcok, described as a Russian 'tool of hybrid war' that 'casts doubt on work with the European Union' (Higgins 2021).*

Examples № 1–4 contain quotes with the opinions of politicians concerning COVID-19 vaccines. Images of politicians are used as a means of advertising either a person or an issue in the modern media (Dorofeev 2023). Thus, their image is transferred to the vaccines, highlighting either positive or negative vaccine qualities. References to politicians' opinions serve as a means of creating either positive (№ 1–3) or negative (№ 4) vaccine images, increasing the popularity of both the vaccines and the politicians in the news coverage. Example № 4 supports the research hypothesis regarding the political bias in the news coverage. The opinion of the politician steers the readers' minds towards his negative opinion concerning the foreign vaccine and its producing country. This finding is in line with the ideas of Abbas (2022) regarding ideological polarization in mainstream media coverage when journalists highlight the positive qualities of 'our' vaccines, on the one hand, and negative qualities of others' vaccines, on the other hand. Furthermore, examples № 1–4 show that political language contains specific connotations and ideological meanings that encourage the public to act in a way that is favorable to politicians. Emotion-laden words that denote either politicians' approval of the vaccines ('trust', 'support', 'great' and 'safe') or their disapproval ('cast doubt', 'a propaganda tool' and 'a tool of hybrid war') are intended to incline the audience towards positive or negative opinions about the vaccines and prejudicial attitudes, which reflect their emotional and political bias. Thus, emotional elements are typical indicators of public opinion manipulation (Teneva and Bykov 2023).

Recent studies (Brennen et al. 2020; Dahlstrom 2021) have revealed that vaccine narratives containing the personal testimonies of politicians, celebrities and public figures have a significant impact on vaccine attitudes and behaviors, even if they contain inaccurate scientific information. According to Brennen et al. (2020), high-level politicians, celebrities or other prominent public figures produced or spread only 20% of the misinformation in the vaccine coverage, but that misinformation attracted a large majority of all social media engagements. Similarly, DeLay (2021) has highlighted the role of political and social actors in framing science-related policy issues in public discourse and mobilizing support for their position or perspective. These findings recall the concept of social proof, developed by Cialdini (2007), where people copy what other people do. The analysis of the news stories in both papers revealed frequent references to personal testimonies of politicians who were vaccinated or who urged the public to get vaccinated, for example:

5. *PM has first dose, calling experience 'very good, very quick' and urging Britons to get vaccinated (Walker 2021).*
6. *President Biden went out of his way to draw attention to Pfizer-BioNTech's findings on Wednesday, calling them "very, very encouraging. [...] If you get the booster, you're really in good shape," Mr. Biden said (LaFraniere 2021).*

Examples № 5 and 6 illustrate that the personal testimonies of politicians often serve as pseudo-scientific evidence in favor of a vaccine's effectiveness. These testimonies are aimed to prove that if Boris Johnson, or any other politician, is vaccinated with this vaccine and feels well, then it can be regarded as effective and safe. The feelings of the former British Prime Minister after being inoculated with the Astrazeneca vaccine and the opinion of the US President who urges the public to get inoculated with the Prizer-BioNTech vaccine are

provided to promote the effectiveness of these vaccines without providing any scientific evidence. Emotional elements that are embedded into the politicians' statements, including adjectives denoting positive feelings ('encouraging' and 'good') and intensifying adverbs ('very' and 'really'), exert emotional influence on the audience and, thereby, manipulate public opinion (Teneva and Bykov 2023).

The findings of the study reveal frequent mentions of the opinions of celebrities used as 'advertisements' of the COVID-19 vaccines, for instance:

7. *British stand-up comedian Lenny Henry says, 'the vaccine [AstraZeneca] does not contain the live virus and is definitely working' (May 2021).*

8. *Lionel Messi has helped to obtain 50,000 COVID vaccines from China for an ambitious but controversial plan to inoculate all of South America's football players [...] (Goni 2021).*

Examples № 7 and 8 demonstrate that the opinions of celebrities are a way to advertise the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines. Celebrity endorsements contribute to public opinion manipulation and creating a more favorable and positive vaccine image. The credibility of such claims depends not on the competence of celebrities on health issues or provable scientific facts but rather on the popularity of famous people among the audience. The more popularity celebrities have, the more convincing their arguments are likely to be. This finding is congruent with the understanding of the 'post-truth' crisis, where personal opinions have become more 'trustworthy' than facts (Giordani et al. 2021).

The results of the study indicate frequent references to the testimonies of the vaccinated people who are either in favor (№ 9) or against (№ 10–12) the COVID-19 vaccines because of political and health reasons, for example:

9. *'I'm more than happy to get the vaccine [AstraZeneca] myself, though I feel it's immaterial' Lewis, 29, architect, London (Obordo and Guardian readers 2021).*

10. *'I don't trust the government. There's no way I'm taking the vaccine [Sputnik V],' said one Moscow teacher, who declined to be named (Beaumont and Harding 2020).*

11. *'Even right in the middle of this emergency, I have no reason to trade my life or my family's for a Chinese vaccine,' said Nguyen Hoang Vy, a manager for health care operations at a hospital in the city of Ho Chi Minh (Wee and Lee Myers 2021).*

12. *Yasmine Cotton, 19, health care assistant and student. 'Now, I just feel extremely worried. Every headache I get I think is this the blood clot? It's terrifying.' (Blackall 2021).*

Examples № 9–12 illustrate citations containing personal opinions of vaccinated people about the COVID-19 vaccines. Emotional vocabulary denoting positive or negative feelings of these people about or after the vaccination ('happy', 'extremely worried' and 'terrifying') is intended to trigger similar emotional responses in the audience and make them identify with the feelings and opinions of these people about the vaccines, thus contributing to public opinion manipulation and creating distorted vaccine images. Examples № 10 and 11 show that vaccines were portrayed in terms of public distrust of the Russian government and anti-China sentiment in Vietnam, which supports the hypothesis about politicization of the vaccine coverage (Hart et al. 2020; Kim 2021; Ng 2021; Abbas 2022; Christensen et al. 2022).

The results of the study also show that the opinions of anonymous or 'implicit' scientific experts, whose names were either not mentioned or hidden from the public eye, were widespread in the vaccine coverage of both papers. In these cases, words with a generic meaning of authority were common, for instance:

13. *Observers say the Sputnik V jab is aimed more at sowing political division than fighting coronavirus. [...] EU observers say Moscow is deploying Sputnik as another weapon of geopolitical influence. (Henley 2021).*

14. *Experts all agree that AstraZeneca is a safe vaccine (Boseley 2020).*

References to the opinions of implicit scientific experts ('observers' and 'experts') whose names were not mentioned in the text of the news stories create an illusion that the provided opinions are credible and trustworthy. They are used to promote either trust (№ 13) or skepticism (№ 14) towards the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines. This finding is in line with the results of a recent study (Teneva 2021), which identified the types of pseudo-authorities in the vaccine coverage, including nonexperts whose names are mentioned ('nominal' pseudo-authorities) and not mentioned ('implicit' pseudo-authorities).

Appeals to journalists' personal opinions are another way to enhance the image of both the vaccine and journalists themselves in the news coverage, for example:

15. *I got my first AstraZeneca shot. The only lasting effect has been a sense of relief. [. . .] I am very happy to have had the AstraZeneca vaccine* (Butler 2021).

16. *Why I Got the Russian Vaccine* (Kramer 2021).

As is evident from examples № 15 and 16, news stories containing journalists' personal experience of vaccination often serve as 'trustworthy' arguments in favor of the COVID-19 vaccines and are intended to engage the readers emotionally, making them trust journalists without any factual evidence. Thus, the image of journalists becomes a means of advertising the positive qualities of the vaccines. It is a way of disseminating online misinformation by replacing scientific evidence with personal opinions on the vaccine issues.

4.2. Identification with Pseudo-Statistics

It goes without saying that information is one of the most valuable resources in the modern world (Matrokhina et al. 2021). However, distinguishing 'information' from 'pseudo-information' has become a challenging task in the post-truth era, when facts are often confused with opinions and beliefs (González-Méijome 2017; Kim and de Zúñiga 2021). Lippmann ([1929] 2021) also reflected on the ways in which information is chosen in the media and organized to serve someone's interests. According to his theory, people are impressed by those facts which fit their philosophy. In other words, facts do not convince the audience if they are contrary to their views or stereotypes, which contributes to the spread of personal opinions and beliefs, as well as misinformation.

The findings of the study reveal that apart from providing scientific data, journalists frequently utilized references to statistical overgeneralizations or 'hasty generalizations', which suggests making conclusions without providing accurate factual evidence. Statements containing these pseudo-statistics were provided to reinforce journalists' arguments about the COVID-19 vaccines, for example:

17. *Many Russian liberals reflexively rejected the vaccine [Sputnik V] because of its association with the Kremlin* (Troianovski 2020a).

18. *Much of the world is looking to AstraZeneca in part because it has set more ambitious manufacturing targets than other Western vaccine makers* (Mueller and Robbins 2020).

19. *Much of Latin America has relied on the Chinese and Russian vaccines, and on AstraZeneca* (Nolen 2021).

20. *Several million pediatric doses of Pfizer-BioNTech's coronavirus vaccine should be available in the next few days* (LaFraniere 2021).

Examples № 17–20 illustrate statistical overgeneralizations either about the number of people who are either in favor or against the vaccines or about the amount of the vaccine supply. Quantifiers, which have a meaning of an unspecified large amount ('many', 'much', 'several', etc.), and collective nouns ('millions', 'thousands', etc.) are typical indicators of such pseudo-statistics. Using this vocabulary contributes to promoting (№ 18–20) or discrediting (№ 17) the vaccines and creates their distorted images. Notably, this kind of pseudo-scientific evidence is used not only as factual information but also as a means of emotional manipulation, since it lacks any accurate scientific data. Large numbers are aimed at increasing the emotionality of the arguments in the eyes of the newsreaders, which

is a way to manipulate public opinion. Examples № 17 and 18 demonstrate the political and economic reasons behind choosing or rejecting the vaccines, which indicates political framing of the vaccines and supports our research hypothesis about the political bias in both mainstream media.

The results of the study reveal frequent references to generalized statistics about the vaccine preferences of particular nations, for example:

21. *Polls are finding Americans increasingly wary of accepting a coronavirus vaccine [AstraZeneca] (Grady et al. 2020).*

22. *Many Chinese had also been hesitant to get the shots [of 'CoronaVac'], in part because of past scandals involving Chinese-made vaccines (Qin and Chang Chien 2021).*

23. *Mongolians have also expressed a preference for Russia's Sputnik vaccine (Stevenson 2021).*

Examples № 21–23 demonstrate journalists' overgeneralizations about the vaccine preferences of each nation, which lack any scientific evidence and data. The vaccine preferences are portrayed in terms of political interests of the corresponding country. The exact number of people 'for' (№ 23) or 'against' (№ 21 and 22) is not provided, which contributes to public opinion manipulation and creates either positive (№ 23) or negative (№ 21 and 22) vaccine images.

4.3. Identification with Stereotypes

The crucial role of stereotypes has been recognized by many scholars. Lippmann ([1929] 2021) first noticed the tendency of journalists to generalize about other people based on stereotypes or popular opinion. In the post-information society when information is transmitted and processed faster than a human thought (Vinogradova et al. 2020), the processes of perception of information have changed a lot. Using stereotypes simplifies our perception of the world and directs out attention towards particular information (Sherman 2022). Nevertheless, they can influence our decisions, create cognitive bias towards gender, nation, race, etc., and even lead to collective self-deception.

The results of the study indicate the presence of statements that contain metaphors and overgeneralizations about the vaccine-producing countries, which we referred to as the fallacy of stereotyping. Metaphors play a significant role in stereotype formation. They create new realities (Kövecses 2018), have the power to shape our perception of the world and can, to some extent, influence our actions (Carter 2021). In order to interpret metaphors and make inferences about their meaning, the context should be taken into account (Pushmina and Carter 2021). Recent studies (Lahlou and Rahim 2022; Teneva and Bykov 2023) have found that conceptual metaphors of war dominate vaccine discourse. The findings of the discourse analysis of the news stories show that war metaphors were very common in both papers. Journalists often referred to stereotypes related to the Soviet Union and the Cold War, for example:

24. *It is no accident that Russia has named its vaccine Sputnik V, harking back to the Soviet satellite sent into orbit in 1957 amid fierce competition with the US. For Russia, providing the first solution to a pandemic that has affected every corner of the world would be seen as a confirmation that the country's scientific brains are still among the world's best (Walker 2020).*

25. *Malte Thiessen, a historian of immunization, told German media that the vaccine was seen as a huge opportunity in Russia for it to polish up its image abroad. 'Just the name Sputnik is a first-class piece of propaganda,' he said. (Connolly 2021).*

According to Lippmann ([1929] 2021), we perceive reality through a 'stereotyped' vision. Mentioning the 'Sputnik V' vaccine in examples № 24 and 25 as a metaphorical reference to the stereotypes about the communist era and the Soviet Union may have a double meaning: as a negative symbol of Russia's propaganda and aggressive foreign policy and as a positive symbol of Russian medical breakthroughs in the vaccine race.

Example № 24 shows the stereotypes about Russia's first artificial earth satellite and the space race during the Cold War, which creates a positive image of Russia as the country in which 'scientific brains are still among the world's best', while in example № 25, the same stereotypes of the Soviet Union reflect negative attitudes and political bias towards the producing country of the vaccine, which is regarded as 'a first-class piece of propaganda'. Thus, this finding also supports the research hypothesis on the political bias in the vaccine coverage.

The findings reveal conceptualizations of the COVID-19 vaccines as 'weapons', for example:

26. *'Our Sputnik V is unpretentious and reliable, like the Kalashnikov rifle,' the state television host Dmitri Kiselyov said on his show month (Troianovski 2020b).*

27. *'I would not get AstraZeneca because that would be like playing Russian roulette.'* (Cohen 2021).

Gun-related metaphors contribute to either discrediting (№ 26) or enhancing (№ 27) the image of the vaccines and their producing countries. On the one hand, in example № 26 comparing 'Sputnik V' to the most famous Russian weapon, a Kalashnikov rifle, this evokes positive stereotypes of the Soviet Union and its reliable product, thus inclining the audience towards the idea of the safety and high quality of the Russian vaccine. On the other hand, this metaphor evokes negative stereotypes of Russia as a country that boasts its power and weapons and poses a threat to the rest of the world. In example № 27, the 'Oxford-AstraZeneca' vaccine is compared to a potentially lethal and dangerous game, which involves the use of a gun—'Russian roulette'. The feelings of fear and danger that are associated with this game are extended towards the British vaccine, creating its negative image. These findings confirm that metaphorical language is a powerful tool for manipulating public opinion (Van Dijk 1998).

The findings also show that stereotypes related to the quality of the national medicine were also widespread in the vaccine coverage, for instance:

28. *Russia has plenty of world-class scientists, and the Gamaleya Institute claims to have had a head start (Twigg 2020).*

29. *Anti-China sentiment runs high in Vietnam, but the country accepted a donation of 500,000 doses of Sinopharm in June, causing a backlash among citizens who said they did not trust the quality of Chinese shots (Wee and Lee Myers 2021).*

30. *Some doctors and activists have put forward proposals to increase the delivery worldwide of vaccines produced in the West. These calls are well-intentioned, but they, too, assume that vaccines from Western countries are the only ones worth having—and waiting for (Prabhala and Yoke Ling 2021).*

Examples № 28–30 illustrate positive and negative stereotypes about the quality of Russian, Chinese and Western medicine. This vaccine framing may have an unintentional effect, producing specific prejudice against the vaccine-producing countries. Thus, example № 28 contains exaggerations about the professionalism of Russian scientists. Emotionally charged vocabulary, including the word 'plenty' as a quantifier, which means 'a large quantity', and the adjective phrase 'world-class', which denotes 'being of the highest degree of excellence in the world', is intended to create a positive image of both the vaccine-producing country and its health experts. Example № 29 illustrates the political prejudice against the Chinese vaccine, where China is viewed as a culprit in the pandemic (Kim 2021), whereas in example № 30, the reference to 'implicit' experts ('some doctors and activists') reveals the journalist's own preference in favor of Western vaccines. The indefinite pronoun 'some' is used to hide the source of information. These exaggerations, prejudices and stereotypes contribute to public opinion manipulation in the vaccine coverage.

5. Conclusions

To summarize, this study aimed to consider the concept of digital pseudo-identification as a tool for manipulating public opinion concerning the COVID-19 vaccines and disseminating online misinformation. The findings of the study confirm that, apart from scientific data, the vaccine coverage of the two major British and American mainstream media sources contained information that was pseudo-scientific and mainly related to politics. This information was used by journalists unintentionally as ‘false’ arguments to support their claims about the vaccines, which supports the research hypothesis about the presence of logical fallacies in the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 vaccines. The computer-aided content analysis of the collected data revealed that the journalists of ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The New York Times’ used similar logical fallacies, including the opinions of pseudo-authorities and references to pseudo-statistics and stereotypes. Using these fallacies creates distorted images of the COVID-19 vaccines, which can manipulate public opinion and lead to false or invalid conclusions concerning the vaccines’ effectiveness, based on faulty logic, pseudo-scientific evidence or political bias. Thus, using logical fallacies in vaccine coverage poses a serious threat to the credibility of the media and science. Detecting these fallacies is a challenging task both for scientists and professional journalists, since they are often embedded in the rhetorical patterns that obscure the logical connections between statements. Therefore, the present research intends to help communications platforms, journalists and fact-checkers worldwide improve their classifications of ‘false’ information and detect logical fallacies in order to combat the spread of online misinformation about COVID-19.

Notably, the findings of the content analysis revealed discrepancies in the vaccine coverage: the articles from ‘The New York Times’ contained more logical fallacies than the articles of ‘The Guardian’, which means that ‘The New York Times’ is more vulnerable to online misinformation than ‘The Guardian’. The results also support the research hypothesis on the political bias in both papers, with relatively more positive coverage of domestic (European) vaccines than foreign (non-European) ones. Frequent mentions of famous political actors and institutions in relation to the COVID-19 vaccines were aimed at either promoting or discrediting the COVID-19 vaccines, which contributed to public opinion manipulation. These findings show that the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 vaccines is highly politicized, proving that ‘the propaganda model still works well’ (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008).

The results of the discourse analysis show similarity in the use of ideological language means by the journalists of both papers. These means include common nouns with a generic meaning of authority, collective nouns and quantifiers that denote large numbers, indefinite pronouns that do not refer to specific persons or things, and emotionally charged vocabulary. Expressive language means, such as gun-related metaphors, were used to induce negative feelings, such as skepticism and fear towards the vaccines, highlighting the idea that the vaccines were regarded as ‘weapons’ in the news reporting. Interestingly, the same stereotypes of the Soviet Union were used to show both positive (a reference to ‘a Kalashnikov rifle’) and negative attitudes (a reference to Soviet propaganda during the Cold War) towards the Russian vaccine in both media, which reveals the dual nature of stereotypes and their significant role in interpretation of the information (Lippmann [1929] 2021).

Overall, identification of logical fallacies helps understand how an argument may be incomplete or ‘false’ and develop critical thinking and media literacy skills that are necessary to combat online misinformation. Therefore, the present research opens up perspectives for further education on media literacy and misinformation detection. It also reveals a shift in modern journalism from evidence-based reporting to opinion-based reporting when personal opinions and beliefs have become more prevalent and ‘reliable’ than scientific evidence and facts, which confirms the relevance of the ideas of Walter Lippmann ([1929] 2021) in the post-truth era.

6. Limitations of the Study and Further Research

There are some significant limitations of the study and suggestions for future research. The findings of the study are not applicable to all vaccine news coverage and relate only to the two major mainstream media sources (The Guardian and The New York Times). Although the present research makes some effort to propose a new understanding of pseudo-identification as a type of fallacy that contributes to misinformation, we are aware that references to nonauthorities and nonstatistical descriptive reporting might be referred to the common business practices of media and television production during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we mentioned earlier in the paper, appeals to reason, authority and emotions can be regarded as a means of both persuasion and manipulation. Thus, to avoid any ambiguity in interpreting the qualitative data, references to pseudo-authorities, pseudo-statistics and stereotypes are considered as a means of manipulation through a lens of agenda setting theory, which explains how increasing the amount of coverage of both politicians, celebrities and other nonexperts in the vaccine coverage impacts positive or negative images of COVID-19 vaccines and manipulates public opinion. Logical fallacies may sound convincing, but they lack evidence that supports their claim, which is in line with previous studies (González-Méijome 2017; Dahlstrom 2021; DeLay 2021; Kim and de Zúñiga 2021; Kuchel and Rowland 2023) that considered personal testimonies, uncertain facts and stereotypes as pseudo-scientific information or logical fallacies which lack scientific evidence. Therefore, future research might consider ways to distinguish identification, which functions as a mechanism of persuasion from pseudo-identification as a tool for public opinion manipulation within a broader social and cultural context in humanities and social sciences.

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Article

Red Cross Presence and Prominence in Spanish Headlines during the First 100 Days of War in Ukraine

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Abstract: This research seeks to find out to what extent the Spanish press reflects the role played by the Red Cross during the first 100 days of the war in Ukraine. It aims to identify the main characteristics of the information in which the organization has taken a leading role in the press. The theoretical framework includes a literature review on the strategic relationship between the press and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the benefit of their reputation, as well as the role of the Red Cross in armed conflicts, and the link between the third sector and geopolitics. In order to examine how different media treated the Red Cross as the protagonist of the news, articles published in the written press that included “Red Cross” as keywords in the headline were selected through the Onclusive platform (formerly Kantar Media). The period of analysis covered the first 100 days of war in Ukraine, from 24 February to 3 June 2022. The methodology used was developed in two phases: the first based on content analysis, and the second focused on the description and interpretation of the informative development of the sample. The results reveal that the role of the Red Cross in the conflict is not the focus of media attention and that its name has become a lure for political communication, for social events or for the publicity of the more traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) of companies. We can say that the relationship between the Red Cross and the written press has not contributed to explaining or clearly expressing the institution’s task or mission in a war. This is why it can be deduced that the articles analyzed do not improve the brand value and its positioning among readers.

Keywords: communication; Red Cross; press; reputation; stakeholders; Ukraine; war



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1. Introduction

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, as well as the destruction of much essential infrastructure. The tragic situation forced parts of the Ukrainian population to leave their homes in search of safety, help and welfare (UNHCR 2022). During the first weeks of the Russian invasion, more than four million Ukrainian refugees (WHO 2022) were displaced to neighboring countries, resulting in a situation considered to be at the highest level of emergency (UNHCR 2022). In this context, many non-profit organizations deployed all their resources and went to the field to help, including the Red Cross¹ and Red Crescent, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross² (ICRC).

The onset of the conflict and the humanitarian situation were the focus of media coverage, and Spanish society’s interest in the implications was reflected in an increase in information consumption figures (ComScore 2022). In the face of social injustices, the public service function that defines journalism (Sánchez-García et al. 2015), as well as the media’s capacity to create currents of opinion, are essential to put social problems into the media spotlight and bring them to the attention of citizens (San Felipe and Mariño 2016). The Third Sector of Social Action Organizations (TSSAOs) perceive the media as essential channels for transmitting their messages and making the problems they face visible, as well

as a fundamental tool for creating social awareness (Castillo-Esparcia 2007; San Felipe and Mariño 2016; González-Cabrera 2017).

However, the relationship of NGOs with the press goes beyond awareness-raising. The relationship of non-profit organizations with the media is a strategic task so that the content generated also feeds brand value. “NGOs are aware that they must communicate their principles and actions, although they are not always able to express their values through their brand image” (Moriano 2023, p. 216). Under a new paradigm of managerial intelligence, humanitarian diplomacy is not at odds with corporate diplomacy. NGOs must be able to combine political, communication and digital strategies with their own social action, and at the same time, interact with authorities and administrations (Saz 2018).

In this context, the main objective of this research is to comprehend the presence and relevance of the Red Cross in the Spanish press during the first 100 days of the war in Ukraine. This article aims to uncover the situations of imbalance and/or inconsistencies that occur when the principles and identity values of the Red Cross, such as humanity, impartiality, neutrality or universality (CRE n.d.), are not perceived or manifested in the content of the articles and, moreover, represent a barrier in its press relationship that can influence the image that society perceives of the organization. Moreover, those situations can create a barrier between the Red Cross and the press which can negatively impact on the image that society has of the organization.

An organization such as the Red Cross faces the difficult balancing act of aligning its international strategic positions, its organizational structure, its mission and purpose, and its fundraising tactics with all its stakeholders. Accordingly, the first question that needs to be brought to the table is whether, when the Red Cross is at the center of the news, the content published about its activity *does* actually support and reaffirm its identity, or whether, on the contrary, it can produce certain inconsistencies. A possible lack of coherence may pose a moral hazard by not contributing positively to or even damaging the organization’s image and thus affecting its reputation.

Bearing this in mind, the current study intends to ascertain the presence and prominence given by the media to the Red Cross, as a protagonist of the news, at a time of international war when its mission is especially relevant.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Third Sector of Social Action and the Media

In order to understand the relationship between Third Sector of Social Action Organizations (TSSAOs) and the media, and their potential and limitations, we should focus our attention on the communication strategies carried out by these organizations. Above all, these organizations are oriented towards their purposes, which are mainly based on the defense of human rights, a community approach and mutual solidarity: in other words, those strategies that are characterized by focusing on the problems of the most disadvantaged in order to “make invisible people visible” (EAPN-ES and Plataforma del Voluntariado de España 2019, p. 66).

Research analyzing the relationship between human rights NGOs and the media shares a definition of the media “as key gatekeepers that decide, according to established news norms, which of the seemingly endless human rights issues can occupy a part of the news agenda” (Powers 2016; López 2020, p. 316). In other words, this research shows that the media are not only strategic allies of NGOs, but also become active mediators with the capacity to enable human rights complaints to circulate and resonate (López 2020).

According to López (2020), this mediation is analyzed from different perspectives: firstly, those who study how actors construct “the credibility” of the information and drama they report, favoring “conflict and spectacle” (Fenton 2010; Powers 2016; Waisbord 2011). A second perspective is from those who use the development of strategies of “narrative and reportage of pain” (Dogra 2014; Orgad 2013). A final perspective is from those who consider that information policy is shaped by organizations’ “media marketing strategies”,

i.e., the way in which certain NGOs position their “brand” in the media and legitimize their prestige (Bob 2005, 2010).

However, as a result of the progressive professionalization of TSSA, the organizational identity of NGOs and their management of intangibles imply relationships with the media that are far from those mentioned by López (2020) that are directly linked to the purpose of TSSA organizations.

NGOs are aware that their principles and actions must be communicated effectively (González-Cabrera 2017) to strengthen their connection to their stakeholders (Arévalo-Martínez and Ortiz 2018, p. 87) and even “invite and encourage them to become activists” (Almansa-Martínez et al. 2023, p. 353). According to González (2006) in (Gómez-Nieto et al. 2018), this task leaves behind the widespread and erroneous practice of providing journalists with dramatic and virulent images in order to maintain interest. On the other hand, it favors the creation of discourses that positively influence the ideas, values and behaviors of citizenship in terms of collective responsibility, solidarity and political awareness (Nos-Aldás 2019).

2.2. The Media as TSSA Stakeholders

From a corporate and public relations point of view, dialogue plays an important role in the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders. It is essential that TSSAOs “design a communication system capable of encouraging dialogic interaction, collective action and social participation” (Durán-Bravo 2023, p. 123). In this sense, the media have the capacity to shape opinion on certain issues, while providing users with the resources and arguments to encourage active participation (Castillo-Díaz and Castillo-Esparcia 2018). Thus, given their characteristics and potential, the media are considered a key stakeholder for many organizations (Castillo-Esparcia 2007; Capriotti 2012; Paricio et al. 2023).

The media have the capacity to give visibility to certain topics and issues that, regardless of their relevance, are positioned on the public agenda. Similarly, the amount of information that appears in the media about an organization also influences its visibility (Castillo-Esparcia 2007; Sales Piñeiro and Capriotti 2022). All of this is reflected in the public’s assessment of organizations and, furthermore, contributes to the configuration of their corporate reputation (Capriotti 2012). The media, therefore, become potential creators of any organization’s public reputation (Noelle-Neuman 1973; Sales Piñeiro and Capriotti 2022). In this way, the media, due to their capacity to influence audiences and the public agenda (Castillo-Esparcia 2007; Capriotti 2012), become participants in the formation of the corporate reputation of organizations (Capriotti 2012; Fombrun and Van Riel 2003).

Traditionally, the media have played a fundamental role as proven mobilizers of solidarity and, aware of their power of influence and credibility, TSSAOs have made the most of the opportunity to place and maintain their causes on the public agenda (Castillo-Esparcia 2007; Paricio et al. 2023). The media have contributed to determining the collective imaginary regarding NGOs, but for decades this relationship has only favored the communicative model described by Barbero as “media-centric, unidirectional and instrumental; subordinated to fundraising” (Barbero 2002; cited by Santolino 2010, p. 228).

The media have provided TSSAOs with press coverage realized in most cases through their presence in humanitarian disasters and investment in publicity linked to fundraising campaigns (Castillo-Esparcia 2007). This relationship has been determined by the erroneous identification of concepts such as publicity and communication, as well as by the lack of strategic communication plans that give way to the establishment of new dialogues (Pallarés-Renau 2021). For Moriano (2023), this situation is a clear reflection of the fact that “the brand identity management and the communication of intangibles are still incipient actions, and the planning of corporate reputation is not included in the strategic plans of NGOs” (Moriano 2023, p. 218).

The strategic point of view of communication implies that the selection of media by NGOs should be based on the identification of their stakeholders and not on the benefits associated with renown and visibility. An inadequate selection of the media can damage

the image of the organization, and its own social work, and even increase the risk of being exploited by the media (Araque and Montero 2006).

2.3. *The Role of Corporate Diplomacy in NGOs Operating in Armed Conflicts*

For Manfredi-Sánchez (2018), corporate diplomacy “is the instrumental development of the strategy of organizations in their relationship with public and private powers in the face of strategic changes. Its aim is the generation of trust, the enhancement of reputation and the management of political and social influence” (p. 202). According to Manfredi, “corporate diplomacy” helps to identify the axes of an organization’s strategy, as well as to determine how and why value is created there. In the author’s words, corporate diplomacy “lubricates the relationship between corporate values, mission, vision and goals” (Manfredi-Sánchez 2018, p. 111). L’Etang (2008) also links the activity of corporate diplomacy with public relations. He states that both “generate spaces for dialogue with stakeholders, give credibility to organizations and handle the tools of negotiation and conflict management” (p. 239).

In conflicts of war and geopolitical crises, the alignment of TSSAOs with the written press becomes an opportunity and a fundamental issue for the exercise of Humanitarian Diplomacy. In this sense, the Red Cross aims to combine and balance the strength of its brand to advocate for fair policies with strict compliance with neutrality in geopolitical conflicts, as reflected in Articles 4 and 5 of the Statutes of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC 2013). It is in this balance where communication and information relations become strategic levers for the ethical exercise of effective humanitarian diplomacy in terms of influence. It is worth noting that, in a war, “an NGO is, in essence, a diplomatic agent that must direct and execute international relations between countries, linking with various actors that have the capacity to act in the international arena” (Manfredi-Sánchez 2018, p. 53).

The essence of geopolitics is to assume the link between political events and their consequences in the space in which they occur. This implies understanding geopolitics as the link between political power and the physical (geographical) space that determines that power. From this understanding, the Red Cross and the ICRC become agents that participate in geopolitics in the territories in which they operate. Both exert a specific weight in geopolitical crises in the territories, as their activity is fundamental when international law or human rights are violated (ICRC 2014).

The continuous references to the places where the Red Cross operate, or to the geographical origin of the beneficiaries and/or users of this activity, reveal the international projection of this organization as an intrinsic attribute of its identity (Pallarés-Renau 2021). This circumstance reaffirms the fact that TSSAOs in general, and the Red Cross in particular, are considered powerful geopolitical agents in today’s global world.

Among the principles that provide an ethical, operational and institutional framework for the work of the International Red Cross Movement are neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity (CRE n.d.). These principles are aligned with the definition of the TS proposed by Merle (1986). This author defines TSSAOs as entities, associations or movements constituted on a lasting basis outside the action of governments.

In this context, an organization such as the Red Cross becomes an international catalyst that observes, verifies and calibrates, from neutrality, whether the bases of geopolitics are effective and balanced for the benefit of international law. This role is accentuated throughout war conflicts where the Red Cross follows the guidelines of the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC.

2.4. *The Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Role of the Press in Armed Conflicts*

Although the activity of an NGO is not born with a lobbying vocation, inevitably, associationism favors them (Maracuello and Maracuello 2000). Their existence and activity can generate a high degree of political influence. Their actions are indirectly aimed at

changing laws and policies that guarantee social cohesion. According to [Abril \(2018\)](#), the main political incidences that the TSSAOs can and should provoke are: emphasizing the absence of policies that are adequate to the reality in which they operate; denouncing unethical legal practices; and reporting the non-compliance or poor application of existing policies.

Thanks to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross assumes that humanitarian diplomacy, especially in armed conflicts, is exercised through communication with a wide range of stakeholders to whom the Committee explains its position on issues of humanitarian interest ([ICRC n.d.](#)). The organization is aware that there is a need to multiply the contacts necessary to raise awareness of the needs of those affected by armed conflict and situations of violence. With this in mind, alignment with the written press becomes an opportunity and a fundamental issue for the exercise of Humanitarian Diplomacy that moves away from military or political ends ([Rey 2022](#)).

Under this premise, the Red Cross, in particular, combines and balances the strength of its brand to influence fair policies, with the ironclad fulfilment of neutrality in geopolitical conflicts. Furthermore, it is in this balance where communication and information relations become strategic levers for the ethical exercise of effective humanitarian diplomacy in its influence.

The ICRC recognizes that the role of the written media, through editorials, reports and news, has been fundamental for its work to be understood in international conflicts as polarized as the peace process with the FARC in Colombia or the war in Syria ([Rey 2022](#)). There are two types of objectives for the communication strategies of this committee; the first refers to those established according to the circumstances of the different territories in the world, and the second refers to the major global concerns that threaten International Humanitarian Law such as nuclear weapons and the rise of non-state armed groups ([Rey 2022](#)).

The meeting point between the ICRC and the press lies in the ethical sense of verifying information; thus, once again, the Red Cross becomes a positive reputational shield that acts as a neutral information agency to corroborate or deny news ([Miquel-Segarra et al. 2021](#)). Another key aspect is the ICRC's respect for the different editorial lines of the international press, especially with regard to the diversity of cultures and religions in the world ([Rey 2022](#)). Without such respect for international diversity, humanitarian diplomacy could not develop. In this sense, it is important to remember that, after the universal ratification of International Humanitarian Law in the so-called "four Geneva Conventions", the Red Cross is the only non-governmental institution that plays an active and leading role in the signing of international treaties.

In order to set out the research objectives, it seems timely to ask whether knowledge of the relationship between the TSSAOs and the press can be used to determine the extent to which this relationship favors the NGO's purpose in the conflict, helps to build democracy and strengthens the geopolitical role of the NGO under study.

3. Objectives

The aim of this research is to check the extent to which the press reflects the role played by the Red Cross organization during the first 100 days of the war in Ukraine.

Our aim is to identify the main characteristics of the information in which the Red Cross has played a leading role in the Spanish press at the beginning of the war and to examine the treatment that the different media have given to this information.

In this sense, the following objectives are proposed:

- To identify the thematic axes in which the Red Cross appears linked to the war in Ukraine and to analyze the media in which the news articles were published.
- To analyze the information in order to verify the reasons why the Red Cross makes headlines. Specifically, several issues will be analyzed:
 - Themes of the news articles.
 - Focus and central idea of the news development.
 - Main actors and protagonists.

4. Materials and Methods

The methodology used to achieve the objectives set out above was developed in two phases. The first phase was based on content analysis, a technique that makes it possible to examine messages, identify specific aspects of the content of a text and quantify their frequency (Piñuel 2002).

The second phase involved the application of a qualitative methodology, whose essential objective is the description and interpretation of the qualities of any phenomenon of social relationships and cultural content, in the texts and discourses where they are being used, integrating them into a coherent and explanatory narrative in order to decipher the causes and consequences of the phenomenon (Fernández-Riquelme 2017).

In order to achieve “inferences about the sender and receivers, as well as the latent content or meaning of the message” (Colle 2011, p. 5), the technique of content analysis is used to try to “test or measure, first, to what degree a certain quality is found in a given event, and at the same time to discover as many qualities as possible to broaden the panorama of study” (Fernández-Riquelme 2017, p. 7).

4.1. Sample

For configuration of the sample, the news articles published in the written press that included “Red Cross” as keywords were selected. The selection was made through Onclusive (formerly Kantar Media) (source, media outlet, national press including Headline, AVE, Author, OJD). The period of analysis was set between 24 February 2022 and 3 June of the same year, coinciding with the first 100 days of the war in Ukraine. In total, 702 news reports were initially downloaded. After the elimination of duplicates, 677 were obtained from 61 media outlets. After analyzing the data, those publications in which only one or two articles appeared were excluded (n = 322). The result limits the sample to 355 news reports that were published in 13 media sources, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of news articles extracted from the main media.

Source/Media	Publications (n)
ABC	59
El Periódico de Catalunya	56
La Vanguardia	45
La Vanguardia Vivir	29
El País	43
El Periódico de España	32
La Razón	38
Pronto	15
Expansión	13
Sport	8
Mundo Deportivo	8
Acofar	4
La Razón Especial	3
Total	322

Source: Own elaboration.

Subsequently, only reports that included the words “Red Cross” in the headline were selected, reducing the number of articles analyzed in the qualitative phase to 32.

4.2. Procedure

In order to carry out this research, a content analysis was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1. Content analysis was carried out on the headlines of the 677 news reports that included the words “Red Cross” in the headline and/or body of the news item. All of these were coded according to two thematic axes.

Each of these axes included a series of terms drawn from the categorization of the core values of the Red Cross (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, universality, unity, independence and voluntary nature) and the area of action directly linked to the Ukrainian conflict, that of International Cooperation. Within this area, RC deals with humanitarian aid and development cooperation. The first of the axes identified was “solidarity”, and the words “aid”, “refugees” and “solidarity” were included in this axis. The second axis was categorized on the basis of the theme of “war”, and the words “Russia”, “Ukraine”, “war”, “conflict” and “soldiers” were included in the analysis.

Phase 2. In the second phase, news that included the keywords “Red Cross” in the headline were selected. These articles were analyzed in depth and a thematic content analysis was applied to their texts. From this point, the following units of observation were established: the subject of the headline (1); the analysis of the focus and central theme of the informative development (2); and, finally, the actors involved in the content of the information (3).

5. Results

5.1. Thematic Axes and Media Linking the Red Cross to the War in Ukraine

The first part of the analysis identified the thematic axes in which the Red Cross was linked to the conflict in Ukraine (Table 2). The first axis was “solidarity”, and the results revealed that 8 per cent of the texts referred to refugees, and only 4 per cent included the term “solidarity”. On the other hand, within the second axis, the term “war”, the most repeated keyword was “Ukraine”, at 19%, as opposed to “Russia”, at only 7%. It is worth noting that the keyword “aid” does not appear in any cases and the term “war” only appears in 6% of the news reports analyzed (n = 677).

Table 2. Thematic axes of the news articles published in the press that contain the term Red Cross.

Themes	Terms	n	%
Solidarity	refugees	51	8%
	solidarity	30	4%
	aid	0	0%
	Total	81	12%
War	Russia	46	7%
	Ukraine	126	19%
	war	38	6%
	conflict	0	0%
	soldiers	3	0%
	Total	213	31%
Publications		677	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

On the other hand, as can be seen in Table 3, when we analyze the thematic axis “solidarity”, the main media sources that most frequently refer to the term “refugees” are La Vanguardia and El Periódico de Catalunya, both general daily press and from the same geographical coverage, Catalonia.

Table 3. Main media that include the keyword “refugees” in their news.

Source/Media	Refugees	% s/Ref.	% Ref. s/Total
La Vanguardia	12	23.5%	1.8%
El Periódico de Catalunya	8	15.7%	1.2%
El Periódico de España	4	7.8%	0.6%
La Razón	5	9.8%	0.7%
El País	3	5.9%	0.4%
ABC	3	5.9%	0.4%
Total	35	69%	5%

Source: Own elaboration.

These media sources include 69% of the appearances of the term “refugees”, although they represent only 7.5% of the articles in the sample (n = 677).

On the other hand, as shown in Table 4, the term “solidarity” appears in only 4% of the reports. The frequency is very low and is centered on the following newspapers: ABC, La Razón and La Vanguardia.

Table 4. Main media sources that include the keyword “solidarity” in their news.

Source/Media	Solidarity	% s/Solid.	% Solid. s/Total
ABC	4	13.33%	0.59%
La Razón	4	13.33%	0.59%
La Vanguardia	3	10.00%	0.45%
Mundo Deportivo	2	6.67%	0.30%
El Periódico de Catalunya	2	6.67%	0.30%
Sport	2	6.67%	0.30%
El Economista	2	6.67%	0.30%
Total	19	56.67%	2.52%

These media include 63.4% of the appearances of the keyword “solidarity”. However, they account for no more than 2.8% of the total. In other words, only 2.8% of the news reports include Red Cross and solidarity in the headline.

When analyzing the terms of the thematic axis of “war”, we observe that the most used term is “Ukraine”, with a total of 126 appearances. In second place comes “Russia” with 46 appearances and, finally, the term “war”, which, as mentioned above, only appears on 38 occasions.

If we analyze the publications in which the terms of the thematic axis “war” appear the most, we observe that El Periódico de Cataluña, ABC and La Vanguardia together with El País, that is to say, the main national and Catalan media, are the newspapers that offer the larger coverage of news related to the Red Cross (Figure 1).

From these results, we can say that, when the Red Cross is mentioned in any of the articles in the sample, terms related to the purpose and/or actions of the organization are very infrequently used by the main media in the country. Even with very low numbers, the focus is on a group of people affected by the conflict and the main beneficiaries of the Red Cross—the refugees. On the other hand, it is noticeable that the term “Ukraine” is the focus of much of the news referring to the war or conflict. Moreover, media coverage is very low. The national general and daily press is predominant, but the Catalan media sources stand out above all for being the ones that most frequently deal with the cases analyzed.

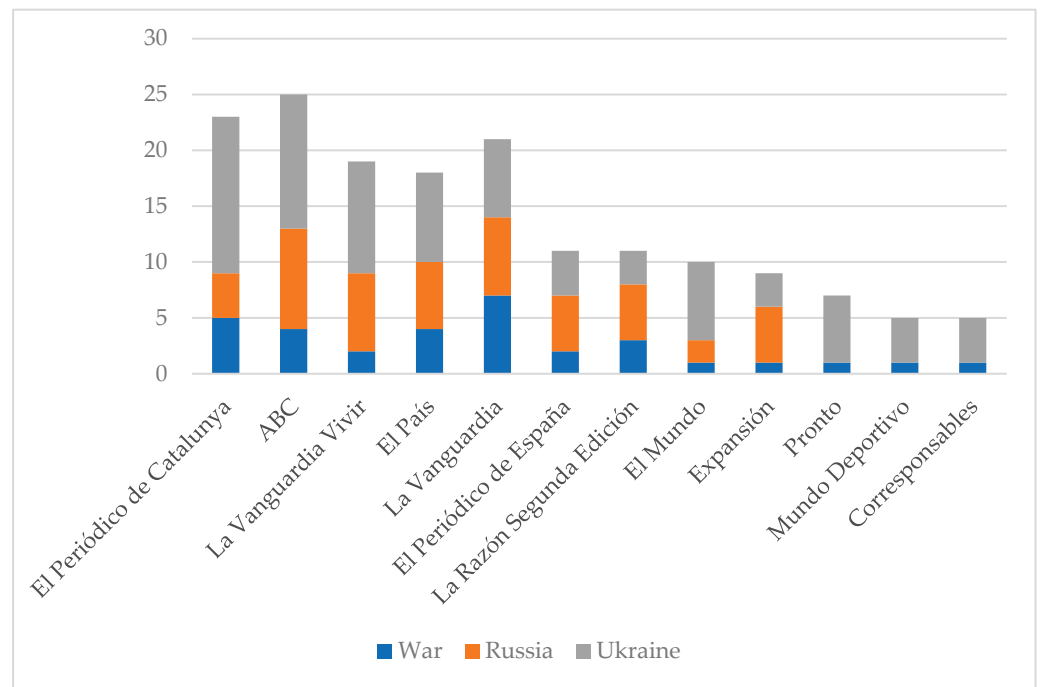


Figure 1. Appearances of the key terms of the thematic axis “war” in the different headlines. Source: Own elaboration.

5.2. Reasons Why the Red Cross Makes Headlines

5.2.1. Subject Matter

After an in-depth review of the 32 news reports in which the Red Cross appears in the headlines, a thematic categorization of the content was carried out, which resulted in four main thematic categories that are summarized and described in Table 5.

Table 5. Main categories detected to characterize the units of analysis.

Themes	Description	n
Collaborations and awards	The signing of agreements between the Red Cross and other entities (TSAS organizations, governments, private companies. . .) stand out.	13
Recognitions and celebrations	They refer to galas and anniversaries of the Red Cross, as well as projects or programs of the organization.	3
Conflict in Ukraine	They allude explicitly to the conflict of the Ukraine–Russia war.	14
Others	They provide general attention to the state of the Third Sector of Social Action and the work of the Red Cross.	2

Source: Own elaboration.

Of the 32 texts in which the Red Cross appears in the headline, we observe that almost half of the articles (14) refer to the Ukrainian conflict. Half of them include the term “Ukraine” or “Ukrainian”, and in the other half, the term “refugee” appears explicitly or includes references to aspects related to their reception and evacuation. In addition, it is noteworthy that among the 14 news reports that refer to the Ukrainian conflict, two refer to negative issues in which the organization has been involved. One of them refers to the attempted kidnapping by individuals falsely claiming to be members of the Red Cross and the other to the boycott that the organization has suffered from the Ukrainian government’s related media. Additionally, the visit of the King and Queen of Spain to the cells set up

by the Red Cross also takes on a certain prominence in the news, occupying four of the headlines.

The topic categorized as collaborations or awards includes thirteen texts, although only three of them refer to Ukraine as the destination of the funds or aid.

On the other hand, there are three texts that refer to the celebration of galas to award or receive recognition from the Red Cross, as well as to highlight milestones or anniversaries of the organization's projects or programs.

Finally, two other news sources deal in a general way with the state of the TSSAOs and the general work of the Red Cross.

Despite dealing with the first 100 days of war, the headlines in which the Red Cross is alluded to and linked to the war do not reach even 50% of the cases analyzed. It is evident that the role of the Red Cross in the conflict is not the focus of attention. In this period, a similar level of information is maintained with regard to the signing of agreements between the Red Cross and other entities.

5.2.2. Focus and Central Idea of the Informative Development—Body of Text

The categorization of the informative focus and development allows us to identify five aspects (Table 6) that, to a greater or lesser extent, influence and define the development of the Red Cross as an organization.

Table 6. Approaches from which the news item is developed.

Approach	Central Idea of Informative Development	n
Action	Information associated with the organization's programs and lines of action.	16
Financing	Information related to obtaining monetary resources and their destination by the organization.	7
Donation	Information related to obtaining resources in kind and their destination by the organization.	2
Communication	Information related to milestones of the organization, and recognitions obtained and granted by it.	6
Promotion	Campaign associated with a specific product or activity.	2

Source: Own elaboration.

Actions, funding and donations occupy the informative development of 23 of the news items analyzed. In 14 texts, the predominant focus is on the organization's lines of action. In ten of them, the focus is on work associated with the armed conflict (humanitarian aid, protection, shelter, denunciation, etc.); two of them highlight the awarding of the contract to the Red Cross for the management of the suicide hotline in Spain and, therefore, for prevention and mental health; one refers to a collaboration agreement for the benefit of training and environmental improvement; and another focuses on collaboration to reduce food waste.

In two texts, the main idea focuses on donations: one concerns the work of the Red Cross during the COVID-19 pandemic and the other on the La Palma volcanic eruption. Additionally, in the case of funding, the information reveals how the organization obtains monetary resources: of the seven news items, one of them deals with the percentage that the Red Cross absorbs in the sector and the rest of the information specifies the origin, amount and destination of these resources. Interestingly, only three of the seven texts include aid to the Ukrainian conflict as a destination of the funds.

It is worth noting that, in two news articles, action is combined with funding and donation. Equal informative weight is given to clarifying the source of donations and to developing the line of action through which the Red Cross will distribute both funds and in-kind donations.

Generally associated with celebratory or collaborative headlines, eight of the texts show a focus closely linked to publicity. Six of them respond to the media impact of the celebrations and the attendance of celebrities, reinforcing public visibility with information generated by the Red Cross for communication in the media. Additionally, two of the news reports have a clearly promotional focus, associating the collaboration of the Red Cross, in this case with shopping centers and communication consultancies, for the organization of the Gold Draw.

5.2.3. Stakeholders Involved

Finally, after analyzing the actors included in the information, there are six groups that are mainly identified as the main subjects, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Actors involved in the information content.

Groups	Definition	n
Red Cross	Red Cross, referring to the organization Red Cross and Red Crescent, referring to movement Red Cross + territory to refer to the delegations	9
CICR	ICRC, International Committee of the Red Cross. Its mission is exclusively humanitarian (to protect and assist victims of war and internal violence).	2
Government and authorities	Political representatives and the head of state. State security bodies and forces.	5
TSAS sector	Set of entities that dedicate their activity to assisting and helping unprotected groups.	2
Partners	Partners, donors and collaborators for the development of Red Cross initiatives and activities.	12
Collective beneficiaries	Those affected by the causes in which the organization intervenes and to whom it allocates its support.	2

Source: Own elaboration.

The nine texts that place the Red Cross at the center of the news do so for a variety of reasons. Four of them reflect the organization's aid to Ukraine, one refers to the development of the organization's activity in Spain during its anniversary, another praises the work of a hospital unit managed by the Red Cross in Spain and two refer to the specific action in Catalonia.

It should be noted that Catalonia is the only autonomous community to receive a specific mention in the headlines (2). In them, reference is made to its activity in hosting refugees. The ICRC appears in two news items, both linked to the controversy raised by Peter Maurer's meeting with Russian leaders. In both cases, it is *El Periódico de Catalunya* and *La Vanguardia* that place special emphasis on the ICRC's territoriality and role.

In one of them, the appearance of the Red Cross in the headline serves as a lure, but the informative development focuses on the state and evolution of the TSSAOs, and in the other, despite awarding the Red Cross prize, the news focuses on the work of the prize-winning foundation and the importance of this for the sector.

Interestingly, five of the headlines incorporating the term "Red Cross" allude to the monarchy. The support and recognition of the Red Cross' work with refugees given by the King and Queen occupies four headlines, and praise from the Queen occupies one headline. In addition, in two of the four news items reporting on the visit of the King and Queen of Spain to the cells set up by the Red Cross, the King and Queen and/or the authorities become the main subjects of the information ahead of the work carried out by the organization in Ukraine.

Despite the fact that their assistance is the *raison d'être* of the Red Cross, the beneficiaries of such assistance occupy the one role only in the development of two news items.

Therefore, responding to our aim to discover the reasons why the Red Cross makes the headlines, we found that the Ukrainian conflict shares the limelight with information related to RC collaborations and awards. On the other hand, we find that half of the texts focus on the organization's lines of action and include information related to its programs, while, to a lesser extent, questions about the organization's funding are addressed.

Finally, as far as the main actors in the news are concerned, the Red Cross is presented as a lever to promote the leading role of government initiatives, the commitment of the monarchy to its work or the involvement of companies with the civil society through CSR actions. It is worth noting that, although the ICRC's role in armed conflicts is decisive, it does not play a central role in the Spanish press. Reference to the ICRC is testimonial and only appears when its intermediary management is questioned.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Despite the fact that the Red Cross is very active in the war in Ukraine, the Spanish written press has not devoted much news coverage to the Red Cross brand or to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the news items analyzed. When these have been mentioned in the headlines, the news does not focus on the direct interests of the NGOs in question. [Moriano's \(2023\)](#) assertion that NGOs are not always able to convey their brand values seems to be true. It is evident that the Red Cross is, literally, a "good" claim in politics, in events, in more traditional marketing and in the CSR of companies. In addition, the results confirm a high content of articles referring to fundraising ([Castillo-Esparcia 2007](#)).

As an answer to the research question that motivated this paper, we can say that the relationship between the Red Cross and the written press has been, in terms of reputation, not very favorable for the organization. This relationship has not served to explain the work of the institution in a war, nor to emphasize its differential values or those of the ICRC. Although authors such as [Castillo-Esparcia \(2007\)](#), [San Felipe and Mariño \(2016\)](#) and [González-Cabrera \(2017\)](#) consider the media to be an essential and indispensable audience for transmitting the work of these organizations, this potential has not been exploited. When we see that their role in the war in Ukraine does not even reach 50% of the information and that most of the content is linked to the national government, the monarchy, companies and events, the possible risk that the information analyzed generates a cliché of the Red Cross that does not correspond to reality is worth highlighting. In that vein, this is a missed opportunity for the Red Cross, as the basic positive incidences of NGOs do not appear in the mass media. In this sense, the influence on the absence of policies in conflict territories, on unethical legal practices or on non-compliance with laws is not reflected ([Abril 2018](#)).

The international Red Cross must understand that its work is criticized for not explaining effectively, and even creatively, the need to comply with the principle of impartiality (one of its main identity values) when trying to meet both the needs and demands of the Ukrainian Red Cross (in the face of the humanitarian corridors, for example) and the request for help (from the families of Russian soldiers, as another example) by the Russian Red Cross. The media and journalists should be strategic allies and active mediators, as [López \(2020\)](#) points out, and encourage correct explanations of how the Red Cross acts in these seemingly contradictory situations, always with a compass of impartiality and outside of any political agenda.

Perhaps an excessive sense of confidentiality as part of the corporate culture of the Red Cross brand, and especially of the ICRC, clashes head-on with journalistic and political reality. In the words of [Rey \(2022\)](#), "there is a stubborn reality that forces us to observe how other international actors instrumentalize our work by not communicating our actions and our positioning in conflicts".

Both neutrality and independence are key to carrying out its important relief work. However, this important independent and neutral role, which leads the organization to abstain from taking part in hostilities and political, racial, religious and ideological

controversies, is diluted in the Spanish media. The relief and assistance offered by the Red Cross in the Ukrainian conflict share headlines with celebrations and awards, rather than being projected as a central part of the work of the Red Cross. This is a fact that could be attributed to the information policies marked by the media marketing strategies defined by Bob (2005, 2010).

We observe how geopolitics necessarily involves a cascade of communication decisions that, if not planned and foreseen in advance, can disrupt the development of the decisions taken. What may be a solution for one territory may be perceived as a threat in another, and this issue can only be solved by strategic planning of the communication of that solution. The conflict in Ukraine is the perfect example of the global tension between various affected territories beyond the Ukraine–Russia tandem; any Red Cross decision taken in the Ukrainian war must be measured and planned in terms of communication and perception in other parts of the world.

We conclude by setting out possible challenges for the future of international Red Cross communication, such as:

- Trying to counteract disinformation in the face of delegitimization campaigns that may even come from governments' own political agendas, and monitor and deal with fake news with technical and technological capacity. The Red Cross monitors the impact of its media appearances through specialized consultancies, and the interpretation of this monitoring should lead to the generation of more strategic, transmedia and creative content that would combat the influence of fake or distorted news.
- Better managing the transition from a culture anchored in the confidentiality of the action, to a new management of the transparency of that action from humanitarian and corporate diplomacy, so as not to run the risk of a negative moral impact on the recipients of news that use the name of the Red Cross in an imprecise, diluted way or that is distant from the exact purpose and concrete activity of the organization.
- Rethinking the role that the ICRC has and takes in communicating the laws of war. The citizenship is unaware that there is international legislation on armed conflict with which countries must comply and which directly affects the safeguarding of international humanitarian law.
- To curb the polarization of public opinion in the face of conflicts in order to ensure that neutrality prevails in the interpretations of interest groups, and communicating the Red Cross identity as a movement that wants to reclaim new generations that currently have no Red Cross presence.

The great communication challenge in the Ukrainian war for the Red Cross brand lies in taking communication risks, and to postulate itself without shyness as the great defender of International Humanitarian Law, seeking a communication system that encourages dialogue and positively influences social participation and political awareness following the precepts of Durán-Bravo (2023) and Nos-Aldás (2019). The Red Cross must be aware of the political weight of Eastern countries such as Russia and China in the world in the midst of the battle to manage the influence of global geopolitics. To this end, it is necessary to combine informative relations with high humanitarian diplomacy of the governments involved.

The ICRC, and thus the Red Cross brand, does not communicate its activity, value and influence in the conflicts in which it operates (such as the war in Ukraine) with sufficient power and "pride". This leads to the assumption that, in conflicts that threaten democracy, the worst failure is the expulsion of the organization by a government, leaving the victims stranded.

Limitations. The first limitation of this research is the size of the sample, limited to the first months of the conflict and with an in-depth analysis only of the articles in which the Red Cross appears in the headlines. It would be interesting to analyze in detail the context in which the Red Cross is referred to in the remainder of the news stories.

Secondly, it would be useful to discern from the sample which headlines come from Red Cross media relations (publicity), which headlines are the direct work of war correspon-

dents or news agencies, and which headlines refer to opinion articles. These data would broaden the conclusions and enrich the discussion on the performance and improvement of the Red Cross' relationship with the media, which could be a future line of research.

Nobody doubts that, since the origin of the communication strategies of TSSAOs in defense of their purposes, there has been a close link between NGOs and the media. However, the current reality, full of technological advances that enable bidirectionality and interaction, makes it necessary to broaden the focus of the research to media and social networks.

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Notes

- ¹ The Spanish Red Cross is a centenary NGO of Swiss origin founded by Henry Dunant that defines itself as a “world humanitarian movement”. In Spain, the Red Cross began in the 18th century with the Count of Ripalda, Joaquín Agulló, and it was in 1970 when the Red Cross extended its scope of aid beyond war conflicts. It belongs to the entities of the Third Sector of Social Action, and in Spain it is one of the most recognized NGOs according to the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (*Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo*). The Red Cross is currently organized around the world through “National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies” located in different countries.
- ² The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), founded in 1863, works around the world to provide humanitarian aid to people affected by conflict and armed violence, to try to protect their lives and dignity, to assist them and to promote laws protecting victims of war. It acts to respond to emergencies while promoting respect for international humanitarian law and its implementation in national legislation. It is an independent and neutral institution whose mandate derives from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It is based in Geneva, Switzerland. It employs 20,000 staff in 100 countries and is funded by donations from governments and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

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Article

Disinformation and Sexual and Gender Diversity in Spain: Twitter Users' Response, and the Perception of LGBTQI+ Organisations

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Abstract: Increased disinformation has been able to flourish in the digital environment. Much of the fake news that circulate social networks is directed against vulnerable groups, such as the LGBTQI+ community. These contents often include hate speech, which has recently experienced a notable increase in Spain. Based on a quantitative and qualitative methodology, the purpose of this research study was, first, to explore the social audience's reaction to four pieces of pseudo-information against LGBTQI+ people posted on Twitter by *Mediterráneo Digital* between 2018 and 2020, to determine the extent to which this content was considered true or rejected by users of this social network through their comments (N = 596). The four selected publications were considered fake news by recognised verification platforms. Secondly, in addition to the above analysis, six in-depth interviews were carried out with representatives of Spanish LGBTQI+ organisations to explore their perception of this situation and how they addressed disinformation. The results indicated that a high percentage of the responses posted on Twitter consider disinformation against this social group to be true, although a significant proportion of comments also intervened in the conversation to reject these messages. Activists believed pseudo-media (websites that try to imitate conventional news sites but do not respect the diligence and principles of journalism), and social networks are largely responsible for the increase in disinformation, and considered the production of truthful information, educational actions, and collaboration with other groups to be successful strategies in combating disinformation.

Keywords: disinformation; LGBTQI+; Twitter; LGBTQI+ organisations; hate speech; social audience; activism; pseudo-media



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1. Introduction

Spain is a benchmark country in terms of social acceptance and recognition of the rights of the LGBTQI+ community, as reflected in various surveys (Adamczyk and Liao 2019; Córdoba 2021). The 2019 Special Barometer on Discrimination in the European Union showed that 91% of the Spanish population agreed that gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, ranking behind only Sweden and the Netherlands. The same poll revealed that 83% of Spanish citizens believed that trans people should be able to change their documentation to adapt it to their gender identity, the highest percentage in the entire European Union. Likewise, 63% agreed that public documents should include a third box in the gender category for non-binary people, while the European Union average was 46% (European Commission 2019). Another study carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2020 in 34 countries around the world indicated that 89% of Spaniards believed that homosexuality should be accepted by society, a percentage that, again, was only surpassed by Sweden and the Netherlands (Pousher and Kent 2020).

One year later, in 2021, an Ipsos survey in 27 countries found that Spain—more than any other country—supports the idea that LGBT people should openly show their sexual orientation or gender identity around other people: 73% of Spaniards agreed, well above

the global average of 51%. Once again putting Spain in first place, 64% of Spanish people believe that LGBT people should be able to show their affection in public, compared to 37% of those in other countries around the world (Ipsos 2021). That same year, YouGov published another study stating that 91% of the Spanish population would support their child, sibling or a close relative if they declared themselves gay or bisexual, the highest percentage in the eight countries surveyed, and 87% would support them if they had a transgender or non-binary identity (Nolsoe 2021). More recently, a survey carried out by 40dB for the newspaper *El País* and Cadena Ser indicated that 56% of the Spanish population favourably valued the new Equality Law promoted by the Coalition Government for trans and LGBTI people, ensuring their rights (Hermida 2022).

However, these positive data on Spanish society's support for sexual and gender diversity contrast the figures for hate crimes and hate speech directed against the LGBTQI+ community. The Ministry of Home Affairs has been carrying out an official annual record of these events since 2015. The latest report released, relating to 2021, indicates that hate crimes committed due to the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity were the second most common in Spain, with a total of 466 registered events, and were only surpassed by those related to cases of racism and xenophobia (Ministry of Home Affairs 2022). They represented 25.86% of all hate crimes and incidents that the Government was aware of; a 68.23% increase of the previous year's data. If we look only at hate crimes committed on the internet and social networks, the increase in those directed towards the LGBTQI+ community was 87.50% in just one year, totalling 60 new events, according to data from the Ministry. Hate speech against LGBTQI+ people is, thus, a growing problem in Spain. These data, therefore, remind us that although there has been progress in the social and legal rights of LGBTQI+ people in Spain in recent decades, discrimination against this group is not a thing of the past and it is still present in the work, education and social spheres, among others, such that there is still a long way to go until real equality is achieved for this social group (Córdoba 2021). This challenge is even greater in a polarised environment (Masip et al. 2020) that sees much disinformation (Sádaba and Salaverría 2022) directed towards social minorities (Wright and Duong 2021). The fusing of these two phenomena is a clear risk in maintaining the pillars of democratic societies (Bennett and Livingston 2018; McKay and Tenove 2021).

The objective of the research was twofold. On one hand, to explore the social audience's reaction on Twitter to pseudo-news about LGBTQI+ people and to measure to what extent their response translated into hate speech. On the other hand, to analyse the way in which the organisations that work for the rights of this vulnerable group perceived and addressed the problem of disinformation about this social minority.

1.1. The Rise of Disinformation through Social Networks and Its Social Impact

The phenomenon of disinformation is not a problem that has emerged from the new and currently existing communication dynamics. False content, whose purpose is to confuse and manipulate public opinion, has existed since the beginning of public life (Valero and Oliveira 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018). However, the current technological environment has made it easier than ever to spread these messages and the intervention of artificial intelligence in their production (Gómez-de-Ágreda et al. 2021), their international reach (Gutiérrez-Coba et al. 2020; Sánchez-Duarte and Rosa 2020) and their consumption through echo chambers (Törnberg 2018; Rhodes 2022) ensure they have a highly influential impact on citizens. The current hybrid communications ecosystem (Chadwick 2013), with the fragmentation of audiences and the democratisation of the content production process, has favoured the intensification of the problem of disinformation. This is a concept preferable to that of fake news (Levi 2019; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2019), which the European Commission defines as any form of false, inaccurate or misleading information that has a clear purpose "to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Commission 2018, p. 10).

This definition is key, since the disinformation that has clearly experienced significant growth in recent years is not the sort that inadvertently fails to correlate with reality, but

rather the sort that is designed with the obvious objective of achieving a specific purpose. Thus, along with the current technological possibilities and the credibility crisis affecting the mainstream media (Lee 2018), there are two other decisive elements that can help us understand the rise of disinformation: first, the rise of populism (Fawzi 2019) and current political polarisation (Gaultney et al. 2022); and second, the manufacturing of content that is profitable and can be consumed over the internet (Cooke 2017; Taylor et al. 2020) with a simple click of the mouse. Politics and economics are, therefore, the two key factors to understanding the appearance of websites dedicated to propagating hoaxes and conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019).

The current digital infrastructure is the best ally to this political–economic context, which uses it to alter the traditional communication ecosystem and move towards a digital public sphere characterised by disintermediation (Salaverría and León 2022). In this new public sphere, the mainstream media no longer play the role of the reliable interpreters of reality that they used to play for such a long time; instead, it is where information and data circulate without an interpretative framework (Masip et al. 2019). It is the internet—and particularly social networks—that now determines the guidelines of the public debate, notably affected by the fake news that circulates and goes viral on it. In fact, social networks are an essential element in understanding how disinformation content is produced, proliferated, and disseminated (Tandoc et al. 2018; Shu et al. 2017) to the point that, as if it were an epidemic, these platforms use social contacts to spread these messages, in a clear analogy to viral infections (Strand and Svensson 2019).

Social networks have placed users at the centre of the communications process. On one hand, digital communication technologies have decentralised the power to produce, publish, and distribute content (Kalsnes 2018), which facilitates the proliferation of message networks without any source of trust (Hasen 2013). On the other hand, regarding consumption, social networks are currently some of the main sources of information for citizens (Gottfried and Shearer 2016; Newman et al. 2021), which makes it easier for the falsehood and lack of verification of some content to go unnoticed by users, who assume that the messages received in their personal networks are true (Eger et al. 2020).

According to a December 2022 survey conducted by the *Pew Research Center* with citizens from 19 countries with advanced economies, the decentralisation of the communications process favoured by social networks is viewed positively by the majority of society; 57% of the individuals consulted believe that these platforms are a positive contribution to democracies. However, the study also presents results that qualify this perception. For example, “a median of 84% across the 19 countries surveyed believe access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors” (Pew Research Center 2022, p. 6); furthermore, “the internet and social media are generally seen as disruptive, with a median of 65% saying that people are now more divided in their political opinions” (Ibid., p. 17). The percentages are somewhat higher in the case of Spain, where 85% and 66%, respectively, of the population support those statements, which shows the public’s concern about the impact of social networks on disinformation and political polarisation.

However, the problem of disinformation is not exclusive to political issues, electoral campaigns or international relations, it also poses a threat to the protection of human rights from a global perspective to the extent that it can give rise to the dissemination of false narratives about minority and vulnerable groups. Through their dehumanisation, these messages seek to deny members of these groups their very citizenship and full rights. As pointed out by Grambo (2018, p. 1299), “from merely biased coverage to utter fabrications, a wide variety of disinformation packaged as ‘news’, has impacted religious, ethnic, and racial groups”; for example, in the US, where these social minorities have been affected by the growing polarisation affecting the country. Fake news impact minority groups, confirm stereotypes, validate prejudices, and promote discrimination towards these communities and division in society (Wright and Duong 2021). The way in which disinformation during the COVID-19 crisis pointed to the Asian, Muslim or Jewish communities as responsible for the

spread of the virus in different regions is a clear example of how lies were put at the service of xenophobia and antisemitism in the context of an infodemic (Doncel Martín 2021).

The circulation of these types of messages can have serious consequences in the way in which minorities are perceived and treated by the rest of the population. Believing fake news and distrusting the conventional media is a clear predictor of holding prejudiced views towards minority groups as they foster feelings of threat and anxiety (Wright and Duong 2021). It even happens when people know how to recognise disinformation, “We may reject the content of these claims, but nevertheless prime ourselves to respond fearfully to members of the minority group. Repeated exposure may result in the formation of implicit biases, which are themselves ground-level representations” (Levy 2017, p. 32). Among other social minorities, LGBTQI+ people have traditionally been victims of fake news, being accused of championing a clandestine agenda that aims to destabilise countries and societies (Strand and Svensson 2019).

1.2. Hoaxes about LGBTQI+ People, Disinformation and Hate Speech

Despite there having been continuous disinformation and hoaxes about the LGBTQI+ community for decades, the number of messages about this population has increased significantly in recent years. On occasion, this type of discourse emerges from political far-right populists, who have found that attacking these people reinforces their ideological and moral positions, and builds a certain “sexual panic” that helps them legitimise certain forms of government and exercise social control. An example of this would be the former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, who in his electoral campaign accused an educational programme called *Escola sem homofobia* (schools without homophobia) (which he called “gay kits”) of being an instrument for the “deviant” sexual indoctrination of minors (Osuna and Soforza 2019). Messages of this type have also circulated in countries such as the US and Poland (Rosińska 2021).

Disinformation about LGBTQI+ people has a greater diffusion capacity the more it resonates in a given sociocultural context and its dominant values (Lelo and Caminhas 2021). An example of this is what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions such as the United Nations (2020) and organisations such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA 2021) identified and denounced discriminatory discourse against the LGBTQI+ population, which was used as a scapegoat when it was accused, without any foundation, of being responsible for the spread of the disease in countries in Africa and Central Asia, although similar messages also circulated in Europe and the United States. In South Korea, for example, the media were complicit in the dissemination of messages that associated, without any type of proof, the COVID-19 infectious disease with non-normative sexual orientations, which risked the stigmatisation of the group (Amnesty International 2021). A similar phenomenon occurred with the appearance of the first cases of monkeypox in Spain in May 2022, when various pseudo-news items tried to associate the disease with gay men, establishing a link that favoured the double stigmatisation of the group (Carratalá 2023).

The discriminatory and stigmatising attitude that is often observed in certain discourses of the ‘information disorder’ (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) characterises hate speech as another expression of disinformation. In fact, both share very clear distinctive elements, such as the use of stereotypes, prejudices, dehumanising strategies and the absence of empirical evidence and expert knowledge (Hameleers et al. 2022). As Kyaw (2021, p. 98) notes, “hate speech and fake news have a symbiotic relationship in creating effective and lasting disinformation narratives”. Therefore, although initial classifications suggested considering hate speech “mal-information” when interpreting it as messages based on reality (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), it is clear that fake news seeks to stigmatise and discriminate against vulnerable social groups (Segura 2021). Thus, these expressions correspond to “the more pernicious and deliberately manufactured use of fake news to target specific individuals or minorities based on race or religion sow confusion, and/or incite conflict” (Marston 2022).

The [Council of Europe \(1997\)](#) defined hate speech as messages that “spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”. It is speech whose language is manifestly pejorative and discriminatory, directed at a person or group simply because of who they are ([United Nations 2019](#)). As with any type of disinformation content, hate speech has also found a space for its online dissemination due to the anonymity and speed that the internet facilitates, among other reasons. Thus, hate speech posted online is more tolerated and more complicated to control than hate speech expressed in physical spaces ([Keen and Georgescu 2020](#)). Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram or Facebook have proven to be forums that allow these messages to circulate freely, often without control and with impunity, “hate speech has alarmingly permeated our society and social media have become the most suitable means of propagation” ([Arcila-Calderón et al. 2022](#)).

The data recorded by the [Ministry of Home Affairs \(2022\)](#) confirm the role of digital channels in the dissemination of hate speech in Spain; during 2021, 37.83% was disseminated over the internet and 22.29% through social networks. Part of those messages is directed at the LGBTQI+ population. This discourse corresponds to all “online communication or expression which advocates, promotes, or incites hatred, discrimination or violence, against any individual or group, because of their sexual orientation, or gender identity” ([Galop 2021](#)). Social networks have, therefore, become hostile spaces for the LGBTQI+ community. According to a study developed by the organisation [GLAAD \(2022\)](#), “40% of all LGBTQ adults, and 49% of transgender and non-binary people do not feel welcome or safe on social media”. When social networks were rated on providing a safe space on a 100-point scale, none of the main social networks reached a rating of 50: Instagram (48%), Twitter (45%), Facebook (46%), YouTube (45%), TikTok (43%).

Despite the efforts of public institutions to observe and monitor the scope of hate speech online, the official data that exist seem to not reflect the reality of the problem, partly due to under-reporting. For this reason, initiatives have been launched in recent years by social observatories and organisations to obtain a more precise analysis of the discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+ people in Spain. The Valencian Observatory against LGBTphobia published its first report on hate crimes and incidents based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the Valencian Community in April 2018 ([Observatorio Valenciano contra la LGTBfobia 2018](#)). According to it, 79 crimes and incidents motivated by hate and discrimination occurred during 2017 in this region alone, compared to the 217 that the government recorded throughout the state ([Ministry of Home Affairs 2018](#)). If we add the incidents on social networks that this report classified as hate speech (11), verbal attacks (21) and threats (18) together, we can conclude that, in reality, the Observatory counted 50 events where hate was disseminated through words. The Ministry only registered 27 cases of hate speech linked to sexual orientation or identity that same year in the entire country. More recently, in 2021 the Lambda organisation carried out a programme called “Al loro!”, whose objective was to identify and record LGBTphobia discriminatory content and hate crimes on social networks to raise awareness on the problem of attacking members of the LGBTQI+ community. Throughout that year, Lambda identified 511 LGBTphobia messages ([Lambda 2022](#)), mostly insults, mockery and false information. Only 2% of these attacks were condemned or reprimanded socially. This report showed Twitter to be the social network that had the most LGBTQI+ discriminatory messages circulating, with 85% of the cases, followed by Facebook, with 9.5%, and Instagram, with 5.5%. According to the study, the reason Twitter tops this list is because it is the easiest platform to post messages anonymously. That same year, the Ministry of Home Affairs only registered 60 hate crimes committed against the LGBTQI+ community on the internet and social networks ([Ministry of Home Affairs 2022](#)).

Parallel to the efforts of the organisations to uncover the real extent of the problem, other recent investigations have tried to shed light on how hate messages against the

LGBTQI+ community circulate on social networks. Studies carried out by [da Silva and da Silva \(2021\)](#) and [Carratalá \(2022\)](#), for example, focused on how a large part of the comments on news items published on Facebook demean and discriminate this social group. The way in which users of social networks intervene, commenting on the coverage of news related to the celebration of LGBTQI+ Pride has also been the subject of study. Research by [Martínez Valerio \(2022\)](#) analysed the comments made to the publications of the Instagram accounts of five prominent Spanish newspapers; the author found that the majority were favourable to the LGBTQI+ collective, although she also observed a small percentage of messages that could be considered hate speech. [Rivera-Martín et al. \(2022\)](#) obtained different results after analysing the comments on news items published by five large Spanish newspapers on their Twitter accounts during the 2021 Pride week. The authors concluded that there are still many people who reject sexual and gender diversity, and there are those who encourage and applaud expressions of contempt and animosity towards the LGBTQI+ community through derogatory, hostile and homophobic discourse. However, until now, the analysis of the social audience's comments to publications related to LGBTQI+ people has not been made on disinformation messages or pseudo-news, whose content this research study is focused on.

Thus, in accordance with the above, and based on the objectives set at the beginning of the work, we would like to outline the following two research questions as a basis on which to structure this study:

RQ 1: How does the social audience respond to hoaxes about the LGBTQI+ community that circulate on Twitter?

RQ 2: How do Spanish LGBTQI+ organisations perceive and address disinformation?

2. Materials and Methods

To answer the research questions that guide this study, we carried out two analyses, which together combine quantitative content analysis techniques and qualitative techniques, basing our empirical work on a methodological triangulation.

First, and with the aim of answering RQ 1, we collected the hoaxes spread on Twitter between 2018 and 2020. To narrow down the messages whose reactions were going to be analysed, we decided to focus on publications about the LGBTQI+ community disseminated by the pseudo-media organisation *Mediterráneo Digital* that were later proven false by at least one of the two main Spanish verification platforms, Maldita and Newtral, both associated with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) ([Rojas Caja 2020](#)). We decided to focus the analysis on content published by *Mediterráneo Digital* on Twitter, and subsequently proven false, because this pseudo-media organisation has been one of the main sources of disinformation in Spain in recent years ([Palau-Sampio and Carratalá 2022](#)), especially on issues that affect social minorities and vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQI+ people ([Carratalá 2023](#)). It should be noted that Twitter and Instagram are the only two social network platforms that this pseudo-media organisation uses to disseminate the content initially published on its website, since Facebook closed its page in June 2020. *Mediterráneo Digital* is considered a pseudo-media outlet insofar as its editorial proposal coincides with websites that try to imitate the design and style of conventional news sites ([Rathnayake 2018](#)) but does not respect the diligence and principles of journalistic production ([Del-Fresno-García 2019](#)), and generates pseudo-information in the sense of false or imprecise information ([Kim and Gil de Zúñiga 2021](#)).

A specific search for verifications carried out between 2018 and 2020 by the Maldita and Newtral platforms through their websites identified four pieces published by *Mediterráneo Digital*. Table 1 lists the headlines under which these pieces were disseminated, the date of publication and the date the news items were proven false.

Table 1. Pseudo-news published by *Mediterráneo Digital* object of study.

	Headline	Publication Date	Proven False by Maldita	Proven False by Newtral
N1	The Government will ban Father's Day and Mother's Day so as not to offend gays ¹	21 October 2018	22 October 2018	24 February 2021
N2	The Health Department has warned that HIV will soar in Madrid during LGBTI Pride week	30 June 2019	5 July 2019	7 July 2019
N3	The Government allows the celebration of Gay Pride in Madrid despite the coronavirus	30 April 2020	30 June 2020	Was not verified
N4	The Government will create a new hand-out for LGBTI people	30 June 2020	Was not verified	2 July 2020

Source: Maldita (<https://maldita.es/>, accessed on 15 December 2022) and Newtral (<https://www.newtral.es/>, accessed on 16 December 2022).

The four selected cases correspond to the second type of classification made by [Doncel Martín \(2021\)](#) of fake news and hoaxes that attack minority groups; that is, the one that identifies informative constructions that, following the structures of the media and using an apparently objective tone, seek to informatively validate an accusation made against a certain social community through fake evidence. The study subjects the reactions generated by these four pseudo-information pieces on Twitter to a quantitative and qualitative content analysis to evaluate the social audience's response on this platform. First, we examined the engagement associated with each of the publications through the calculation of likes, retweets and comments. This initial approach to the tweets allowed us to consider and to observe whether, comparatively, some topics generated greater engagement than others. Next, the qualitative study of the reaction focused solely on the comments that Twitter users made on each of the pieces considered. These comments were collected manually. The manual coding of the responses to the four *Mediterráneo Digital* publications was based on a coding sheet that contemplated the following variables related to how users evaluated the certainty of the publication: (1) The comment lends credibility to the publication; (2) The comment denies the publication; (3) The comment doubts the veracity of the message; and (4) The response does not allow the veracity it lends to the publication (others) to be established. Finally, two other issues were analysed. On one hand, the number of responses that believed the publication to be true and expressed a hostile message towards the LGBTQI+ community, and thus, were considered hate speech, was counted. On the other hand, the number of messages that rejected the pseudo-news item—and also accused *Mediterráneo Digital* of being a source of spreading disinformation and fake news—was also counted. To guarantee reliability and consistency, the single coder carried out a test to measure the stability of the results obtained at two different times (test–retest or intracoder test), with two months between tests. The test was performed on 25% of the sample and, after verifying total agreement, the coding of the rest of the tweets continued.

Next, in order to answer RQ2, the study was complemented with a qualitative analysis based on six interviews with managers from organisations that work to defend the rights of LGBTQI+ people in different regions throughout Spain. The semi-structured ([Rubin and Rubin 2005](#)) and in-depth ([Taylor and Bogdan 1990](#)) interviews were divided into two large blocks, following the two dimensions of framing tasks defined by [Benford and Snow \(2000\)](#): diagnostic framing (What is the problem? How is it defined?) and prognostic framing (How do we solve the problem?). Firstly, it was an attempt to find out what diagnosis would be

given to the issue of disinformation against this social group by committed activists who are knowledgeable of the LGBTQI+ population's reality. This block included seven questions: Do you think that the LGBTQI+ community is a target population of disinformative actions or fake news? Would you say that there has been an increase in disinformation about the group in recent years? Since when? Do you think that some members of the collective are especially targeted by this type of action? Who do you think are those mainly responsible for generating and disseminating disinformation against LGBTI people?

We then asked about their opinion on how the phenomenon should be dealt with and what could be carried out to stop hoaxes against this community being generated. This second part included questions such as: How do you think activism can address the problem of disinformation? Has your organisation taken any specific actions on this issue? Do you remember any denial/denunciation from your organisation regarding any hoax/disinformative content? Do you consider the alliance between social organisations and other actors, media, public institutions, to be necessary?

All interviews were carried out electronically through the Blackboard Collaborate and Zoom platforms between May and December 2022. The people interviewed are listed in Table 2. The names have been omitted to conceal the participating subjects' identity. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The analysis of the responses looked for similarities and points of disagreement across the main categories included in the questionnaire that was used during the interviews.

Table 2. List of people interviewed.

Person Being Interviewed	Organisation	Area of Operation
A	Lambda	Valencia
B	Castelló LGTBI	Castellon
C	Diversitat	Alicante
D	SOMOS	Aragon
E	No te prives	Murcia
F	Colectivo GAMÁ	Canary Islands

Source: Prepared by the author.

The presentation of the results will consequently be divided into two parts. The first part will describe the findings obtained from the content analysis of Twitter's social audience's reactions to the hoaxes about the LGBTQI+ community and the second part will outline the conclusions drawn from the interviews carried out with the activists.

3. Results

3.1. The Social Audience's Reaction to Disinformation about LGBTQI+ People

The analysis of Twitter users' reaction to the fake news disseminated by *Mediterráneo Digital* about the LGBTQI+ community was unbalanced given the different hoaxes considered. As can be seen in Table 3, the social audience's engagement for pieces N1 and N3 was evident, but much lower in the case of the other two publications. The fake news that claimed that the government was going to allow the Madrid Gay Pride celebration to take place despite the coronavirus, published on 30 April 2020, when all of Spanish society was still confined at home because of the pandemic, was the item that most generated audience interaction, with a total of 1440 reactions. It was the piece that registered the most activity in terms of comments, retweets and likes. The sum of all of the reactions was 49.7% of the total reactions to the four pseudo-information analysed. In proportional terms, the interaction resulting from this tweet was especially notable in terms of likes (53.3% of the total of the four publications), the number of times it was shared, also numerous (49.6%), and comments (46.1% of the total sample). The last pseudo-news item analysed related to the creation of a government subsidy for LGBTQI+ people, and was the one that generated

the least reactions, with only 112 interactions (3.9% of the total). The comments on this piece were only 4.2% of all those analysed.

Table 3. Social audience engagement to the hoaxes spread by *Mediterráneo Digital*.

	Comments	Retweets	Likes	Total No. of Reactions
N1	266	626	157	1049
N2	30	141	124	295
N3	275	823	342	1440
N4	25	68	19	112

Source: Prepared by the author.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 596 comments to the four publications according to the four categories on which the quantitative content analysis is based.

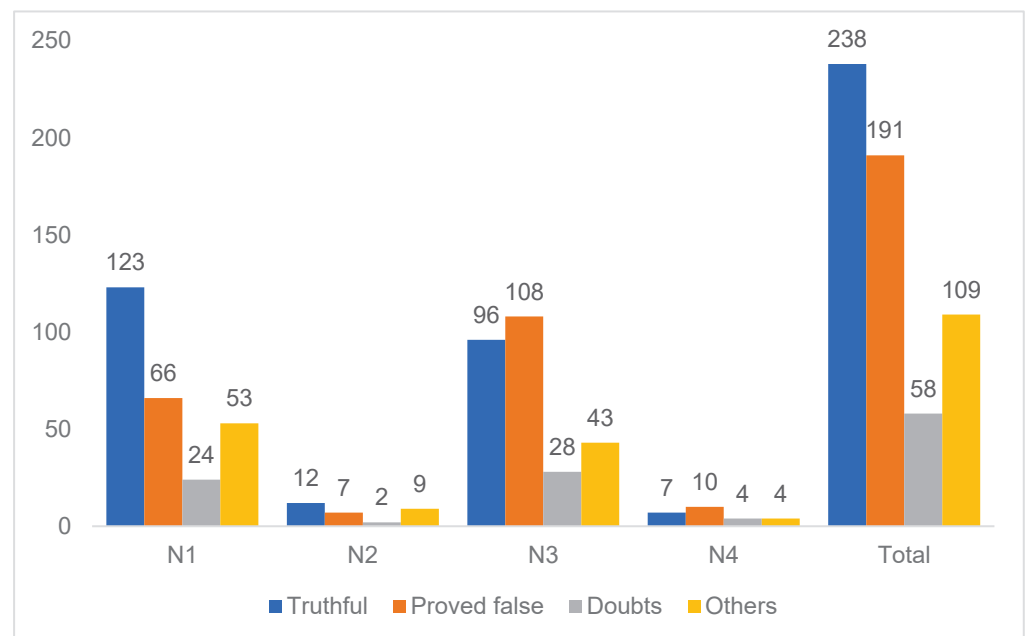


Figure 1. Distribution of social audience comments on Twitter. Source: prepared by the author.

As shown in the graph, the analysis data indicate that comments believing the pseudo-information in the message was true predominated. This type of gullible opinion (238 comments) represented 39.9% of the total reactions of Twitter users. On the other hand, comments that sought to reject the information (191 responses) accounted for 32% of the total. Opinions expressing doubts about the truthfulness of the news (58 comments) were seen less frequently (9.7%). Conversely, 18.3% of the comments analysed (109 responses) did not manifest the user’s position regarding the pseudo-information, but were simply expressions addressed to other participants in the discussion, without directly alluding to the *Mediterráneo Digital* post.

Categorising the comments to each piece allows us to highlight certain differences. The audience’s reaction to both N1 and N2 follows the general dynamics, and therefore, comments that believed the pseudo-information was true predominate, since they represent 46.2% (123) (N1) and 40% (12) (N2) of the total comments that accompany these publications (compared to 24.8% (66) and 23.3% (7), respectively, of messages that seek to reject the news pieces). Here are two examples of the comments: “Are we all turning into idiots?? Who does this supposed equality benefit? Why should rights be taken away from me to give

to only a handful of other people? I will continue to celebrate Mother’s and Father’s Day, whether the government likes it or not!!!” and “We must stop this totalitarian delusion. This government must be thrown out. I am so offended I feel sick”, both expressed by users who commented on N1. In the case of N3 and N4, the majority of the comments refuted the pseudo-information. In the first case, they represented 39.3% (108) of the total comments (compared to 34.9%–96 who believed it), while in N4, 40% (10) of the opinions rejected the message (compared to 28%–7). The comments that refuted the veracity of the information pointed out that, in reality, the Pride celebration “is online” (N3) or described the publication as “junk journalism” (N4).

Figure 2 shows the messages that can be categorised as hate speech towards the LGBTQI+ community from the total number of comments that believed the content of the pseudo-news published by *Mediterráneo Digital* was true.

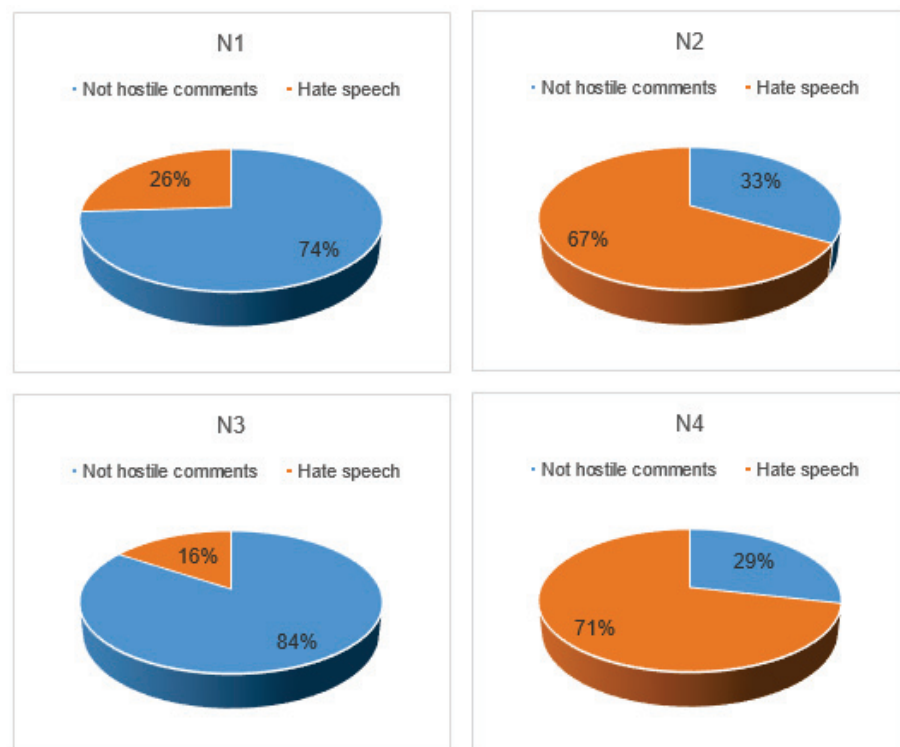


Figure 2. Presence of hate speech in the comments that believed the pseudo-information posted. Source: Prepared by the author.

Of the total number comments that we analysed, 60 of them—one in ten—were considered examples of hate speech because they expressed discriminatory, hostile or violent messages against LGBTQI+ people. This occurred among those comments that believed the content of the publications published on the *Mediterráneo Digital* Twitter profile were true. If we look at only this type of message (those that believed the pseudo-news contained in the posts was true), the percentage of messages that we categorised as hate speech increased to 25.2%—one in four. As can be seen in Figure 2, the presence of hate speech is inversely proportional to the publication of comments by the social audience. In other words, in those publications that did not receive many comments, N2 and N4, the most prevalent reaction among users who seemed to believe the fake news was hate speech. In the two pieces that had a much higher reaction from Twitter users, N1 and N3, the percentage of hate speech of the total amount of opinions that believed the messages was significantly lower.

As noted, comments categorised as hate speech openly express disdain and hostility towards LGBTQI+ people. The following messages are noteworthy examples: “Fags are always vexatious, the retards should be put back into their cave” (N1), “It would have been

a joy to see homosexuality categorised as a mental illness and treated with electroshock last century” (N1), “Hopefully they’ll all get infected and realise that the [Pride] festival might kill them and it is the last one the celebrate. You have to be an idiot, they have everything, their sex is normalised, equality, but they continue to play the fool with orgies. If you like it, you’ll do it whatever the cost.” (N2), “Hopefully, they’ll be none left afterwards” (N2), “this country is run by ETA, the LGBT community and gender quangos.”² (N3), “They are retarded” (N4), in relation to LGBTQI+ people, and “Is this disease so feeble?” (N4), in reference to homosexuality.

Figure 3 shows the extent to which the Twitter social audience that reacted to these pseudo-information used the comments to accuse *Mediterráneo Digital* of being a troll and spreading fake news and disinformation.

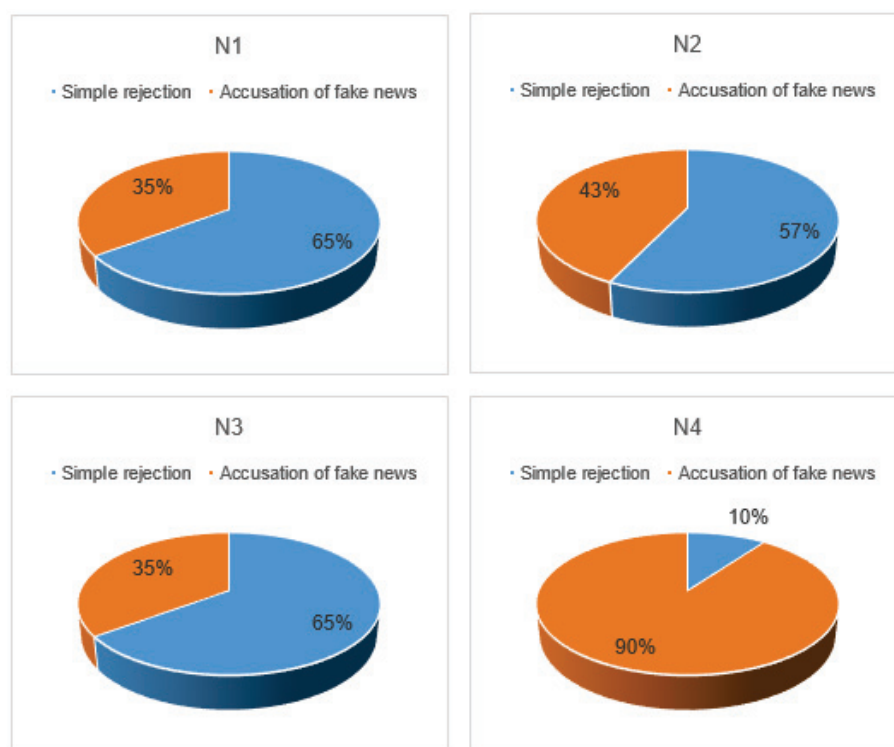


Figure 3. Comments from the social audience calling out *Mediterráneo Digital* as a source of fake news. Source: prepared by the author.

Around 12.4% of the total of 596 comments that make up our sample are messages that accuse *Mediterráneo Digital* for being a source of disinformation on the internet. These are not comments that simply refute the specific post, they go further by pointing out that the media outlet itself contains fake news that does not deserve any credibility. This type of comment represents 38.7% of those that reject the messages contained in the publication (191). While these types of expressions represented 40% of the comments to pieces N1, N2 and N3; in N4 they were the clear majority, representing 90% of the comments rejecting this publication.

The social audience censors the activity carried out by the pseudo-media outlet through these types of comments, and by using statements such as the following, “This is fake news, I don’t know how you have the nerve to call yourself journalists. The headline reads “the government will prohibit” but then the body of the news states that: “the observatory against LGBTphobia recommends [...] the government study...”. You want to deceive, but the worst thing is that you succeed.” (N1), “And then you call yourselves journalists? You should call it crappy science fiction. From lie to lie and it’s my turn next.” (N1), “This seems to be a crap newspaper funded by VOX³. It spews journalistic rubbish” (N2), “It is Fake news that attracts homophobes like moths to a light; they believe it because they only

have sufficient brain cells to shit" (N3), "The @MediterraneoDGT professional media outlet is based on misinforming, creating hoaxes and sensationalism" (N3) and "fake news and generating hate?????" (N4). The critical reaction of these users even mentions the possibility of reporting *Mediterráneo Digital* to the police, "Either you delete the tweet or I duly inform the police?" (N2) and "Report filed. Let's see if they close you down once and for all, imbeciles" (N4).

3.2. Activism against Disinformation

3.2.1. Diagnosis of the Problem

The interviews with representatives of organisations that fight for the rights of LGBTQI+ people included questions regarding the diagnosis of the disinformation problem that affects this community. Asked if they believe that this social group is a target population for disinformation actions or fake news, the six interviewees agreed that that was the case. For many, in fact, it is a problem that is not new at all, but has a long history. As expressed, for example, by Interviewee B:

"The disinformation is not current, it is historical disinformation. In the Holocaust, what was the largest victim population? The Jews. And the second? LGBTI people and nobody knows about it, it doesn't appear anywhere... That is historical disinformation, just as crimes of sodomy in the Middle Ages are not usually noted nor that when two women lived together they were accused of witchcraft and burned...".

Interviewee E also observes this history:

"We have been a target population for a long time, and especially since the LGBTI community has been used as a political instrument, by parties and organisations, to use us for votes and pretend that they are helping us, or, quite the opposite, to present us as an axis of power that only seeks to indoctrinate the population and take advantage of it."

Other interviewees concurred, and also stated that there has been a recent increase in the phenomenon of disinformation against this community. Interviewee C noted that:

"if we take a historical tour of events at national and international levels, we see that the LGBTI collective has been and is a target group. We can see it happening right now very clearly with monkeypox, which has been used to stigmatise gay men."

According to some interviewees, gay men are precisely one of the groups within the LGBTQI+ community who are particularly affected by disinformation and fake news. Interviewee A stated it:

"Traditionally, it has been gay and bisexual men that have been the most visible, and it is this identification with the feminine part that ignites machismo, which is why it is that group that has been most attacked in this sense, historically".

Currently, however, the target of disinformation is shifting towards "trans people, mainly trans women, who are receiving the most attacks." The six people interviewed concurred with this last idea since, as highlighted by interviewees D, E and F, trans women have been at the centre of disinformation regarding the debate on the law put forward by the progressive coalition government.⁴

The political aspects surrounding the problem of disinformation and hoaxes against the LGBTQI+ community were noted by the different interviewees, for example, when they were asked since when they thought there had been an increase in this phenomenon. For several of them, 2018 was a key year for this when the extreme right-wing party, VOX, was voted into one of the Spanish regional parliaments for the first time, in Andalusia. Interviewee A states:

“We associate the increase to when VOX was voted into the institutions, although it has always been a common theme... But the extreme right being voted in legitimised that discourse in some way.”

Interviewee B notes: “Since VOX were voted into the institutions, it has given them a very big microphone, and a lot of money.” Without mentioning this party, Interviewee D noted that the disinformative discourse, especially against trans people, “has been brewing for 3–4 years [...] one more consequence of the social polarisation we currently have.”⁵ In other cases, interviewees believed that the increase started a few years prior to that mentioned earlier, as indicated by Interviewee C, who dated it to the financial crisis of 2008,⁶ when “a very favourable context” where “social rights were supported” gave way to grave economic problems that resulted in “social issues becoming less important”. The approval of same-sex marriage in 2005 is, for Interviewee E, the turning point:

“There was a huge movement headed by the People’s Party and the Church demonstrating against the law and accusing us of everything [...] the fake news started there as they said that, if equal marriage existed, the rights of heterosexual people would be eroded.”⁷

When asked about the channels or platforms used to disseminate disinformation against LGBTQI+ people, several of the interviewees agreed that the main one was pseudo-media outlets, especially *Okdiario* and *Mediterráneo Digital*: “There are media outlets, which I find difficult to call media outlets, that are dedicated precisely to this and that have found support on the internet” (Interviewee A), “*Okdiario*, *Okdiario* and *Okdiario*” (Interviewee B), “There are media outlets that are spreaders of hate [...] I call *Okdiario* a propaganda manual [...] *Mediterráneo Digital*, *Estrella Digital*...” (Interviewee C), “There are digital media outlets that do not fact check information [...] *OKdiario* has said atrocities” (Interviewee E). Along with them, social networks are seen as spaces for the circulation of hoaxes against this community: “Social networks have been a channel to spew hate [...] very rapid consumption, very little thought and very simple messages” (Interviewee A), “the greatest damage is done by social networks, most of all Twitter; it is the most dangerous thing in the world to me” (Interviewee C), “In the last 2–3 years, social networks have been very popular, especially Twitter and Instagram, where I constantly see disinformation [...] on social networks hate is free and available to everyone” (Interviewee F).

3.2.2. The Answer to the Problem

After the diagnosis, the interviewees were asked about whether the problem of disinformation could be managed through activism. Truthful information, supported by data, is for many of the interviewees a key tool. Interviewee A states:

“The main way is to disseminate truthful information... In the end we always move slower and reach fewer people than hoaxes do, but by repeating it, people learn... And always be a reliable source of the information we give, HIV issues, trans or LGBT people, Chinese water torture, until society learns”.

Interviewee D points out that “the strategy we have used is often one based on data, because data is indisputable.” These opinions are shared by other interviewees, who also believe that working with the media is essential:

“We believe that respect for diversity can be attained through forceful political advocacy actions [...] always being present in the media, taking every opportunity possible for interviews [...] disseminating research and studies” (Interview F),

“I really like working with journalists who take the issue seriously and call you with questions. A sensitive media is essential” (Interviewee C).

In addition, working in educational environments is also important. Thus, Interviewee B notes that the fight against disinformation is also addressed “by being visible, being everywhere. [...] Going to all events, being involved in society, organising pride events, all

sorts of events, giving talks at schools”, and similarly, Interviewee E notes, “There are many videos and short films on our website. . . we carry out film screenings, literary contests, talks at schools, conferences. . .”. Interviewees A and C also highlight the need for educational action, while Interviewee F talks about training journalists.

When they were asked whether they remembered any specific action taken by their organisations to reject a specific hoax, all except one interviewee were able to provide an example. They included actions carried out to prove the following stories were false: information disseminated by the police about a trans girl accused of breaking lockdown during the pandemic (Interviewee C),⁸ the treatment of monkeypox being a disease spread by gay men (Interviewee D), accusations of indoctrination when giving talks at schools (Interviewee E) and falsehoods about the supposed negative impact that the new trans law would have on women (Interviewee F). In these cases, the organisations of the people interviewed took an active role in publicly denouncing the disinformation. Only Interviewee A confirmed that her organisation

“tried not to reproduce the hoax when it came to rejecting it. We try not to directly comment on it or give it a specific mention. The rule is to ignore hoaxes, but providing information that helps people understand that it is not true is essential”.

In the fight against disinformation and hoaxes, LGBTQI+ organisations understand that they cannot walk alone. The people interviewed believe that alliances with other entities and actors are key, as is the attention of politicians. Interviewee C believes that “an alliance with the media and third sector entities is very important [...] what is not seen, does not exist and what does not exist cannot be regularised”. Interviewee F, for their part, understands that

“without alliance, synergy, coordination, there is no progress [...] we are always at the Administration’s work tables [...] in all areas, health and education, [...] we always try to support other entities that, in an cross-sectional and transversal manner, work the different realities, we are not only LGBTI people”.

This reciprocal support and collaboration with other organisations is also highlighted by Interviewee E (who mentions a platform against discrimination,⁹ “a part of the feminist Platform”, Mujomur)¹⁰ and Interviewee A:

“neighbourhood networks made up of other groups that are not LGBT but are affected by the extreme right, feminist groups, migrants . . . we are all the same focus of hatred. The enemy is always the same and the more people they find blocking them, the easier it is: cross-sectionality is key”.

4. Conclusions

The present study that has been carried out confirms that disinformation regarding the LGBTQI+ community is a serious problem in Spain; a high percentage of the responses posted on Twitter consider this fake news to be true, and social organisations perceive it to be a serious threat that, although not new, has experienced a notable increase in recent years.

Firstly, regarding how disinformation is received by Twitter users (RQ1), the results of the study found that a notable proportion of social network users commenting on it believe these messages. Nearly four out of ten answers given to this pseudo-information assume it to be real news. One in four of these reactions express hate towards LGBTQI+ people. The study has also shown that a significant percentage of the comments made on these messages (32%) reject them, thus contributing to ensuring other users also reject them. These opposing tensions in the reaction to disinformation on social networks show a certain ambivalence in the digital space, as it has shown itself to be a forum in which fake news and hate speech can easily spread, and an environment in which participants who are critical about disinformation can counter such content through their responses, with

the purpose of proving hoaxes to be false. Thus, as [Strand and Svensson \(2019, p. 78\)](#) point out: “while we acknowledge that social media plays an important role in the production and circulation of fake news, it similarly also provides organised interests a space where fake news can be contested”.

The findings also establish a clear relationship between the polarising nature of disinformation messaging and its impact on the social audience. Pseudo-information news items N1 and N3, the ones that generated the most reactions, are also the ones that spread a message that is controversial, and thus divide ‘us’ (heterosexual people) and ‘them’ (LGBTQI+ community) by generating grievances (the prohibition of Father’s Day or being given special permission to celebrate Gay Pride in the midst of a pandemic); this results in users writing hostile messages towards this social group through the vulnerability reversal strategy ([Carratalá 2021](#)). This link between disinformation and polarisation should be addressed in greater depth in future studies. Similarly, the results have found that the two pseudo-information news items that gained most rejection reactions were the two most recent, both disseminated during the pandemic (2020), which could be explained by the fact that the social audience was more alert to disinformation at a time when fake news circulated intensely.

The risk that the digital space is used as a forum to spread disinformation is also shared by the representatives of the social organisations interviewed. In their perception of the problem (RQ2), these subjects point to how social networks and pseudo-media have been two key players in the growth of fake news against LGBTQI+ people in recent years. The concurrence of both elements, as this research study has found, can further significantly poison the public space through disinformation. In their responses, the representatives of these organisations also demonstrated a high commitment to combating fake news, which they often described as hate speech, in a more proactive than reactive way. Although many remember having acted to reject a specific hoax, they are more focused on increasing the generation of truthful information, supported by data, and working for the visibility of the community in the public administrations, the media and on the street, collaborating with other collective actors who also suffer the scourge of disinformation. Along with the production of truthful information, education is another priorities; literacy, especially among young people, in matters of sexual diversity and media consumption, was noted as a key tool in the face of the problem of disinformation, which they believe affects gay men and trans women mostly.

The research developed shows two significant strengths that make notable contributions to the study of disinformation about the LGBTQI+ community. On one hand, it addresses the close relationship between fake news and hate speech, focusing also on the threatening confluence of the action of pseudo-media and social networks. On the other hand, the study incorporates the perspective of those who suffer the impact of disinformation, which broadens the discussion on how they perceive it and how they believe it can be combated through collective action. However, the analysis also presents certain limitations that, at the same time, offer opportunities for future work. Probably the most relevant is the limitation of the analysis of the social audience’s reaction to disinformation from the four publications posted by the pseudo-media organization on Twitter. Although the selection of these pieces is based on rigorous criteria (the pieces had been denied by recognised verification platforms), the number of messages that were subjected to analysis is limited.

For this reason, this present study can give way to other research studies that further the analysis of disinformation against LGBTQI+ people circulating on the internet, not only based on the reaction to content proved to be false by professional verifiers, but through more exhaustive research that addresses multiple message types. Similarly, the study of the response to this content could be completed with an analysis of digital audiences through surveys or discussion groups. Finally, research on how social organisations perceive and combat the problem of disinformation requires expanding the case study of the LGBTQI+

community to other vulnerable groups, such as immigrants or people with disabilities, who are also affected by hoaxes and fake news.

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Notes

- ¹ This pseudo-news item was shared six more times from *Mediterráneo Digital*'s Twitter profile after its original publication in October 2018. It was specifically posted on the following dates: 19 March 2019, 21 February 2021, 19 March 2021, 2 May 2021, 19 March 2022, 1 May 2022, thus coinciding with Father’s Day (19 March) and Mother’s Day (first Sunday in May) in Spain. Only the social audience’s response to the first posting has been analysed for our study, as it was the one that generated the greatest number of comments among Twitter users.
- ² It is a derogatory expression used in Spain to refer to state offices or agencies, which exist almost exclusively to give jobs to friends of senior politicians and allow them to collect large salaries for often unnecessary work.
- ³ Vox is a far-right Spanish political party, with representation in the Congress of Deputies since 2019.
- ⁴ The progressive coalition government formed by the Socialist Party and Podemos has pushed for a comprehensive law to expand protections and entrench the rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, which was approved by Parliament in February, 2023. The regulation has been strongly criticised by right-wing political parties and also by part of the feminist movement, which opposes the gender self-determination recognised in the law.
- ⁵ It should be noted that “affective and ideological polarisation in Spain has been growing in recent years: political parties are increasingly far away in their ideological and territorial positions, and the feelings of one party’s voters towards the rest are among the most negative worldwide” (Miller 2020).
- ⁶ The 2007–2008 financial crisis, or the global financial crisis (GFC), was a severe worldwide economic crisis that occurred in the early 21st century. It was the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression (1929).
- ⁷ Prominent members of the Spanish Church, representatives of the main conservative party (Partido Popular) and anti-gender organisations developed an intense campaign of opposition to the approval of same-sex marriage in Spain in 2005, which they considered would end the concept of family as they say it should be understood.
- ⁸ Two Benidorm policemen were suspended in May 2020 for a hate crime after one of them was filmed by his colleague verbally insulting and humiliating a trans woman in the street.
- ⁹ The Region of Murcia has a platform of LGBTIQ+ associations that integrates six organisations that fight for the defense of the rights of these social groups.
- ¹⁰ Mujomur (Young Women of the Region of Murcia) is an association of young women specialised in feminism, gender equality and youth.

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Article

“Platformization of News”, Authorship, and Unverified Content: Perceptions around Local Media

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Abstract: In recent years, the growing importance of platforms for producing, sharing, and consuming news has been evident. However, several challenges associated with this growth have emerged, such as those linked with disinformation and news authorship. In this article, which uses part of the data from a more extensive study of local media in the central region of Portugal, we present the results from three focus groups with editors, journalists, and local media consumers. Through this information, we try to understand their perceptions about how platforms change news work and distribution, affecting journalists and the public. The focus groups results showed that although local media professionals consider it essential to be present on distribution platforms, they are concerned about the inability of audiences to distinguish the content created by local media from others that circulate online. We believe the results presented are significant to reflect on changes made by platforms to journalism and to think in terms of new strategies of media literacy concerning how and what ways platforms are involved in news distribution infrastructures.

Keywords: platforms; local media; authorship; audiences; news



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1. Introduction

Among the various transformations that have taken place in recent years, the growth of digital platforms for publishing and distributing content (van Dijck et al. 2018) and the empowerment of former audiences (Rosen 2012; Anderson et al. 2014) can perhaps be highlighted as the ones which most affected news media. The truth is that in an era dominated by digital platforms and news applications, the media faces many challenges, mainly because they are no longer the only ones to control the ecosystem of news production and distribution (Cardoso et al. 2016a). In this context, for news outlets, these digital platforms of we can include, between others, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, “become powerhouses of news distribution and production”, a “key for the success of news stories, and “the most effective way to cultivate new audiences” (Nechushtai 2018, p. 1049).

Therefore, distribution has gained particular importance “as the owners of networks and content aggregators increasingly assert themselves as key players in negotiating power and ability to influence consumer and browsing behavior” (Cardoso et al. 2016b, pp. 25–26). This negotiation becomes particularly challenging in the case of local media since, as Anne Schulz says, “local and regional news media are under immense financial pressure as audience attention, and advertising budgets increasingly flow to big platforms and other competitors” (Schulz 2021, pp. 42–43).

This work explores the relationship between local media and digital platforms for publishing and distributing content, considering the audiences’ role in this context. Thus, the goal is to understand how these digital platforms can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content and well as question the role that audiences can have when consuming news through these platforms in putting pressure on the media, causing them to disclose unverified content.

Regarding research methods, we opted for the case study strategy (Yin 1989) since it is a more adapted tool for the reality we intend to study, the one from local media. We then conducted three focus groups with directors and editors, journalists, and local media consumers to understand how the relation with platforms can affect distribution, circulation of contents, and identification of news authors.

The focus groups were carried out as part of the project Re/media.Lab in which we try “to diagnosis the current situation of local/regional media, promoting experimental tools and strategies to strengthen their business model, increasing their innovation degree, and improving their connection with the public” (Morais et al. 2020).

The focus group results showed that although local media professionals consider it essential to be present on digital platforms, such as Facebook or Google, for publishing and distributing content, they are concerned about the inability of audiences to distinguish the content created by newspapers from others circulating on the platforms. On the other hand, we also verified that the media feel compelled to disclose content that needs more significant verification because they were pressured by competition, but above all, audiences.

The article is divided into three parts. We start with a brief literature review, focusing on the contextualization of the Portuguese reality and considering the platformization of news and its impact on the local media. Next, we present the methodological strategies adopted for the three focus groups, which are part of a broader project, the Re/media.Lab, where local media in the central region of Portugal were studied. Finally, some of the results obtained with the focus groups are presented and discussed, namely, those that allow us to investigate the impact of platforms on the perception of news authorship.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Reality of Local Media in Portugal*

We started this literature review by portraying the Portuguese media’s reality and highlighting, in particular, the panorama of the local media. According to the publication, “Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Portugal”, “despite a slight recovery compared to 2020, the general situation of the Portuguese media is still relatively difficult, with the small advertising market not being enough to support all operators in the market. The inversion that has taken place in recent years with the growth of digital does not ensure the economic rebalancing of this sector” (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 6). The report warns about the concentration of news media in just four major groups but also expresses concern about the lack of transparency concerning the management and ownership of these media groups. Considering data from the previous report, the authors highlight that “(...) the media viability risk indicator is still high, with the media sector having close to no growth compared to last year, as the sector is still recovering from the COVID-19 crisis. Media companies do not always have fully transparent information about their management structure and the issue of ownership, despite the regulator’s efforts and the creation of the Transparency Platform” (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 8).

In a global analysis of the Portuguese media landscape, the report also stresses a need to “(...) strengthen the protection for journalists, especially from an economic point of view” (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 10). In terms of the viability of local media, the scenario is not very different, with the authors of the report considering that “The indicator Access to Media for Local and Regional Communities and community media scores medium risk (50%), the same score as last year’s report” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17). In a more detailed analysis, we can also see that there are problems at various levels, starting with a matter of local framework since “the community media is not foreseen in Portugal’s legal framework, although local media tend to be seen as proximity or community-based media. Some media initiatives are classified as community media, but, in fact, their independence, as well as one of the local media, is at risk, mainly due to financial and economic difficulties” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17). In addition to the legal problem

and the economic and sustainability difficulties, there is a lack of data that allows knowing and understanding the true importance of these media among the populations. “Another risk arises from the fact that the audience and the actual impact on communities of these local media are not known or described. The danger of concentration of ownership and the diminishing value and sustainability of local media, despite several policy measures and State subsidies for local and regional media (nationally distributed), should be seen with concern” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17).

In the particular case of local media, the focus of this study, it is also important to remember that economic difficulties have contributed to the extinction of several newsrooms, making the news deserts in Portugal a reality (Abernathy 2018; Abernathy 2020, 2022; Jerónimo et al. 2022b). In Portugal, the authors consider news deserts a “portuguese municipality without local news”. Radio stations without local news and doctrinal newspapers without local news were not considered. Print and digital publications not registered with the ERC are also excluded. Municipalities with only one specialized communication outlet were also included as deserts” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 18). Therefore, according to the “News Deserts Europe 2022: Portugal Report”, “more than half of the Portuguese municipalities are news deserts or are on the verge of becoming so. Out of the 308 existing municipalities, 166 (53.9%) are news deserts or semi-deserts or at risk of becoming one. These are municipalities in a red flag situation regarding news coverage” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 20). The authors emphasize that “out of these 78 municipalities, 54 (17.5%) are in a total news desert, which means that they don’t have any media outlets producing news about these territories, and 24 (7.8%) are in semi-desert status, that is, they only have less frequent or not satisfactory news coverage. It should also be noted that 88 (28.6%) are at risk of entering into the status of news desert, as they have only one media outlet with regular news coverage” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 20). Finally, the report also allows us to verify that “the North, Center and Alentejo regions concentrate over 80% of news deserts and semi-deserts in Portugal” (Jerónimo et al. 2022b, p. 20).

At this moment, when we are trying to portray the reality of the local media in Portugal, it is also important to highlight that the local media has received increasing attention from the academy, having grown, in recent years, the number of investigations that seek to characterize professionals and their working conditions (Jerónimo et al. 2022a; Morais et al. 2020), but it is also important to study the challenges introduced by digital (Jerónimo et al. 2022c; Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021; Carvalheiro et al. 2021; Campos and Jerónimo 2019) and the sustainability of the local media business itself (Morais et al. 2020; Jerónimo and Correia 2020; Ramos and Correia 2020; Quintanilha et al. 2019; Cardoso et al. 2017), without forgetting the studies and the analyses that focus on the growth of misinformation in these media (Jerónimo and Esparza 2022; Correia et al. 2019). Even when we consider the studies that seek to analyze the state of journalism in a more general way, more and more emphasis has also been given to local media professionals and their problems in particular moments, such as the one that occurred during the pandemic (Newman et al. 2022; Cardoso et al. 2021; Camponez et al. 2020).

These investigations show that during the pandemic local news sites have seen significant increases in their consumption (Cardoso et al. 2021, p. 11). This change was assumed to be decisive for maintaining the operation of these media, many of which had a very fragile economic situation that tended to get worse during the pandemic. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that Portugal continues to be the second country—just behind Finland (69%)—where people trust the news the most (61%) and, in particular, the regional and local press (67%) (Cardoso et al. 2022; Newman et al. 2022), which reinforces the idea that during the pandemic, consumers sought credible information about a problem with global impact from the journalistic projects closest to them. On the other hand, these reports do not fail to warn of the degradation of working conditions, with the growing emptying of newsrooms and the overload on the remaining professionals during the pandemic (Cardoso et al. 2021; Camponez et al. 2020). Finally, the reports underline the challenges faced by the media in terms of their relationship with social networks, “controlled by

Meta platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook Messenger) and Google (Youtube)” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 36), and increasingly used for informative consumption. It is precisely this dimension that we explore in the next point.

2.2. The Importance of Digital Platforms for Local Media: Between Opportunities and Challenges

We ended the previous point by highlighting the importance that digital platforms for publishing and distributing content have gained as a source of news. In this second part of the theoretical review, we will deepen the relationship between the media and these platforms, trying to understand the potential effects of this dependence. In recent years we have witnessed the growth of digital platforms while the media have lost readers and listeners on their websites. It is in this context that “it has been suggested that these platforms, including (but not limited to) Facebook, Google, Apple, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, could potentially help rehabilitate journalism by allocating funds, providing journalists and editors with sophisticated tools and capabilities, highlighting and promoting quality news content, and directing audiences to news they are likely to find relevant” (Nechushtai 2018, p. 2).

However, while digital platforms have made it easier for people to access news content, they have also led to concerns about the quality and diversity of available news and the potential for spreading disinformation. The so-called platformization of news has been studied (van Dijck et al. 2018; Shearer and Matsu 2018; Hase et al. 2022; Zaid et al. 2022), but many questions remain unanswered regarding the impact these platforms can have on news outlet work. For some authors, “a vision of mutually beneficial collaboration between financially distressed news organizations and successful digital platforms, for which the dissemination of news is at best a secondary activity, should not overlook some sources of inevitable tension” (Nechushtai 2018, p. 1044).

Digital platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok, have played an increasing role in the distribution and consumption of news content. However, with the rise of social media and search engines, traditional news outlets face competition from these digital giants, who have become gatekeepers to the flow of information. This aspect is particularly important if we think that “interest in news fell, in Portugal, by 17.5 percentage points between 2021 and 2022”. Although “the general drop in interest in the news may be related to the excessive dual-thematization of the news agenda around the themes of the pandemic and the 2022 legislative elections” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 10), we cannot forget that digital platforms have become one of the primary sources of news.

A study by the Pew Research Center found that 62% of U.S. adults get news from social media and that these platforms are an increasingly important source of news for younger adults (Shearer and Matsu 2018). This value has been growing in recent years, as shown by the annual report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Digital News Report). For example, TikTok has become the fastest growing network in 2022, reaching 40% of 18–24 years, with 15% using the platform for news. Telegram has also grown significantly in some markets, providing a flexible alternative to WhatsApp (Newman et al. 2022). According to the Digital News Report Portugal 2022, produced by OberCom–Observatório da Comunicação, “91.2% of the Portuguese use some Meta platform in general, and 66.2% do it to get information. The Portuguese mostly use messaging apps (79.4%) for various purposes, and about a third (33.5%) use these platforms to get information through news” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 36). Access to platforms for news consumption has increased, but it is also important to highlight that “(...) roughly 1/4 of Facebook users consider that there is too much news content in their feeds, originating from news brands” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 37). In this context, it is important to highlight the idea presented in the “Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era” report, where the authors stressed that “in the digital environment, news consumption in Portugal is rarely made directly from news agencies, which causes the possibility of algorithmic influence and disinformation”. The data also show that “78% of the access to online news in Portugal occurs indirectly:

news aggregator (5%), search engine (28%), social media (24%), email (8%), or mobile alerts (13%) (Obercom 2021; Reuters 2021)" (Cádima et al. 2022, p. 19).

Thus, it is easy to understand how platformization has been influencing consumption. Social media algorithms prioritize content likely to generate engagement, such as likes, shares, and comments. As a result, news content that is sensational or divisive is more likely to be promoted, while more nuanced or in-depth reporting may be overlooked. This strategy has raised concerns about the quality and diversity of news available to consumers and the potential for spreading disinformation or hate speech.

Media management and business models are equally important parts of the issue. Many traditional news outlets have seen a decline in advertising revenue because of the shift to digital ads, dominated by big tech companies such as Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta (Facebook), and Microsoft. These changes have led to cutbacks in newsroom staff and a reduction in investigative and public interest reporting.

On the other hand, there have been calls for the regulation of technology platforms to address these issues. In 2019, the European Union passed the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market¹, which includes provisions to ensure that news publishers are fairly compensated for using their content through online platforms. There have been proposals for similar legislation in the United States, such as the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act².

Thus, we can conclude, "(...) this year's data [2022] confirm how the various shocks of the last few years, including the Coronavirus pandemic, have further accelerated structural shifts towards a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment, with further implications for the business models and formats of journalism" (Newman et al. 2022, p. 10). Nevertheless, in studying the role and impact of platforms, it is also necessary to consider those that have been other, more recent trends in the media ecosystem, namely, the importance that local media have been gaining.

The development of studies about local journalism shows that the topic has aroused more interest in recent years. At production and distribution levels, they have become dominated by the digital process. Newsroom structures and cultures are trying to reflect a digital-first mindset and changing audience preferences (Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021). On the other hand, local media are struggling with daily dynamics such as responding to audience demands and trying to survive the financial pressure and monopolization of the big platforms (Schulz 2021). These challenges were evident in the first years of internet integration in local newsrooms (Jerónimo 2015) and in the process of adopting social media (García-de-Torres et al. 2015). Recent studies point to the full integration of the internet into local journalists' routines as well as social media and mobile (Jerónimo et al. 2022c), mainly used for newsgathering and getting in touch with sources. Employing social media to engage with the community is not always a reality in local newsrooms. The same happens when recognizing or even incorporating content produced by citizens.

Although aware of the digital potential, the lack of human and material resources has hampered the work of local media. The platforms, which appear as an opportunity, are also spaces where new challenges emerge, such as difficulties with verifying content or the growing speed at which fake news circulates.

It is important to remember that, according to some studies, "'source blindness', which is defined as a state whereby individuals fail to consider source information when processing news content" (Pearson 2020, p. 3) has grown. The author of the study, who evaluated the influence of aspects such as "information context collapse" and the "volume of content" on "source blindness", concluded that "due to social media design features, users fail to connect source information to related content. While users are aware content has a source, those high in source blindness, are unlikely to recall source information or use the source to make content evaluations" (Pearson 2020, p. 3).

This difficulty in identifying sources is particularly worrying in the case of local media, not only because it jeopardizes the work of these professionals but also because the lack of human resources in these media prevents verification work that becomes fundamental.

In this context, it is essential to remember that the most recent data from the Digital News Report reveal “(...) that 7 out of 10 Portuguese are concerned about what is real or false on the Internet”, but at the same time, the percentage of those “who have a neutral position regarding concerns about the legitimacy of online content” has grown (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 20). If it is true that “(...) the Portuguese who trust the most in the news tend to be more concerned with falsehoods” (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 20), the feeling that it is not necessary to verify the legitimacy of the contents increases the importance of media literacy. Some of the most recent reports emphasize that “civil society is increasingly active in what concerns the presence of media literacy in non-formal education”. However, they also alert us to the lack of further initiatives since “(...) despite the existence of training programs on media education and digital citizenship for teachers, media literacy is only presented in a limited range in the education curriculum, in possible relation to other areas, such as the work on journalistic texts and narratives” (Cádima et al. 2022, pp. 16–17).

The data from the report “How It Started, How it is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022” by the European Policies Initiative (EuPI) and the Open Society Institute–Foundation Sofia (OSI–Sofia), which featured for the first time 41 European countries, confirms this idea. According to the document, “the countries in Northern and Western Europe have higher resilience potential to fake news with better education, free media and higher trust between people. The countries in Southeast and Eastern Europe are generally most vulnerable to the negative effects of fake news and post-truth, with controlled media, deficiencies in education and lower trust in society” (Lessenski 2022, p. 2). The index, where Portugal occupies the fourteenth position, highlights the fact that “education remains an essential component in addressing the “fake news” problems with targeted media literacy training as for youth and adults alike”, while also recommending that “the education and awareness raising remain long-term solutions, regulatory measures are necessary too in the short-term to address the erosion of democracy and geo-political challenges too” (Lessenski 2022, p. 2).

Eurobarometer data on media and news consumption habits also reveal that “10% of respondents think that, in that past seven days, they have ‘very often’ been exposed to disinformation and fake news; 18% reply that this happened ‘often’ in the past seven days and 33% reply that this happened ‘sometimes’” (European Parliament 2022, p. 38). Among respondents “a majority feel confident they can recognize disinformation: 12% feel ‘very confident’ and 52% ‘somewhat confident’” (European Parliament 2022, p. 38). In addition to differences between countries, “there are also differences between socio-demographic groups: seven in ten male respondents feel confident they can recognize disinformation and fake news; among female respondents, less than six in ten feel confident” (European Parliament 2022, p. 38). Finally, we also found that “confidence in distinguishing between real news and fake news decreases with age and increases with the level of education. Among respondents still in education, 16% replied feeling ‘very confident’ and 55% ‘somewhat confident’ in recognizing disinformation and fake news. Similarly, among 15-24 year-olds, 68% feel confident they can recognize disinformation, compared to 59% for 55+ year-olds” (European Parliament 2022, p. 39).

The data reveal, on the one hand, that the level of education influences the ability to identify disinformation and is, therefore, a relevant aspect to take into account in this article, but also that it is essential to stop considering the need for media literacy only for younger audiences, as it has been demonstrated by several studies that there is a need for “media and digital literacy education among adults and the elderly, including educating the educators” (Lessenski 2022, p. 15).

3. Materials and Methods

Before presenting the methodological procedures adopted, it is essential to remember that the focus groups carried out follow the surveys already done within the scope of the Re/media.Lab, the Regional Media Lab & Incubator project, mentioned earlier (Morais et al. 2020). The questionnaires applied to 42 local media in the central region of Portugal, namely, 25 newspapers and 17 radio stations, allowed to characterize the

professionals and their working conditions (n = 91), the business models (n = 107), and the sustainability of the journalistic projects (n = 107) (Morais et al. 2020). However, despite the relevance of the data obtained, which allowed us to better understand the reality of local media newsrooms, it would be necessary to deepen the information collected beyond a quantitative dimension. We then choose, within the project, focus groups as a data collection tool, since “focus groups are especially useful as a complement to other methods of data collection for providing in-depth information in a relatively short period of time” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 299). Therefore, we understand that as a qualitative technique, this could help us to deepen our knowledge about newsrooms, but above all, to listen to other equally essential voices in an analysis of the transformations within the local media ecosystem. The option for focus groups also resulted from the fact that they “are completely different from the other methods, in which the data can be collected individually, because they promote interaction among participants with spontaneity” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 301).

The use of focus groups thus made it possible to listen to those responsible for the media studied and considering their role in managing the media. It also allowed us to collect opinions and perceptions of media audiences (Morais et al. 2020), whereas they are “carefully planned series of discussions, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger and Casey 2000, p. 5).

In this article, we present the results of the three focus groups carried out, taking as a starting point the book report published within the Regional Media Lab & Incubator project (Morais et al. 2020). We conducted three focus groups with different elements: a first focus group, which had five elements, including journalists, directors, and subdirectors from different local media; a second focus group, also with five elements, including media directors, editors and journalists; and a third focus group with elements of the public, which brought together six readers and listeners of local media from the central region of Portugal (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution, roles, and local media of participants by focus group.

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3	
Focus Group with Local Media Professionals (Roles)	Local Media	Focus Group with Local Media Professionals (Roles)	Local Media	Focus Group with Local Media Consumers (Profession)	Local Media
Journalist	Press	Director	Press/Radio/Web TV	Sociologist	Press
Journalist/Chief Editor	Press	Journalist	Radio	Cameraperson	Press/Radio
Director	Radio/Press	Director	Press	Entrepreneur	Press/Radio
Subdirector	Press	Chief Editor	Press	Retired	Press/Radio
Journalist	Radio	Chief Editor	Press	Radio host/Musician	Press/Radio
				Higher Education student	Press/Radio

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

Considering that “selecting participants for focus groups is a very important and crucial task in order to make it a representative sample” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 300), in composing the focus groups, we try to ensure the participation of journalists, directors, editors, and local media consumers (newspapers and radios) from all regions under study within the project’s scope, as mentioned earlier (Morais et al. 2020). Therefore, the formation of groups was done based on discriminating factors (Gundumogula 2020, p. 300), such as the role in the local media in the two first focus groups, and local media consumption in the last one. Regarding the characteristics of the different elements that make up the groups, we are facing homogeneous groups in the first phase, that is, groups of only professionals and only consumers, but heterogeneous in their internal structure with the view that professionals assume different roles, whether in the press or on the radio, and that consumers are also different from a professional point of view and also in terms of sex and age (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution and characteristics of participants by focus group.

Focus Group 1			Focus Group 2			Focus Group 2		
Focus Group with Local Media Professionals	Sex	Age	Focus Group with Local Media Professionals	Sex	Age	Focus Group with Local Media Consumers	Sex	Age
Journalist	Female	25	Director	Male	59	Sociologist	Female	42
Journalist/Chief Editor	Male	42	Journalist	Male	50	Cameraperson	Male	29
Director	Male	46	Director	Male	40	Entrepreneur	Male	28
Subdirector	Male	51	Chief Editor	Female	41	Retired	Male	62
Journalist	Female	46	Chief Editor	Male	56	Radio host/Musician	Male	37
						Higher Education student	Female	20

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

The data in the table also show that men dominate among the professionals who participated in the focus groups. This trend is in line with other studies that alert us to gender inequalities in journalism (Jerónimo et al. 2022a), but men are also dominant among local media consumers. As we mentioned, there was an effort to form balanced groups, also in terms of gender. However, when this was impossible, the participation of elements from different regions was privileged. As for the age of the participants, the age range for media professionals ranges from 25 to 51 years old, while for readers and listeners, the range varies from 20 to 62.

In organizing the three planned focus groups, we also ensure, whenever possible, the most significant representation in geographic terms (Figure 1). As we can see in the figure, we have, between professionals and local media consumers, representatives from all of the eight Portuguese subregions (NUTS III) of the center of the country.



Figure 1. Subregions where representatives of both the media and the public come from.

It is also important to emphasize that the option to carry out three focus groups and the decision that each group had at least five elements was not random. On the contrary, this decision respected the indications of the different authors, who consider, on the one hand, that it is not desirable to carry out just one focus group about a theme since this option may jeopardize the legitimacy of the study. On the other hand, the ideal number of participants per group is between five and eight (Morgan 1997; Suter 2004). It is also

important to emphasize that in the two focus groups with professionals, we find journalists, editors, and directors, since in small media, professionals often assume all these functions, given the small number of elements that make up the newsrooms.

As we have already mentioned, focus groups differ from other techniques mainly due to the wealth of information to which they provide access (Gundumogula 2020). Thus, right after the focus groups, we checked the recordings and notes from the researchers who participated in the sessions. The next moment, the recordings were listened to and transcribed, constituting a fundamental basis for the analysis and interpretation of the data. Thus, the corpus of analysis results from the complete transcription of the interventions of the different participants in the focus groups, inserting the analysis in the qualitative and not quantitative framework, as is the case in many situations. Considering that it is possible to adopt different strategies and approaches for the analysis of focus groups, in this study, we opted for a method that follows the line of ethnographic studies, and that considers, for data interpretation, the very words of the participants in the focus groups (Krueger 1994). This decision results from the fact that we consider that “qualitative research methods do not only collect the data but also help researchers to understand the processes behind observed results by considering the thoughts, feelings and expressions of the participants” (Gundumogula 2020, p. 299). It is a question of effectively giving the possibility of expression to the participants rather than proceeding with data codification, as happens in thematic content analyses. This approach also results from the need to interpret and compare the different opinions and perceptions of the participants. Therefore, the presentation of data assumes an expositive and descriptive dimension. In the exposition, the name of the participants in the focus groups will not be revealed, just their function and the type of medium in which they work.

The next point presents the most relevant data, highlighting the shared opinions concerning the theme we address in this article, which involves issues of authorship and sharing news on social media. It is essential to point out that the focus groups addressed various issues related to local journalism. However, we focus here on those aspects that allow us to respond to the question that guided the investigation: can digital platforms for publishing and distributing content (Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, etc.) affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content? How does the dependency of the news industry on digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter pose a challenge to news organizations in terms of identification of news authors, namely, from local media?

Based on these questions, we hypothesize that the amount of content made available on digital platforms, with characteristics that, at least from a formal point of view, are similar to many news outlets, have contributed to an increasing difficulty in identifying news content on the part of readers, especially considering the lack of media and digital literacy of the Portuguese population. Considering the challenges that local news organizations are already facing, namely, the lack of human resources, we try to understand to what extent this platformization of news can, while allowing the media to cultivate new audiences, raise problems related to the authorship and identification and, ultimately, with the propagation of false news.

4. Results and Discussion

When presenting the results, we chose to divide the opinions of the participants according to the focus groups in which they participated, trying at the same time to group a set of ideas according to the purpose of the article, which was mainly to understand whether digital platforms can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content.

4.1. New Technologies, the Potential of Digital and the Lack of Media Literacy

We begin the presentation highlighting some aspects that stood out in the first focus group with media professionals, remembering that not only journalists but also directors

of local media were part of this group. For one person responsible for the local press who participated in the study, the new communication and information technologies allowed for more speed and connection with the news sources, which contributed to an increase in the production of news. The journalist also defended that those technologies allowed for an increase in the number of online readers and a closer relationship with the audiences themselves.

However, despite all of the potential, this journalist does not fail to highlight the negative side associated with technology, particularly with digital platforms, which “pass through fake news, lies and content that spread much more easily”. The false content that circulates on digital social media is one of the dimensions that most concern the journalists participating in the focus group. “The lack of rigor combined with the lack of verification of facts” the editorial manager also warns, since it appears that “many contents are published without being verified” (Morais et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, the professional from this local radio station also points out that false content cannot be dissociated from the lack of literacy on the part of audiences, namely, concerning the ability to distinguish trustworthy news from fake news. The journalist also considers that “(...) there is no literacy on the part of consumers on the Internet. Many cannot distinguish what is true and what is a lie. For them, everything is true because it is there. They do not even discuss it. Moreover, if we say that the news is fake, that it happened differently, they will say: “no, no, I saw it on the internet”” (Morais et al. 2020).

The lack of literacy by the public is also seen as a problem by other journalists. For one of them, this gap is joined by another, which is related to the possibility of information reaching audiences that are not interested in the issues but who share them, giving them a new context that can adulterate the meaning and facts presented by journalists. The journalist warns that “news we publish may reach someone other than our target audience. Furthermore, if the person receiving the news is not interested, does not know the source, or does not know the media and the journalist, they can very well make a negative comment and spread it around, which becomes a snowball” (Morais et al. 2020).

In another dimension, but still discussing digital platforms’ role in sharing news, journalists point out that the speed at which information circulates on social networking sites sometimes makes their verification work difficult. This difficulty arises associated with the platforms themselves. The different professionals consider that platforms have responsibilities in this process, but they do not assume them. In certain situations, even after the contents are flagged as fake by journalists, the platforms allow them to continue to circulate.

In this context, journalists consider fact-checking fundamental, especially considering the different problems related to misinformation that mark contemporary societies. Professionals also highlight the pressure to publish news, which is responsible for many mistakes, in addition to the speed of information circulation.

4.2. The Pressure to Publish and the Ability to Recognize Misinformation

We also try to understand, together with local media professionals, how they perceive the whole issue around immediacy and the pressure to publish. For one of the journalists from the local press, speed can never overrule the verification of information, and therefore, “if in doubt, do not publish it. It is better to miss the train”. For another one of the participants, “the accuracy has to be above the speed of the news; otherwise, it is not news, we are deceiving the listeners, the readers, the viewers”. The journalist alerts us of another phenomenon that has increased this pressure on the publication: press releases. He believes they contribute significantly to “a kind of fast-food journalism” as they promote “a copy-paste (...) of what was sent in the press releases” (Morais et al. 2020).

Although all professionals agree that they cannot submit to publication without verification, some alert immediacy is a way of survival since the ecosystem is now dominated by those who publish faster. The journalist believes it is only necessary to find a balance between rigor and speed in publishing information. For that professional from the local press,

one way to find that balance is to keep updating the news, starting with less information and adding as it becomes available, always guaranteeing its confirmation. The journalist also recalls that sometimes, when media outlets compete against each other, they inevitably make mistakes.

However, some consider that the issue of speed is closely linked to the public's demand. For another journalist, "people want immediacy, and when something happens, they are not concerned with knowing the most reliable source; people want to know right away" (Morais et al. 2020). The professional considers that confirmation remains in the background since the media are afraid that they will lose readers or listeners who find this information in other media by not publishing. This behavior on the part of the public is corroborated by the different participants in the focus group, who draw attention to concrete situations, namely, on social media: "Frequently, journalists, waiting to confirm something, are even insulted, on social media, for not reporting some news" (Morais et al. 2020). One of the professionals gives the example of a situation in which the newspaper decided to publish something without news value due to a wave of indignation on social media. The professional, therefore, alerts us of the importance of confirmation and verification, practices that are highlighted by all participants, especially considering growing public involvement. Another one of the journalists defends media outlets, stating that part of the problem is that the public thinks everything must be in the media: "People think everything is news, especially in the local. People think we must put everything in the newspaper. There are private issues that become public, and others that do not". The weekly journalist considers that, in this context, there is no concern on the part of the public regarding the selection criteria. In some situations, the public wants to report the events. It is also essential to note some difficulties in separating journalism from advertising. "We often feel this confusion by the audiences. People say and swear: "I read it in your newspaper" and "I am not talking about the internet", "I read it in the newspaper, you put that in the news". "We say it is not information, and the citizen will pick up the newspaper to prove it and then show an ad" (Morais et al. 2020).

4.3. Changes in Journalistic Processes and News Consumption Habits

In the second focus group with journalists, directors, and editors of local media, we also identified some of main local media challenges, including, in the words of the participants, immediacy and the need to produce content more quickly and, in the case of the radio, first for the website and only then for radio broadcasting. For these professionals, the routines of journalists are transformed, registering changes right away in the search and selection of information. However, those responsible for local media also speak of a change in consumption habits, not only in terms of media but also concerning the time dedicated to each media, with an increase towards time-phased consumption on demand. The journalist also recalls that although digital platforms have augmented views of the content produced, advertisers continue to favor traditional media, posing several challenges to advertising revenue. For another of the journalists from local radio, one could even speak of a change in access to sources since journalists are often contacted. That is, the initiative comes from the sources, contrary to previous events. The journalist is now contacted through social media by sources he is unaware of; there has been a "democratization" of this process. However, the director of a local newspaper draws attention to the danger of accessing much of the information circulating on social media. According to him, much of that information is often not confirmed, opening doors to misinformation simply because the journalist could have done their job better, leaving their desk and going to confirm the facts. Journalists agree that it is necessary to reinforce the process of confirming the information that arrives, namely, through social media, remembering that the media can even have access to exclusive information. However, they must confirm and wait to publish it (Morais et al. 2020).

4.4. *The Problem of Verifying the Origin of Content*

The different participants in the focus group consider that it is essential that journalists do not limit themselves to desk work. They must take advantage of the potential of digital platforms to establish contacts and obtain information. Nevertheless, they must go out into the street to confirm this information. In this context, the participants in this second group address a subject also highlighted in the first focus group, which is related to the fact that “people have more and more access to information and know less and less”. The journalist considers that sharing of content has increased without its origin being verified. Thus, those responsible for local media emphasize the importance of differentiating social media consumers and media readers and listeners. “Consumers of social media, who are not newspaper readers or radio listeners, put everything in the same basket and believe everything is information made by the journalists” (Morais et al. 2020). The professionals’ defense, therefore, is that there is a lack of media literacy, but also general knowledge, and considers that it is not easy on the part of the public to identify the authors of the content, often mixing content produced by citizens with content produced by journalists.

4.5. *The New Role of Journalists and the Platforms’ Accountability*

In the last of the focus groups, this time with members of the public, the participants highlighted the importance of investing in public education. Several defended their view that the media also have a responsibility in this process of public formation. In this context, they also believe there is room to implement new models and formulas to approach new themes in innovative ways. However, the concern that we identified in the focus groups with professionals is also present among readers and listeners, who agree that it is necessary to bet, more effectively, on the work of separation between what matters and what does not, between what is fake or just promotional content. Thus, public members highlight the importance of carrying out this examination and do not give the idea that anyone can be a journalist. “(...) There is a lot of filtering work to debug what matters. Nevertheless, there are other associated problems. For example, a ghost hangs over journalists, resulting from the idea that all citizens start filming everything and putting it on a blog, ending the journalist’s profession because we are all amateur reporters” (Morais et al. 2020). Some members acknowledge that they follow certain issues through sources other than the media, noting that many blogs or pages sometimes have more solid structures than the local media. In this sense, the participants argue that journalists currently have new responsibilities. “The journalist will have to act almost like a judge. Realize: “okay, it is important, but is it credible?” This is what I also want to pass on to readers, who, in turn, are already producing content. We need some content filtering” (Morais et al. 2020).

To finish this presentation of the results, we emphasize that the ideas presented by media professionals are confirmed by the members of the public who participated in the focus groups. This convergence of opinions and perceptions concerning the local media situation deserves to be highlighted, as it reveals that a common path can be traced in the search for solutions to some of the main problems that affect the sector. In particular, considering the question that guided us in this study, which involved understanding how the relation with platforms can affect distribution, circulation of contents, and identification of news authors, we also noted a convergence of ideas about the role of platforms and the need for a greater separation between different types of content. Everyone argues that it is necessary to invest more in media literacy, remembering that it is also essential that platforms act more effectively in the fight against disinformation.

5. Conclusions

The realization of focus groups within the scope of the Re/media.Lab project allows for the collection of opinions from local media professionals and public members, which would entitle a deeper understanding of the reality of the challenges that arise in these media’s present and future. One of the issues that drew our attention during the analysis of responses was related to the role of digital platforms in news distribution and the growing

difficulties in identifying the authorship of content shared on social media. We decided to extract this issue from a broader set of data (Morais et al. 2020) and address it in more detail in this article.

The data presented in the previous point, which are part of a book on *“Journalism in the central region of Portugal”*, were produced within the scope of the Re/media.Lab project Regional Media Lab & Incubator. Ref. (Morais et al. 2020) synthesizes the main perceptions concerning some of the most relevant local journalism transformations. The data allow us to conclude that all professionals, as well as the public, are aware of the changes introduced in the news ecosystem regarding production, distribution, and consumption. The potential that new technologies have brought to journalists is evident in the fast and easy contact with news sources, allowing access to much more information today. Professionals also highlighted the growing difficulty in selecting and verifying much of the information circulating in the digital environment and reaching newsrooms. In this context, they also alerted us to the problem of disinformation, emphasizing the importance of fact-checking. They also stated that having a presence on digital platforms for publishing and distributing content is fundamental. However, these digital platforms, such as Facebook or Google, must be reconciled with accountability for their actions concerning content identified as fake but which continues to circulate. Among the main concerns demonstrated by the professionals is the issue of authorship of the contents, which was precisely the issue that we focused on in this study. Professionals revealed difficulties in explaining to audiences that only some contents that appear on social media are news and the differences between news and advertising or branded content. The perception of readers and listeners of local media accompanied this concern by professionals. They defended the need to affirm the journalist’s role as the only one capable of assuming the function of verification, keeping audiences away from falsified or adulterated content.

In the literature review, we talked about the difficulty in connecting source information to related content, which the responses of journalists, readers, and listeners of local media help corroborate. We also refer to the first steps that have already been taken towards regulating the platforms’ activity, which media professionals’ responses indicate as decisive. Greater accountability of platforms is seen as fundamental in combating the lack of information and in the process of literacy for social media. At the beginning of the article, we mentioned that the objective was to understand how platforms can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content. We question if digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, etc.) can affect the perception of audiences concerning the authorship of news content.

Nevertheless, we are also interested in understanding how the dependency of the news industry on digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, poses a challenge to news organizations in terms of identifying news authors, namely, from local media. After analyzing the participant’s responses in the focus groups, we can conclude that the platforms affect the audience’s perception of authorship. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the news authors more clearly. Another one of the questions that guided this work was related to the role that the audiences themselves could have, putting pressure on the media and contributing to a publication without verification. Journalists assumed that this pressure was real and that mistakes are made because the content is published without being correctly verified. We can conclude that the market and competitive logic that dominates the media ecosystem has contributed to the increase in unverified publications, putting journalistic authority itself into question. Therefore, we confirm the hypothesis that we put forward regarding the increasing difficulty in identifying the contents by the public. It is also essential to invest more and more into media literacy, starting with the local media themselves, to combat these difficulties in identifying the authorship of news content and the spread of disinformation. On the other hand, if, as we verified in the literature review, “in distinguishing between real news and fake news confidence decreases with age and increases with the level of education,” it is fundamental that the commitment to media literacy initiatives considers other publics beyond the young.

Finally, we must notice that with such high levels of exposure to disinformation, as we identified in the literature review, the percentage of respondents who feel confident in identifying this content is high. However, the focus groups allowed us to go beyond the numbers and survey responses and capture the actual perception of the issues. Thus, once again, we highlight the importance of media literacy to assess this ability to identify content, ensuring that such a high level of confidence in the news is not affected by a false sense of disinformation detection.

We finish the article with the idea that it is necessary to continue studying local media. Above all, it is necessary to analyze how these media have used social media and how they look at the potential of digital platforms for publishing and distributing content. The lack of resources in many of the local newsrooms and the lack of knowledge can constitute an obstacle in the use of the resources of the platforms. However, we should not place the burden of the issue only on the side of the media. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate what has been done by digital platforms, what responsibilities have been assumed, and what they need to continue to do so that issues of authorship and difficulty in identifying sources do not continue to be a problem that undermines journalistic credibility. In a moment as challenging as the one we are going through, namely, in terms of disinformation, efforts are up to everyone. There is no point in the media doing their part if there is no legislation to regulate the platforms' activity.

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Notes

¹ Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/790/oj>.

² Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/673>.

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Article

Hate and Incivilities in Hashtags against Women Candidates in Chile (2021–2022)

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Abstract: This study is interested in the phenomenon of violence in social networks against women who hold political office in the framework of the Chilean constitutional process (2021–2022). To study this major socio-political phenomenon, we have used the tracking database “Women and Politics”, composed of 2,912,732 Twitter posts mentioning women candidates and collected between July 2021 and September 2022. Based on this data, we analyzed the network of hashtags by electoral list at points in time: all 2021 messages, all 2022 messages and only hate messages published in 2022 (n = 563,223), codified by an automated detection method. The results of the study reveal that hashtags extracted from messages containing hate speech are better understood under the concept of incivilities. These were expressed in a two-phase electoral process: the presidential election and the constitutional plebiscite. The implications and limits of this study are discussed and considered in context in the conclusion.

Keywords: women; hate speech; online violence; constitutional process; Chile



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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the violence published in social networks about women candidates, in the context of the Chilean Constitutional Process. After the social uprising of October 2019, a cross-party political agreement enabled a constitutional reform and plebiscite that allowed the people of Chile to approve the possibility of drafting a new constitution. In the context of a deep social and political crisis unprecedented in recent Chilean history, the country set out to find an institutional way to channel an acute social malaise that had accumulated over the past 30 years. The response to this problem was the organization of a Constitutional Convention, which incorporated gender criteria and quotas for indigenous peoples, as well as selecting the grouping of independent lists. The result was the election of a body with very heterogeneous and atypical members, with differing “political capitals” (Jofré-Rodríguez 2021), whose mission for one year was to draft a new constitutional proposal, which was put to a plebiscite on 4 September 2022.

The election of convention members took place on 15 and 16 May 2021 within the framework of unprecedented electoral rules. On an axis from left to right, the following lists were presented: Apruebo Dignidad, which grouped the candidates of the Partido Comunista de Chile and the parties of the Frente Amplio; Lista del Apruebo, grouping the center-left parties or Ex-Concertación; and Vamos por Chile, that grouped the alliance of the center-right parties RN, UDI and Evopoli. In addition to the lists, two other groupings were also presented: the one that brought together the candidacies of the Indigenous Peoples (Pueblos Originarios), who elected 17 representatives; and the list of *Independientes* candidates, who surprised by winning 38 seats, out of a total of 155.

The distribution of seats was also the product of an unprecedented parity rule, which ensured that half of the representatives were women. The new institutional rules had a clear effect on the expression of parity and also about indigenous peoples’ representation, which makes it possible to study in detail the type of discourse circulating on social

networks about various groups excluded from society. In effect, the regulations approved (Law 21.216 2020) established that the process would ensure gender parity and with reserved seats for indigenous peoples, also allowing for the representation of lists outside the traditional party structures. Moreover, the gender parity of constituent power has meant a massive presence of women candidates across the country, with their public voice erupting in debates around contingent issues and others such as women's rights, feminism and discrimination (Figuerola 2021; Ponce de León 2021). The implementation of the measure was considered very successful, since parity was achieved and even in several cases, the rule operated in reverse: that is, some female candidates with very good electoral results had to give their seats to candidates who obtained only third place in the voting. Out of a total of 1373 nominations for the convention, 51% were women (699). In the end, seventy-seven women and 78 men were elected.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Hate Speech

We have preferred to use the notion of hate speech for this study, given that we have a panoramic view of the characteristics that the phenomenon assumed during the functioning of the Constitutional Convention in Chile. According to Parekh (2006), hate speech is: an objectively offensive or demeaning message; targeting a specifically identified social group and putting that group at risk of exclusion from society. Waldron (2012) expressed that hate speech manifests itself in four modalities: (a) accusing members of a specific group of committing illegal acts in a generalized manner; (b) equating that group with another element that allows its dehumanization; (c) denigrating and offensive characterization of the group; (d) specific prohibition according to the group's representative defining features. Starting from Miró's (2016) taxonomy, Calderón et al. (2020) identify three purposes pursued by these hate speeches: (1) direct incitement or glorification of violence; (2) incitement to discrimination, hate or restriction of rights; and (3) offenses against feelings.

2.2. Hashtags and Incivilities

Hashtags are one of the ways we have of approaching online communication phenomena that occur in social networks. From that point of view, hashtags represent a form of discrete and intentional expression of a message. In this particular case, our research focuses on studying hashtags extracted from a much larger corpus of tweets, which collected the total number of mentions of the women candidates. The study of hashtags has been frequently used to analyze feminist social movements (Mendes et al. 2019), social mobilizations (Suk et al. 2021) and, in general, public opinion phenomena such as the campaign #me too (Lindgren 2019). However, entry by hashtags has also been used to analyze hate speeches and, in particular, to study rational, ethnic and misogynist hate speeches circulating in social networks. In summary, it is possible to propose to formulate an analysis of hashtag networks for hate speeches against women in political office, provided that it is understood that the nature of the messages circulating under this type of mass messaging is not expressed under the same form and systematicity as in the cases of other hate speeches.

However, the use of hashtags seems to be less adapted to capture hate speech by itself, given that hashtags contain a message that seeks to circulate extensively. While individual tweets may contain more overt hate speech, this is not expected to be the case with hashtags. For this reason, we have considered it pertinent to use the notion of incivilities. A large part of the literature assumes that this violence is part of the nature of the exchanges that take place in social networks against politicians, and therefore observe this phenomenon through the prism of incivilities (Theocharis et al. 2020; Saldaña and Rosenberg 2020). By contrast, Gagliardone et al. (2015) define cyberhate as including expressions that directly encourage the commission of discriminatory acts or hate violence. This conceptualization leads Wright et al. (2021, p. 22) to say that "it is a central and highly relevant scientific and social issue", while the newly termed concept of cyberhate requires its own field of study

(Chakraborti et al. 2014). Finally, Davidson et al. (2017) proposed distinguishing between offensive or vulgar language and hate speech.

The use of the concept of incivilities is further justified by the issues in which this research is framed: women's participation in political institutions and the discourses that circulate about them in social networks. Therefore, this work is part of the line of research that is concerned with the gender gap in the field of politics. Among these concerns, one that is fundamental is the violence that women who perform representative functions receive via social networks. Indeed, several studies have shown that these people are more exposed to this type of violence due to high levels of public recognition (Rheault et al. 2019, p. 1; Krook and Restrepo 2020; Southern and Harmer 2021; Suarez Estrada 2021). By posing the question of how hostile behavior against women affects the Chilean constitutional process, we will gain a much better understanding of the challenges they face in consolidating their careers, particularly in an international context of an acute and diverse crisis of democracy.

In order to answer this major question, we re-constructed the networks of 50 hashtags with the highest circulation for the four main and one additional minor electoral lists that ran for constitutional elections (five in total: Independientes, Pueblos Indígenas, Apruebo Dignidad, Lista del Apruebo and Chile Vamos). In this way, a comparison was made between the total hashtags mentioning the members of each list for the period 2021 and 2022. That same information was compared with the hashtags that were extracted from the messages that were effectively coded as hate speech for the year 2022, by means of the automatic detection method that we describe below. From this network analysis exercise that emerged from the analysis and its metrics, we explored whether there were substantive differences between the hashtags that appeared most frequently in the different electoral lists (RQ 1) and whether there were detectable differences in each electoral list for the three observations (2021 without hate/2022 without hate/2022 hashtags with hate) (RQ 2).

The analysis is presented in two sections: (a) the hashtags and their metrics are presented for each list, and (b) the network graphs of all lists for the three data corpora (2021 total hashtags, 2022 total hashtags and 2022 hashtags with hate messages) are then introduced.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and Procedure

We used a quantitative methodology in two phases. The first phase, based on natural language processing techniques, had as its main objective the detection of these discourses. With the support of the Stop Hate project of the Audiovisual Content Observatory of the University of Salamanca, Spain, we executed the download of tweets using Python through Twitter's Application Programming Interface 2 (API). The search was carried out using the usernames of the different members without the 'at' symbol (@) to access both their tweets and those that mentioned them. All these messages and their associated microdata were downloaded—language, geolocation (if any), public tweet metrics, and public metrics of the user, among others.

The second stage consisted of the characterization of these speeches, based on manual coding. A total of 2,912,732 tweets were downloaded between July 2021 and September 2022. Table 1 below describes the distribution of the data collected by each discharge month (month of the year) and by the list that represented each woman candidate during her election (electoral lists).

Table 1. General corpus of Twitter messages by electoral list, 2021–2022.

Date	Lista del Apruebo	Apruebo Dignidad	Independientes	Pueblos Originarios	Vamos por Chile	Total
July-21/December-21	50,464	237,360	308,059	487,220	624,343	1,707,446
January-22–September-22	40,705	214,513	329,439	131,913	676,520	1,393,090
Total	84,190	428,404	591,286	602,441	1,206,411	2,912,732

As can be seen in the table, the candidates are not distributed evenly across the different lists. Some lists, such as “Vamos Chile”, returned far larger numbers of mentions than others. This is not related to the number of representatives that each list elected: For example, in the second biggest list of mentions (from “Pueblos Originarios”), the candidates in question represent only 11 of the total seats, including candidates of both sexes. Finally, the “Lista del Apruebo” obtained a very small number, and in this case, a good part of its candidates are mentioned. All this means that it was not the number of representatives that explains the number of mentions, but rather the notoriety and/or interest that the candidates caused in Twitter users.

From this general corpus, a subcorpus of messages was extracted which, according to the detection method used, contained hate speech. The distribution by list and month is shown in the Table 2. As can be seen, all the lists studied record hate speech in their messages, showing the political transversality of the phenomenon. A second aspect of interest is that the number of hate messages detected is proportional to the total number of messages that mention the candidates on each list. It should be noted that the dictionary used for the automatic detection went from 102 words to 5379 words, thanks to the improved detection and the adaptations to the use of Chilean Spanish that the project team was able to identify.

Table 2. Subcorpus of Twitter messages with hate speech detected by electoral lists (2022).

Month/Electoral Lists	Lista del Apruebo	Apruebo Dignidad	Independientes	Pueblos Originarios	Vamos por Chile	Total
January	2499	4397	11,089	7156	8755	33,896
February	4968	8749	19,640	7577	42,916	83,850
March	3755	8918	17,673	8980	35,466	74,792
April	3900	17,698	26,354	13,732	44,795	106,479
May	1097	6044	4261	7617	7198	26,217
June	1163	8569	17,880	6827	25,749	60,188
July	1184	10,046	17,479	7096	51,489	87,294
August	8749	17,352	14,679	3415	38,071	82,266
September	635	1341	2000	1013	3252	8241
Total	27,950	83,114	131,055	63,413	257,691	563,223

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Electoral Lists

In view of the significant scores obtained by the various groups calling themselves “independents”, we have grouped them into a single category. However, this exercise is not without its problems. For this choice, it is possible to identify at least two types of independents—independents within a given list or pact, i.e., those persons who were not party militants but were sponsored by the parties to integrate their lists; and the lists of independents. According to the analysis of [Rozas Bugueño et al. \(2022\)](#), of the 155 elected candidates, at least 103 did not belong to a political party (p. 80). Of these 103, 55 can be considered non-partisan independents, that is, candidates not supported by parties and without militancy, and of these, 33 were women (p. 82). However, it is possible to point out that from an ideological point of view, the label of independent does not fully reveal in name the complexity of the variable considered for the analysis. Indeed, as [Fábrega \(2022\)](#) has

pointed out, the ideological identification of each candidate prior to the process provided a variable that predicted very well their legislative behavior within the Convention. Therefore, it is possible to point out that in some cases, the category of independents is too large to perceive, for example, the discrepancies that existed in the positions defended by the members of Lista del Pueblo and those of the list of Independientes No Neutrales. Such is the heterogeneity of the lists that participated and of the possible combinations, that we have preferred to group under the category “Independent” all those candidates who belonged to this complex series of lists without belonging to the traditional political parties in Chile.

3.2.2. Hashtags’ Network Metrics and Visualization

We performed the metric analysis of hashtags extracted from the Twitter messages posted. We used an undirected graph network G to represent the connections between the fifty most frequent hashtags in tweets. In $G = (V, E)$, V denotes the set of nodes (hashtags) and E denotes the set of edges (co-occurrence of two hashtags in the same tweet) in G . An edge $e_{ij} \in E$ corresponds to a set of node pairs (v_i, v_j) that connects node v_i and v_j in G . Edges in the network were defined after Kang et al. (2017) as follows.

Degree centrality simply corresponds to the degree of a node, i.e., the number of edges that a node has with the other nodes. Closeness centrality is based on calculating the average of the geodesic distances (or shortest paths) from one node to all other nodes. The greater the distance between two vertices, the smaller the closeness between them. Therefore, closeness is defined as the multiplicative inverse of the remoteness between two vertices. Betweenness centrality is a measure of centrality that quantifies the number of times a node lies between the geodesics of other nodes. A node will have high betweenness if it is a cutoff vertex for many geodesics between nodes (Drieger 2013; Gloor and Diesner 2014; Kang et al. 2017; Mattei et al. 2021). To detect communities, we used Community detection based on edge betweenness. High-betweenness edges are removed sequentially (recalculating at each step) and the best partitioning of the network is selected (Girvan and Newman 2002). For the construction of the network and the calculation of the metrics, we used the package igraph (Csardi and Nepusz 2006). Figure 1 summarizes the three steps required, which are as follows.



Figure 1. Description of network construction stages.

1. Loading the data. In this step, the data previously labeled as tweets with “hate speech” loading are read.
2. Network construction. In this step, each tweet is considered as a document. A process of separating by “token” is performed obtaining a matrix of 0 and 1—0 if the token is not in the tweet and 1 if the token is in the tweet. Then, only the hashtags in the document array are selected prior to creating a “sparse feature co-occurrence matrix” (Benoit et al. 2018).
3. Network attributes calculation. In this step, the overall network metrics are calculated: density, diameter and average path length. Moreover, the local centrality measures (degree centrality, betweenness centrality and closeness centrality) are calculated.

3.2.3. Detecting Hate Speech and Incivilities

To detect messages containing hate speech and incivilities, we used a double coding process, first manual (2021) and then automated. First, the predictive model classified the messages into hate/non-hate speech (first coding) and second, this classification was manually validated by a researcher (second coding). In a first stage, the intercoder reliability index between the three manual coders was controlled, with a result of 0.70 for the June 2021 data, 0.79 for that of July 2021 and 0.80 for the August 2021 data. Next,

the intercoding agreement between manual and automated coding was checked. Thus, a 0.50 manual intercoding agreement was obtained for September and October 2021 and 0.68 for November and December 2021. These results, although lower, are still within the commonly used standards for this type of automated detection procedure.

To detect incivilities, we operated a qualitative manual analysis, from the five most frequent hashtags up to the total network of 50 hashtags. Emphasis was placed on the dimension of offensive, personal discrediting and vulgar expressions that can be summarized in hashtags. We read each hashtag and, when there were doubts about their meaning, we went back to check in the database the meaning that this expression may have had for the accounts that used them at the time.

4. Results

We organized the analysis of the hashtags into two points in time: 2021 and 2022. Here, we present only the metrics that the networks collected, highlighting the contrasts seen in the topics of each network. The first point that seems important is the analysis of the hashtag networks metrics. The observation is given for each year separately, thus favoring the analysis of the possible differences that each network articulates. Secondly, we show the metrics of the hashtag’s networks. Tables 3–8 show the five hashtags with the highest metrics of the five electoral and studied lists. Subsequently, in Figures 2–6, we present the graphs of each network, which allow the hashtags containing incivilities to be analyzed. An interpretation of the totality (50) of the hashtags of the network is given.

Table 3. Five highest hashtags in local network metrics for “Apruebo Dignidad”.

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
2021	#convencionconstitucional	0.058234098	#chile	0.061760646	#chile	0.0003016006
	#chile	0.055910543	#convencionconstitucional	0.057163137	#convencionconstitucional	0.0003015991
	#boricpresidente	0.042550102	#boricpresidente	0.031703071	#boricpresidente	0.0003015927
	#convencionconstituyente	0.028173105	#convencionconstituyente	0.020692143	#convencionconstituyente	0.0003015906
	#boricpresidente2022	0.026575661	#circoconstituyente	0.016701160	#convencionconstitucional	0.0003015882
2022	#apruebo	0.062204046	#apruebo	0.043150557	#rechazo	0.0004489131
	#rechazo	0.061127852	#rechazo	0.042513213	#chile	0.0004489101
	#chile	0.048428756	#chile	0.035170520	#apruebo	0.0004489071
	#rechazotransversal	0.041541111	#convencionconstitucional	0.025602884	#convencionconstitucional	0.0004489018
	#convencionconstitucional	0.036375377	#nuevaconstitucion	0.020994198	#rechazotransversal	0.0004488966

Table 4. Five highest hashtags in local network metrics for “Lista del Apruebo”.

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
2021	#convencionconstitucional	0.057928613	#convencionconstitucional	0.0470311662	#convencionconstitucional	0.001036760
	#chile	0.047981276	#chile	0.0304784154	#chile	0.001036705
	#circoconstituyente	0.047981276	#circoconstituyente	0.0272174545	#rechazodesalida	0.001036678
	#rechazodesalida	0.039204213	#maluchapinto	0.0260586534	#circoconstituyente	0.001036676
	#maluchapinto	0.037448800	#rechazodesalida	0.0193613223	#teleton	0.001036632
2022	#rechazo	0.087579618	#rechazo	0.0466066455	#rechazotransversal	0.001656769
	#rechazotransversal	0.070063694	#rechazotransversal	0.0405721383	#rechazo	0.001656677
	#rechazoelmamarrachocomunista	0.064490446	#convencionconstitucional	0.0379152858	#rechazoladestrucciondechile	0.001656634
	#convencionculia	0.056528662	#rechazodesalida	0.0279228956	#rechazoelmamarrachocomunista	0.001656618
	#convencionconstitucional	0.050955414	#convencionculia	0.0278270625	#convencionculia	0.001656542

Table 5. Five highest hashtags in local network metrics for “Independientes”.

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
2021	#chile	0.088442087	#chile	0.082362316	#chile	0.0002921714
	#convencionconstitucional	0.068829407	#convencionconstitucional	0.062670888	#convencionconstitucional	0.0002921693
	#tiapikachu	0.047119773	#tiapikachu	0.032845669	#tiapikachu	0.0002921613
	#antofagasta	0.040582213	#antofagasta	0.026173946	#convencionconstituyente	0.0002921604
	#circoconstituyente	0.035031454	#circoconstituyente	0.024310114	#antofagasta	0.0002921602
2022	#chile	0.062228871	#chile	0.0460340376	#chile	0.0003298569
	#rechazo	0.060882573	#convencionconstitucional	0.0431648988	#rechazo	0.0003298563
	#rechazotransversal	0.057142857	#rechazo	0.0364276174	#convencionconstitucional	0.0003298548
	#convencionconstitucional	0.052505610	#apruebo	0.0277960151	#rechazotransversal	0.0003298537
	#apruebo	0.048017951	#nuevaconstitucion	0.0235721928	#apruebo	0.0003298518

Table 6. Five highest hashtags in local network metrics for “Pueblos Originarios”.

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
2021	#elisoncon	0.107892527	#elisoncon	0.0638686641	#elisoncon	0.0001674043
	#chile	0.090330255	#convencionconstitucional	0.0539812099	#convencionconstitucional	0.0001674038
	#convencionconstitucional	0.087881332	#chile	0.0538189096	#chile	0.0001674037
	#circoconstituyente	0.067450322	#circoconstituyente	0.0431164686	#circoconstituyente	0.0001674023
	#convencionconstituyente	0.062902323	#convencionconstituyente	0.0314237062	#convencionconstituyente	0.0001674023
2022	#elisoncon	0.093133386	#elisoncon	0.0563966388	#elisoncon	0.0005901172
	#chile	0.076295712	#chile	0.0484200257	#chile	0.0005901166
	#rechazo	0.073138648	#rechazo	0.0377312987	#rechazo	0.0005901082
	#rechazotransversal	0.056300973	#convencionconstitucional	0.0365022372	#rechazotransversal	0.0005900961
	#convencionconstitucional	0.052091555	#apruebo	0.0250988344	#convencionconstitucional	0.0005900933

Table 7. Five highest hashtags in local network metrics for “Vamos por Chile”.

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
2021	#convencionconstitucional	0.057928613	#convencionconstitucional	0.0470311662	#convencionconstitucional	0.001036760
	#chile	0.047981276	#chile	0.0304784154	#chile	0.001036705
	#circoconstituyente	0.047981276	#circoconstituyente	0.0272174545	#rechazodesalida	0.001036678
	#rechazodesalida	0.039204213	#maluchapinto	0.0260586534	#circoconstituyente	0.001036676
	#maluchapinto	0.037448800	#rechazodesalida	0.0193613223	#teleton	0.001036632
2022	#rechazo	0.075341111	#rechazo	0.0442381727	#rechazo	0.0002013888
	#chile	0.064563971	#chile	0.0426955224	#chile	0.0002013877
	#rechazotransversal	0.048348823	#apruebo	0.0219553850	#rechazotransversal	0.0002013857
	#apruebo	0.043602927	#rechazotransversal	0.0179918509	#rechazodesalida	0.0002013851
	#convencionculia	0.033814515	#convencionculia	0.0144377625	#apruebo	0.0002013850

Table 8. Five highest hashtags in local network metrics with hate speech (2022).

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
Apruebo Dignidad	#rechazo	0.093913744	#rechazo	0.0722973939	#rechazo	0.0009527240
	#rechazotransversal	0.060056429	#chile	0.0455788406	#chile	0.0009526622
	#apruebo	0.056831923	#apruebo	0.0385706469	#rechazoelmamarrachocomunista	0.0009526479
	#chile	0.054816606	#convencionculia	0.0325274655	#rechazotransversal	0.0009526464
	#rechazoelmamarrachocomunista	0.054413543	#rechazotransversal	0.0321835020	#convencionculia	
Lista del Apruebo	#rechazo	0.09129512	#rechazo	0.0577913241	#rechazotransversal	0.002306037
	#rechazoelmamarrachocomunista	0.07112527	#convencionconstitucional	0.0459548109	#rechazo	0.002305947
	#rechazotransversal	0.07112527	#rechazotransversal	0.0425674794	#rechazodesalida	0.002305806
	#convencionconstitucional	0.05944798	#rechazodesalida	0.0374297950	#rechazoelmamarrachocomunista	0.002305698
	#convencionculia	0.05307856	#convencionculia	0.0341646357	#convencionculia	0.002305687
Independientes	#rechazo	0.083732057	#rechazo	0.054970093	#rechazo	0.0007381898
	#rechazodesalida2022	0.064892344	#convencionconstitucional	0.046320314	#chile	0.0007381690
	#rechazotransversal	0.064294258	#chile	0.045161088	#rechazodesalida2022	0.0007381662
	#chile	0.061004785	#rechazodesalida2022	0.032766792	#rechazotransversal	0.0007381652
	#convencionculia	0.061004785			#convencionconstitucional	0.0007381581

Table 8. Cont.

	Hashtags	Degree Centrality	Hashtags	Betweenness Centrality	Hashtags	Closeness Centrality
Pueblos Originarios	#rechazo	0.094594595	#rechazo	0.051852527	#rechazo	0.001107906
	#elisioncon	0.081547064	#elisioncon	0.045490531	#rechazodesalida2022	0.001107885
	#rechazodesalida2022	0.076421249	#chile	0.039661442	#elisioncon	0.001107885
	#rechazotransversal	0.072693383	#convencionconstitucional	0.039510053	#rechazotransversal	0.001107876
	#chile	0.068965517	#rechazodesalida2022	0.039278551	#chile	0.001107868
Chile Vamos	#rechazo	0.094194962	#rechazo	0.063475465	#rechazo	0.0004214846
	#chile	0.074297189	#chile	0.051056471	#chile	0.0004214772
	#apruebo	0.054581964	#apruebo	0.027644181	#rechazotransversal	0.0004214643
	#rechazotransversal	0.051113545	#convencionculia	0.023711760	#rechazodesalida	0.0004214632
	#convencionculia	0.048010223	#rechazotransversal	0.017433542	#rechazoporchile	0.0004214626

4.1. Highest Hashtags Networks Local Metrics by Electoral Lists (2021–2022)

The representation of these networks is shown in Figures 2–6 below. Firstly, we have in Figure 2 the representation of the network of hashtags of the *Apruebo Dignidad* membership. This list represented the left-wing sensibilities of the political spectrum, which eventually integrated with the government at the time of the election in December 2021 of President Gabriel Boric Font. In this network, in 2021, the hashtags refer mostly to the constitutional process, giving way also to messages that make clear reference to the then candidate Gabriel Boric. There are also some references to the right-wing candidate José Kast and to rejection, but these are not central to the network. However, in 2022, we find a complete turnaround in the mentions of the members. The hashtags are oriented in this second phase towards the plebiscite process, with the call to approve the process clearly appearing (#apruebo). At the same time, the discourse of rejection also appears very strongly, with various hashtags showing that mentions of the members are strongly associated with this discourse (#rechazodesalida, #circoconstituyente or #rechazoelmamarracho).

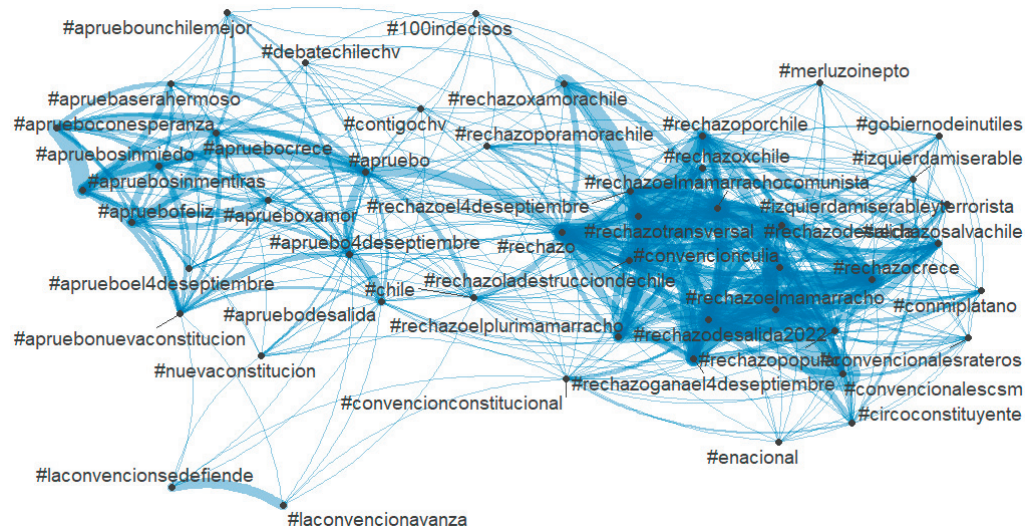


Figure 2. Network of hashtags with hate speech for *Apruebo Dignidad* 2022.

#recha-zoel4deseptiembre, #noesmiconstitucion, #rechazoxamorachile). Rejection is then observed as a much denser and interconnected group of mentions at the top of the network, while the approval node is observed as less dense and with fewer nodes than the rejection network.

In the “Independientes 2021” network, the conversation focuses on the convention and its work in the regions of the country; and the largest of its ten groups mentions the convention and its actors only. In the “Independientes 2022” network, the centrality metrics indicate that the conversation goes from being neutral to a conversation charged against the process, thus polarizing towards one of the sectors. We found ten communities, the largest of which having 21 nodes, where the conversation is centered against the convention.

It seems interesting to analyze the network of hashtags that mention women candidates entering the convention in the quotas set aside for indigenous peoples. We know from previous descriptive studies that violence against women candidates was more intense in this subgroup, so that in this case it is possible to point out that it is not only about incivilities, but also about hate speech, which mixes attacks based on gender, race and social class. In this case, Table 6 shows a clear centrality in the first phase in 2021 of the constitutional convention process, with the figure of Elisa Loncón standing out as the main representative of this space. The sub-network articulated in the upper part of the figure, which integrates criticisms of the policy of pension fund withdrawals and the work of the convention, is a curious matter. In contrast to the first, the second phase shows a clear predominance of rejection in its different modalities (#re-chazotransversal, #rechadodesalida, #rechazocrece, #rechazoporchile), together with critical allusions to Boric’s government. Mentions of the ‘Apruebo’ option are marginal and not very dense.

In the networks “Pueblos Originarios 2021” and “Pueblos Originarios 2022”, the centrality metrics place #rechazo in the second position, after #chile, being a direct allusion to being against the constitutional process. In addition, the other hashtags also call to vote against the project of the new constitution. It is important to mention that in the network “Pueblos Originarios 2021”, the hashtag #elisaloncon is in fifth place in the centrality metrics, which led us to think about the existence of messages loaded with rejection towards the figure of this candidate.

When we review the hashtags where candidates from the “Vamos por Chile” lists are mentioned, we can see in the first phase of 2021 a fairly dense graphic with many connections. The members of these collectives, who represented the parties and sensibilities of the Chilean right, were an important voice within the convention. Despite the fact that the representation of these collectives was minimal in number within the convention, they managed to make their presence felt, and for this very reason were on the receiving end of a considerable amount of hate speech during the period under study. The references refer to contingent public policy and legislative issues such as pension fund withdrawals, as well as explicit references to the presidential candidates, Kast and Boric. Mention is also made to some candidates in particular (Elisa Loncon or Teresa Marinovic) and to the convention in general (#constituyentesflaites). References to rejection are still very limited, with the scenario of the 2021 presidential run-off in Chile monopolizing the discussion.

The tendency to orient hashtags towards rejection is shown in the majority in the second phase in 2022. The references articulate a series of ways to justify rejection in the exit plebiscite of 4 September 2022, which itself seem to be the main justification for mentioning the specific candidates. Marginally, there are hashtags that direct their criticism against elements of contingent politics, and against the performance of President Boric and his ministers (#renunciasiches). The central hashtags of the network are approval and rejection, both articulating different forms and modalities of agreement and rejection of the constitutional reform proposed.

In the “Vamos por Chile 2021” network, the centrality metrics show that the nodes with the highest scores pointed to the discrediting of the process and called for the rejection option. In addition, we found two distinct communities: the conversation of the largest one revolved around the discrediting of the convention and its president; the other community

points to the discrediting of the ruling pact of the time and of those who were from the same political current as this list. In the network “Vamos por Chile 2022” the centrality metrics show that the discourse focuses only on the rejection option. Ten communities were found, the largest with 29 nodes, whose conversation encourages the choice of the option to reject the new constitution.

4.2. From Hate Speech to Incivilities

In a second stage of the analysis, we analyzed the metrics of the network of hashtags with messages in which we detected the presence of hate speech. We proceeded in the same way as with that information downloaded for the network of mentions for the year 2021 and 2022. However, in this section we present the hashtags and metrics for all the lists gathered. The result of this overview is seen in Table 8.

The information presented in the table follows a clear pattern. Of the 75 hashtags recorded (5 possible for each metric), there is a high recurrence of themes. Indeed, 42 of them make mention of the rejection of different modalities, while 14 hashtags include the word Chile, showing the importance that the question of identity and nationality has gained in this debate. Hashtags mentioning the convention numbered 13, those that did so for the approval option were 6 in number, and 3 include the name of the President of the commission, Elisa Loncón.

These results allow us to verify that there is an evident coincidence between the presence of hate speech in tweets and the presence of messages related to the campaign of the rejection of the new constitution. This situation is transversal to the hashtag’s networks of the different electoral lists, which shows the important presence of this discourse in most of the discussions that circulated on Twitter. The centrality of the rejection discourse in these networks is very eloquent.

Other results that can be extracted from the comparison between lists is the cross presence of antagonistic discourses in these networks. Approval is more present in the hashtags of *Apruebo Dignidad* and *Lista del Apruebo*, but also in the *Vamos por Chile*’s network. Conversely, the rejection network is very strong in the first two former lists, which indicates that the mentions of candidates with hate speeches were effectively crossed: those who were for the approval mentioned candidates of the lists that were for the rejection; conversely, those who were for the rejection made obvious mention in their hate tweets of candidates who were for the approval.

Beyond the five hashtags with the highest metrics, we can go deeper into the political analysis of each network thanks to their network visualizations. The following figures plot the position of the 50 hashtags that comprise them. The graphs for the *Lista del Apruebo* and *Apruebo Dignidad* lists are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

In the network of hashtags of *Apruebo Dignidad*, rejection is not only present, but represents the main subnetwork. A darker core is clearly observed in Figure 2 on the right side of the image. This implies that there are many links between the hashtags, which makes the network denser in that sector. Conversely, the presence of approval is plotted on the right side of the image, by several nodes but with less density.

In the network of hashtags of the *Lista del Apruebo* representatives, the presence of messages alluding to rejection is central but less dense than in the *Apruebo Dignidad* network, for example. The allusions to approval are found in the lower part of the graph, in a dispersed and not very dense manner. An interesting aspect that appears in this network is a nucleus with hashtags that formulate the concept “recapacitar” (please reconsider) in various ways. These hashtags integrate the names of women, alluding to their extreme positions they took within the Convention. Other hashtags that appear and that could be qualified as incivilities are #rechazosalvarachile, #izquierdamiserable, #rechazoelplurimamarracho, #la-weaesmalaypunto.

In the case of the *Independientes* network of hashtags, a denser nucleus linked to rejection and its different modalities can be observed in the low part of the network, on the left side. It has in its center two hashtags alluding to the convention: #rechazoelmamarracho

and #rechazoelplurimamarracho. Many of the hashtags do not seem to carry negative messages, but rather convey positive ideas associated with rejection, for example: #rechazodetodos, #rechazoconesperanza, #rechazopopular, #rechazoconesperanza. Contrary to what is observed with rejection, allusions to approval are marginal. Among the negative messages, there are mentions of the regulations approved by the convention (#convencionalesrateros) and to the convention itself (#convenciontramposa, #convencionqlia).

In the case of the network of hashtags for the *Pueblos Originarios* list (Figure 5), the approval option is hardly mentioned. As in the other cases, the messages alluding to the rejection option are in the majority. The hashtag #elisoncon is central to this network: this is logical in view of her public significance, yet also shows the permanent vigilance that surrounded her as a public figurehead of the convention, and which effectively besieged her. It is interesting to note that there are several hashtags that clearly contain incivilities and insults showing the negative mood with which Twitter users expressed themselves against the women representatives of this group. Some examples were: #mamarracho, #izquierdamiserableyterrorista, #zurdosdemierda, #convencionqlia, #convencioncsm. Finally, it is worth noting the allusion to the Mapuche conflict with the State of Chile (#llaitul, #mapuche, #araucanía), which shows how the performance of this list was related to the development of this conflict in the southern part of the country.

In the case of the *Vamos por Chile* network (Figure 6), it can be observed that mentions are evenly balanced between hashtags alluding to approval and rejection, with a core of hashtags clearly identified with approval in the lower part of the network. In the upper part, we clearly find the presence of hashtags linked to the rejection option. In the middle of both we find the hashtag #chile, which seems to unite and connect both networks, since it is in the center of both cores.

5. Discussion of Results and Conclusions

How can we understand the nature of the violence suffered by women in politics? Social networks have only increased this phenomenon, to the extent that they have become a sounding board for hate speech and incivilities that target certain groups in society. In this way, the social and political context in Chile during the constitutional process has offered an important opportunity to study the underlying mechanisms of this phenomenon.

The results show, in line with the literature, that most of the interactions with women politicians' on their Twitter accounts contain violent speeches of different nature. The analysis not of the messages themselves but of the hashtag networks is particularly practical for revealing the political interests and macro-discourses from which violence is perpetrated against women candidates.

- On the other hand, it is possible to point out that violent messages come not only from perpetrators of violence who occasionally use social networks for this purpose. Hashtags are often part of a strategy that linked the women's performance and the convention to two major electoral processes: the presidential election in December 2021 and the constitutional plebiscite on 4 September 2022. These two events framed the constitutional debate and were therefore directly related to the type of violence that the women candidates received.
- According to the relevance to certain lists, female candidates may have been more exposed to violence associated with the dispute for the second round of the 2021 presidential election, where José Kast and Gabriel Boric faced each other. Secondly, it is possible to observe that in temporal terms, the discussion and the majority option for the rejection of the new constitutional text was imposed transversally in the hashtag's networks of all the lists of women candidates. It remains to be seen whether it is possible to verify a close link between violence against women on social networks and the extension of the discourse of rejection of the constitutional text. The evidence gathered here seems to indicate this tendency. However, given that this was not the aim of this paper, we believe that further studies are needed to confirm this hypothesis.

- In the particular case of female candidates, their messages highlighting the hopeful character of the process differ profoundly from the animosity shown towards them. The results show that the hashtags used in tweets with hate speeches do not necessarily carry explicit hate messages. Rather, it is discovered that, in a polarized context of strong social crisis, hate speeches circulate strategically associated with hashtags, but without making hateful mentions explicit. No hate speeches were observed in an intersectional perspective that crosses gender, race and even social class, as might have been expected from the tweets.

Among the limitations of this study, it is necessary to note the following. While this is not the only way in which candidates engaged with public opinion, it is striking to note that much of their social networking interactions were informed by the presence of these discourses in the messages and comments they received. It is necessary to consider that there is a lot of cross-hashtag mentions, i.e., that may involve either positive or negative comments about the candidates. There is a lot of criticism that goes through the mention of hashtags. Finally, the very broad category of Independents can be misleading. In this case, the diversity of women's accounts that were grouped in this category may have diminished the diversity of discourses that was expressed during the period.

The results of this study show the close link that other research has detected between hate speech and incivilities. However, what we can conclude from this research is that their use is not only complementary but also strategic. This poses a methodological challenge for future research, since it makes it necessary to articulate the study not only of tweets containing hate, but also their articulation with hashtags and other forms of synthesizing messages for campaign purposes.

This finding may offer an interesting avenue to consider in future research aimed at studying the challenges posed by the increasingly important incorporation of women in positions of political representation. In the context of the current crisis of democracies in several countries, parity policies will be accompanied by a corresponding rise in this type of online violence. It will therefore be increasingly important to understand the logic, the agents and the ends with which this violence is articulated in the context of social networks.

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Article

Relationship between the Use of Social Networks and Mistrust of Mass Media among Mexican Youth: A Mixed-Methods and NLP Study

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Abstract: The relationship between trust and media consumption has been a subject continually studied in communication sciences. There are various studies that indicate that the greater the confidence in a certain medium, the greater the consumption. However, due to the consolidation of digital media and specifically social networks as the main sources of information among the young, the question of whether trust in these media affects their consumption arises again. To examine this relationship, a study was carried out with a mixed methodology. On the one hand, a survey was carried out in which young Mexican university students were asked about the media that they trusted the most and those that they used the most. On the other hand, interviews were conducted with university professors regarding their observations of the behavior of students in relation to usage and trust in these media. In general, the results allow us to conclude that trust in the media is not a variable that impacts the consultation of a specific media outlet given that, despite mistrust, there may be a high rate of usage.



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a transformation in practically all sectors of human life, and particularly made digital media essential for carrying out work, social, economic, and cultural activities. This makes the study of social networks increasingly relevant in the social sciences, and it is necessary to approach the subject matter from different perspectives (De la Garza and Peña-Ramos 2022). At first, these media seemed to bring with them a positive element towards democratization due to the use they were given in certain movements and social outbreaks such as the Arab Spring, 15M in Spain, or the #YoSoy132 movement (Candón 2013). Because of this, several investigations focused on the relationship between the use of electronic media and political participation.

However, today we have seen events in the world that have questioned whether the influence of digital media continues to positively strengthen democracy. Therefore, new questions have arisen along with different angles of research that need to be explored (Hall et al. 2018). The main objective of this investigation is to determine if pre-existing trust in media is a variable that determines the consumption of political content, whether traditional or digital. This approach is necessary as currently informational biases, as well as misinformation, have had unexpected impacts on social life.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Confidence and Consumption of Conventional and Unconventional Media

On the issue of trust, conclusions have been reached that trust in a medium is essential for an individual's decision to continue its usage (Gainous et al. 2019). If people trust a

medium, they tend to consume more information from it. This can have an implication in the vision that citizens have about democracy, and potentially in their decision to act on matters of a public nature.

This process, ironically, is stronger in places where democracy has limitations. In times of growing political polarization and the emergence of populist alternatives on both the left and right, research has shown that those citizens who support anti-establishment alternatives distrust traditional media more than they do virtual media (Liu et al. 2020). But among those citizens who maintain more moderate positions, they usually value journalistic aspects (in all types of media) such as political analysis and the questioning of the excesses of public power. But the information from previous studies can only apply to a specific place. Arguably, during the presidential election in Mexico in 2018, social media did not damage trust in institutions in a greater proportion than traditional media, as was expected (Echeverría and Mani 2020).

However, another study agrees that the credibility that people grant to a certain medium corresponds to the journalistic credibility it has (such as the presence of sources) (Llamero et al. 2019). In a context of wide polarization, users may be motivated to participate (or comment) in media that have a different ideological position than their own, because in this way, they consider that they can balance the information.

There are similarities with research carried out during the confinement in Spain during COVID-19, where it was found that the information that citizens consume more, and also consider more reliable, come from those media that express similar ideologies to their own (López et al. 2020). There may come a situation in which citizens' distrust of the information they receive becomes unanimous. This is a scenario in which people declare that they distrust all sources of information that are presented, representing a deep crisis of institutional trust, which ends up transcending ideologies and political parties across the spectrum (Gualda and Rúas 2019; Marques et al. 2022).

The trust that users have in the same social media is a factor that influences the loyalty that they may have to a particular site. This factor is so important that some argue that trust plays an important mediating role between user loyalty and the satisfaction they get from the site (Sadiq et al. 2020). Without the presence of trust, there is no relationship between the other two factors.

2.2. Media and Perceptions

Media generate perceptions that influence how people think. Even when we perceive a transition in which mass media are progressively losing their monopoly on influencing public opinion, a study shows us that they still maintain an important influence (Jacuński et al. 2019). On the other hand, social media have had an enormous responsibility building the perceptions that users have of mass media. An investigation concluded that, during the presidential elections in the United States in 2016, social networks contributed to the questioning of the credibility of traditional media (Weeks et al. 2019).

But these conclusions differ from another study that argues that political polarization is the consequence of audiences that consider that the information they receive from the media with which they maintain an ideological identification is the most reliable. To the extent that a medium demonstrates a different narrative, audiences tend to distrust the source (Kelly 2019; Cetina and Martínez 2019).

This situation is valid for both traditional and digital media. While in the past it was an editorial stance that can reinforce the convictions of viewers, today, platforms such as YouTube work in a similar way. The algorithm that suggests content to users usually recommends videos that are in the same argumentative line as those that have been previously selected. The suggested alternatives strengthen the preconceived perceptions of citizens who use this social network (Lin et al. 2016; Vihalemm et al. 2019).

There is a study that reinforces this position. It maintains that there are some audiences that interpret the information in the following way: If what a medium describes is aligned with their convictions, they choose to consider that it behaves with professionalism and

objectivity. Otherwise, they might choose to have a critical attitude towards the information presented (Javaid and Elahi 2014).

It is also possible to argue that the transition from communication media to digital media entails a significant risk because the younger generations, who largely consume digital media, are not used to checking the news they receive (Catalina-García et al. 2019). This could represent a serious problem, since the perceptions obtained about what is happening around them come from sources that, in many cases, are weak (Sup and Kaye 2019).

2.3. Social Networks as an Informative Medium

As part of the transition of mass media that has occurred in recent years, it has been noted that social networks are a means of communication that inform citizens about relevant information. According to a study, there is a positive relationship between the usage of social networks and knowledge about political issues (David et al. 2019). Following the same logic, the conclusions of another study are similar, as it shows that users who consult social media for news have a greater knowledge of issues of public interest (Kim and Dennis 2019; Mohamed et al. 2020).

The researchers found a clear differentiation between those who use traditional media for public affairs and those who consult social networks, in which the second group was more politicized than the first. It is also important to recognize that social media can help some users persuade others about a specific agenda. This influence is more noticeable when the users receive information from friends and family (Dewi and Satyawan 2022).

One of the main differences between digital and traditional media has to do with the plurality of voices that are recognizable in the dissemination and positioning of specific information. In the view of some, the traditional media were more efficient in setting the public agenda, while in the time of social networks, more actors are involved in the interpretation and spreading of information (Yerlikaya 2020; Arianto et al. 2019).

As social media have become a relevant and, in many cases, even a primary source, awareness of how they can contribute to misinformation has increased. Acknowledging a new reality also implies noticing some of the main risks presented by digital media (Tucker et al. 2017). These include practices related to information verification methods (Fink and Gilich 2020; Domínguez 2015). Therefore, in current times, the change in the consumption of information on politics is not questioned, but there are doubts about the challenges that arise with this new reality. Fake news and misinformation constitute a serious challenge for democracy (Moreno and Zirit 2019).

2.4. Young People and Consumption of Social Networks

The importance of social networks has been progressively recognized as a tool used by young people to organize themselves and discuss public affairs (Rubio-Romero and Espinosa 2015; Domínguez 2015). These media have enabled interaction that can be both collective and individual. These media have also changed civic involvement, giving rise to movements that have a different dynamic from those of the past (Alonso López and Bolinches 2020).

Due to its popular use among youth, WhatsApp has been found to be one of the applications most valued by young people because it allows them to make contact in a timely manner (Huang et al. 2021). There are also studies that indicate that use has been given to Instagram as a platform capable of contributing to the expansion of knowledge of students by allowing them to continue to learn about subjects that interest them in a didactic manner (Fuster-Gullén et al. 2020). This is mainly because young people value interacting in a very visual way (Bustamante Pavez 2017).

There are similarities with an experiment in which it was confirmed that social networks can contribute to improving student learning by connecting them with hypertext links (Gavilán et al. 2017). In this way, students can encounter different sources of information, which is something that favors the fact that they can delve into the topics they investigate. From a commercial point of view, brands that seek to connect with young

people through digital media have had to employ a different language from the one used in a traditional marketing strategy. A study pointed out how young people tend to pay more attention to those brands that behave like another user than to a company that only seeks to promote its products (Cano et al. 2017).

Digital media have also functioned as a platform for activism and to defend social causes. However, the results of one study show that these cases are generally a minority (Hoffmann and Lutz 2021). Most of the Spanish students that were surveyed remain skeptical of actively participating in social media or expressing themselves on these issues. These results are largely consistent with other research in which young people remain skeptical of participating in politics, even when they have extensive digital resources at their disposal (Serrano and Serrano 2014; Valerio and Serna 2018).

However, it is also important to note that social media can also have a negative effect on the young. In another survey carried out, it was reported that a significant proportion of young people surveyed had suffered situations of harassment through social networks (De la Garza et al. 2019). Social media can also end up generating a sense of disconnection among youth (Díaz et al. 2013).

3. Materials and Methods

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the relationship between the variables of consumption and trust in media based on a data analysis of a polling instrument applied to young university students between the ages of 18 and 25 during the 2018 electoral period in Mexico. Likewise, it seeks to describe the patterns of consumption and trust, specifically observing the relationship between the level of consumption of digital media and the degree of trust or distrust in them. For this, a hypothesis test was performed using the Mann–Whitney U statistic.

In the same way, we applied text mining to analyze a group of interviews carried out with professors where they were asked for their observations regarding the same phenomenon, consumption, and trust in the media of their students. The analysis was carried out by applying computational artificial intelligence (AI) techniques, known as Natural Language Processing (NLP), with the aim of obtaining new empirical conclusions through mathematical models of Machine Learning, and thus assess and propose the use of these new tools for the analysis of qualitative data in social research in Spanish. For both approaches, the Jupyter Notebook computing platform was used, and the programming language used was Python in its version 3.9.7. Based on previous research, it is advisable to have more than a single point of view regarding perceptions on the use of technology. Therefore, it can be argued that it is useful to have both students and professors' testimony, because students are the actors of this transition, but professors have been a witness of this process.

On the one hand, students provide valuable information about their own behaviors and perceptions of the media, which allows for a deeper understanding of the degree of trust that influences their consumption of political information. On the other hand, teachers can provide a more objective and observational perspective of their students. Since teachers interact with students in an educational setting, they can provide insight into how students seek and consume political information in a more formal context. In addition, teachers can gain a broader view of trends in media consumption among young people, which can help contextualize the results of the student survey.

3.1. Quantitative Approach

The data used for this first part were obtained through a survey of university students in which they were presented with a list of media, both traditional and digital, and using a Lickert-type scale, they were asked to indicate the respective level of usage, as well as in which they place greater trust or distrust. The design of the questionnaire took into consideration previous studies on the subject, and it had already been validated in other contexts (Krishnan and Rogers 2014). The sample was non-probabilistic, for convenience,

in which 804 young university students residing in the state of Nuevo León, the Valley of Mexico and Oaxaca participated.

The survey was applied through the Google Forms platform, so, the responses were obtained electronically. Likewise, these were applied between 30 March and 27 June of the year 2018, since, according to Mexican electoral legislation, this is the period in which political parties are allowed to carry out electoral campaign acts. For the pre-processing and analysis of the data, the Pandas, Seaborn and Matplotlib libraries were used. For the hypothesis test, mainly the stats module of the Scipy library was used. Media consumption variables were treated as ordinal variables since a Likert-type scale was used for their measurement. On the other hand, the trust variables were treated as nominal, since the possible answers to these measures were: (1) I trust it, (2) I do not trust it and (3) I don't know.

Hypothesis

To carry out the hypothesis test concerning the relationship between the variables of consumption and trust in the media, it was first necessary to confirm the type of distribution of the data. For this, the Kolmogórov–Smirnov test as shown in Table 1 was carried out, which establishes the following:

H₀. *The sample follows a normal distribution;*

H₁. *The sample follows its own distribution.*

Table 1. Results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test.

Statistic	0.916
<i>p</i> -value	0.00

According to the results of the normality test, the result of the statistic is equal to 0.916 and the corresponding *p*-value is 0.0. Since the *p*-value is less than 0.05, it is possible to reject the null hypothesis; that is, we have enough evidence to say that the sample data do not come from a normal distribution.

Once confirmed that our data follow a non-normal distribution, it was possible to formulate the hypothesis that allowed us to understand the type of relationship between the variables of consumption and trust in the media. The statistic used was non-parametric, in this case, the Mann–Whitney U test. The approach included the following:

H₀. *The degree of confidence is not related to the level of media consumption; that is, the variables are independent;*

H₁. *The degree of confidence is related to the level of media consumption; that is, the variables have a certain measure of dependency.*

3.2. Qualitative Approach

The data used for this second part of the analysis are textual and come from a series of interviews with 16 research professors: 5 from the state of Nuevo León; 6 from the Valley of Mexico and 5 from the state of Oaxaca, all with more than five years of experience in the classroom and with a field of study in the social sciences. The professors were selected based on the following criteria: they must be Social Sciences professors with at least five years of experience. We wanted to make a match on the perceptions of both actors. The interviews were of a structured type so that they had the same common thread according to the analysis categories established in the survey (TensorFlow n.d.).

The questions were aimed at gathering information that teachers could have observed and perceived in the behavior of their students regarding the two dimensions considered in this study: (1) The level of consumption of traditional and digital media by university

students and (2) The degree of confidence they appear to have regarding both categories of media.

Data analysis and preprocessing were performed with the help of Pandas, Re, NLTK and Gensim libraries. The implementation of these tools is part of the study approach called Natural Language Processing (NLP), a field that combines linguistics and artificial intelligence (AI) so that computers can understand human or natural language (Elekes et al. 2020).

The NLP techniques applied to this study comprised 4 main phases: The first consisted of a stage of cleaning and purifying the text of the transcribed interviews. At this point, capital letters, tildes and special characters were removed. In this way, the algorithm could label each of the terms more precisely. In the second phase, a tokenization process was carried out, which consisted of classifying and separating strings of characters into entities called tokens.

For this work, two tokenization processes were considered: the first in sentences and the second in words. At this point, stop words were also eliminated. These are words that do not add value to data labeling, such as prepositions or articles, and therefore do not capture the essence of the words and phrases that help natural language processing. In the third stage, the Wordcloud library was used to create a graph that could proportionally visualize the frequencies of the most recurring words in the text, also known as a word cloud.

Finally, the fourth phase consisted of the embedding of text or Embedding. This is a deep learning technique or Deep Learning that consists of a dense and continuous representation of words in a low-dimensional vector space. The advantage of this vector representation is the possible encoding of general semantic and syntactic relationships between words, assigning similar words to nearby points in the representation space (Elekes et al. 2020).

For this, the Gensim library was imported, and the Word2vec pre-trained neural network was used. This tool converts the words into vectors, and once the algorithm has been trained with our data, it could represent the words according to their context. The export of our model and resulting files were loaded in the Jupyter Notebook and code web application. We use the open embedding projector at <http://projector.tensorflow.org> (accessed on 26 August 2022). With this tool, it was possible to show the visualization of the embedding work easily and automatically and thus observe the closeness of words according to the cosine similarity.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

According to the results of the survey (Table 2), students state that they have greater distrust in the media that are presented digitally or electronically. The data showed that almost 60% of students distrust the information they receive through emails, followed by social networks (57.6%) and blogs (57.1%). Likewise, it was observed that the media that enjoy greater trust are those considered traditional media. The results show that the media that are most trusted among university students are: the printed magazine (61.1%), the written press (55.5%) and the radio (49.3%). However, this generalization does not extend to television. In this sense, it was observed that, on the contrary, television is the only traditional means of communication to which young people show greater distrust.

Table 2. Confidence in the media of university students from Nuevo León, Valle de México and Oaxaca.

	Majority Option	Full Percentage
Trust in TV (News)	I do not trust it	48.63
Trust in TV (Programs)	I do not trust it	50.12
Trust in Radio (News)	I trust it	49.25
Trust in Radio (Programs)	I trust it	40.42
Trust in e-mails	I do not trust it	59.95
Trust in web pages	I do not trust it	44.28
Trust in blogs	I do not trust it	57.09
Trust in Social Networks	I do not trust it	40.67
Trust in Social Media	I do not trust it	57.59
Trust in Press	I trust it	55.47
Trust in Magazines	I trust it	61.07

N = 804. (1 means "He trusts", 2 means "He does not trust, and 3 means "He does not know").

Regarding consumption, young university students state that the media they consume use the most are social networks, as shown in Table 3, ($M = 3.23$, $STD = 0.93$), with 51.37% responding to consult them "Quite a lot" (the highest value they could choose), followed by the digital press ($M = 2.44$, $STD = 1.07$) with 32% of young people who say they consult these media "A lot". Regarding the least consumed media, the results were: television ($M = 1.32$, $STD = 0.96$), with 43.91% of young people stating that they consume it "Little", followed by the written press ($M = 1.34$, $STD = 0.9$), with 41% indicating the same response, in addition to radio ($M = 1.31$, $STD = 1.0$), with 39.4% of young people also stating that they consume it "Little". In general, young people consume traditional media to a lesser extent, having a greater preference for digital and electronic sources.

Table 3. Media consumption of university students from Nuevo León, Valle de México and Oaxaca.

	TV	Written Press	Digital Press	Radio	Printed Magazine	Social Media	Blogs
Never	19%	18%	4%	21%	21%	0%	9%
Little	44%	41%	14%	39%	37%	5%	22%
Somewhat	26%	33%	32%	30%	28%	17%	36%
A lot	9%	7%	33%	8%	12%	26%	21%
Quite a lot	3%	2%	17%	2%	2%	51%	12%

N = 852. The table shows the percentage of each degree of consumption according to the medium. The minimum value is 0 and the maximum value is 4. There are 5 values: Never (0), Little (1), Somewhat (2), A lot (3) and Quite a lot (4).

Hypothesis Test

Table 4 shows the results concerning the previously stated hypothesis test, which seeks to understand the relationship between the consumption and trust variables. Because the p value is greater than 0.05, it is possible to accept the null hypothesis, which states that the degree of confidence is not related to the level of media consumption; that is, the variables are independent.

Table 4. U test results.

Statistic	44,163
p-value	0.199

4.2. Results of Natural Language Processing

4.2.1. Word Frequencies

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, teachers generally observed that the trust and consumption of university students reside mainly in digital media and specifically in

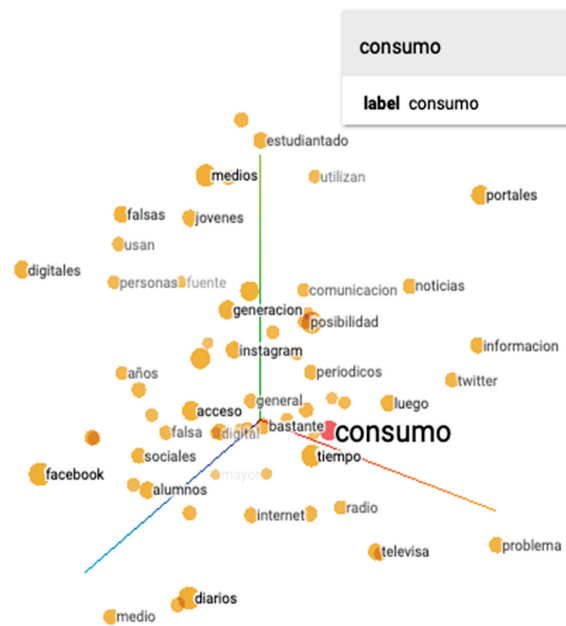


Figure 3. Visualization of the “consumption” vector.

4.2.2. Embedding Visualization

In order to better analyze the results obtained with the embedding process, it was decided to visualize a couple of specific vectors. In other words, from the selection of two specific words, “consumption” and “trust”, it was possible to visualize the words that our algorithm was able to relate. Figure 3 shows the vector space, and the words close to the word “consumption”. Specifically, the closest words are the following: “access”, “media”, “facebook”, “generation”, “portals”, “news”, “students”, “time”, “prints” and “information”.

Likewise, Figure 4 shows the vector space where the word “trust” is highlighted. Specifically, the closest words were: “people”, “themes”, “media”, “portals”, “generation”, “digital”, “headline”, “social”, “print” and “consumption”.

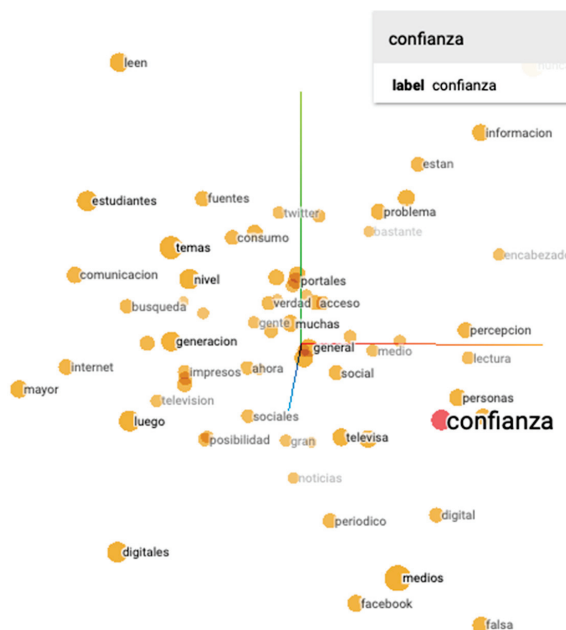


Figure 4. Visualization of the “trust” vector.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the survey allowed us to anticipate the possible relationship that exists between trust and media consumption. It was observed that, in the case of television, usage was minimal and at the same time a degree of distrust was evident. It was also observed that the radio or the press had a higher degree of trust; however, usage was not higher but, on the contrary, was lower. Likewise, the phenomenon also presented changes in reference to social networks, since despite the clear distrust, these are the media most consumed by Mexican youth.

The results of the U test allowed us to provide more statistical evidence to support the hypothesis that in these times of the digital boom, young natives of the digital world do not consider trust as a factor that determines their consumption decisions. With this evidence regarding the independence between these two variables, the results of the qualitative approach seem to offer a possible assumption that would be worth exploring in future research, which is that the consumption of these digital media, and especially social networks, is not precisely determined by trust, but rather by an aspect of easy access to information that identifies this generation.

In this sense, obtaining the information that young people obtain through digital means seems to be due to a question of optimizing the time and effort involved in searching for and comparing information. Therefore, it is interesting that the embedding model that was trained for this research has related words such as “access”, “time” or “header”. The teachers stated that they observed that the students had much information at hand on social networks; however, beyond inquiring about the events related in headings, the headings of the notes seemed to be enough to satisfy students’ information needs: a fact that may represent a problem affecting young people’s ability to distinguish false information and consequently their ability to make informed decisions in the political arena. Finally, it is hoped that the research presented here will serve to motivate the use of these types of computational tools within social research and thus enrich the methods of qualitative data analysis.

The findings confirm the two hypotheses raised for the development of this research. H1 confirms a trend that was visible in past research, among which are those that affirm that there is a change in the consumption of information on politics (Moreno and Zirit 2019). At the same time, this research coincides with the research that found the positive relationship that exists between consumption of social networks and the politicization of young people (David et al. 2019). As the qualitative results indicate, young people learn about political and social events, even if they initially access platforms for entertainment purposes.

In addition, it is also possible to affirm that the results prove H2, since even though the young people surveyed expressed greater distrust towards digital media, it is precisely these media that are consumed more frequently. Based on the data obtained, it was not possible to confirm other trust findings, since the highest levels of trust that young people expressed, in traditional media, did not correspond to their consumption (Gainous et al. 2019). However, these findings could partially confirm that, despite the progressive decrease in the presence of the mass media, they still maintain an important influence on public opinion due to their migration to social networks (Jacuński et al. 2019). Of course, based on the data collected, the latter does not apply to television, since this was the only medium in which there is a negative correlation in both trust and consumption.

Another important conclusion of this study is that when young people say that they have distrust in social networks, they possibly refer to the electronic medium as such and not to the network of acquaintances with whom they interact in that space and from whom they obtain and relay information. Social networks have already been confirmed as a means of information and communication; however, the dynamics of their operation are very different from the traditional model of the mass media.

As some point out, in the logic of the traditional media, there was only one channel that issued the message that would be received by a wide audience. In this sense, the establishment of a specific editorial position was much easier to identify (Yerlikaya 2020).

However, in the dynamics of social networks, there is no clear editorial line, since within the same medium, multiple broadcast channels of content can be presented; therefore, the determining factor turns out to be the interpretation of the information by each user.

Consequently, this phenomenon causes the parameters of trust to be transformed; that is, it causes users to go from trusting an established medium, to trusting a network of contacts and followers who, in turn, also play a role as a channel for generating and distributing information.

Having said this, it would be possible to understand why young people argue that they do not trust social networks, even though qualitative data shows the opposite. In other words, it is possible that when young people say they have distrust towards social networks, they do so by understanding them from a generalized conception of a digital tool. But in the use and consumption of these, the trust they show is not towards the medium, but towards their own network of contacts.

According to this view, users may consider members of their network as reliable sources. However, there is also a risk that a member of your network could distribute false information. As some research reveals, users of social networks are increasingly aware of this risk, so it is possible that the knowledge of the existence of this phenomenon is what makes them mistrust social networks in general. Obviously, this argument gives rise to new studies that would allow us to confirm this approach with greater certainty. In general, it seeks to contribute to and motivate the study of the need to better understand how young people consume political information, since this has a direct impact on democratic systems that function as an important foundation for the making of informed political decisions (Tucker et al. 2017).

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Article

The Negative Campaign on Telegram: The Political Use of Criticism during the 2021 Community of Madrid Elections

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Abstract: Mobile instant messaging services have become a standard tool for political actors in communicating with citizens, especially during electoral campaigns. Telegram predominates in this context of disintermediated communication with the electorate. This platform enables parties to issue electoral information while taking advantage of this private space to criticize their adversaries. They do it with messages linked to negative emotions that generate a deeper impact on the audience, although they imply risks such as political polarization. This research analyzes the use of criticism to the adversary by political parties on Telegram during the electoral campaign. For this purpose, a descriptive study with an exploratory purpose was chosen, and a quantitative content analysis was carried out on 710 messages published on Telegram by the main political parties that stood for the elections to the Community of Madrid held in 2021. These parties are the PP, Ciudadanos, Podemos, Más Madrid, and Vox. The PSOE has been excluded as they did not make any publication during the analyzed period. The results show that criticizing the adversary is an emerging communication strategy in political parties on Telegram. Unlike other social media such as Facebook, the attacks on rivals are used on this platform mainly by the parties in the government, who focus their criticism on the president of the Spanish state. The attacks are mainly directed at the professional trajectory of their rivals and question the credibility of any action carried out by them.

Keywords: political communication; polarization; criticism; mobile instant messaging services; Telegram; Community of Madrid



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1. Introduction

The technological changes that have occurred in recent decades have transformed electoral campaigns. Currently, the digital environment is the primary stage for both parties and leaders. Traditional media are no longer the exclusive issuers of information because social media is capable of disseminating their messages without any type of filter or limitation (Casero-Ripollés 2018; Chadwick 2013). Therefore, they have become a preferential space for political actors to disseminate political information. Although the relationship between politics and communication is not new, this phenomenon seems to have sparked renewed academic interest in recent years (Rivas-de Roca et al. 2022).

Both parties and candidates have seen the need to incorporate these platforms as new channels to share campaign information and political proposals and to mobilize the vote to achieve the participation of their electorate (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2021; Jungherr et al. 2020; Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo 2020; Baviera et al. 2019; López-Meri et al. 2017). The use of these platforms is particularly accentuated during electoral campaign periods, when parties intensify their presence on social media (Elishar-Malka et al. 2020; Stier et al. 2018; Vergeer 2015).

Along with social media, the digital environment offers new tools for the communicative activity of politicians. Smartphones have become the primary Internet access device internationally and in Spain (Fundación Telefónica 2020). The Life Mobile Style has led to an increase in the consumption of political information through mobile devices (Guzmán

and Medero 2016). In this scenario, mobile instant messaging platforms have recently erupted with force and are currently a primary channel of political communication between parties and citizens.

Mobile instant messaging platforms facilitate conversations in closed environments since messages reach users' devices through private conversations without others being able to access them (Vermeer et al. 2021). They are built on a special encryption technology designed specifically for this kind of application, which turns them into the most secure messengers available on the market (Kazanin 2017). This feature makes users employ these platforms to create smaller and private social groups instead of more inclusive and open social media (Valeriani and Vaccari 2018). In this sense, some authors argue that in the coming years, the communication strategies of the parties will move to Telegram to find a more direct discourse and discuss the possibility that citizens will act as viralizing agents of this content (Bigas Formatjé 2019).

The disintermediated communication of mobile instant messaging platforms and the effect of moving in an environment of trust also influence the type of content that political actors share (Hernández Escayola 2022). It enables political actors not only to disseminate information but also to criticize their adversaries and to point out their contradictions (Maier and Nai 2021) without public overexposure occurring in other social media such as Twitter or Facebook. In addition, political actors have taken advantage of the freedom of expression that characterizes mobile instant messaging platforms (Shirky 2011) while adapting their communication strategies (Stromer-Galley 2014), incorporating standard dynamics of offline communication into the online medium. Thus, elements such as a negative campaign or criticism to the adversary have achieved prominence on platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. This type of message linked to negative emotions generates a more resonant impact on the audience, although it implies risks such as disaffection or political polarization (Berganza-Conde 2008; Patterson 1993).

Of special interest is the study of criticism and the attack on the political use of Telegram. This platform is breaking into the communication field with great force as the app that grew the most during 2020 (IAB Spain 2021). It is a free service that allows users to send and receive unrestricted messages freely and confidentially. Its recent boom in political use is linked to the possibility of establishing a closer and more personal connection with citizens (Gil 2016) and to the limitations to parties introduced by WhatsApp in 2019 in sending mass messages during electoral campaigns (Alonso 2019). As a result of the abusive use that some formations made of it during the electoral period, WhatsApp prohibited the use of computer systems, programs, or software to automate messages and send them in masse to users, thus blocking the accounts that the formations had activated in this service.

However, despite its high number of users, its growing use by parties, and its multiple potentialities, Telegram remains little explored in political communication yet (Casero-Ripollés 2018), especially during campaign periods. Its use in this field has had different effects that have been previously studied from the perspective of citizen participation (Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes 2021; Abdollahinezhad 2016; Herasimenka 2022), social movements (Su et al. 2022), and election journalism (Ameli Reza and Molaei 2020), but despite its importance, this topic has still generated a low number of research works in terms of its use as a tool of political communication by parties in elections. Specifically, the use of Telegram for negative campaigns is still unexplored. In this context, it is necessary to extend the research to analyzing the dynamics that political actors use to activate negative campaigns on this platform, which remain unexplored so far. Consequently, the study of Telegram from this perspective fills a gap in the previous literature. Furthermore, this research analyzes Telegram since, in the general elections of April 2019, WhatsApp blocked the mass dissemination of electoral content to Spanish political parties, cancelling its use as a communication tool in the campaign.

The main objective of this research is to know the degree and type of criticism used by the parties in their Telegram channels. This study examines the role of criticism and attacks on rivals in the communication on Telegram groups of the principal parties during

the campaign of the Community of Madrid elections held in 2021. The election of this electoral period is relevant for three reasons: first, it enables knowing the communication strategies carried out by political actors with a differentiated trajectory. Second, it is one of the first regional elections affected by COVID-19, which enables studying the level of incidence of a context of a health crisis in the electoral campaign. Third, we are facing a campaign marked by a high climate of political polarization, a factor that conditions the communication strategies of the different parties.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Negative Campaigning as a Political Communication Strategy

In recent years, a dynamic that has gained greater prominence in online political communication is negative campaigning. Far from being a one-off phenomenon, it has become a recurring resource in the communication strategies of political parties in Western democracies (Schweitzer 2010). The most recent evidence in the US and other international elections suggests that conservative parties are more likely to use negative campaigning (Lau and Pomper 2004). It consists of any act that involves criticizing or attacking political opponents (García Beaudoux et al. 2005; Geer 2006), either at a personal level focused on the opposite party's leader or towards their political behavior (Kaid 2003). Benoit (2014) already categorized this type of campaign message in their Functional Theory, in which they differentiated ads that praised their own strengths, those that attack the opposition to weaken the opponent, and those of defense, subject to the previous ones, in which actors and politicians defend themselves to refute the accusations of their rivals. Therefore, through arguments that can be true or false, emotions such as fear, frustration, or anger are provoked in the electorate, causing a context of high political polarization that leads to the creation of two antagonistic positions. According to Casero-Ripollés (2022), the right to self-determination is used as a source of misinformation to promote political conflict.

The recent proliferation of populist movements has contributed to the rise of negative campaigning, as they use it as a civil resistance movement against traditional governments. Populist parties show a more conflictive and aggressive personality (Nai and Martínez-Coma 2019) and develop more negative and emotional campaigns (Nai 2021), to the point that some of them focus their communication strategy more on negativity than on formulating programmatic proposals (Enli 2017). Populist rhetoric tends to reflect a transgressive political style (Oliver and Rahn 2016) and emphasizes the spectacularization of politics with a more antagonistic and hardened tone in debate (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015).

In negative campaigns, political actors focus their speeches on highlighting the adversary's mistakes and defects rather than valuing their virtues (D'Adamo and García-Beaudoux 2016; Ceron and d'Adda 2016; Valera-Ordaz and López-García 2014). On many occasions, they use warlike language to exaggerate the confrontation and gain firmer support for their extremist policies (López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat 2021). In this sense, the greater the social perception of competition between the candidate parties is, the more attractive the campaign is. Therefore, more considerable amounts of negative political information are disseminated. This type of campaign fosters contexts of polarization that decide with a high level of simplification who are the "good" and the "bad" in politics (García Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013).

In this context, previous research indicates that an attack policy is especially effective for members of the electorate with a high level of involvement in social and political conflicts (Maier and Faas 2015). This type of voter prone to reacting to political raids tends to support, in general terms, extremist and anti-system parties (Nai 2021), so they feel stimulated by campaign negativism. However, other studies suggest that political messages with a negative emotional charge are especially attractive for those voters who are not politically aligned or feel political disaffection, since perceiving political messages as threats requires an immediate response (García Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013).

All in all, negative campaigning has a curvilinear effect whose main benefits include citizen interest, the stimulation of public debate, and the simplification of the electoral decision (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991), although it entails certain risks such as the saturation of voters, empathy with the politician victim of the attack, and political intolerance, both of the attacker and the attacked (García Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013).

2.2. The Political Use of Criticism in the Online Environment

In the same way that it happened in the 1950s with the birth of television as a reference communication medium, the use of negative campaigning has been boosted by the consolidation of digital social media as the main political communication channels of parties (Greer and LaPointe 2004; Klotz 2004). In this sense, after Brexit in the United Kingdom and the electoral triumph of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016, the role of social media as a factor of polarization and destabilization of democratic systems was observed with some concern (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2018).

Criticism has become an emerging mechanism in the online communication strategies of political actors. Specifically on Facebook, criticism was present in a quarter of the messages disseminated by political actors in the 2016 Spanish electoral campaign (Marcos-García et al. 2021). The freedom of expression offered by the digital environment, among other factors, has favored the tendency to publicly blame other parties for problems (Shirky 2011) and to show disagreement with specific ideas (Jungheer 2016; Dang-Xuan et al. 2013). In addition to criticizing the pragmatic proposals of their rivals, their ideological line, or professional trajectory, parties also attack their character traits or appearance (Maier and Nai 2021; Stevens 2012; Lau and Pomper 2004). Thus, they take advantage of the disintermediation and openness that characterizes digital platforms to introduce political criticism and attack in their online speeches.

Recent studies have shown that factors such as the ideology and the position on the government–opposition axis of the parties have a decisive influence on the use of criticism on social media such as Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021). In general terms, parties with extreme ideologies tend to criticize those who position themselves in the center (Nai and Sciarini 2018; Lau and Pomper 2004). Additionally, those on the left generally employ speeches to attack. Those political actors in the opposition introduce numerous attacks in their messages, both to the party and the leader (Marcos-García et al. 2021). Along these lines, there is also a tendency for emerging parties to differentiate themselves from their opponents by pointing out their mistakes or defects, while parties with a more consolidated track record opt for positive campaigns to highlight their achievements (Valli and Nai 2020). This dynamic differs in the Spanish case, where currently, the traditional parties focus their messages on criticizing the adversary and those with a shorter trajectory that propose actions for democratic regeneration (Marcos-García et al. 2021).

Political parties generally focus their attacks on Facebook on the professional functions conducted by their opponents—that is, on messages discrediting the decisions made by their opponents during their political careers. However, there is a growing trend towards the use of personal attacks, a fact that reduces political discourse to a confrontation between personalities (Marcos-García et al. 2021). This inclination is directly related to the phenomenon of the spectacularization of the political message. To attract more attention from users, they do so by appealing to emotions, mainly fear and enthusiasm, for political change (Abejón-Mendoza and Mayoral-Sánchez 2017).

Although some investigations have warned of the weight that criticism has reached in periods of electoral campaigns in the online environment, these studies focused on its use in social media such as Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021) or Twitter (Ceron and d'Adda 2016). However, it is still unknown how parties articulate this type of message on mobile instant messaging platforms. This dynamic leads to the following research questions:

PI1. What use do political parties make of criticism on Telegram and to who is it addressed?

PI2. What type of criticism do political parties use on Telegram and how do they do it?

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Data

The sample of this research concentrates on the campaign of the regional elections held in the Community of Madrid on 4 March 2021. In particular, the 15 official days of the campaign, the day before the election, the election day, and the day after the election have been studied. During this period, all messages shared on the Telegram channels of the Partido Popular (PP), Ciudadanos, Podemos, Más Madrid, and Vox were analyzed. The PSOE made no publication during the period analyzed and has been excluded from the sample. The sample comprises a total of 710 Telegram messages (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of the sample.

Party	Units of Analysis	
	N°	% of the Total
Partido Popular C.Madrid	355	50
Ciudadanos C.Madrid	53	7.46
Podemos C.Madrid	40	5.63
Vox C.Madrid	171	24.08
Más Madrid	91	12.82
TOTAL	710	100

Source: Self-made.

The elections to the Community of Madrid were relevant for various reasons. First, it is an electoral campaign that enables knowing the communication strategies carried out by political actors with differentiated trajectories; while the PP, Ciudadanos, and Podemos are three parties that already had representation in this autonomous community, Más Madrid and Vox ran for the first time for the presidency of the Community of Madrid. Second, we are facing one of the first regional elections marked by COVID-19, which enables us to study the level of incidence in the context of a health crisis in the electoral campaign (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2022). This factor is especially interesting in the Community of Madrid given the political tension between the regional government and the executive Pedro Sánchez over the management of the pandemic in this region. This, added to the fact that it is an early electoral call by the president of the Madrid Government, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, given a vote of no coincidence by Ciudadanos and the PSOE, makes this an electoral campaign characterized by a climate of high political polarization. It is a context that, as recent studies have highlighted, is especially interesting for the analysis of political criticism given the emergence of digital negativity as a communication strategy (Moret-Soler et al. 2022).

The selection of Telegram as an object of study is due to its growing social relevance and recent rise in popularity in the field of political communication. For the analysis of criticism, given the private nature that characterizes them, the study of mobile instant messaging services is more original since there is no public overexposure of the political actors in these applications as opposed to other social media such as Twitter or Facebook. In addition, this research analyzes Telegram since, in the April 2019 general elections, WhatsApp blocked the mass dissemination of electoral content from Spanish political parties, thus eliminating its use as a campaign communication tool.

3.2. Analysis

The methodology applied in this research consists of a quantitative content analysis. The objective is to analyze the presence of criticism in the communication strategy of political parties on Telegram. For this, an analysis model composed of 6 variables and 20 study categories is proposed (Table 2) (Marcos-García et al. 2021). In the case of the variables related to the type of and reason for criticism, the model is adapted to the proposal of García Beaudoux and D'Adamo (2013) for the study of negative campaigning.

Table 2. Summary of the analysis model used in this research.

Use of Criticism	
Yes	The message contains criticism or attack.
No	The message does not contain criticism or attack.
Who is the Criticism Directed at?	
Political party	The criticism is directed at a certain political party.
Politician	The criticism is directed at a certain politician.
Media or journalist	Criticism is directed at a particular media outlet, program, or journalist.
Institution or public organization	The criticism is directed at a specific institution or public organization (government, autonomous community, town hall, etc.).
Business or businessman	The criticism is directed at a certain employer or company.
Others	The criticism is directed at another type of actor not mentioned in the previous categories.
Typology of Criticism	
Personal	The criticism or attack is directed at the personal characteristics or qualities of a certain actor.
Biography	The criticism or attack is directed at the functions or positions previously developed by a certain actor.
Political program	The criticism or attack is directed at the pragmatic proposals of a certain actor in relation to a specific topic or issue.
Ideology	The criticism or attack focuses on the ideology and values of a certain actor.
Intensity of Criticism	
Predominant	Messages in which a certain actor is directly criticized.
Collateral	Messages in which a certain actor is criticized, but the attack remains in the background. The main function of the message is not criticism.
Critique Structure	
Simple	Messages where only a certain actor is criticized.
Compared	Messages in which a certain actor is criticized while emphasizing and highlighting the positive aspects and merits of the person who performs it.
Execution/Reason for Criticism	
Data-driven	The criticism or attack is based on data or information, as well as on statements that the criticized actor has previously made.
Emotional	The criticism or attack is based on language that evokes negative emotions or feelings such as fear, indignation, anger, or disappointment.
Ethical	The criticism or attack questions the credibility of a proposal or action conducted by a certain actor.
Humor/ridicule	The criticism or attack is delivered from a humorous perspective to ridicule one or more actors.

Source: [Marcos-García et al. \(2021\)](#).

The messages were downloaded manually from the Telegram Desktop application via screenshot. The intercoder reliability was calculated using Scott's pi formula on 130 messages (18.31% of the sample), obtaining a level of 0.92. After its coding, statistical treatment was conducted with the SPSS program (v.28). To study the independence between the

categorical variables, the chi-square test was applied. The significance value that was established is <0.05 .

4. Results

4.1. What Use of Criticism Do Political Parties Make on Telegram?

In the 2021 Community of Madrid election campaign, an emerging use of criticism was detected in the communication strategies proposed by political parties on Telegram. Of the total number of messages published, 27.2% contained criticism or political attacks on the adversary (Figure 1). These data indicate that although it is not a major resource, its presence to a greater or lesser extent in the publications of all political parties defines an incipient trend in the use of Telegram as a tool for political communication.

Generally speaking, if we look at the results within each party, they reveal that the party of Ciudadanos is, in proportion, the one that disseminated the most extensive number of attacks within its communication strategy (37.7%), followed by the PP (34.9%) and Vox (22.8%) (Figure 1). These parties dedicated a large part of their publications to criticizing the mistakes or actions of their rival parties on Telegram.

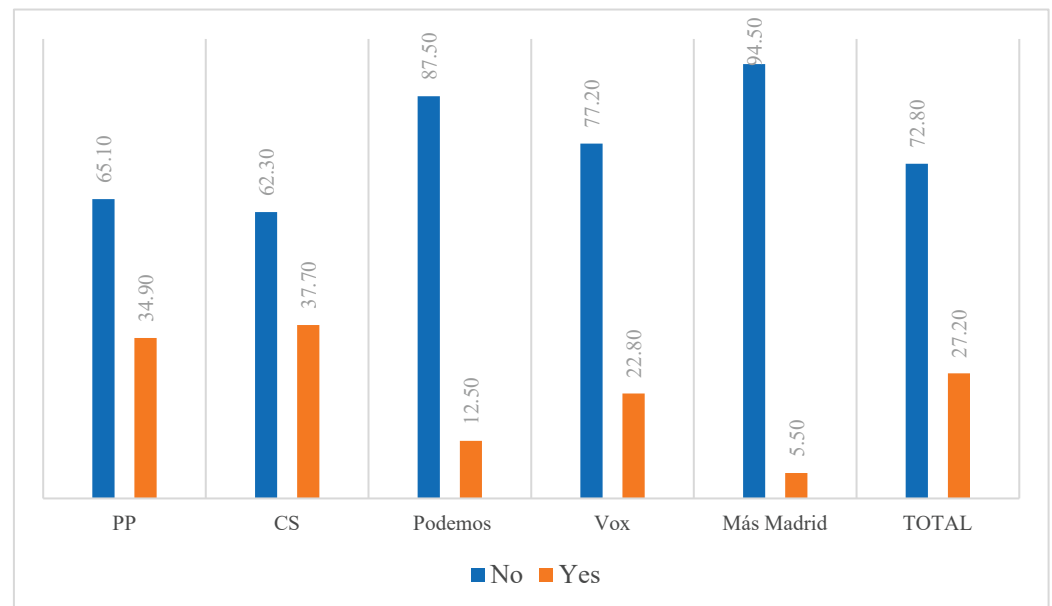


Figure 1. Presence of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties (% within the user). Source: Self-made.

In this context, if we analyze the data in detail, we can verify that ideology is related to the use that parties make of criticism on Telegram ($\chi^2(1) = 31,016$; $p < 0.001$). It can be seen how the right-wing parties (PP, Vox, and Ciudadanos) produced the most attacks on their publications on this platform (25.8%) (Table 3). The left-wing parties (Podemos and Más Madrid) hardly resorted to this resource (1.4%) (Table 3).

Secondly, the data reveal that the government/opposition axis also influences the management of political criticism ($\chi^2(1) = 31,881$; $p < 0.001$). The data based on this axis present patterns similar to those described above, as the PP and Ciudadanos represented the government, being parties with a conservative ideology. In this sense, the parties that constitute the government of the Community of Madrid are the ones that, in general terms, resorted more frequently to criticism in their messages. They directed most of their attacks towards the Spanish president, Pedro Sánchez, intending to weaken his figure (20.3%) (Table 3). However, the opposition parties, especially Podemos and Más Madrid, did not make prominent use of attacking the adversary on Telegram (6.9%) (Table 3).

Ultimately, the analysis confirmed that the use of criticism on Telegram was conditioned by the political trajectory of the parties ($\chi^2(1) = 22.642$; $p < 0.001$). In this case, the

parties with the most extensive political experience in the Madrid Assembly, namely the PP, Ciudadanos, and Podemos (21.0%) (Table 3), were the ones that criticized more often than those who were running for the presidency of this community for the first time, such as Más Madrid and Vox (6.2%) (Table 3). These attacks were generally used to differentiate themselves from new parties and demonstrate their political expertise.

Table 3. Presence of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties based on axes (%).

Criticism	Ideology Axis		Government/Opposition Axis		Biography Axis	
	Right	Left	Government	Opposition	Old	New
No	55.8	17	37.2	35.6	42.1	30.7
Yes	25.8	1.4	20.3	6.9	21	6.2

Source: Self-made.

Concerning the target of the attacks, the criticism was mainly pointed at another rival political party (43.52%) (Figure 2). However, it is worth noting that the high number of messages containing individualized criticism of a political actor revealed a tendency towards negative personalization on Telegram. It is especially relevant in the case of Más Madrid, which devoted 40% of its publications to personal criticisms (Figure 2), specifically to the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso. The PP and Ciudadanos also stand out in this regard, having dedicated 28.13% and 25% of their publications (Figure 2) to criticizing other political actors, respectively, positioning the President of the Spanish Government, Pedro Sánchez, at the center of their attacks. It is interesting to note that only 0.52% of the messages containing criticism were addressed to the media and companies (Figure 2).

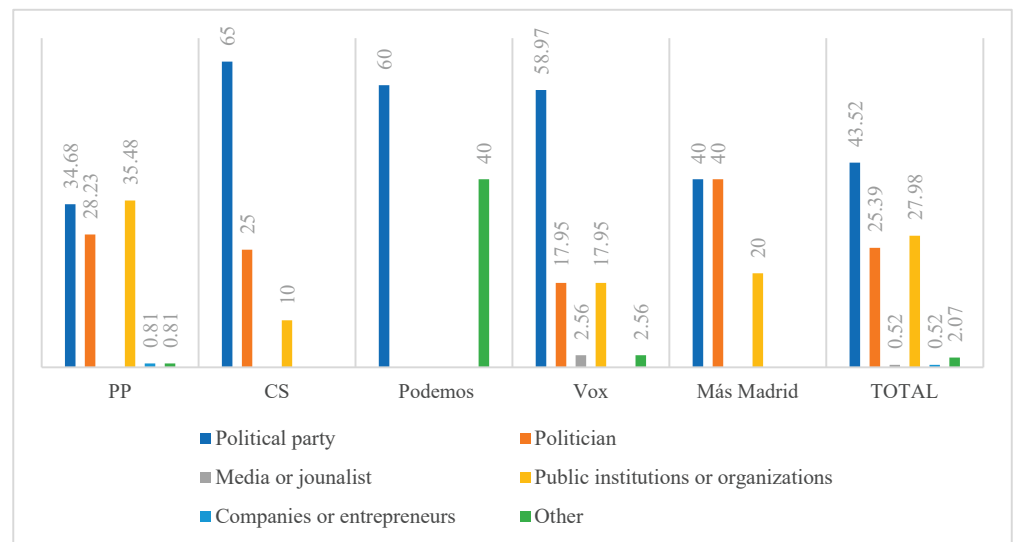


Figure 2. Subjects of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties (% within the user). Source: Self-made.

4.2. How Do Political Parties Criticize on Telegram?

Regarding how parties conducted their criticism on Telegram, the analysis shows that attacking the biography of rivals was the type of mechanism most exploited by political parties. Of all the messages containing any criticism, 68.39% did so by discrediting the decisions and actions conducted by other parties (Figure 3). Más Madrid and the PP prioritized this strategy over other attacks (100% and 73.39%, respectively) (Figure 3).

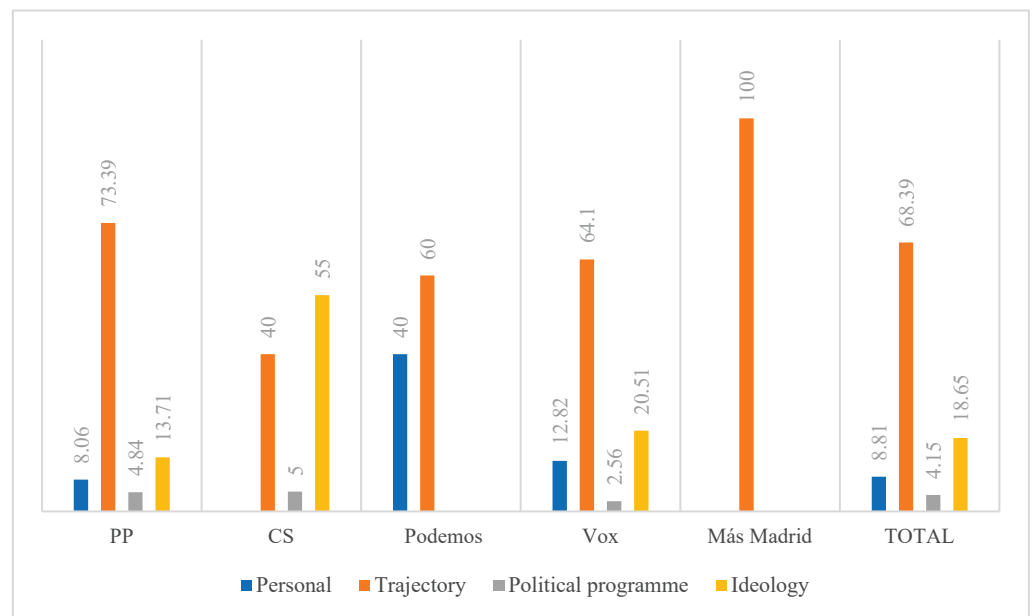


Figure 3. Typology of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties (% within the user). Source: Self-made.

The second type of criticism most used by the parties was attacks on ideological values (18.65%) (Figure 3). The case of Ciudadanos stands out since 55% of its publications containing any criticism did so by pointing out values and ideas of certain tendencies contrary to its own, especially socialism (Figure 3). Although personal criticism was only present in 8.81% of the messages that contained an attack (Figure 3), it was a notable dynamic in Podemos' Telegram strategy. Forty percent of their criticisms articulated the attributes, traits, and other personal aspects of their rivals (Figure 3), specifically those of the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, and other members of her match.

In the analysis of how political parties carry out their criticism on Telegram, the data obtained revealed three significant trends: first, regarding the intensity of the attacks, in 72.02% of the messages that contained some criticism, it remained in the foreground of the publication (Table 4). This dynamic occurred at similar levels in the strategy of all the parties analyzed, which means that criticism was used on Telegram to directly attack their rivals. The left-wing parties Podemos and Más Madrid stand out in this strategy. In 80% of their publications that contained some criticism (Table 4), the attack was the predominant function in the message.

This dynamic complements how parties structured their criticism on Telegram. The results revealed that they mostly used simple attacks. Along these lines, in 83.94% of the critical messages, a certain actor was attacked without highlighting the positive aspects and merits of the person (Table 4). That is to say, there was no comparison between the criticized actor and the criticizer, but rather the attack was executed in only one direction to emphasize the opponent's mistakes. It is worth mentioning in this regard the absolute priority that Vox gave to this form of structuring its criticism (100%) (Table 4), thus proposing a totally destructive attack for their addressee.

Finally, the third strategy detected in the analysis referring to how parties make criticisms on Telegram, their reason for existing. Parties generally questioned the credibility of a proposal or action conducted by a specific political actor. That is, they attacked their rivals mainly based on ethical reasons (84.97%) (Table 4), focusing their offensives on evaluating the party's lack of honesty, a leader, an institution, or an action carried out by some of these. All the parties analyzed prioritized this practice of making their criticisms

on this platform. However, Más Madrid stands out for doing so in all the messages they disseminated with attacks during the campaign (100%) (Table 4).

Table 4. How political parties criticize on Telegram (% within the user).

		PP	CS	Podemos	Vox	Más Madrid	TOTAL
Intensity	Predominant	72.58	55.0	80.0	76.92	80.0	72.02
	Collateral	27.42	45.0	20.0	23.08	20.0	27.98
Structure	Simple	80.65	85.0	60.0	94.87	100.0	83.94
	Compared	19.35	15.0	40.0	5.13	0.0	16.06
Execution	Based on data	0.81	0.0	40.0	0	0.0	1.55
	Emotional	12.1	15.0	0.0	5.13	0.0	10.36
	Ethical	83.06	85.0	60.0	92.31	100.0	84.97
	Humorous/ridicule	4.03	0.0	0.0	2.56	0.0	3.11

Source: Self-made.

In this context, it is interesting to highlight the percentages registered for the rest of the categories analyzed in this variable. The second most common reason for political parties to spread criticisms on Telegram was for emotional attacks (10.36%) (Table 4). These messages contained expressions to evoke negative emotions such as anger or rage. On the other hand, comical or funny attacks and criticisms based on empirical information registered residual values. The political parties did not use criticism on Telegram to ridicule other actors (3.11%) (Table 4), and they did not show a particular interest in discrediting their rivals with credibility and legitimacy provided by data (1.55%) (Table 4).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The research results permit us to establish relevant contributions on the role of criticism in the communication strategies of political parties on Telegram. These original contributions can be extrapolated to other electoral contexts outside the Spanish sphere, particularly to those countries with similar political and media systems, such as those of southern European countries (e.g., Portugal, Italy, Greece, and France).

The first finding reveals the presence of criticism as a strategic resource in party communication on Telegram (PI1). Although it is still an emerging use, as detected on Facebook in the Spanish electoral campaign of 2016 (Marcos-García et al. 2021), the parties have begun to introduce criticism and attacks in their messages on Telegram to express disagreement with the actions of rivals or the proposals that they put forward (Jungheer 2016; Dang-Xuan et al. 2013). Furthermore, the private environment that characterizes Telegram enables parties to present a direct discourse condemning the errors and contradictions that the rest of the parties may have made (D'Adamo and García-Beaudox 2016; Ceron and d'Adda 2016; Valera-Ordaz and López-García 2014) without being exposed to the public overexposure to which they are subjected on other social media (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán 2020; Terrasa 2019). An ideological use of this platform was observed, a fact that could lead to an increase in the polarization of the electorate (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2022).

In this context, the analysis results have shown that the ideological inclination of a party, its position on the government/opposition axis, and its political trajectory are determining factors in its use of criticism on Telegram. This idea reveals another of the relevant findings of this study, since the trends detected on Telegram in this regard are opposite to those identified from other social media such as Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021). On the one hand, ideology is decisive in the political attacks on Telegram as right-wing parties use it the most in their digital communication strategies, while left-wing parties employ Facebook the most. Contrary to what the previous literature on criticism indicates (Nai and Sciarini 2018; Lau and Pomper 2004), Telegram brings something distinct: it is not the parties located at the ideological extremes that criticize the moderate parties

with greater frequency and intensity. In this case, Ciudadanos and the Partido Popular, both moderate conservative parties, were the most critical of the PSOE, a moderate progressive party, especially against its actions connected to the national political framework.

Contrary to what happened on Facebook, parties in governance presented the most significant number of attacks in their Telegram messages, while the opposition parties hardly resorted to this resource. It is interesting to note that most of the criticism disseminated by these government parties was not directed at rival parties at the regional level but concentrated on the state government, showing the national significance of these regional elections given the evident political confrontation between Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Madrid Assembly, and Pedro Sánchez, president of the Spanish government. This caused the PP of the Community of Madrid to use Telegram to discredit the policies of the Spanish government led by its main opposition party, the PSOE.

Lastly, political biography is also a parameter that conditions the use of political criticism on Telegram. In this case, the patterns detected on Facebook at the national level were repeated (Marcos-García et al. 2021). Thus, parties with the most extensive political experience in the Madrid Assembly tended to criticize most frequently on this platform. This suggests that the attacks were a self-defense mechanism against the possible rise of new parties that increased electoral competitiveness.

Another relevant contribution of the study is related to the addressees of the criticism used by political parties on Telegram. These criticisms focused on discrediting rival parties. Thus, during the electoral period, the parties converged their communication efforts on exhibiting the weaknesses of their opponents, while other actors linked to politics such as the media or public institutions received almost no criticism. Therefore, the parties benefited from the direct and private communication that characterizes this mobile application to prioritize the electoral competition with the aim of obtaining more votes at the polls.

Regarding the types of criticism used (PI2), the parties emphasized attacks on the political history and biography of the rivals, focusing on the functions or positions previously developed by them. They tried to discredit the behavior of the rest of the parties in their professional activities. In contrast, they did not consider Telegram useful to criticize the personality traits or image of rival leaders. This shows that it is a medium with low personalization. In this respect, the parties articulated criticism in their communication strategies on Telegram around ethical reasons and, contrary to what was detected on Facebook (Abejón-Mendoza and Mayoral-Sánchez 2017), left emotions in the background. The parties launched direct offensives at their opponents and did not take advantage of the attacks to compare themselves and highlight their own positive aspects and merits.

All in all, the research results show that criticism on Telegram is a strategic resource beginning to manifest in the field of digital political communication. The use of it has increased compared to the 2016 general elections on Facebook. Thus, a growing trend may be the cause of political polarization. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the political attacks on Telegram present, in general terms, a more rational profile than those registered on Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021).

The main limitation of this research is that it is a single case study and lacks a comparison with other electoral campaigns. Future lines of research must study this political communication resource beyond the electoral period and thus verify whether the trends detected follow the same dynamics during ordinary political activity or if it is a one-off event. As recent studies point out (Moret-Soler et al. 2022), the advance of political polarization and the attacks on rivals suggest that a change of cycle is taking place, and these new trends will be consolidated in digital political communication. In this sense, this exploratory research is a starting point to understand how political parties have benefited from the characteristics of mobile instant messaging services to introduce criticism as a strategic resource for digital political communication.

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Article

Exploring the Political Debate over the COVID-19 Vaccination on Twitter: Emotions and Polarization in the Spanish Public Sphere

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Abstract: In a scenario marked by COVID-19, communication has posed a real challenge for institutions. Since the first case of COVID-19, Spain has faced the enormous challenge of an unprecedented health, economic, and social crisis. The public sphere has put its trust in vaccination as the only chance for the country's recovery. To determine the role played by political leaders in the debate on vaccination and citizens' perception of crisis management, this article analyzes the messages posted on Twitter by the four leaders of the parties with the most representation in parliament: Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Pablo Casado (PP), Santiago Abascal (Vox), and Yolanda Díaz (Podemos). Using a methodology for comparative content analysis on Twitter, a sample was established that began at the start of the vaccination process and inoculation with the first dose, and covered the entire year that followed. The research results, which contrasted with those collected in demographic surveys, reflected an increase in polarization and electoral use of the vaccine, which took precedence over the awareness-raising discourse typical of public campaigns.

Keywords: COVID-19; vaccination; public communication; polarization; Twitter



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1. Introduction

The public dilemma surrounding COVID-19 vaccination, the confusion, and polarization of political discourse on social media constituted the hallmarks of an institutional communication process also in crisis (Casero-Ripollés 2020). Having surpassed the first stage of the pandemic marked by the unknown nature of the virus and the digital informational chaos (Larrondo Ureta et al. 2021), a second phase emerged with the vaccine as its protagonist. In front of the containment measures employed to stop the virus (social distancing, confinement, or travel restrictions), the vaccine was postulated as the main hope to end the pandemic (Carrasco-Polaino et al. 2021). The priority of vaccination occupied the political agenda (Thelwall et al. 2021), which continued to promote the storytelling of conflict among leaders, parties, and governments.

Similar to previous crises (Broniatowski et al. 2018; Cheng et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2017; Ghenai and Mejova 2018), the origin of the virus, expectations for the vaccine, or preventive measures were sources of misinformation, especially on social media (Dredze et al. 2016; Kang et al. 2017). This informational disorder led the WHO to include distrust of vaccines in the list of the ten leading threats to global health (Friedrich 2019).

Vaccines are an opportunity for democratic systems to explain technical procedures and global health, and to reinforce their role as an instrument of transparency and good governance (Westphalen and Libaert 2008). However, facing social audiences and taking Twitter as the primary support for propaganda and cyber rhetoric (López Meri 2016), political communication favors personalization and spectacularization strategies over resources that guarantee reliability (Amado 2016; Más-Manchón and Guerrero-Solé 2019). Institutional political discourse shows signs of improvisation, insecurity, and disconnection from experts. The opinion of specialists, professionals, and scientists is undervalued

because it does not represent the ‘people’ (Waisbord 2018). Disinformation and denialism, the battle for global influence, as well as polarization are intensifying (Ali and Gatiti 2020). Doubts and suspicions concerning vaccines are mixed with public distrust of institutions. Politicization of uncertainty further weakens a democratic system that was already in decline (Colomina 2021; Wardle 2017).

According to the specific Digital News Report Spain (Negredo et al. 2020), 44% of the surveyed population stated that they found a lot or quite a lot of misinformation regarding COVID-19 on social media, and blame politicians (42%), the media (36%), and the government (34%) for the hoaxes. For its part, the report prepared by the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) measured the evolution of attitudes towards vaccination in Spain through three representative surveys (n = 12.162) (Lobera Serrano and Álvarez 2021). Additionally, the report advanced theories on acceptance or resistance of the population (Ramonfaur et al. 2021; Lorini et al. 2018; Hornsey et al. 2018; Betsch et al. 2018), highlighting the concept of trust in institutions (a diffuse trust in the set of political organizations, the WHO and the European Union, municipalities, the government of Spain, and the autonomous communities) associated with a more favorable attitude towards vaccination.

Incorrect information or falsehoods from authorities had a negative impact on the course of the pandemic, as individuals adopted behaviors based on the data and information they received and the effects they produced on social media (Cuauthémoc Mayorga 2021; Ceron et al. 2021). In this context of confusion, conspiracy, and reticence, the report gathered recommendations on the increased visibility of institutions’ efforts at the international, national, and local levels, in addition to the effectiveness and unity in the fight against the pandemic, and the guarantee of public control mechanisms against disinformation. In this line of research, the objective was to analyze the political discourse on COVID-19 vaccination from the main leaders with representation in the Spanish Parliament on Twitter and check the perception of the audiences through the viral response on the network and sociological surveys.

1.1. Impact of the Vaccination Political Campaign on Twitter: The Axis of Misinformation

The controversy over the benefits or drawbacks of social networks projected in the area of political communication maintains an open debate about disinformation fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic (Salaverria et al. 2020). The dysfunction of the institutional political message regarding vaccines (Costa-Sánchez and López-García 2020), the disconnection with experts and science (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022a), and the degree of confrontation between leaders on Twitter are aspects that require academic review.

In the health sphere, the previous literature has analyzed the conversation in the public sphere on Twitter about specific vaccines and in general (Bello-Orgaz et al. 2017; Milani et al. 2020; Tomeny et al. 2017). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare professionals were already treating patients who had been misinformed online, a phenomenon known as “Dr Google” (Lee et al. 2014). However, interviews conducted by the New York Times (<https://nyti.ms/2FJFVNb>, accessed on 28 January 2023) with more than a dozen doctors and researchers specializing in disinformation from the United States and Europe revealed that they had never seen such a high volume as that related to COVID-19. These professionals blamed leaders such as Donald Trump for amplifying alternative theories, digital platforms for not doing enough to end false information, and people for so easily believing what they consumed online.

Due to its recent nature, there has not yet been an opportunity to analyze the political and citizen dialogue regarding COVID-19 vaccines. Beyond the advantages of the network, due to its instantaneousness, virality, and engagement (Campos-Domínguez 2017), Twitter has been useful to the scientific community to detect incorrect conceptions of users and act as detractors of false information, since the number of people who go to the Internet looking for information regarding vaccination is increasing (Graells-Garrido et al. 2019; Burnap et al. 2016; Kouzy et al. 2020; Jolley and Douglas 2014).

A stressed and frightened population seeks shelter in strong and competent leaders, capable of leading the country in the face of an uncertain scenario (Amat et al. 2020). This opportunity was being exploited by leaders to manage emotions and convert Twitter into an electoral tool at a time of pandemic. Recent studies have already confirmed a clear divergence between institutional messages concerning COVID-19 (Castillo-Esparcia et al. 2020a), consisting of administrative or service information, and the content of a more emotional nature, which citizens tend to interact with more (Castillo-Esparcia et al. 2020b).

A context is then produced of emerging fake news that has empowered anti-democratic policies, equaling the number of professional news items from accredited media (Fernández-Torres et al. 2021; Howard et al. 2018). An example is the conspiracy theories put forward by Donald Trump linking the origin of SARS-CoV-2 to a Chinese laboratory and the announcement of medications without scientific evidence. In addition, criticism concerning the efficacy of vaccines from other countries or their attitude of politicizing and downplaying the virus are hallmarks of this political leader's populist discourse. Therefore, politics and politicians are presented as a source of misinformation and propaganda on social media, especially during election periods (Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo 2020).

Regarding the national and local scope, given that vaccination was framed in a context of mixed management (governmental and autonomous communities), the treatment of vaccines on Twitter was a direct projection of what had happened internationally. The influence of a two-party system PSOE/PP that denotes conflict, polarization, and criticism of the socialist government's management shared by the media and by the social audience is added to the position of emerging forces such as Vox and Unidas Podemos, that points to a "polarized pluralist" discourse with a preference for centralized or ideologically aligned information (López-García 2020; Brennen et al. 2020). However, the conspiratorial narrative of "no to the vaccine" that was popularized by populists such as Trump or Bolsonaro on Twitter, was transferred to Spain with a behavior that eluded the topic in the case of the extreme right (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2021; Manfredi-Sánchez et al. 2021). In this context of antivaccine policies, social media acted as a feedback mechanism for ideologies that could foster polarization and, in turn, influence users by increasing confusion and misinformation (Wilson et al. 2014; Getman et al. 2018).

Paradoxically, a social network such as Twitter, with the capacity for nodal interaction, could generate echo chambers and activate the debate about vaccination (Cardenal et al. 2019; Pérez-Dasilva et al. 2020), becoming a focus of political interest and a channel for aligning audiences with ideologies. These suppositions also provoked conflicting opinions from the public regarding Twitter, which they rated as not recommended for health information due to the distrust it generated.

In any case, the influence of politicians and the electoral use they make of Twitter is added to the activism of a social audience, which also participates in the creation and propagation of false information (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro 2019). Topics related to the origin of the virus, expectations for the vaccine, the progression of the outbreak of infectious diseases, or preventive measures have been subject to fallacies in previous health crises (Broniatowski et al. 2018). At the beginning of April 2020, 113 million unique authors had shared messages on Twitter regarding COVID-19 (Larson 2020). The freedom of expression allows social networks to spread unchecked erroneous information and false news (Rosenberg et al. 2020; Salaverría et al. 2020). In conclusion, a risk ecosystem is needed that puts institutional dialogue with experts, informative rigor, and data verification on topics that affect public health and requires the commitment of political leadership to stop the metastatic spread of disinformation on the network (Bounegru et al. 2017).

1.2. Perception of Citizen's Social Attitudes toward Vaccination. Context Study

In a moment of institutional and political crisis provoked by the infodemic, citizens have been left more vulnerable to the impact of disinformation, especially in the realm of social media (Salaverría et al. 2020). The social audience has not only become an object of influence, but also a potential disseminator of falsehoods concerning the virus,

contributing to exponentially increasing its social circulation radius (Martínez-Costa et al. 2022). Meanwhile, an increase in public confusion and distrust in politicians and media is evident, caused by the digital immersion of hoaxes and fake news regarding COVID-19, the government's management of COVID-19, or the efficacy of vaccines and vaccination campaigns (Pérez-Curiel and Casero-Ripollés 2022).

As part of the pre-investigation process, the report entitled "Evolution of the Social Perception of Scientific Aspects of COVID-19", published by the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (June 2020/January 2021) has been retrieved. The objective of this work was to measure the evolution of the attitudes of citizens towards vaccination in Spain and to identify the main factors involved in the reluctance exhibited towards COVID-19 vaccination. The report collected the results of two rounds of telephone surveys and one in-person survey, representative of the Spanish population, and covered a total of 12,162 interviews. The 5C model explained vaccine hesitancy in terms of five dimensions: trust in vaccines and the healthcare system, complacency, calculation, the cost of vaccination, and the perception of vaccination as a collective responsibility (Betsch et al. 2018). Meanwhile, the scale measuring agreement with conspiracy theories was centered on the case of vaccines (Shapiro et al. 2016). A summary of the results of the third and fourth survey conducted confirmed a greater acceptance of the vaccine, increasing from 23% achieved in July 2020 to 83% in May 2021 (1), a certain relaxation in the compliance with prevention measures, when only half of the population (49%) assured that they have been able to avoid sharing closed spaces with non-cohabitants (2), and the belief in conspiracy theories by a significant percentage of the population (3). In fact, almost a third of the Spanish population (31%) consider that masks are bad for their health, and close to 8% firmly believe that vaccinating children is harmful and this fact is hidden. All of this is in a context of disinformation, with 58% of Spaniards stating that they have seen or heard messages encouraging people not to vaccinate against COVID-19.

The applicability of this report to research on the strategies of the main Spanish political leaders regarding COVID-19 vaccination on Twitter has been particularly focused on the survey variable that deals with the level of trust of the public in political institutions. The results confirmed a diffuse degree of trust in the WHO and EU, passing through the government of Spain, the Autonomous Communities, and the Municipalities, which favored a position of reticence among citizens towards vaccination. The FECYT report set out a series of recommendations to combat the public's lack of trust in institutions. Among them, the pertinent recommendations included promoting transparency and making the efforts of institutional and political organizations and their efficacy in the fight against the pandemic and the deployment of the vaccination campaign more visible; increasing communication regarding the functioning of public control mechanisms, such as the European Medicines Agency and the Spanish Agency for Health Products; and combating rumors regarding the negative effects of vaccines or their lack of efficacy, linked to conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Therefore, the data collected from the three population surveys published by FECYT provided information on citizens' behavior toward the institutional management of the vaccine conflict and the use of disinformation, which allowed for comparison with the response of users to messages posted by Spanish political leaders on Twitter, in the context of the first COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

In conclusion, taking this entire context into account, the main objective of this article was to delve into the role that Spanish political leaders have played in the debate on vaccination and the perception that the public has concerning institutional management. Thus, this work analyzed, through a content analysis, the messages published on Twitter by the four leaders of the parties with the highest parliamentary representation in Spain.

2. Materials and Methods

The management of a global health crisis, marked by containment strategies such as social distancing, lockdowns, travel restrictions, and other services, and by the hope or

distrust in vaccines to end the pandemic, on a network such as Twitter (Friedrich 2019; Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022a) has generated an institutional and political campaign of dissent among experts. This campaign's main identifying features are polarization, ideological bias, and disinformation, projected in the distrust of the social audience.

From this perspective, the following research questions arose:

RQ1.—Are vaccines a topic of debate among the main Spanish political leaders on Twitter?

RQ2.—Are polarization, bias, and misinformation characteristics of political discourse on vaccination?

RQ3.—Are there differences between the response of Twitter users to political messages regarding vaccines and the public opinion collected in demographic surveys?

Taking these premises into account, a triple focus content analysis methodology that was quantitative–qualitative and discursive (Silverman 2016; Krippendorff 2012; Flowerdew and Richardson 2017; Van Dijk 2015) was applied, which was supported by the issue frame/game frame theory (Cartwright et al. 2019). The social network Twitter was chosen, given the importance it has achieved for political communication in electoral processes and in health crises (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2017; D'Heer and Verdegem 2015; Chen et al. 2020).

To delve deeper into the role played by political leaders and experts during the COVID-19 vaccination process, we opted to study the Twitter accounts of the four Spanish political leaders with the highest parliamentary representation in the Congress of Deputies (Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Casado, Santiago Abascal, and Yolanda Díaz). Regarding the temporal period analyzed, the sampling began with the start of the vaccination process and the administration of the first dose in Spain (27 December 2020) and extended throughout the following year (27 December 2021). Although this time frame did not encompass the entire vaccination process, the twelve months of sampling captured the moments of greatest political media focus on immunization and were significant, both in terms of quantity and quality, to support the conclusions of the study.

Using the Twitonomy application, all tweets posted by these leaders during the specified period of time were downloaded, constituting a general sample composed of 4283 messages. From there, screening was performed, selecting those tweets that included the keywords 'vaccine', 'vaccines', or 'vaccination'. From the general sample, a specific sample of 166 tweets regarding the vaccination process, spread across the four leaders on Twitter, was derived and adjusted to the indications of previous methodological models, which recommended that, in the collection of data in discourse studies, quality should be prioritized over quantity (Baker 2006; Cleary et al. 2014; Silverman 2016). This premise was therefore applicable to the analysis of emotions, an indicator that the cited experts considered representative of the leader's behavior to influence the citizenry.

From this premise, a coding manual was designed that allowed the analysis of the narrative that Spanish political leaders developed throughout the vaccination process, composed of 11 quantitative, qualitative, and discursive variables. The statistical program chosen for the processing and exploitation of the data was IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25).

The categorization table was structured into three main blocks: issue frame (topic), game frame (strategies) and discursivity (feelings and tone), and message diffusion (virality). These three methodological tools answered the three research questions. To clarify the adequacy of the methodological plan, Table 1 relates the research questions to the analysis indicators.

Table 1. Approach to operationalization of research questions.

Research Question (RQ)	Indicators
(RQ1) Are vaccines a topic of debate among the main Spanish political leaders on Twitter?	Issue frame (topics)
(RQ2) Are polarization, bias, and misinformation characteristics of political discourse on vaccination?	Game frame (strategies) and discursivity (tone and feelings)
(RQ3) Are there differences between the response of Twitter users to political messages about vaccines and the public opinion collected in demographic surveys?	Viralization capacity

Source: Own elaboration.

For the study of the issue frame and tactics (game frame), a pre-analysis phase was conducted in which a random sampling of 50 tweets was taken from the general sample ($n = 166$) to determine and check the main categories for each variable. To deepen the narrative of the leaders, the bias of tweets and discursive emotions were also studied, adapting previous research to the characteristics of the sample being studied (Yeste and Franch 2018; Moret-Soler et al. 2022).

In order to estimate the viralization and influence capacity of each tweet, a previously used formula was applied (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022b). In this sense, this metric completed a valid and proven formula for taking user responses into account (Carrasco-Polaino et al. 2018). The viralization capacity was based on the sum of retweets multiplied by 2, plus the likes and responses, all divided by the number of posted tweets ($VC = (\text{sum of retweets} \times 2 + \text{sum of likes} + \text{sum of replies}) / \text{sum of tweeted messages}$). The double value of retweets was justified because Twitter increases the visibility of these tweets, showing the messages on the timeline of the person who shares them.

3. Results

The study of Twitter profiles of the main Spanish leaders and political parties during the twelve months analyzed gave rise to a total sample of 166 tweets related to the vaccination process (see Table 2). In this sense, it is noteworthy that the socialist leader, Pedro Sánchez, was linked to one out of every ten tweets published to this process (10.1%). Likewise, the President of the government also published 117 tweets concerning vaccines, which represented 70.5% of the specific sample.

Table 2. Frequency of tweets from each political leader.

Leader	Total Tweets	Vaccination Tweets	% of Total Leader Tweets
Pedro Sánchez	1152	117	10.1%
Pablo Casado	1267	42	3.3%
Santiago Abascal	732	0	0.0%
Yolanda Díaz	1132	7	0.6%
Total	4283	166	3.8%

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the leader of the opposition and the PP, Pablo Casado focusses on vaccination in only 42 of the 1267 messages he sent on Twitter during the 12 months analyzed, which represented 3.3%. Regarding the specific sample, the popular leaders contributed 25.3% of the tweets to the study. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Vice President of the government and head of the Unidas Podemos list, Yolanda Díaz, only focused on vaccination in 7 of the 1132 messages published throughout the year studied, which represented 0.6% of the total and 4.2% of the specific sample. Regarding the leader of Vox, Santiago Abascal, the silence he adopted was striking regarding vaccination, since he did not dedicate a single message to this topic out of the 732 tweets he published throughout the year.

Delving deeper into the sample obtained from political leaders, it is worth considering the distribution of publications throughout the period of time studied (see Figure 1). Therefore, the data showed an increase in President Pedro Sánchez's activity in the months of April to July, coinciding with the period of highest vaccination among the population. On the contrary, Pablo Casado focused his message in January, when the Spanish government's vaccination strategy was not yet consolidated.

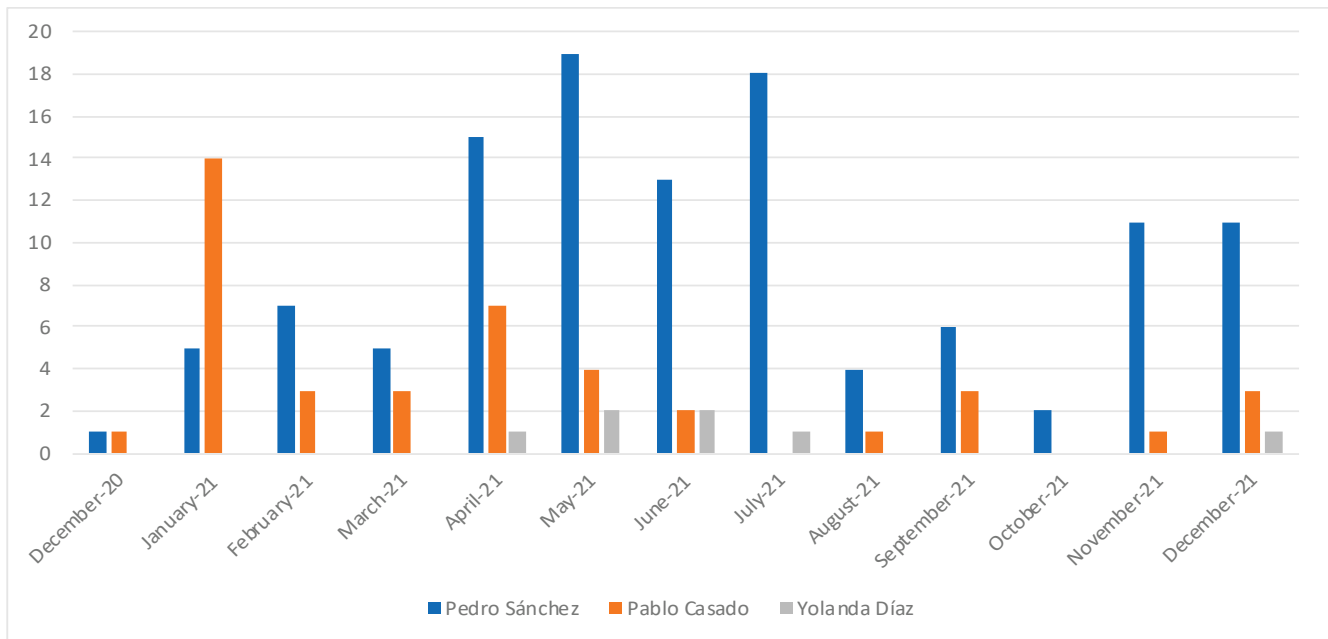


Figure 1. Frequency of tweets from each political leader by month.

3.1. Speech by National Leaders on Vaccination against COVID-19

After analyzing the theme on which the discourse of each of the selected leaders was based (see Figure 2), it could be observed that Pedro Sánchez mainly focused on providing information relating to the vaccination process (42.7%), the donation of vials to Latin American countries (12%), research into new vaccines (7.7%), or the purchase of doses (4.3%). Furthermore, there were a considerable number of cases (20.5%) in which vaccination was used to discuss other national issues, such as the economy, or to illustrate meetings with other international leaders (12.8%). In this line, Pablo Casado also focused on the vaccination process (47.6%), the purchase of vials (4.8%), or the research into new treatment (4.8%), but at the same time, used the situation to question the government's management in other national (28.6%) or international (9.5%) matters. Meanwhile, Vice President Yolanda Díaz dedicated the clear majority of the few messages she posted on providing information related to the vaccination process managed by the government (71.4%), and the rest to other national issues (28.6%).

Diving deeper into the discursive strategies of Spanish leaders regarding vaccination (see Figure 3), it was observed that President Pedro Sánchez mainly bet on providing information relating to his management at the head of the government of Spain (83.8%), including concerning the distribution of doses, the progress of the national economy, or international management, while specific messages aimed at raising awareness among citizens regarding the need to immunize themselves against the virus constituted a minority of messages (14.5%). Following this line, Vice President Yolanda Díaz focused a clear majority of her limited messages on vaccination to spread the government's management (85.7%) compared to those that aimed to raise awareness among the population (4.3%). By contrast, Pablo Casado used vaccination to question the management of the Spanish government (61.9%) or to spread the management of conservative leaders (23.8%) such as Ursula Von der Leyen, Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla, or Isabel Díaz Ayuso. It is noteworthy

that the leader of the PP only dedicated two tweets (4.8%) to explaining the importance and convenience of getting vaccinated against this disease to citizens.

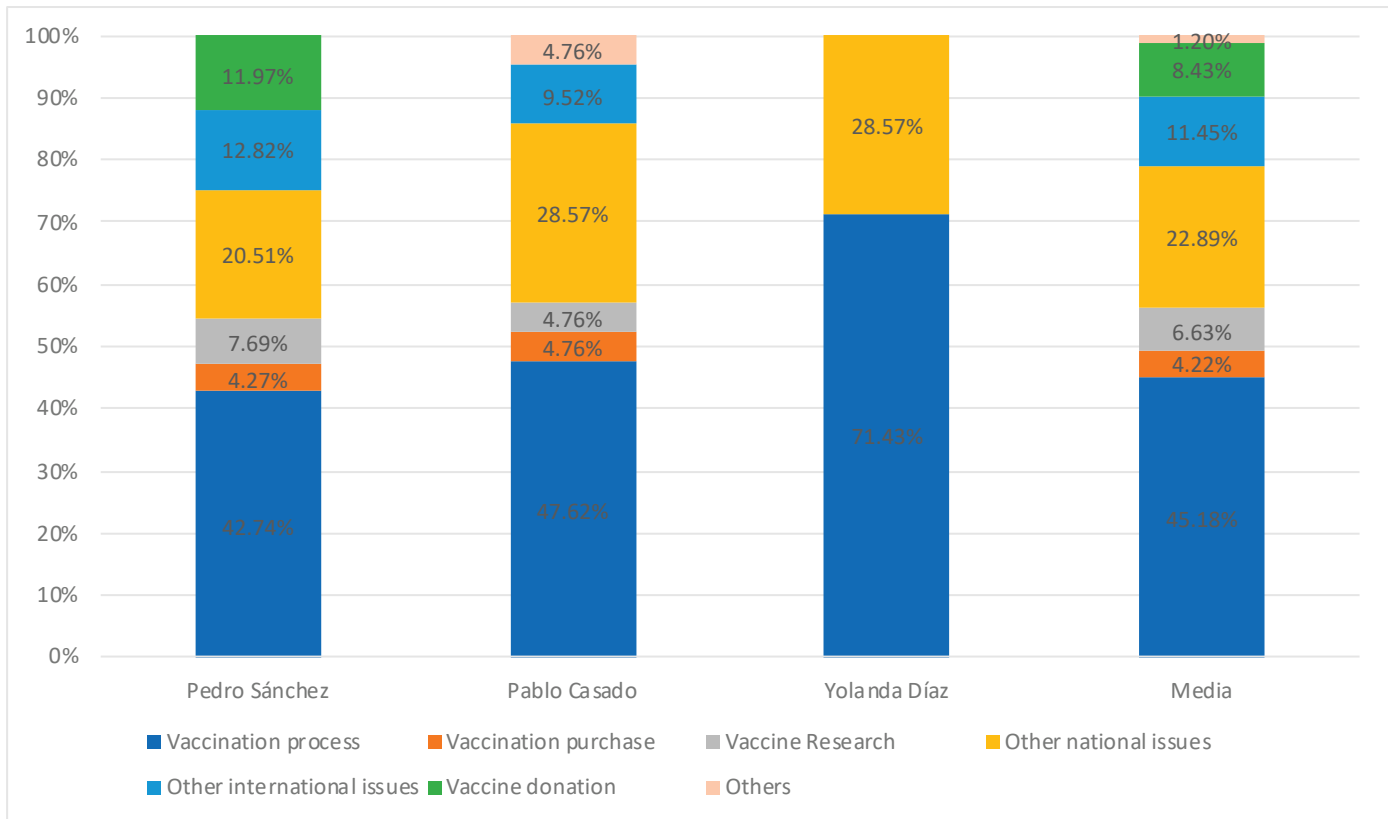


Figure 2. Thematic analysis of messages posted by Spanish leaders.

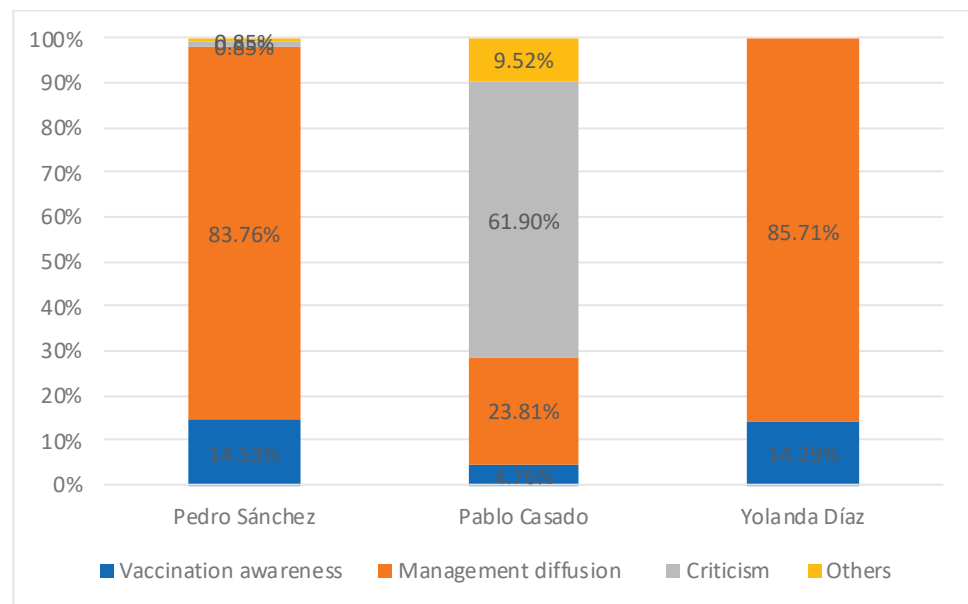


Figure 3. Strategies of Spanish leaders on Twitter.

In this vein, the analysis of the tone of the messages posted regarding vaccination by Spanish political figures shows a behavior of maximum polarization. The tendency of the members of the government translated into an optimistic vision of the vaccination process,

which contrasted with the strategy of the leader of the opposition, who bet on criticism (see Figure 4). Thus, Pedro Sánchez’s messages were mostly positive (93.2%) or neutral (5.1%), while there were two tweets with a negative bias (1.7%) aimed at questioning the stance of the opposition parties. Sánchez’s positive communication strategy was complemented by the attitude of Vice President Yolanda Díaz, as all of her messages were positive (100%). On the other hand, the PP leader focused (64.3%) on negative messages concerning the governmental management of the inoculation process, compared with 31% positive messages and 4.8% neutral messages.

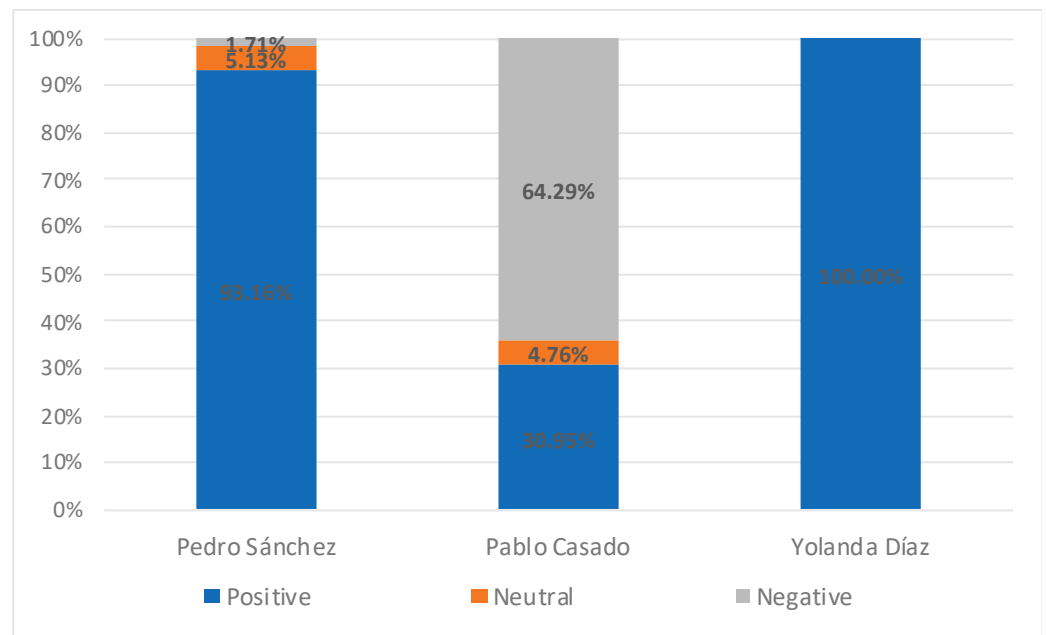


Figure 4. Tone of messages posted by Spanish leaders.

With the aim of delving deeper into the narrative disseminated by Spanish political leaders when addressing the COVID-19 vaccination process, the emotions in which their messages were framed were explored. Thus, the data again showed a polarization between the messages of the government and those of the opposition (see Figure 5). In this way, the socialist leader, Pedro Sánchez, mainly used messages in which he showed his pride in what has been achieved in terms of vaccination (45.3%) and his hope that this will translate into an improvement in the country’s situation (32.5%), while the Vice President Díaz mainly opted to show her gratitude to health professionals (57.1%). Nevertheless, in the case of the popular leader, clearly the blame (50%) took precedence, focusing their criticism of the executive management on President Sánchez and the Minister of Health. Despite this, in their messages, emotions of gratitude (16.7%) or disapproval (14.3%) were also present.

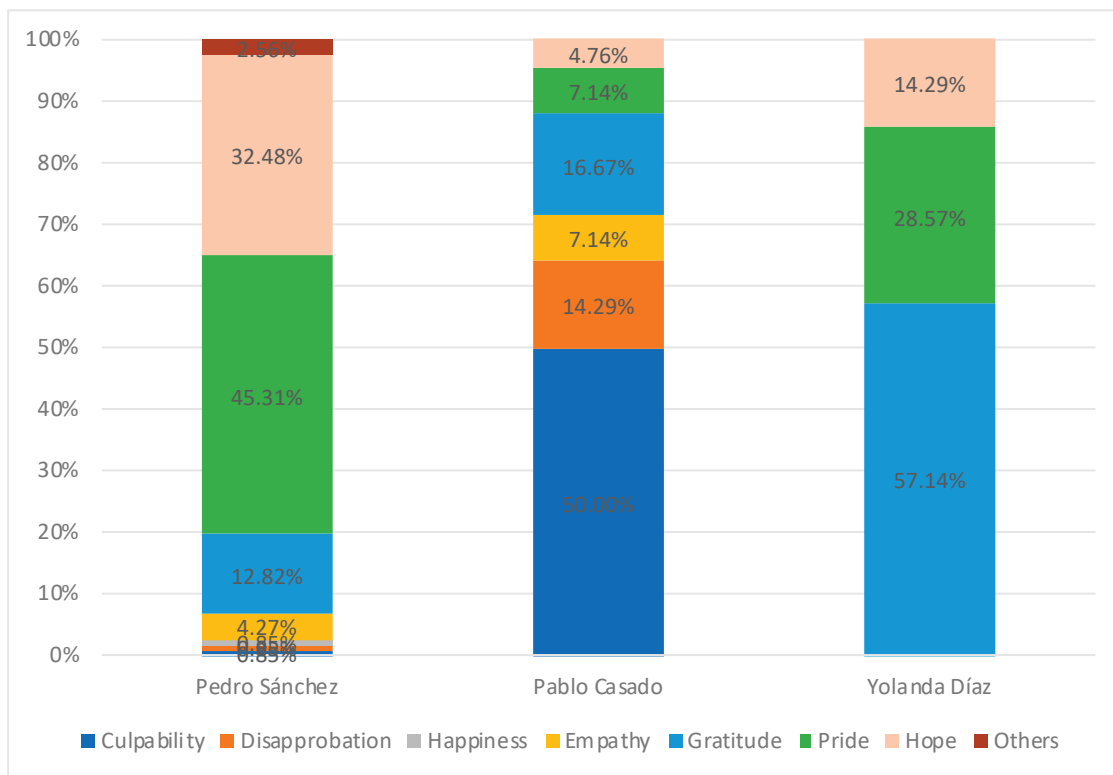


Figure 5. Feelings portrayed in the messages posted by Spanish leaders.

At the time of completion of this analysis, it was advisable to take into account another formal aspect of the messages emitted by Spanish political leaders. In this sense, a majority trend was observed for Pedro Sánchez (62.4%) and Pablo Casado (54.8%) to incorporate videos with their statements, while Yolanda Díaz did the same with images that illustrated her message (42.9%). The fact that the vast majority of tweets posted by Pedro Sanchez and Pablo Casado included edited videos or professional photos points to prior strategic planning by their respective teams.

3.2. Response of the Audiences to the Debate on Vaccination

This research was supplemented by the study of the audience response on Twitter to COVID-19 vaccination messages posted by the main national political leaders. From the analysis of retweets, likes, and responses, it was evident that political leaders had a very high capacity for virality when they referred to vaccination (2927). After analyzing each of the cases studied (see Figure 6), we observed that the few messages posted by Yolanda Díaz had a significant reach (5688), compared to the viralization of tweets from Pedro Sánchez (2989) and Pablo Casado (2300).

Furthermore, it should be noted that the study of the viralization capacity of messages, depending on the tone used, points to the fact that, in the context marked by fear of the pandemic and polarization, the audience interacted more with positive messages (3085) than with negative ones (2680), and that neutral messages clearly had a lower influence (1238). On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that users of the social network Twitter were more interested in information related to the vaccination process (3731), the purchase of vials (2914), or the research of new treatments (2884), compared with those messages related to donation to Latin American countries (1961) or international relations (1671). In relation to the strategies implemented by leaders, the enormous viralization of messages aimed at raising awareness of the need to vaccinate (5523) stands out, doubling that of those who criticized vaccination (2560) or questioned the management (2560) of the distribution of doses and the inoculation process.

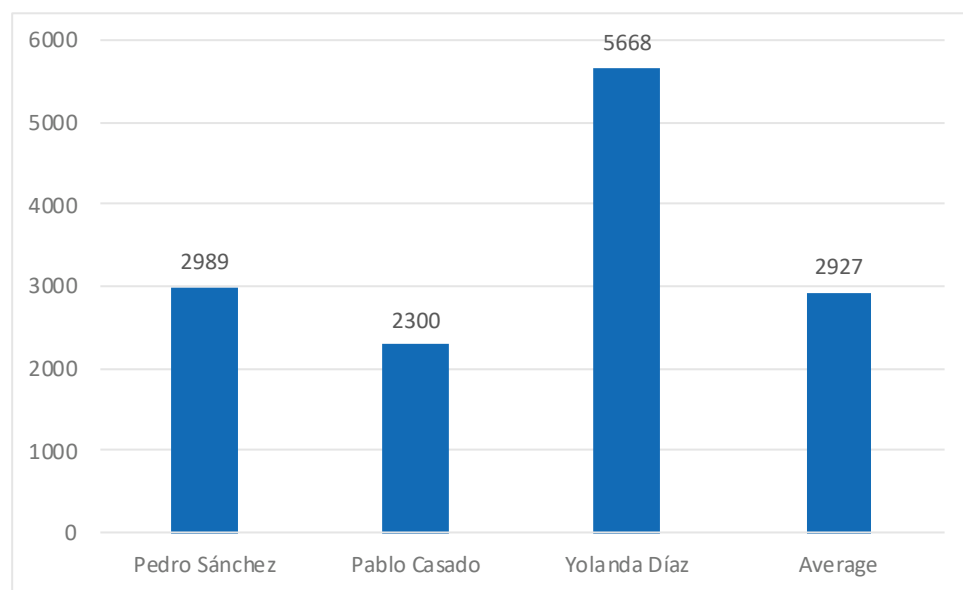


Figure 6. Viralization capacity of messages from Spanish leaders.

4. Discussion

This research adds to other previous studies that have addressed the digital conversation on Twitter of pro-vaccine and anti-vaccine communities, and, in turn, provides a vision of the strategic behavior of political leaders regarding the COVID-19 vaccination campaign (Larrondo Ureta et al. 2021; Carrasco-Polaino et al. 2021; Cuesta-Cambra et al. 2019). The fact that two of the leaders in the sample selection were members of the government, with Pedro Sánchez as President and Yolanda Díaz as Vice President, allows us to verify the identifying marks of institutional discourse, focused on promoting awareness as a demonstration of the effectiveness of public management, compared to the partisan discourse of the leader, marked by ideology, bias, and confrontation in their role as opposition. The act of investigating political behavior through the emotions of the leader is also postulated as a novel approach within the framework of COVID-19, in comparison to previous studies on electoral campaigns (Moret-Soler et al. 2022), as the use of rhetoric language becomes a communication and electoral strategy in the digital environment.

However, it should be noted that this work has some limitations. The first has to do with the methodology. In addition to the content analysis of the accounts of political leaders to assess their discourse on vaccines, it would be convenient to propose focus groups that would allow enquiry concerning citizens' opinions regarding the digital public agenda related to vaccination, including information from new actors that have been established in social networks during the pandemic and who promote conspiracy, denialism, and disinformation. Other limitations are related to the geographical criterion of the sample, which only considered the Spanish national scope, and could be extended to the Latin American scope, where institutional vaccination campaigns have been marked by a polarized discourse and by the influence of populist policies of the extreme right and extreme left. Finally, future research could focus its interest on experts, such as specialized sources that, in connivance to the media, can guarantee rigorous and contrasted information concerning vaccines, which encourages the trust of the public.

5. Conclusions

This research addresses the political discourse on Twitter regarding the COVID-19 vaccination campaign through the analysis of issues (issue frame) and strategies (game frame) developed by the four main Spanish leaders during the pandemic. In a context marked by citizens' insecurity, confusion, and distrust towards institutions (Lobera Serrano and Álvarez 2021), the results showed the differences in approach and debate of the vaccine

topic between the government representatives and candidates of different political parties (RQ1). The candidate of the Socialist Party, Pedro Sánchez, was constructing an institutional narrative as President of the government, in which awareness raising and the importance of the Spanish population getting vaccinated was the mark of identity. Statistical measurement indicated that this leader dedicated one out of every ten tweets posted during the sample year to the process of distribution of vaccines and inoculation, as messages based on the rhetoric of emotion that emphasized the delivery of the Spanish government's agenda to prevent and combat the effects of the virus.

Facing this model of communication that prioritized raising awareness among citizens, polarization was consolidated as a discursive strategy of Pablo Casado, the leader of the Popular Party. In this sense, although the data confirmed that raising awareness in relation to vaccines and the vaccination process was a shared goal of President Pedro Sánchez, his Vice President Yolanda Díaz, leader of Unidas Podemos, and the PP candidate Pablo Casado, a double electoral discourse model was evident: that of awareness and efficiency of the government's management by the government representatives, and that of polarization and criticism of that management by the leader of the opposition.

In this framework, the silence of the Vox leader, Santiago Abascal, on Twitter was also noteworthy, as he did not comment on the issue, in contrast to the skeptical attitude towards vaccines that identified the policies of extreme right-wing populisms (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022a). The fact that there was not a single tweet posted by the populist candidate in relation to vaccines distanced him, in this case, from other far-right leaders such as Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, or Jair Bolsonaro, who generated a discourse marked by misinformation and conspiracy in relation to the pandemic. However, it is true that Abascal's silence did not help to end the hesitancy towards vaccination.

The mechanisms of action and reaction of leaders regarding vaccination and the entire process of production, distribution, inoculation, and side effects in the population described a political game with different topics and communication strategies, depending on the institutional or partisan role of the leader. The government wanted to demonstrate their ability to manage an unprecedented global health crisis, such as COVID-19, and to raise awareness among the population to get vaccinated, at a time when populist conspiracy theories (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022b), the pre-eminence of antivaccine denialist discourse (Larrondo Ureta et al. 2021), and the spread of rumors by users themselves flooded social networks. The results showed that this weakened, rather than eliminated, the level of polarization, bias, and misinformation during the vaccination campaign (RQ2). Comparison between leaders revealed the diffusion of messages that promoted confrontation, especially in leaders representing bipartisanship. The announcement of the vaccination campaign by the socialist leader on their Twitter account emanated an institutional discourse, without ruling out the electoral brand, inherent to political communication (Gainous and Wagner 2014), which made the vaccine a key tool for not only health, but also economic recovery of the country. The government's effort to inform its citizens about active vaccination and prevention policies against the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by the language of emotions (Cuesta-Cambra et al. 2019), configuring a rhetorical narrative of pride for the achievements made, and of hope for the future. Institutionalization was a characteristic feature of the government's vaccination campaign and a resource to bolster the trust of citizens. However, the data showed a tendency of Pedro Sánchez, in line with other international leaders (González-Rosas et al. 2022), to prioritize the showcasing of the achievements of his management over raising awareness of vaccination.

Meanwhile, from the opposition, Pablo Casado delegitimized the vaccination campaign and, therefore, the public management, resorting to a tone of constant conflict, which promoted "blaming" the adversary as the dominant emotional trait. Despite the fact that holding the government accountable is essentially the purpose of any democratic opposition, the attitude of the conservative leader did not contribute to reducing social polarization and increasing the public confidence to overcome the health, economic and social crisis. The only common denominator between both leaders existed in expressing

support for the vaccine, in line with the opinion expressed by experts, and against the conspiratorial and negative behaviors that circulated on the networks, and identifying extreme populist ideologies. In this permanent division dynamic, a weakening of the role of other political actors, such as Unidas Podemos candidate Yolanda Díaz, was observed. It should be noted that, despite her enormous ability to go viral on Twitter, the Vice President of the government also opted to publish a small number of messages concerning vaccines and focused her attention on other issues related to her institutional management.

The non-participation of the leader of Vox in this digital debate on vaccines and the vaccination campaign could be considered an indicator of ideological bias, since silence can be considered as a strategy of hiding his attitude of rejection of the vaccine and avoiding criticism from part of the electorate against this negative position of the populist leaders. In this sense, at the end of the studied period, close to 90% of Spaniards older than 12 years had been vaccinated (Ministry of Health 2021). In addition, in relation to Vox voters themselves, it is noteworthy that, in the survey of the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS 2021), the vast majority (89.1%) of far-right party voters claimed to have been vaccinated, which was slightly below the average (96.5%).

Confirmation bias (Riva 2018; Amorós 2018) is also a sign of identity of the leader's strategies, prevailing the positive tone of messages of the two government representatives, and an evident sign of negativity in the tweets published by the PP candidate, who questioned the effectiveness of public policies in the health field. This cannot be overlooked, and this is reflected in the thematic and linguistic analysis of the messages posted on the network; the relevance of issues such as the purchase of vaccines and the progress of the inoculation process is an example of an electoral narrative that relegates scientific argumentation to a secondary plane. Finally, polarization can be considered a common trait of the political discourse of the candidates of the PSOE and the PP, in each case incentivizing the vaccine as a resource for defining the electoral vote. Consciousness raising as a discursive mark is part of institutional discourse, but does not manage to impose itself as a base political strategy to weaken polarization.

This research aimed to analyze the response of audiences to messages disseminated by leaders (RQ3), based on the bidirectionality criterion that defines a network such as Twitter (Campos-Domínguez 2017). From this perspective, there was a greater interaction of audiences with messages of a positive tone, compared to negative or neutral messages, which did not generate virality. The audience was also prone to comment on and spread those messages that aimed to raise awareness among citizens regarding the importance of vaccination, outnumbering those other tweets that praised the effectiveness of the government's management of the vaccination process or, in contrast, the opposition's criticism of the institutional vaccine campaign. The response of audiences to Yolanda Díaz's messages was remarkable, doubling that of Pedro Sánchez and Pablo Casado, and showing a greater interest from users in those informative messages, public gratitude, and positive tone compared to the polarization emanating from the two party leaders.

In line with the tendency of citizens to provide a greater response to emotional, empathetic, and personal messages (Castillo-Esparcia et al. 2020b), this research confirmed that political representatives were trying to lead the vaccination debate, intensifying their emotional language and, consequently, contributing to polarizing society (Rivera Otero et al. 2021; Robles et al. 2022). All of this does not contribute to developing the necessary communication that helps to create a soothing effect in the face of a health, economic, and social crisis (Xifra 2020). In conclusion, this research represents a pioneering and original contribution not only with regard to the debate on COVID-19 vaccination in social networks, but also with regard to the polarizing capacity of political leaders in Twitter's digital public debate. Furthermore, the methodological proposal could be used for future research in the field of political communication.

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Article

Framing Food Transition: The Debate on Meat Production and Climate Change in Three European Countries

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Abstract: The link between meat production and climate change has fostered increasing social debate in recent years. Livestock is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, among other global problems attached to the meat industry. However, this debate is often presented as one-dimensional, without a comprehensive approach. As the media plays a key role in shaping public perceptions of nutrition, this study aims to examine how the matter of food transition and climate change is addressed by three centre-left media outlets from Germany (*Der Tagesspiegel*), the United Kingdom (*The Guardian*) and Spain (*El País*). A search including the words *meat* and *climate change* in different languages, performed over one year (2021), resulted in a sample of available news items (N = 273). Using quantitative and qualitative methods, we analysed the coverage in terms of scope and use of frames. The results showed a scant number of news items combining climate change and meat consumption, though there were some differences indicating a greater awareness in the United Kingdom. Most of the news items from the three countries applied frames based on solutions from an environmental perspective. Media attention was discontinuous and sometimes determined by political debates, which made it difficult to reflect upon the underlying issues.

Keywords: climate change; livestock; meat consumption; meat production; cultivated meat; media framing; food transition; food system; Europe



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1. Introduction

Meat production represents a critical challenge in the climate change debate, as it involves the difficulty of reconciling many conflicting and relevant interests. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognises that livestock systems are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for almost 14.5% of the total (FAO 2020a), although new research has put the figure at 16.5% (Twine 2021). At the same time, its role is crucial to enhance the livelihoods of almost a fifth of the population since animal rearing on farms can be particularly effective at reducing hunger and poverty (FAO 2022). However, it requires sufficient guarantees for sustainability as the global food structure shoulders the very stability of the Earth system (Rockström et al. 2020).

The dominant agricultural and food systems have been widely criticised for their multiple failures in preventing the depletion of environmental resources and for not providing universal access to healthy food (Hebinck et al. 2021; Firkbank et al. 2018). It is not only “the single largest greenhouse-gas-emitting sector in the world”, but also “by far the largest cause of biodiversity loss, terrestrial ecosystem destruction, freshwater consumption, and waterway pollution due to overuse of nitrogen and phosphorus” (Rockström et al. 2020, p. 1). Untying the Gordian knot of meat production entails sustainable livestock management, which has the potential to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (FAO 2020b) provided that measures to enhance

production efficiency (Gerber et al. 2013) and policies aimed at an urgent and “irrefutable” food system transformation (Webb et al. 2020) are implemented.

World population growth and the increase in meat consumption per capita has resulted in an overall rise in global meat production and consumption (Vranken et al. 2014), driven in part by globalisation practices (Popkin 2006). In 2021, the world’s total meat production reached 355.5 million tons, up 4.5% from 2020. Despite the pandemic and logistic problems, meat exports reached 42.1 million tons in 2021, up 0.9% (FAO 2022). Research has focused on the nutrition/health, economic, environmental and social costs of meat overconsumption (Rust et al. 2020; Drewnowski et al. 2020) to underline that unsustainable food production and consumption negatively affect human and environmental health (Nyström et al. 2019). Whilst meat contains essential nutrients and makes a vital contribution to nutrition and food security (Vågsholm et al. 2020), excessive consumption has been associated with adverse health outcomes (Murphy and Allen 2003). In addition to that is the serious pressure of greenhouse gas emissions caused by intensive livestock production (Garnett 2009).

The current context of rising levels of consumption in high meat-eating countries puts the possibility of keeping the global temperature rise below 2 °C at serious risk, as first established at COP15 held in Denmark in 2009, and also limits the chances of achieving the United Nations SDGs (IPCC 2019; UN 2019). Faced with this scenario, transitioning towards sustainable diets is urgently needed and widely accepted (Hawkes and Popkin 2015; Rust et al. 2020; Zou et al. 2022). El Bilali et al. (2019) suggested three main strategies to encourage a sustainable transition of food systems, under the premise that they should be resilient: efficiency enhancement (e.g., sustainable intensification), demand restraint (e.g., sustainable diets reducing meat consumption) and food system transformation (e.g., alternative food systems). However, there is no consensus as to whether this is the best alternative (Zou et al. 2022), and the instruments for such a transformation are very limited (Butler et al. 2021). The urgency has led some authors to call for “suitable and applicable tools for assessing any proposed solutions” (Clément and Ajena 2021), and for fostering a shift towards a sustainable food system that also promotes “livelihoods and food cultures while being fair, just, and equitable” (Drewnowski et al. 2020, p. 1).

The complexity of the issue is reflected in the wide-ranging debate, in which domains such as health, ethics, politics, economics and technology come together. However, this debate is often presented as one-dimensional and lacking in a comprehensive approach that it necessarily entails. This is particularly relevant to the media, which plays a central role in shaping public perceptions on diet and nutrition (Frewer et al. 1995; Mroz and Painter 2022). The aim of this study is to understand how the debate on food transition and climate change is addressed by three European media outlets from Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and Spain to identify its scope and the predominant frames in media coverage.

1.1. Food Transition and Alternatives

The idea of food transition entails a progressive change in the way humankind produces and consumes in order to reach “a sustainable, affordable, trustworthy and high-quality food system” to “fulfil the needs of a diverse and growing world population” (Kampers and Fresco 2017). The process requires time and various adjustments to fit the diverse pieces of a complex puzzle together and to ensure the availability of “adequate, sustainable and healthy food in a healthy environment” (Kampers and Fresco 2017). The fulfilment of these criteria has multiple implications, from healthy products, protein transition, animal welfare, fair trade, local food, urban agriculture or non-food waste to innovations such as customised food or cultivated meat and also trends such as comfort, exclusivity or going back to nature (Warnaar and Methorst 2017).

Based on the environmental justice approach, Tribaldos and Kortetmäki (2022) advocate a holistic understanding of health under the assumption that it encompasses both human health and ecosystem health. Considering that food system transitions may cause significant adverse effects and aggravate existing inequalities and unsustainability, those authors call for justice issues to be put at the heart of the debate in order to make food

transitions inclusive. In this vein, [Almiron and Zoppeddu \(2015\)](#) highlight the close link between livestock meat production and animal cruelty (e.g., confinement, exploitation, genetic modification, mutilation), which activists, NGOs and scholars have denounced over the past 30 years. In the ethical dimension, there has been criticism of speciesism discrimination ([DeGrazia 1996](#); [Singer 2009](#)).

[Hundscheid et al. \(2022\)](#) stress that with a few exceptions, policy interventions supporting a sustainable protein transition—“change from a diet with a high proportion of animal proteins to a higher proportion of plant proteins” (p. 301)—are missing in European countries. Research highlights the symbolic connotations and cultural conventions of meat in Western countries ([Siegrist and Hartmann 2020](#)) and its association with individual freedom ([Warde 2013](#)), which together hinder the change, even though the issue of meat overconsumption is increasingly entering the public debate ([Hundscheid et al. 2022](#)). An example is the article published in July 2021 by the Spanish Consumer Affairs Minister Alberto Garzón, who advocated reducing meat consumption as one of the measures to lower the impact of climate change and also to improve citizens’ health. First published by a digital newspaper, the article entitled ‘Menos carne, más vida’ (Less meat, more life) ([Garzón 2021](#)) had a huge impact when the Minister posted a six-minute video on his Twitter account warning that high meat consumption harms our health and our planet. However, the message resulted in a strongly polarised political debate, in which there was verbal confrontation rather than an exchange of ideas or an opportunity to examine the challenge of promoting ecological transition in depth ([Palau-Sampio and Picó 2021](#)).

1.2. Framing the Role of Animal Agriculture in Climate Change

Despite scientific evidence of the relationship between animal meat production and its harsh impact on the environment, this issue has received very little attention from Western media ([Neff et al. 2008](#); [Almiron and Zoppeddu 2015](#)). Some authors refer to an “awareness gap” ([Bailey et al. 2014](#)) when addressing the livestock sector’s influence on climate change. Even when the media acknowledged the link, they avoided suggesting changes in individual or public behaviour, as [Kiesel \(2010\)](#) observed. Similarly, research carried out on media from Spain and Italy emphasised the underrepresented role of animal agriculture in climate change and the presentation of “carnist traits more frequently than frames in defence of nonhuman animals” ([Almiron and Zoppeddu 2015](#); [Moreno and Almiron 2021](#)). More recently, [Hundscheid et al. \(2022\)](#) stressed that the barrier to transitioning is food that represents the culturally high status of meat within the “Austrian protein regime”.

[Kristiansen et al. \(2021\)](#) observed similar patterns in their analysis of the UK and American elite media from 2006 to 2018, with a low volume of coverage and a tendency to mention consumer responsibility more than that of governments or large-scale livestock farms. These results contrast with the 2005–2009 coverage of the Meat Free Monday’s campaign in the UK—a civil society initiative that challenged meat-centric diets—that revealed a relatively balanced picture of both positive and negative reporting, and a position that was “slightly more inclined than not to conceptualise eating less meat” ([Morris 2018](#)).

Together with underrepresentation, polarisation has been another drawback in media coverage of the issue. The study by [Sievert et al. \(2022\)](#), including four major red and processed meat (RPM) producing and consuming countries (United States, UK, Australia and New Zealand), concluded that polarisation has led to a binary conflict between pro- and antimeat reduction actors. These authors consider that this division may mean that political leaders will give less priority to it in policy agendas and suggest that “nuanced and context-dependent messaging could ensure the narratives around meat are less conflicting and more effective in addressing health and environmental harms associated with RPM” ([Sievert et al. 2022](#)).

Regarding the influence of social media as sources of information for many people ([Shehata and Strömbäck 2021](#)), the study by [Maye et al. \(2021\)](#) focused on the role of animal agriculture in climate change on Twitter and revealed two key insights: the limited evidence of an encompassing debate and the prominent use of this platform for marketing purposes,

both commercial (#sustainablemeat) or linked to planetary issues or ‘vegan’ narratives (#eatlessmeat).

A core part of research dealing with the debate on livestock and climate change is that of monitoring how the media presents the impact of innovation and technology on meat production under different names: curated meat, customised meat and in vitro meat. Early studies suggested the influence of media coverage on cultured meat—genuine animal meat produced by cultivating animal cells directly—on consumers’ perceptions (Goodwin and Shoulders 2013), highlighting certain aspects of the concept (Laestadius et al. 2016) or shifting individuals’ opinions in a positive or negative direction (Bekker et al. 2017).

Goodwin and Shoulders (2013) observed a neutral or positive association in media from both the United States and the European Union, as news articles “commonly discuss cultured meat in terms of benefits, history, process, time, livestock production problems, and skepticism” by relying on sources that are proponents of cultured meat, mainly in print media. Bryant (2020) considers that this fact “may partially explain the more positive attitudes of those who are more familiar with the concept because they presumably become familiar through the media”.

The biotechnological component of curated meat opens ethical debates that will shape the future viability of this technology and its acceptability for potential consumers. Research carried out by Dilworth and McGregor (2015) comparing Australian discourses in academic literature and mainstream print media found that, while in the first “discourses relating to in vitro meat’s promised environmental, animal welfare and food security benefits are most prominent”, “ontological struggles over its ‘nature’ have emerged as the dominant feature in the Australian print media”. Hopkins (2015) noted that Western media gives “a distorted picture of what obstacles are in the path of cultured meat acceptance”, especially by overrepresenting the importance of the reception of cultured meat among vegetarians. Furthermore, Bryant and Dillard (2019) demonstrated that frames emphasising the “high tech” elements of cultured meat may be causing consumers to develop more negative attitudes towards it, in contrast to frames stressing the societal benefits of cultured meat or its sensory similarity to conventional meat.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection and Sample

This study analyses how the debate on climate change and meat consumption is addressed in three European countries: Germany, the UK and Spain. This selection follows three criteria: (1) representativity in terms of population, as they are the first, third and fifth most populated countries in Europe; (2) belonging to different media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004); and (3) a dissimilar presence of the green vote in the 2019 European election (Pearson and Rüdiger 2020) (higher in Germany, average in the UK—where the first Green party in Europe was formed—and residual in Spain). Green parties secured 21 seats out of a total of 96 in Germany (B’90/Grüne), 7 out of 73 in the UK (Green Party of England and Wales) and 1 out of 54 in Spain (Catalunya en Comú) (European Parliament 2019).

Previous research has found that right-leaning newspapers showed a higher degree of scepticism and contrarianism in reporting the relationship between meat eating and climate change (Almiron and Zoppeddu 2015). A conservative vision of society is understood as being right leaning, so we focused on progressive left-leaning media—based on ideas such as rights and reform—to observe nuanced differences by country in how the debate is framed. To this end, we selected three newspapers representative of the centre-left editorial line in each country: *Der Tagesspiegel* (TZ), *The Guardian* (GU) and *El País* (EP). All three are published in the state capital of the respective countries, and even though the German *Der Tagesspiegel* has a regional target, it is influential throughout the country. Beyond that, the centre-left ideology has traditionally been more sensitive to environmental problems.

The sample was collected between 1 January and 31 December 2021, following two steps. Firstly, by carrying out a search on two keywords in the Mynews database: *meat* and *climate change* and their respective translation into German—*fleisch* and *kli-

maschutz* *umweltschutz*, as both of the latter are used indistinctly—and Spanish—*carne* and *cambio climático*—we obtained a total of 981 items including these words. Secondly, by means of a manual search, we only selected those articles dealing with the study issues (N = 273). The items returned after this search were extracted in an Excel document including the title, date of publication and link to the digital edition.

2.2. Data Analysis Method

The analysis was based on quantitative methods to identify coverage and relevance patterns and qualitative methods to define the focus. Following the designed datasheet (Table 1), we wanted to discover the emphasis given by the different media outlets in terms of the number and frequency of items published, the section in which they appeared, the journalistic genre presented and the resources invested in reporting and writing the tasks.

Table 1. Datasheet for quantitative analysis.

Reference	Options
Type of text	News, Opinion
Section	International, Politics, Economics, Society (Education, Food, Health, Innovation and Technology), Environment, Opinion, Lifestyle, Other
Genre	Editorial, Column, Piece of News, Analysis, Interview, Reportage, Profile
Professional resources	Bylined by a journalist, Not bylined, News agency, Other

The qualitative analysis relies on framing theory, which states that a media outlet selects a particular approach (frame) to report a fact (Entman 1993). The study of frames allows the premises and representations of the debate on climate change and meat transition to be identified. Starting with the proposal by Moreno and Almiron (2021) and drawing on previous works dealing with the topic (Palau-Sampio and Picó 2021), a codebook was designed after carrying out a process of reading and reflecting on the items included in the sample. Following this path, three macroframes were identified: responsibility for global warming linked to meat production and consumption; diagnosis, i.e., an analysis based on the symptoms observed; and the solutions offered. Each one was further developed into more specific frames (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories used for frame analysis.

	Frame	Characteristics
Responsibility	Negationist	Denial of climate change and liability exclusion
	Corporative	Refers to both farm livestock production and the meat industry
	Political	Focuses on governments, politicians and public policies to regulate the effects of meat production and consumption on climate change
	Human beings	Identifies humans as being responsible for the main impact on climate change since protein diets, traditionally linked to men, cause more emissions

Table 2. Cont.

	Frame	Characteristics
Diagnosis	Worsening of human health	Relates the dual climate emissions and health effect of meat overconsumption
	Linked to global problems	Emphasises the connection between meat production and the devastation of rain forest to make space for agriculture and animal grazing, or between meat production and altering land-use practices (i.e., crop replacement) in a context of overpopulation
	Inconsistency of plans and actions	Criticism of public actors responsible for announcing plans that are never implemented, or the incongruency of public actors when defending meat reduction to prevent climate emissions
	Political conflict shadows debate	Underlines that the approach to the topic remains merely as political confrontation and avoids in-depth debate on meat consumption and climate change
Solutions	Sustainable livestock farming and animal welfare	Relates to the environmental, economic and ethical questions involved in livestock farming methods and meat production, e.g., rearing conditions, impact on the ecosystem and effect on costs
	Systemic change	Calls for a holistic treatment of the complex phenomenon, analysing and interrelating multiple factors linked to climate change that should be considered, including just transition measures
	Cultured meat	Presents artificial meat as a solution to replace farmed meat without creating environmental problems
	Plant-based food and insects	Veganism, vegetarianism and meatless diets are the most sustainable ones. Use of insects as a protein source is also emphasised
	Education and consumer responsibility	Highlights the role of citizens in changing their eating habits and the importance of involving schools
	Innovation and technology	Optimism about the climate solutions offered by technologies and innovation
Others	Options not included in the previous sections	

The sample was analysed manually by two coders. First, a pre-test of 15% of the sample (41 items) was conducted to calculate intercoder agreement. Scott's Pi formula reached an acceptable error level of 0.87, scoring over 80% for all variables. However, the categories with the biggest mismatches were further developed to improve reliability. A previous round of coding training was also held, so both coders were familiar with the datasheet.

The study results were obtained from a descriptive analysis of the categories. The said analysis was mixed with bilateral tests for the proportion of columns based on the Bonferroni correction, targeting the divergences among the analysed sections, although the z-test for pairwise comparisons was limited due to the size of the sample. The null hypothesis for sections under consideration was equal.

This study aims to answer the following three research questions (RQs) relating to coverage, relevance and the focus of the published text:

RQ1: Which media outlet devoted greater attention to the meat consumption and climate change debate? How was publishing distributed over time?

RQ2: Which genres were employed by the analysed media outlets? Did they allocate in-house professional resources to cover the issue? Which sections hosted the items published?

RQ3: Which main frames were present in the articles analysed? How were they used by each newspaper in specific sections?

3. Results

This section presents, under three subheadings, the results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis, in order of the research questions formulated above.

3.1. Coverage of the Issue

The level of attention that newspapers paid to debates on meat consumption and climate change is an interesting way to assess the media agenda. To answer RQ1, the number of news items on climate change published by each specific newspaper is presented. According to the data collected from the Mynews database (Table 3), these media outlets published a lot of articles on climate change (N = 6506 articles), but its association with meat consumption was limited (N = 981 articles). In 2021 specifically, *The Guardian* had much more news on climate change, whereas *El País* and *Der Tagesspiegel* offered quite an even number of pieces. It should be noted that while references to climate change and meat appeared several times in *El País*, these issues were not dealt with properly, thus explaining why its final sample was 56.

Table 3. Number of articles resulting from a Mynews search of ‘Climate change’ and ‘Climate change and meat’.

Media Outlet	Climate Change ¹	Climate Change and Meat ¹	Final Sample ¹
elpais.com (EP)	1519	457	56
theguardian.uk (GU)	3369	391	156
taz.de (TZ)	1618	133	61
Total	6506	981	273

¹ Translated into the respective language of the newspapers.

As stated, the study results showed that *The Guardian* devoted more attention to the issue, while *Der Tagesspiegel* and *El País* scarcely accounted for a fifth of the sample (Figure 1a). Interestingly, the frequency of publishing and distribution experienced abrupt changes when considered monthly. Although fluctuations could be observed in all three newspapers, these were particularly evident in *The Guardian* and *El País*. Figure 1b shows that the peaks of each media outlet did not follow a common pattern. In this sense, October was the most productive month for *The Guardian*, July for *El País* and March for *Der Tagesspiegel*. In all three, media attention was linked to public agenda issues: COP26 held in Glasgow (GU), the controversy surrounding the video posted by the Spanish Consumer Affairs Minister Alberto Garzón (EP) and the debate on the agricultural reforms under the new government (TZ). A detailed observation showed that July and, to a lesser extent, September, were the only periods in which all three media outlets had a positive evolution.

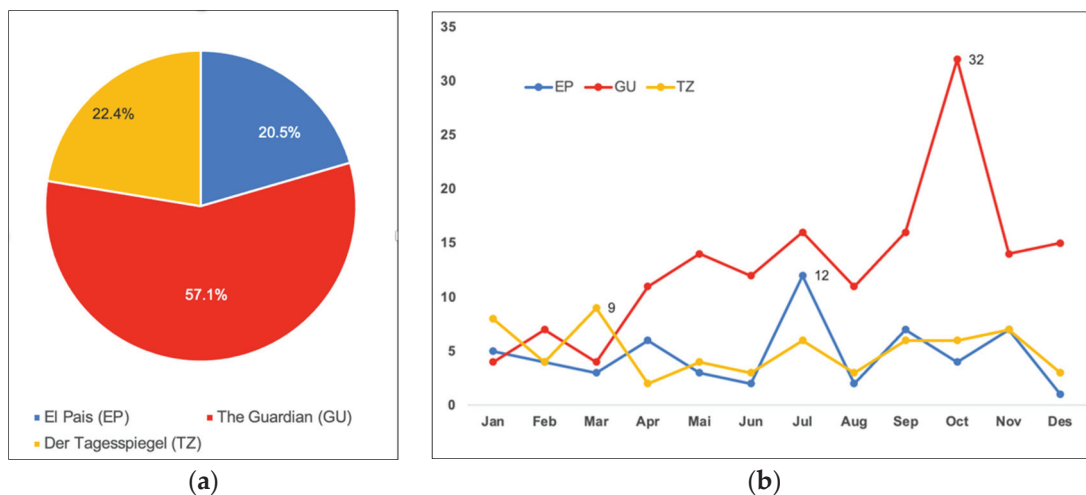


Figure 1. (a) Percentage of the sample published by each media outlet including ‘Climate change and meat’; (b) publishing distribution by month for each media.

3.2. Relevance and Resources Allocated

To answer RQ2, different aspects were analysed. First were the characteristics of the texts published by the media outlet. The results showed that, in all the outlets, opinion pieces prevailed, albeit with varying strength. In this sense, almost 40% of the articles on the issue in *El País* were opinion texts, whereas the figure was below 20% in both *The Guardian* and *Der Tagesspiegel* (Figure 2).

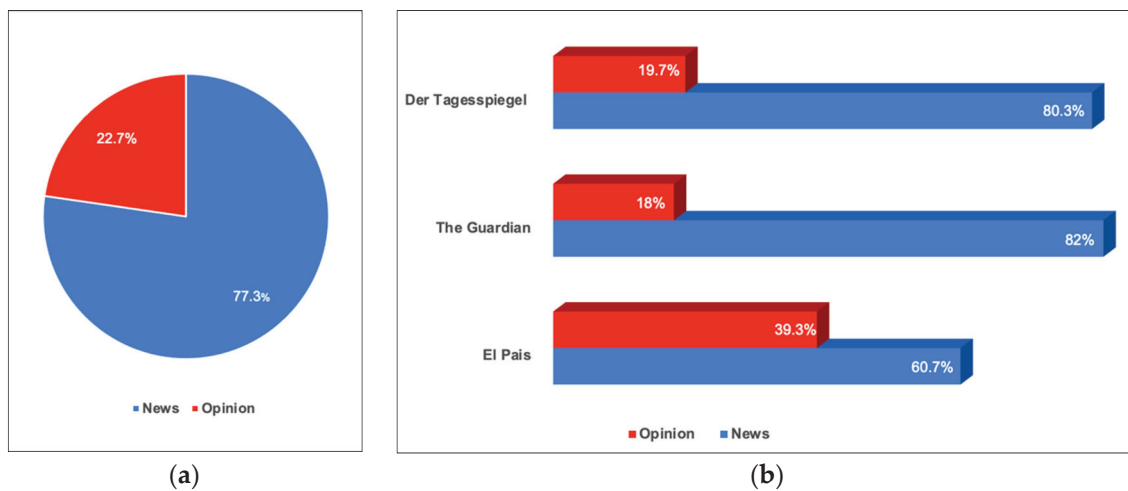


Figure 2. (a) Type of text in the sample; (b) distribution by media outlet and type of text.

Secondly, to obtain a better understanding of the type of resources allocated, both the pieces produced by journalists or columnists and the genres employed in the articles were considered. On the one hand, it is noteworthy that 94.5% of the texts were bylined, meaning that the newspapers were committed to providing their readers with differentiated and comprehensive information. Only 2.2% of the texts were either not bylined or were presented with a generic identification (e.g., *El País*), and the rest included editorials (not bylined as they represent the editorial position of the media outlet), pieces from news agencies or a mix of the foregoing. On the other hand, news emerged as the most prominent genre in each media outlet, present in almost 46% of the sample. Columns accounted for a fifth of the sample, while editorial pieces accounted for a much lower proportion (2.6%). Considering the sum of the remaining genres, they accounted for less than a third of all articles, distributed as follows: reportage, interview, analysis and profile (Figure 3).

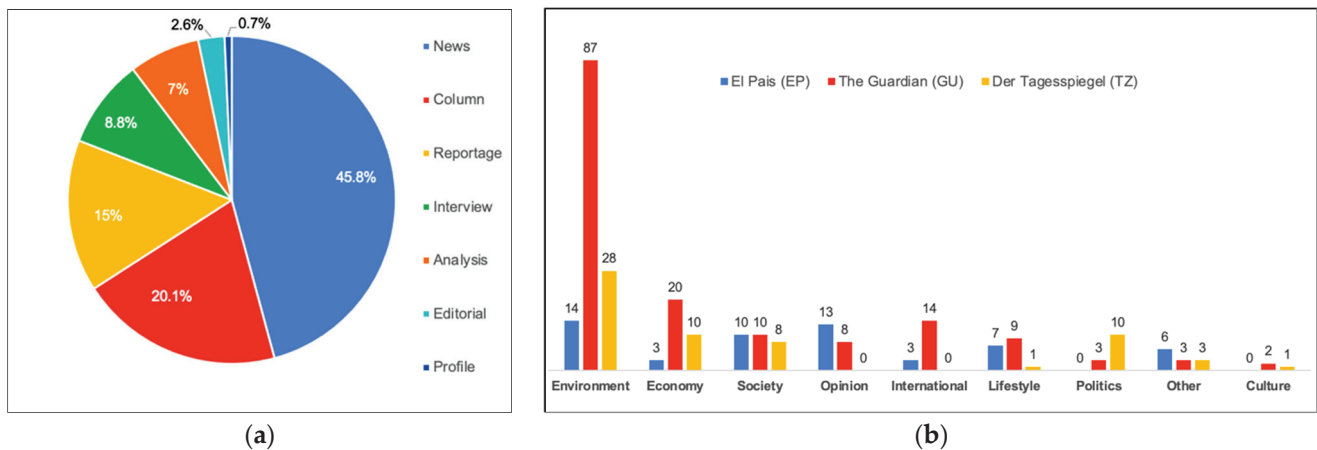


Figure 3. (a) Percentage of journalistic genres referred to the items included in the general sample; (b) percentage of items per genre published by media outlet (%).

Finally, we analysed the sections that hosted the selected news items in order to monitor their distribution and affiliation (Figure 4). The rubric Environment included almost half of the texts published (47.2%), followed by Economy and Society. The six remaining sections accounted individually for less than 10% of the published articles discussing the relationship between meat production and climate change. While International, Opinion and Lifestyle reached or exceeded 5%, Politics and Culture did not.

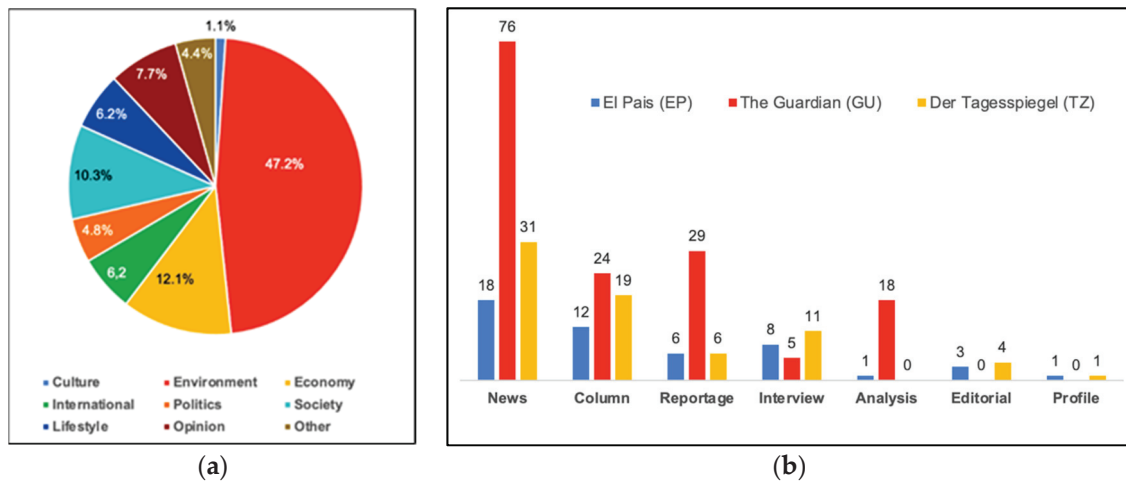


Figure 4. (a) Percentage of items published by section included in the general sample; (b) percentage of items published by media outlet in each section (%).

3.3. Frames

Regarding the use of frames, as indicated in RQ3, most of the sample focused on frames that tried to provide solutions to the problems reported (59.1%). There was a big difference between diagnosis (24.8%) and responsibility (14.6%). Nevertheless, some divergences between newspapers are noteworthy (Figure 5). *El País* published almost the same number of pieces on diagnosis (46.4%) as on solutions (48.2%). By contrast, the relevance of the solutions was higher in *The Guardian* and *Der Tagesspiegel*, as they published less in the other type of frames.

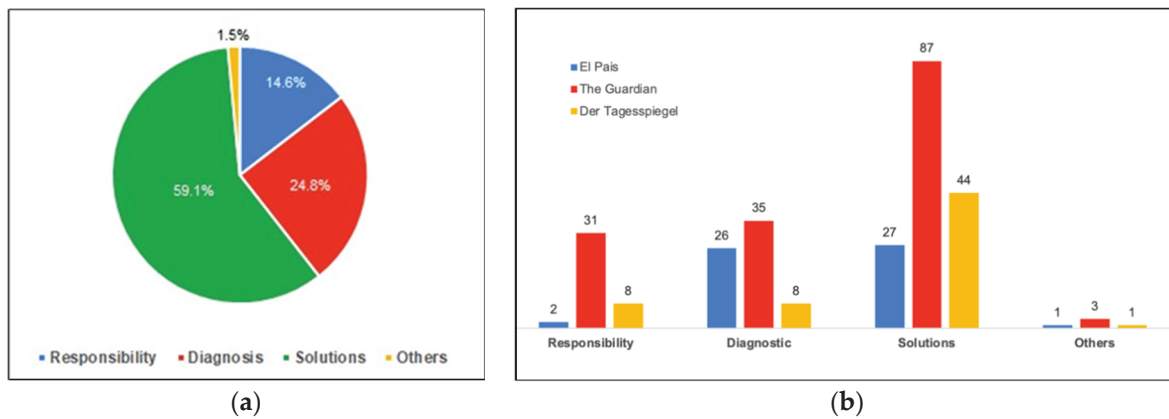


Figure 5. (a) Percentage of news by group of frames included in the general sample; (b) percentage of items published by media outlet in each big frame (%).

In the same vein, Table 4 furthers our understanding of the specific strategies (frames) employed by the media. In the whole sample, solution frames such as sustainable farming and animal welfare, systemic change and plant-based food and insects were the most mentioned. *The Guardian* gave priority to these frames, which led to these results. Likewise, *Der Tagesspiegel* mostly used a perspective centred on sustainable livestock farming and animal welfare (n = 22). Again, these were contrary to the pattern of *El País*. The Spanish newspaper published a similar number of items in diagnosis frames and solutions frames.

Table 4. Distribution of frames by newspaper according to the proposed categories (raw numbers).

		Total	EP	GU	TZ
Responsibility	Negationist	4	-	3	1
	Corporative	18	-	15	3
	Political	15	2	10	3
	Human beings	4	-	3	1
Diagnosis	Worsening of human health	19	4	11	4
	Linked to global problems	16	7	7	2
	Inconsistency of plans and actions	20	6	12	2
	Political conflict shadows debate	14	9	5	-
Solutions	Sustainable livestock farming and animal welfare	44 ¹	1	21	22
	Systemic change	31	3	20	8
	Cultured meat	16	4	10	2
	Plant-based food and insects	30	7	15	8
	Education and consumer responsibility	28	10	15	3
	Innovation and technology	9	2	6	1
Others	5	1	3	1	

¹ Findings in bold indicate interesting trends.

In addition, Figure 6 presents information about the distribution of groups of frames by section. Environment was the main section for all three big frames (responsibility, diagnosis and solutions), with a huge number of published news items on solutions being particularly outstanding. The number thereof (64.2%) was statistically significant at a *p*-value of 0.05 compared with the rest of the sample (N = 273) according to the Bonferroni correction. This pattern was also visible throughout the sample, since many sections mostly covered solutions. Conversely, diagnosis frames were more common in the Opinion (13) and International (9) sections.

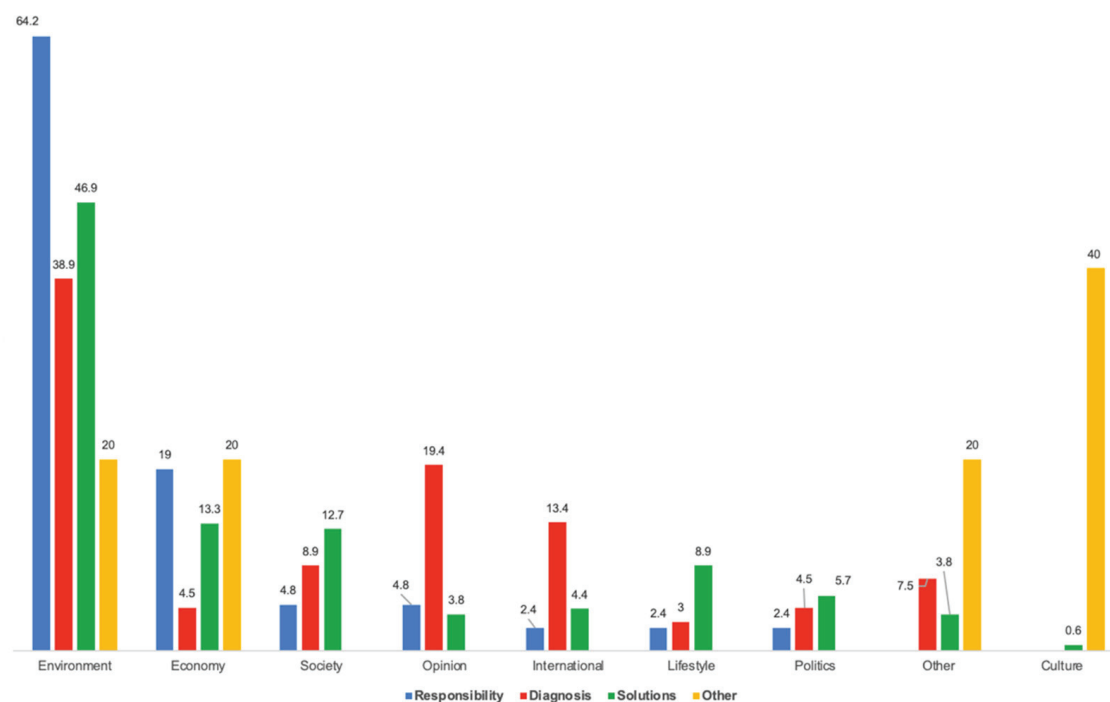


Figure 6. Percentage of items published by frame in each section of the sample (%).

In order to find possible differences between the columns, the statistical analysis performed was a Z test for independent samples. Considering the results, the diagnosis of climate change and meat consumption problems was more likely to be an opinion or a reference to the international sphere, for instance, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP). Regarding responsibility, it mostly appeared in Environment (27), but also to some extent in Economy (8). On this matter, how the economy shapes food transition was relevant, showing that economic factors were key to evaluating this debate.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This article examined the media coverage of the challenging and multifaceted topic that is meat production and climate change, with enormous significance in the sociocultural, political and economic fields. From a comparative perspective, this study focused on media outlets from three European countries, each belonging to a different media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004) yet all having a centre-left editorial line. Three main conclusions can be highlighted.

Firstly, attention to livestock as a major source of greenhouse gas emissions is limited, which is consistent with recent studies carried out in the UK and the US (Kristiansen et al. 2021). Even though the three analysed media outlets are sensitive to environmental issues—they include sections devoted to climate, ecology or environment, and allocate professional resources to cover them—the number of articles published is in line with previous studies (Almiron and Zoppeddu 2015; Kristiansen et al. 2021; Moreno and Almiron 2021). Moreover, the monthly distribution of publishing suffered abrupt changes across the year, particularly in *El País* and *The Guardian*. This finding overlaps with prior scholarship on the discontinuous and biased attention to environmental issues (Neff et al. 2008). However, differences among the outlets can be observed, as *The Guardian* was both the most involved with this topic and the most explicit in labelling its section as ‘Climate Crisis’, which shows a particular focus on this issue. It is important to stress that in 2021, the year analysed, the UK hosted the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, and the peak of publishing coincided with the event.

Secondly, although news was the most prominent journalistic genre, it is worth mentioning that *El País*, belonging to the Mediterranean Polarised/Pluralist media system,

devoted almost 40% of its publications to opinion items. Most of them were concentrated in July, linked to the video posted by the Spanish Consumer Affairs Minister. Most news items were linked to the solutions frame, as news focuses on particular facts, actions or statements but does not allow a more in-depth discussion, as is the case of reportage, analysis, interview or even opinion, a genre associated with the diagnosis frame. So, the multifactorial approach to climate change involving political, social and economic causes and consequences is restricted in the sample considered. Findings relating to frames and genres, focusing on solutions but making an abstraction on the contextual aspects, may be associated with counterproductive messages, as [de Boer et al. \(2013\)](#) stress, considering that, from the perspective of motivation, it is preferable not to isolate the meat–climate issue but to develop an approach that combines multiple values regarding food choices, including health and nature-related ones.

Finally, this study offers insightful findings on the main frames in media coverage, with a particular focus on solution approaches. In this vein, the analysis shows that diagnosis frames aiming to evaluate the actions and implications of meat production and climate change constitute a secondary manifestation. This subordinate role contributes to a partial framing of the meat production and climate change discussion, as the link to human health or global problems and debate regarding plans and actions are underrepresented.

Unlike solution-oriented coverage, responsibility only accounted for a seventh of the items in the sample; consequently, readers may have found it difficult to assess the role of every stakeholder involved in climate change. This also implies the perpetuation of biased coverage of both anthropogenic contributions to global warming and resultant action, as [Boykoff and Boykoff \(2004\)](#) revealed in their work on the American prestige press coverage of global warming. Similarly, a report on the coverage of the 2013 United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that many mainstream media outlets extended this bias by amplifying viewpoints questioning the role of human activity in global warming ([Greenberg et al. 2013](#)). In contrast to [Kristiansen et al. \(2021\)](#), we observed a shift in the responsibility attribution, with a major focus on corporate and political actors and a pedagogical orientation towards citizens, which is presented as a solutions frame. This issue deserves more attention in future research, as it may be influenced by the editorial line of the newspapers selected.

The solutions frame includes a notable variety of options, since they range from systemic changes—including citizens involvement, sustainability and welfare—to marked technology-oriented solutions. This heterogeneity is consistent with the complexity of the topic and its diverse implications. On the one hand, the call for holistic treatment and consumer responsibility implies an important step forward, with differences among the media outlets analysed; there was a greater focus on systemic change in the UK and Germany, and on consumer responsibility promotion in Spain.

On the other hand, and in contrast to the German and the British newspapers, the very little attention paid to sustainable livestock in the solutions frame by the Spanish newspaper is worthy of note. This is related to two events that happened in 2021: the video posted by the Spanish Consumer Affairs Minister Alberto Garzón and the subsequent interview in *The Guardian* ([Jones 2021](#)), in which sustainable livestock was openly addressed by Garzón, as was the need to reduce meat consumption to stop climate change and to improve health conditions. In both cases, however, political conflict shadowed debate. Spain is the biggest consumer of meat in Europe, with a consumption of 99 kg per person per year, and the EU country with the highest livestock population in 2019 ([Eurostat 2020](#)), which may explain the influence of the meat production industry in terms of silencing the debate on sustainable farming.

More than a third of the items in the solutions frame are linked to commercial endeavours, frequently under the guise of innovations in food technologies. The coverage—primarily event-driven and based on the frame of cultured meat as a scientific discovery ([Botelho and Kurtz 2008](#))—is consistent with the news genre priority. While some studies stress that high-tech alternatives such as cultured meat ([Bryant 2020](#)) are promoted by in-

dustrial lobbies (Orset and Monnier 2020), others are critical of the widespread expectation that solutions require break-through novelties and highlights, and that the high-tech focus shadows meat options with greater sustainability potential, which receive little attention (Van der Weele et al. 2019). According to our study and consistent with prior scholarship (Dilworth and McGregor 2015), ethical discourses critical of the sociocultural ramifications of solutions are currently under represented in the media, regardless of the different discursive trends.

This study's main limitation concerns the sample. We only included one media outlet per country, omitting the regional field and thus making it difficult to obtain representative data for further statistical analysis. Hence, the data need to be interpreted in a national context. However, newspapers with a predominantly rural readership, having a significant animal agriculture make up, are more likely to problematise demands for lower levels of meat eating (Morris 2018). Further research should expand the scope of this work by analysing coverage in urban communities and the countryside. In short, we argue that reporting the food transition involves many factors, which may explain why coverage is focused on environmental solutions. Moreover, in-depth semistructured interviews with journalists will also help us obtain a more nuanced understanding of coverage.

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Article

The Emotional Dimension of the Spanish Far Right and Its Effects on Satisfaction with Democracy

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Abstract: The recent rise of the far right in Spain highlights the importance of analysing the elements that have contributed to VOX's success and the party's ascent to the third political power in the country after the general election held in November 2019. In order to explain the electoral support for VOX, in this study we adopt an emotional perspective, giving emotions a fundamental role alongside the traditional variables involved in the far-right vote. After describing the emotional regime of VOX voters, we observe the relationship between these voters' emotions towards political actors and the levels of satisfaction with democracy. Subsequently, we try to identify the determining elements of the vote for VOX through a multivariate analysis. Finally, after stating that hope in Santiago Abascal is one of the main variables that explain voters' support for VOX, we analyse its constituent elements. Our findings reveal that hope for VOX's leader is not made up of structural elements but cultural elements, citizens' ratings of political leaders and ideological and identity questions.

Keywords: far right; emotions; satisfaction with democracy



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1. Introduction

The electoral success of the far right is a phenomenon that has spread throughout Europe, becoming increasingly important. Proof of this are the recent electoral successes achieved by the far right in countries such as France or Italy. However, its arrival in Spain (and subsequently in Portugal) has occurred later than its European neighbours. That defeated resistance places Spain in the spotlight for researchers analysing the factors driving the rise of the far right 40 years after the end of the Franco dictatorship.

Since VOX became part of the national Parliament, but especially after becoming the third political power in the country in November 2019, political scientists have made many attempts at explaining the emergence of the far right in the Spanish party system. However, as is also the case in the literature on the rise of these parties in Western Europe, few contributions have centred on both the structural aspect of the vote and the underlying emotion that motivates supporting a political group that flirts with the margins of the political system and undermines the principles of liberal democracy and values agreed and accepted by our society. This phenomenon defies the political system itself, whether through its impact on and conditioning of the political debate, its implications for partisan competition, its influence on the shaping and functioning of governments or parliaments or, more recently, VOX's role as a member of the government of Castilla and León and the resulting public policies.

First of all, our research aims to determine the variables that explain the vote for the Spanish far right in the November 2019 general election, proving that both emotions and structural elements have contributed to VOX's success in the urns, contrary to what has been traditionally argued. Finally, from a constructivist perspective of emotions, we go a step further and aim to determine which elements contribute to generating hope for VOX's

leader. As it turns out, this is a determining factor when citizens decide to vote for the far right instead of supporting the mainstream political parties.

In other words, in this analysis the emotional component acquires a dual role: on the one hand, it is the independent variable that helps to explain the vote for the Spanish far right. On the other hand, it becomes the dependent variable in order to determine which elements generate said emotion. Finally, we complete our work by analysing the relationship between the emotions towards VOX and its leader and the level of satisfaction with democracy. Our aim is to show how emotions towards political actors are related to the attitudes of Spaniards towards our political system.

Therefore, the questions guiding our research are as follows: first, what are the emotions explaining the vote for the Spanish far right and how important is the emotional component compared to the other variables influencing the vote for VOX in the November 2019 general election? Second, what are the elements that compose the emotions that explain the vote for VOX and, specifically, the hope for Santiago Abascal; and how are emotions towards political actors related to the attitudes of Spaniards towards the democratic system?

In order to answer these questions, we have divided our paper into five parts. In part one, we present a brief overview of contributions that include the emotional component when studying political behaviour in general and electoral behaviour in particular, putting special emphasis on the constructivist tradition we have taken as a starting point. Then, we gather the most relevant studies trying to explain the rise of the far right in Western Europe, focusing on those that include an emotional component in the study of this type of political party. Subsequently, after briefly explaining the objectives and research hypotheses, as well as our methodological design, we present the results of our investigation. We start with an analysis of the emotional profile of VOX voters and its relationship to levels of satisfaction with democracy. After that, we perform a multivariate analysis that reveals the components of the vote for the Spanish far right and the emotions that explain that support.

2. Emotions as a Social Construct and Their Role in Explaining Voting Behaviour

In recent decades, emotions have been progressively included in explaining political phenomena. The most recent theoretical developments incorporate the relationship between the cognitive and the emotional (Lynggaard 2019) and are completed with proof that emotions are empirically operationalizable, specifiable with some degree of accuracy and susceptible to being measured (Lagares et al. 2022, p. 20). Despite this, it is also true that there is still a lack of consensus over which emotions should be measured to explain political behaviour.

Specifically, in the past few years of emotional revival, there has been a proliferation of studies from different disciplines and approaches that address the importance of emotions and their relationship to different aspects of politics, such as the construction of collective emotion and the role of identity in politics (Hogget and Thompson 2012); the influence of negative emotions like fear or anger on the emergence of populist attitudes (Rico et al. 2017), political communication and information processing (Redlawsk 2006); or, more recently, the role of emotions on social media (Rivera et al. 2021). Other contributions include political marketing and defining the emotional dimensions specific to each electoral campaign that could influence voters' ratings (Brader 2005); the relevance of the emotional factor in the perception of political leaders and their actions (Sullivan and Masters 1988); or the weight of emotional components when explaining the vote for specific political parties (Jaráiz et al. 2020), including far-right parties (Jaráiz et al. 2020; Rivera et al. 2021).

However, there is still a lack of contributions incorporating the emotional component to the study of political behaviour in general and electoral behaviour in particular, and there are even fewer works investigating which factors trigger emotions in politics; that is, what are the elements that compose them.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that emotions are intrinsic to human beings, a phenomenon that each person experiences individually and even in isolation, forgetting

that, as Aristotle said, ‘man is by nature a social animal’ and therefore emotions can also be produced socially, as is the case with principles or values.

Thus, contrary to the physiological, psychobiological or psychoevolutionary approaches, which study emotions from an essentialist or positivist perspective and assume them as pre-existing, cognitive approaches (Appraisal Theories) acknowledge the importance of social processes in their formation, even if they also interpret emotions as an intrinsic phenomenon. The constructivist approach goes one step further, understanding emotions as social constructs, which is to say that emotions are produced socially within a specific cultural context. Traditionally, it has been assumed that emotions are essentially internal and strictly personal reactions. However, from the 1980s onward, the budding constructivist approaches incorporate a social dimension to the analysis of emotions, providing a more suitable approach for the study of emotions in the field of Political Science.

[Armon-Jones \(1986\)](#) refers to four aspects that would become key elements of the constructivist approach to emotions: firstly, attitudes such as beliefs, judgements, and desires characterise emotions, but these attitudes would not be “natural”, they would be determined by each community’s system of cultural beliefs and values, and would therefore have a cognitive background. Secondly, the processes of learning and socialisation allow us to understand what is culturally appropriate in regard to emotions. Thirdly, there is a prescriptive relationship between the emotions and values of each cultural community, which means there is a link between the specific context in which an emotion arises, expressed in a specific way and with a specific intensity. Finally, since emotions are at least partially learned, they have a socio-cultural role in regard to the responsibility of citizens towards their own emotional expression.

To [Lupton \(1998\)](#), it is possible to distinguish between three major areas within the constructivist approach: structuralism, which examines social structures, the belonging to a social group and the power dynamics as elements that shape emotion; phenomenology, which understands emotions as an inherent part of the ego; and post-structuralism, which focuses on the discursive construction of emotions.

On the other hand, [Mead \(1993\)](#) suggests the existence of a strong constructivism, which posits that emotions are a result of the individual experience of conceptualizations formed through language, beliefs and social norms; and a weak one that acknowledges that emotions can be a natural phenomenon, even if they depend on social norms. Therefore, the differentiating factor of both types of constructivism would be the presence or absence of the biological component: while strong constructivism categorically rejects the biological component, weak constructivism admits its impact, but is always mediated by socialisation processes ([Mihai 2016](#)). The latter approach would stop positioning the biological and sociological components as opposites, recognising both as the product of the creation of emotions. As argued by [Averill \(1980, p. 308\)](#), even if emotions are defined as socially constructed syndromes or as transient social roles, the biological component of emotions is not denied.

However, if the biological component is the differentiating element, the idea of emotions as the result of experience is the uniting component, leading to another key aspect of constructivism. According to this approach, the individual would not behave as a passive subject, but would play an active role in the generation of emotion ([Armon-Jones 1985](#); [Averill 1980](#); [Felmand 2018](#)) as they themselves would select and organise the repertoire of actions in the process of constructing emotion. Additionally, if individuals are not passive subjects, then citizens would be responsible for their emotional expressions towards politics ([Hall 2005](#); [Mihai 2014](#)).

Assuming the individual’s active role in the production of emotions, [Felmand \(2018\)](#) proposes the theory of constructed emotion to explain the process of generating emotions. To the author, emotions would not be reactions to the world, but the brain would rather build the emotion from stimuli and the individual’s previous experiences. However, without those previous experiences, it would be impossible to recognise the stimuli and have the ability to react to them in one way or another. It is precisely the role played by

previous experiences that leads Feldman to assert that emotions are not predetermined by genetics, but are generated due to the individual's cultural context, and therefore different cultures could produce different emotions. In this way, socio-cultural and historical features would be as unquestionable as the biological component of emotions.

In this regard, beliefs and social norms provide "prototypes" that enable the identification of emotions and these prototypes would be included among the elements differentiating one culture from another. Nevertheless, we should not only consider the emotional diversity arising from culture. As pointed out by [Averill \(2008\)](#), each individual's socialisation is different and, therefore, it seems impossible that two individuals experience the same emotion in an identical way.

However, without denying that each person can experience an emotion in a particular way and on the basis that emotions are culturally constructed, in our constructivist interpretation of emotions there is room for two more concepts: emotional regime and emotional architecture. The former refers to the emotional components that are present in a given context or situation, while the latter refers to the proportion and intensity in which these emotions are distributed ([Lagares et al. 2022](#)). In other words, while emotional regime refers to emotions that are generated in a given context arising from a particular situation, emotional architecture would be somewhat more specific, referring to how and how much, to the way and the quantity in which these emotions towards leaders or political parties are distributed in society.

3. The Rise of the Far Right and Its Threat to Democracy

Without delving into the complex debate about the most suitable concept to refer to the family of far-right parties¹, the fact is that this is a multifaceted phenomenon that has acquired an increasing presence throughout Western Europe, especially after the 1980s. In fact, Spain was one of the few countries that did not have one of these political groups in its national parliament.

However, in the context of the fourth wave ([Mudde 2019](#)) and after the turning point that was the 2018 Andalusian election ([Rivera et al. 2021](#)), VOX managed to enter the Congress of Deputies in April 2019 with 24 seats, becoming the third political power after the second election in November of the same year. Since then, and as seen in the rest of Europe, many contributions have tried to explain the rise of the Spanish far right ([Aladro and Requeijo 2020](#); [Álvarez-Benavides 2019](#); [Bernardez-Rodal et al. 2020](#); [Ortiz 2021](#)), but few have taken into account the emotional component ([Cazorla and Jaráiz 2020](#); [Castro and Jaráiz 2022](#)).

In part, this absence may be due to the lack of studies on public opinion that address the emotional aspect and to the difficulty of operationalizing emotions, despite the fact that, in theory, there have been many papers linking emotions to the populist style adopted by far-right parties in recent decades ([Betz and Johnson 2004](#); [Evans 2005](#); [Mudde 2007](#); [Rydgren 2003](#)). We say 'style' because, unlike what authors like [Mudde \(2004, p. 543\)](#) defend, rather than a 'soft' or 'thin' ideology, we understand populism as a 'political style' ([Inglehart and Norris 2017](#)) characterised by a rhetoric that evokes latent grievances and appeals to the emotions they cause, offering simplistic and unrealistic solutions to socio-political issues ([Betz 2001, p. 393](#)).

As with any other party adopting populism as a political strategy, the far-right populist discourse is built on dividing society in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite' ([Mudde 2007, p. 65](#)). They embellish this with a plethora of emotions such as anger, contempt ([Fieschi and Heywood 2004, p. 291](#)) or resentment ([Betz 1990](#)) in order to mobilise people against the political establishment. However, unlike other types of organisations, the elite the far right opposes is not a problem merely for being the elite, but for implementing policies aimed at immigrants, the unemployed, feminists or environmentalists ([Castro and Jaráiz 2022](#)).

In other words, the populist discourse of the far right restricts the right to citizenship to a limited group of people that fits the ethical and moral criteria of what these parties

consider ‘what’s right’. In this citizenship, there is no room for family models other than the two-parent family, with or without children, in which the woman must have a secondary role and without room for foreigners unless (in some instances) they are similar to the locals. When the idea of citizenship becomes such a restrictive concept with no room for ‘the others’, for ‘the nation’s enemies’, it is a direct attack on the principles of liberal democracy and, therefore, the far right represents a real threat to democracy.

Immigration is not only the issue most frequently used to explain the rise of the far right in Western Europe (Hainsworth 2008, p. 70), but it is also one of the focal points targeted by these political leaders in their discourse of fear. Whether by linking immigration to unemployment, crime and the loss of national identity or religion, the far right seeks to cause a wave of anxiety and resentment (Arter 1992) that, together with their self-appointment as a bulwark against the ineffectiveness or mismanagement of the political establishment, turns into electoral gains. However, in the case of Spain, although the arrival of immigrant flows has increased in recent years (Bover and Velilla 2005; De Bustillo and Antón 2010) and a change in the composition of the foreign population (Castro and Jaráiz 2022; Castro and Mo 2020), previous research indicates that its impact on electoral behaviour is uncertain (Mendes and Dennison 2021; Méndez and Cutillas 2014; Ortiz 2018).

Given the increasing tension and the latent unrest in society, it seems evident that this discourse does not have an innocuous effect on it. Citizens react to the perceived lack of attention to social demands by voting for the far right as a form of protest. From this perspective, the vote for far-right parties, rather than being based on ideological and/or programmatic affinity, looks more like a negative vote arising from the rejection of the political establishment and democratic institutions. Once again, we see the danger the far right presents to the levels of citizens’ satisfaction with democracy. When a structure of opportunity arises and is characterised by people’s dissatisfaction and disaffection with the political establishment, the far right can be seen as the saviour in the current situation. However, far from reinforcing the legitimacy of the political establishment, the success of these political parties poses a threat to the principles and proper functioning of democracy.

In fact, studies incorporating the emotional component to the explanation of the vote for VOX have found that negative emotions impact the decision to support the Spanish far right. Specifically, Castro and Jaráiz (2022) found that resentment and bitterness towards PODEMOS and the emotions included in the ‘anxiety’ dimension (Marcus et al. 2006)—i.e., fear, anxiety, anger and worry triggered by Pedro Sánchez—have a significant effect in explaining the vote for VOX. Other emotions involved are fear (Castro and Jaráiz 2022) and worry (Oñate et al. 2022) towards the Spanish Prime Minister.

Something that is not included in traditional literature on the rise of the far right in Western Europe and that these papers address is that negative emotions are not the only ones that help to understand the reasons for voting for VOX. Both the far-right leader Santiago Abascal and the party itself are capable of evoking positive emotions such as pride, enthusiasm, hope and peace of mind. These emotions, whether through the positive rating of the leader or sympathy towards the party, have both a direct effect in the explanation of these phenomena and an indirect effect in the explanation of the vote for the Spanish far right (Castro and Jaráiz 2022). Jaráiz et al. (2020) obtain similar results and state that Santiago Abascal’s leadership, together with the peace of mind triggered by him, help to explain the vote for the party. Meanwhile, Oñate and others (Oñate et al. 2022) also claim that one of the positive emotions that influences the vote for VOX is the presence of hope for Santiago Abascal.

The findings of these papers (Castro and Jaráiz 2022; Oñate et al. 2022) present a new roadmap to study the phenomenon of the far right, showing that their electoral success is not only due to dissatisfaction and discontent with the traditional political establishment. Like the rest of the political parties and their leaders, far-right groups and candidates are able to trigger pride, enthusiasm, hope or peace of mind among their supporters, turning this emotional awakening into electoral support.

4. Research Methodology

The main objective of this paper is, firstly, to prove the presence of the emotional component in the explanation of the vote for VOX in the November 2019 general election, while also linking it to dissatisfaction with democracy; and secondly, to find out which elements construct the presence of these emotions. This dual objective leads to raising a series of hypotheses that will be contrasted throughout our investigation.

Hypothesis 1. *The emotional regime of VOX voters is defined by negative emotions towards the left-wing political establishment and positive ones towards the right-wing political establishment.*

Hypothesis 2. *Dissatisfaction with democracy is related to the vote for the far right.*

Hypothesis 3. *There is a relationship between positive emotions towards the far right and dissatisfaction with democracy.*

Hypothesis 4. *Emotions are the most important component when defining the vote for VOX.*

Hypothesis 5. *Hope for Santiago Abascal is constructed through perceptive, ideological and political elements.*

In order to test these hypotheses, we have used the post-electoral study from the November 2019 general election carried out by Political Research Team², whose technical information is shown in the table below. On the one hand, the study provides a wide range of questions related to the explanations given from the field of Political Science to the rise of the far right in Western Europe. On the other hand, it provides a battery of questions about the emotions felt by citizens towards the main leaders and political parties.

In order to achieve our dual objective, we have followed both a descriptive and an inference methodology. In other words, in the first part we present a descriptive analysis showing the emotional regime and the emotional architecture of the voters of the Spanish far right and their relationship to levels of satisfaction with democracy. In the second part, we use multivariate statistical analysis techniques to test which variables have an effect in the explanation of the vote for VOX, as well as the elements that compose the feeling of hope triggered by Santiago Abascal, which, as we shall see, is one of the major factors explaining the support for the party. Thus, we have built two additive binary logistic regression models which aim to explain, from a constructivist perspective, electoral support of VOX and the construction of emotions towards the far-right leader Santiago Abascal.

Beginning with the model explaining the vote for VOX in the November 2019 general election, we have identified a total of six groups of variables (see Table A1). The first group is made up of socio-demographic and contextual variables such as gender, age, level of education, employment status, income level, religious affiliation and the rating of economic and political situations. These variables have traditionally been used to profile the European far-right voter 'persona': a lower-middle class man with a low level of education, employed in the private sector or unemployed and with a low income (Betz 1990; Arzheimer and Carter 2006), who would perceive himself as the 'modernisation loser', the person who has been most affected by economic restructuring and its social consequences (Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995).

The second group includes variables we have classified as attitudinal, i.e., ideological and identity self-placement and the extent to which an individual feels more Spanish or from their respective autonomous community; the degree of trust in the political class and democratic institutions; the perception that politicians represent citizens' interests and the level of satisfaction with democracy; issues (Catalan independence, homophobia, anti-Europeanism); and post-materialist values (multiculturalism, support for public services, freedom vs. security). Therefore, this group consists of topics traditionally linked to the rise of the far right: immigration, homophobia, the European Union and the economy, topics

that are often related to the division of society along ideological and identity cleavages. We also include political attitudes that could evoke a climate of dissatisfaction or discontent that the third and fourth group of variables also includes: populism and disaffection, respectively.

The third group of variables includes questions related to populism, inspired by the scale suggested by Akkerman et al. (2014).

The fourth group is made up of variables related to political disaffection, proposed by Montero et al. (1998) and often used in this type of analysis, to which we add the individual's degree of disaffection.

The fifth group refers to leadership, i.e., the respondents' ratings of Pablo Iglesias, Pedro Sánchez, Albert Rivera, Pablo Casado and Santiago Abascal.

Finally, the sixth group includes the affective and emotional component, so in this section we include both sympathy towards VOX and the presence of emotions such as pride, fear, hope, anxiety, enthusiasm, anger, hate, contempt, worry, peace of mind, resentment, bitterness and disgust towards the main political leaders and their respective parties when they are present in percentages above 10%.

In regard to the model to explain the presence of hope for Santiago Abascal, the variables introduced as independent are, for the most part, the same as those selected for the models to explain the vote for VOX, but have been grouped differently (see Table A2), since the process of emotional construction differs from the explanation of electoral behaviour.

Therefore, in the first group we include only structural elements, i.e., gender, age, level of education, employment status, income level and religious affiliation.

The second includes political attitudes and attitudes towards institutions, such as the degree of trust in the political establishment and democratic institutions, the representation of citizens' interests by politicians, the level of satisfaction with democracy and variables related to populism and disaffection.

The third group combines the cultural elements and post-materialist values mentioned above.

The fourth group consists of perceptual elements such as the ratings of the main political leaders and of the economic and political situations.

The fifth group includes identity elements such as sympathy for VOX, ideological and identity self-positioning, the Spanish sentiment and the issue of Catalan independence.

The sixth group refers to the role played by the media in shaping emotions. This latter section includes variables about the frequency of following political information in newspapers, television and the radio, and the extent to which individuals use social media to learn about and take part in politics.

Finally, the seventh group represents the political landscape, i.e., citizens' ratings of the government and the opposition, as well as of the inauguration and the formation of the coalition government between the PSOE and Unidas Podemos.

5. Constructing the Explanation to the Rise of VOX

5.1. The Construction of the Vote for VOX

We start our analysis by presenting the emotional regime of VOX voters in the context of the November 2019 general election, after which the Spanish far right became the country's third political power by achieving almost a million more votes than in April³.

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, contrary to what is postulated in the literature, VOX voters do not feel negative emotions towards the political class as a whole, but towards the leaders and political parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum: PODEMOS and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). This is easy to understand since they are the political groups most ideologically distant from far-right voters.

Table 1. Emotions of VOX voters towards political leaders.

Emotions	Political Leaders														
	Pablo Iglesias			Pedro Sánchez			Albert Rivera			Pablo Casado			Santiago Abascal		
	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence
Pride	72.6%	4.50	100.0%	62.2%	4.38	100.0%	28.8%	4.00	68.8%	27.4%	3.46	94.1%	75.7%	4.59	100.0%
Fear							3.1%	4.00	100.0%	1.6%		100.0%	3.5%	3.33	100.0%
Hope	40.6%	4.61	100.0%	30.6%	4.00	100.0%	58.9%	3.37	28.4%	56.0%	3.39	90.7%	93.4%	4.50	98.3%
Anxiety							1.6%		100.0%	1.6%		100.0%	3.5%	2.89	100.0%
Enthusiasm	65.3%	4.51	100.0%	67.4%	4.31	100.0%	32.2%	3.73	36.2%	24.7%	3.45	100.0%	74.1%	4.14	100.0%
Anger	23.8%	4.20	100.0%	24.2%	4.34	93.3%	1.6%	3.29	61.4%	8.2%	3.69	100.0%	1.6%		100.0%
Hate	40.6%	4.21	100.0%	49.1%	4.18	100.0%	1.6%		100.0%	1.6%		100.0%	1.6%		100.0%
Contempt	82.5%	4.59	100.0%	88.1%	4.46	98.2%	6.7%	2.70	23.3%	10.0%	3.16	83.9%	5.1%	3.31	68.9%
Peace of mind	19.9%	4.37	100.0%	27.2%	3.94	88.7%	32.1%	3.90	68.1%	37.8%	3.60	90.7%	77.1%	4.26	100.0%
Resentment	24.6%	4.20	100.0%	22.1%	3.93	100.0%	3.5%	4.56	100.0%	3.6%	3.00	44.3%	1.6%		100.0%
Bitterness	35.5%	4.14	100.0%	39.7%	3.88	100.0%	3.1%	4.50	100.0%	3.1%	3.01	50.5%	1.6%		100.0%
Disgust							1.6%		100.0%	1.6%		100.0%	1.6%		100.0%

Source: authors' own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

Table 2. Emotions of VOX voters towards political parties.

Emotions	Political Parties														
	PODEMOS			PSOE			C's			PP			VOX		
	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence	Presence	Intensity	Permanence
Pride	62.4%	4.72	100.0%	3.2%	4.00	49.9%	25.0%	3.58	85.8%	23.5%	4.11	36.5%	72.2%	4.52	100.0%
Fear				46.8%	4.37	96.6%	6.7%	2.47	63.3%	67.0%	3.52	70.3%	2.0%	3.00	100.0%
Hope	36.7%	4.73	100.0%	20.3%	3.95	100.0%	58.1%	3.22	2.47	1.6%		1.5%	91.8%	4.42	98.3%
Anxiety							31.0%	3.23	52.6%	37.6%	3.33	59.3%	2.0%	2.00	100.0%
Enthusiasm	65.2%	4.59	100.0%	63.2%	4.50	100.0%	3.5%	4.11	100.0%	15.2%	4.08	76.6%	74.9%	4.11	100.0%
Anger	19.9%	4.92	100.0%	11.9%	4.59	87.2%	1.6%		100.0%	2.0%	5.00	100.0%			
Hate	33.6%	4.49	100.0%	19.0%	4.31	100.0%	1.6%	3.00	100.0%	3.5%	4.56	56.2%	3.5%	3.34	100.0%
Contempt	78.5%	4.55	100.0%	73.5%	4.52	100.0%	32.5%	3.58	84.2%	47.0%	3.51	69.3%	75.5%	4.12	100.0%
Peace of mind	18.7%	5.00	100.0%	23.8%	4.45	100.0%	2.0%	5.00	100.0%	5.4%	3.44	100.0%			
Resentment	19.9%	4.92	100.0%	20.3%	4.58	100.0%	3.5%	5.00	55.3%	3.5%	5.00	55.3%			
Bitterness	33.4%	4.45	100.0%	23.3%	4.00	100.0%	2.0%	5.00	100.0%	2.0%	5.00	100.0%			
Disgust															

Source: authors' own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

Nonetheless, we can observe differences in the presence and intensity of specific negative emotions felt by VOX voters towards Pablo Iglesias and Pedro Sánchez and their parties. While far-right voters have at times felt more bitterness and, in particular, more fear and anxiety towards Pablo Iglesias than towards Pedro Sánchez, they have also felt these emotions more intensely—with the exception of hatred—towards the leader of PODEMOS than towards the socialist leader. At the same time, a greater proportion has felt negative emotions more intensely—except for resentment and bitterness—towards PODEMOS than towards the PSOE.

In contrast, those who supported VOX in the last election express positive emotions towards leaders and parties on the right side of the ideological spectrum, but always to a lesser extent and with less intensity than towards Santiago Abascal and VOX. Thus, while the presence of positive emotions towards the far-right leader is above 70%, the presence of positive emotions towards the leaders of Ciudadanos and the Popular Party sits around 30%, with the exception of hope, which sits above 55% in both instances. Even if the presence and, in general, the intensity of the pride, hope and enthusiasm felt by VOX voters is slightly higher for Albert Rivera than for Pablo Casado, the permanence of those emotions—to which we can add a peace of mind—is significantly higher for the latter. This suggests that emotions towards the then-leader of C's result more from the 'heat of the moment', while the affection felt towards the Popular Party leaders is more stable and sustained over time among VOX voters, many of whom have previously voted for the PP.

This statement about political parties is corroborated by the observation that the presence of positive emotions—with the exception of pride—and their intensity—with the exception of peace of mind—is greater towards the PP than towards C's. Nevertheless, the permanence of positive emotions towards Pablo Casado is much higher than their permanence towards the PP. This could point to a loss of affection towards the PP and even anger towards the organisation (15.2%) as the possible cause of the flight of voters towards VOX, a loss that Pablo Casado has been unable to mitigate. As expected, what stands out in the emotional regime of VOX voters are the negative emotions towards left-wing parties and leaders and the positive emotions towards right-wing parties, especially towards VOX and its leader Santiago Abascal.

Next, we study the relationship between the support for the far right and the level of satisfaction with democracy through a correspondence analysis conducted with the variables of satisfaction with democracy (recodified into five groups: not satisfied at all, not very satisfied, satisfied, fairly satisfied and very satisfied) and the recall of vote choice for the five main parties in the November 2019 general election. In Figure 1, we can see that voters of traditional political parties are the most satisfied with democracy, while those supporting the most ideologically extreme formations, whether on the ideological left or right, are the least satisfied with the current functioning of democracy.

Specifically, PP voters are the most satisfied with democracy, followed by PSOE voters—the parties with the longest political tradition—and C's voters. On the contrary, those who have chosen to support Unidas Podemos in the last general election are not very satisfied with democracy, an attitude they share with VOX voters, who are even closer to the highest level of dissatisfaction.

This dissatisfaction with democracy among far-right voters is also observed when relating positive emotions towards Santiago Abascal and VOX to levels of democratic satisfaction. Those who feel three or four positive emotions—pride, hope, enthusiasm or peace of mind—towards Santiago Abascal (Figure 2) and those who feel all four positive emotions towards VOX (Figure 3) declare that they are not at all satisfied with democracy. Therefore, as noted in the literature and as is the case for other far-right groups, the rise of VOX in Spain is related to the climate of tension and political unrest prevailing in our country, and to a low level of satisfaction with our democratic system. Parallel to this disaffection towards the political establishment and democratic institutions, positive emotions—namely pride, hope, enthusiasm and peace of mind—arise towards the far right,

which has an anti-democratic tradition. Far from reinforcing the legitimacy of the political class, these emotions threaten democratic stability.

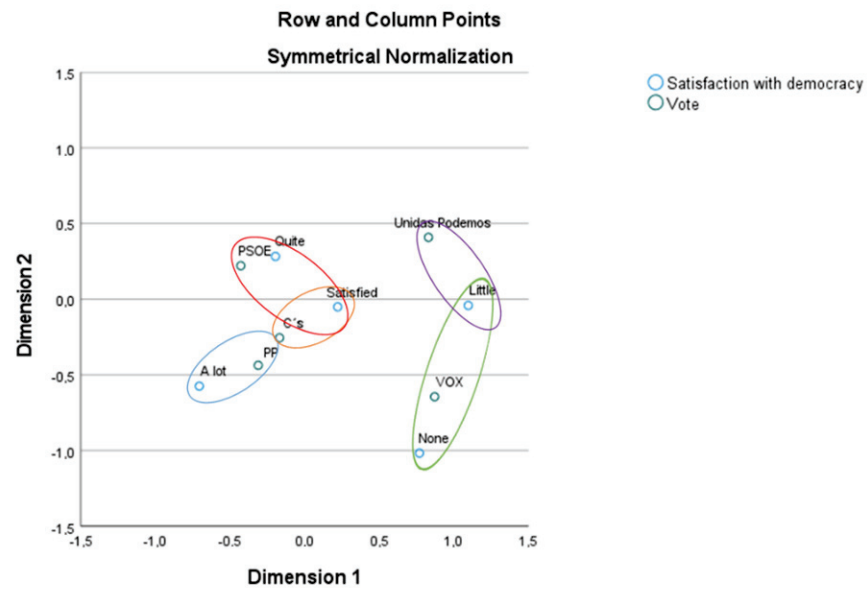


Figure 1. Correspondence analysis of the level of satisfaction with democracy compared to the recall of vote choice in the November 2019 general election. Source: authors’ own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

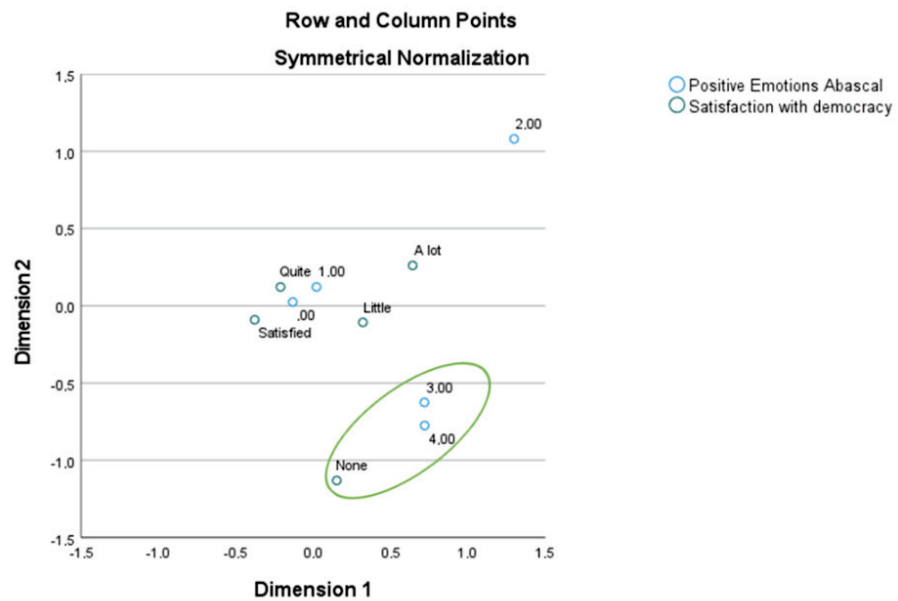


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis of the level of satisfaction with democracy in relation to positive emotions towards Santiago Abascal. Source: authors’ own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

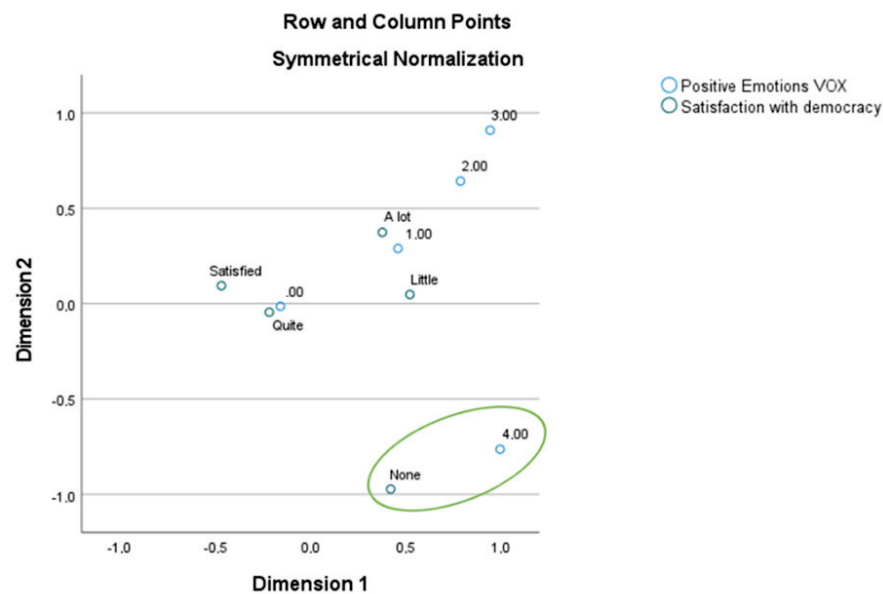


Figure 3. Correspondence analysis of the level of satisfaction with democracy in relation to positive emotions towards VOX. Source: authors' own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

After verifying the presence of positive and negative emotions in VOX voters and their relationship with the levels of democratic satisfaction, we will now show which factors have impacted the decision to support the Spanish far right; in other words, what are the constituent elements of the vote for VOX (Table 3)⁴. Firstly, when socio-demographic and contextual variables are introduced as explanatory variables for voting for the party, we observe that the level of explanation is low (R^2 Nagelkerke = 29.0%). Being male and identifying as Catholic increases the likelihood of voting for the far right. At the same time, as the individuals' ratings of both the current and future political situations improves, the likelihood of supporting VOX decreases. Therefore, this first model reveals that the structural component has little weight in the construction of the vote for the far right, while the negative rating of current politics and the absence of hope in its future evolution seem to indicate the weariness and dissatisfaction of VOX voters with politics.

Our second model significantly increases the level of explanation (R^2 Nagelkerke = 54.7%) and supports the previous finding that, as citizens become more satisfied with democracy in our country, the likelihood of supporting the far right decreases. This democratic dissatisfaction, together with the negative rating of the current political situation and the Catalan independence movement (i.e., perceiving Catalan independence as a problem), increases the likelihood of supporting VOX. Furthermore, ideology also influences the decision to vote for the far right, so as individuals move further to the right on the ideological spectrum, the likelihood of voting for VOX increases.

When variables relating to disaffection are introduced in the third model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 56.8%), the level of satisfaction with democracy continues to be significant and three of the variables representing disaffection are significant too: while the perception of politics as complicated (internal efficacy) and the ability to influence politics (external efficacy) have a negative effect on the support for VOX, the idea that politicians do not care about 'people like me' increases the likelihood of voting for this party. VOX voters are still citizens who are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy, at least as far as the principle of representativeness is concerned, but do not consider politics to be too complex a subject for them to follow or understand. In this third model, the significant effect of socio-demographic and contextual variables also disappears.

Table 3. Explanatory models of the vote for VOX.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Socio-demographic and contextual						
Gender	2.629 ** (0.327)	2.299 * (0.411)				
Catholics	3.468 ** (0.439)					
Rating current political sit.	0.711 ** (0.148)	0.799 * (0.090)				
Rating prospective political sit.	0.805 * (0.132)					
Attitudinal, issues and post-materialist values						
Ideological self-placement		2.313 *** (0.101)	2.527 *** (0.099)	2.663 *** (0.106)	1.801 ** (0.137)	1.735 ** (0.243)
Independence		5.491 *** (0.411)	7.698 *** (0.394)	9.673 *** (0.434)	6.226 *** (0.489)	10.236 ** (0.675)
Satisfaction with democracy		0.814 ** (0.080)	0.857 * (0.080)			
Disaffection						
Complicated politics			0.863 * (0.070)	0.823 ** (0.072)		
Lack of worry			1.177 * (0.076)	1.225 ** (0.082)		
Influence of vote			0.804 ** (0.061)	0.774 *** (0.068)	0.837 * (0.077)	
Populism						
Representation of ordinary citizen				1.126 * (0.057)		
Leadership						
Rating Santiago Abascal					2.032 *** (0.105)	
Rating Pablo Casado					0.611 ** (0.155)	0.686 * (0.157)
Rating Albert Rivera					0.768 * (0.098)	
Rating Pablo Iglesias					0.747 ** (0.088)	0.653 ** (0.139)
Sympathy and emotions						
Sympathy towards VOX						39.251 *** (0.761)
Hope for Abascal						40.564 ** (0.903)
Enthusiasm for Casado						0.095 ** (0.845)
Enthusiasm for C's						0.235 * (0.670)
Anger towards PSOE						3.583 * (0.587)
Constant	0.108 *** (0.510)	0.002 *** (0.797)	0.001 *** (1.039)	0.000 *** (1.064)	0.007 *** (0.965)	0.002 *** (1.153)
R ² Nagelkerke	29.0%	54.7%	56.8%	59.5%	70.8%	80.8%
% Correct	91.4	93.9	95.3	95.1	96.7	97.0
% Correctly predicted VOX observations	0.0	47.3	58.2	56.9	75.0	77.8
% Correctly predicted Other parties observations	100.0	98.1	98.7	98.4	98.7	98.7

Source: authors' own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

These variables, except the level of satisfaction with democracy, together with ideological self-placement and the issue of independence, are still significant in our fourth model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 59.5%), in which we add variables related to populism. Among these, the

fact that the only significant variable is the degree of agreement with the statement 'I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by an experienced politician' reinforces the lack of democratic representation and the distrust towards the political establishment perceived by voters of the Spanish far right.

However, some of these variables cease to be significant, but not citizens' influence in politics through voting when we stop referring to the political establishment as an abstract concept and we start mentioning the main political leaders in our fifth model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 70.8%), which shows a significantly higher level of explanation. In a way, VOX voters would express this crisis of representativeness through their negative ratings of Pablo Iglesias, but also of Albert Rivera and Pablo Casado. This means that the likelihood of supporting the far right increases as voters rate these three political leaders lower while rating Santiago Abascal higher.

In our sixth and last model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 80.8%), the ratings of Albert Rivera and Santiago Abascal are no longer significant when we introduce the affective and emotional components in the explanation of the vote for VOX. Rather than opposition to the leader of Ciudadanos, it is the absence of enthusiasm towards the party that constructs the vote for the far right. Additionally, rather than the perception voters have of Santiago Abascal, it is the hope for this political leader that encourages citizens to support VOX. In the case of Albert Rivera and Santiago Abascal, emotion replaces ratings, which reveals the importance of the emotional component in constructing the ratings of political leaders. However, in the case of Pablo Casado, the negative effect of his rating on the election is reinforced by the absence of enthusiasm towards him. It should be added that the effect of opposition to the political establishment on the decision to vote for VOX is complemented by the presence of anger towards the PSOE. Finally, as is usually the case with all political parties, feeling sympathy for the far-right party increases the likelihood of supporting it, despite the recent introduction of this group in our party system.

Something that is related to the recent introduction of a political party or the novelty of a leader is the emergence of the feeling of hope. Hope is an emotion that is constructed looking to the future, and therefore requires trust in the political leader and the project they propose. That is why, in this awakening of hope for Santiago Abascal, the populist style of his leadership also becomes evident. Populism does not only play on negative emotions such as resentment, contempt or anger—as evidenced by the impact of anger towards the PSOE on the vote for VOX in our model—but also on positive emotions, such as hope, which is projected into the future.

5.2. *The Construction of Hope for Santiago Abascal*

In the above model for explaining the decision to vote for VOX, we have found that hope for the party leader is one of the main conditioning variables of the electoral support they receive. Therefore, to complete our analysis, it is relevant to study the constituent elements of this hope and how it is constructed. To this end, we create five regression models, following the same logic, which are shown in Table 4.⁵

In the first model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 10.2%), we only include the structural components. We observe that, as with voting intention, the fact of identifying as Catholic increases the likelihood of feeling hope for Santiago Abascal, together with income level and level of education, the latter in the opposite direction. This means that, as the level of education increases, it is less likely to feel hope for Santiago Abascal, while the increase in the income level has the opposite effect. As a result, while those with lower levels of education would be more likely to feel hopeful for the leader of the Spanish far right, given their level of income, they would not be considered as 'modernisation losers'.

These variables remain significant when political attitudes and attitudes towards institutions are introduced (second model, R^2 Nagelkerke = 17.8%). In line with our model of the vote for VOX, we also observe a relationship between disaffection and hope. As the level of trust in democratic institutions increases, the less likely it is to feel hope for

Santiago Abascal. We observe this same effect with respect to classic variables indicative of political disaffection, such as perceptions of internal and external efficacy⁶.

Table 4. Explanatory models of the hope for Santiago Abascal.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Structural elements					
Level of studies	0.817 *	0.809 *			
	(0.092)	(0.100)			
Income level	1.173 **	1.244 ***	1.375 ***	1.306 **	
	(0.060)	(0.067)	(0.073)	(0.100)	
Catholics	4.644 ***	4.229 ***	2.311 **		
	(0.261)	(0.272)	(0.298)		
Attitudes towards politics and institutions					
Trust in democratic institutions		0.917 *			
		(0.045)			
Will of the people		0.831 ***			
		(0.051)			
Politicians talk too much		1.155 **			
		(0.052)			
Politics as complicated		0.931 *			
		(0.034)			
Influence of voting		0.916 **	0.908 *	0.864 **	0.900 *
		(0.034)	(0.040)	(0.055)	(0.054)
Cultural elements					
Multiculturalism—Immigration			1.256 ***	1.202 **	
			(0.046)	(0.067)	
Public services—Taxes			1.170 **		
			(0.053)		
Freedom—Safety			1.296 ***		
			(0.060)		
Sexual freedom			0.746 ***	0.722 ***	0.779 **
			(0.060)	(0.078)	(0.020)
Perceptive elements					
Rating Santiago Abascal				2.198 ***	1.899 ***
				(0.080)	(0.078)
Rating Pedro Sánchez				0.742 ***	0.757 ***
				(0.102)	(0.068)
Rating Pablo Iglesias				0.818 *	
				(0.101)	
Ideological elements					
Ideological self-placement					1.646 ***
					(0.133)
Sympathy towards VOX					10.802 ***
					(0.569)
Constant	0.062 ***	0.282	0.020	0.136 ***	−3.508 **
	(0.568)	(0.896)	(0.938 ***)	(1.151)	(0.867)
R ² Nagelkerke	10.2%	17.8%	35.9%	71.3%	73.4%
% Correct	84.7	84.8	86.5	92.7	93.7
% Correctly predicted VOX observations	0.0	5.5	25.4	68.0	72.4
% Correctly predicted Other parties observations	100.0	99.2	97.0	97.1	97.4

Source: authors' own creation based on the data of the post-electoral survey of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

If we pay attention to the variables considered indicative of populist style, we observe that disagreement with the statement 'the politicians at the Congress must follow the will of the people' is significant in the explanation of feeling hope for Abascal. In other words, those who feel hope for Santiago Abascal, despite showing symptoms of disaffection and discontent with the traditional political establishment, do not consider that the political

establishment should obey the will of the people. Their hopes are placed in a strong leader—Santiago Abascal—typical of far-right parties.

Among all the aforementioned variables, only disagreement with citizens' influence in politics through voting, income level and religion maintain their effect by introducing cultural elements in the third model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 35.9%). Thus, this model shows that disagreement with some of the post-materialist values increases the likelihood of feeling hope for Santiago Abascal. Some significant elements include the perception of immigration as a cultural threat; a preference for tax cuts even if this translates into cuts in public services; a preference for security even if this means losing freedom; and disagreement with the statement 'Gays and lesbians should be free to live their lives as they wish'.

Nonetheless, among these values only the cultural threat of immigration and sexual freedom maintain their significant effect when we add the effect of leaderships to the model. In this fourth model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 71.3%), the level of explanation of hope for Santiago Abascal considerably increases. Furthermore, it is observed that hope for the leader of VOX is also constructed in opposition to Pablo Iglesias and Pedro Sánchez, because as individuals rate left-wing political leaders more highly, the likelihood of feeling hope for the leader of VOX decreases.

Finally, when including ideological and identity elements in our last model (R^2 Nagelkerke = 71.4%), the fact that citizens feel close to VOX, as well as their self-placement on the right side of the ideological spectrum, increases the likelihood of feeling hope towards Santiago Abascal, as expected.

Ultimately, we have seen how the construction of hope for the leader of VOX is made up of elements linked to political disaffection, certain values typical of reverse post-materialism, ideological and identity elements, and the rating of the leader himself, as well as of other opposition leaders.

6. Conclusions

According to the results obtained in the analysis of our research, the emotional regime of VOX voters is defined firstly by the presence of positive emotions towards the leader and the far-right party. Secondly, by the presence of positive emotions towards the leaders and political parties that are close in the ideological spectrum (Pablo Casado and the PP and Albert Rivera and C's). This has to do with the fact that many VOX voters are traditional voters of these close alternatives, and still feel more positive than negative emotions towards them, which also implies the possibility of returning to them at some point, since there has been no emotional disengagement. Thirdly, the absence of any hint of positive emotion towards left-wing leaders and parties (Pablo Iglesias and PODEMOS and Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE) shows these voters' centrifugal orientation. Fourthly, this is also consistent with the presence of negative emotions towards these left-wing leaders and parties. Finally, the emotional regime of VOX voters is also characterised by the presence of very negative emotions towards left-wing parties and leaders, emotions linked to aversion, which are rarely so present in the Spanish political reality.

In this emotional regime of VOX voters, the presence of high levels of pride and hope—emotions linked to the past and the future that support the link with the leader or the party—and of enthusiasm and peace of mind—both motivating emotions—stand out. In particular, the high levels of hope indicate that these are voters looking for a subject they can identify with (either a party or a leader), a result of the dissatisfaction towards other groups on the ideological right.

Among the negative emotions, those expressed by VOX voters towards Pedro Sánchez stand out. Some of them are particularly negative, such as contempt, disgust, resentment and bitterness which, as stated before, are unusual to see in Spanish society. Others are more common, such as anger, fear, anxiety and worry. The politician who triggers the highest level of aversion is Pedro Sánchez, while among left-wing political parties this emotion is felt at its highest towards PODEMOS. The presence of this type of very negative

emotions is consistent with what has been described in the literature on emotions and their link to the emergence and rise of far-right parties.

The emotional regime described corresponds to the levels of democratic satisfaction, as VOX voters who feel more positive emotions towards the leader and the far-right party are the ones who feel more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in our country. Dissatisfaction is also related to the decision to vote for VOX in the November 2019 general election.

The explanatory models of the vote for VOX reveal, firstly, the significance of emotional explanation, which considerably increases the levels of explanation. Secondly, it is worth noting the low presence of the structural component in the construction of the vote, which disappears when the variables relating to political disaffection are introduced into the regression. Furthermore, the disaffection and discontent felt by VOX voters towards the political establishment becomes clear, as they do not perceive they care for the problems that affect citizens and declare their preference for an ordinary citizen over an experienced politician when it comes to deciding who will represent them. It is precisely their disagreement with the fact that citizens can influence what happens in politics through voting, together with democratic dissatisfaction, that once again highlights VOX voters' dissatisfaction with the principle of representation in particular and with the functioning of democracy in general. This discontent is reflected in the negative ratings of Albert Rivera and Pablo Casado, as well as in the anger felt towards the PSOE.

The emotional variable with the greatest explanatory power, and which even replaces the rating of Santiago Abascal in the model, is hope for the leader of VOX, whose ability to attract voters to his party is comparable to that of party identification. The absence of enthusiasm towards Casado and Ciudadanos also plays a relevant role.

The feeling of hope for Santiago Abascal would consist not so much of structural elements, but rather of the defence of values, disaffection, the rating of political leaders and the ideological and identity components. Starting with the first ones, the fact that hope for Santiago Abascal is partly explained by the defence of reverted post-materialist values, as formulated in our research, makes us think of an emotion with cognitive components, that is, an emotion in which the evaluation of our perceptions plays a relevant role, as part of the literature pointed out. Hope for Santiago Abascal is not only an emotion generated by opposition to the political elite but to left-wing policies, such as lessening the obstacles to immigration, relaxing the repressive capacities of the state, tax increases to offer a wider variety of public services or the extension of LGBTI+ rights.

The positioning towards these post-materialist values is also a response to one of the cleavages that Spanish politics still hinges on: ideology. This, together with sympathy towards VOX and Santiago Abascal's leadership, would be the other constituent element of the hope for Santiago Abascal. In other words, beyond the individuals' structural conditions, hope for the leader of the Spanish far right would be triggered by elements of a perceptive nature. In the face of a difficult reality to which other right-wing parties offer no solution, far-right voters need to place their hopes for a better future in the leader of VOX.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Variables introduced in the explanatory models of the vote for VOX.

Variable	Type	Interpretation
VOX vote	Nominal (dummy)	1: VOX–0: Other parties
Socio-demographic and contextual		
Gender	Nominal (dummy)	1: Male–0: Female
Age	Quantitative	0–98
Level of education	Ordinal	1: Uneducated–6: University
Interest-bearing assets	Nominal (dummy)	1: Interest-bearing assets 0: Other employment situation
Interest-bearing liabilities	Nominal (dummy)	1: Interest-bearing assets 0: Other employment situation
Non-interest-bearing assets	Nominal (dummy)	1: Interest-bearing assets 0: Other employment situation
Level of household income	Ordinal	1: Up to EUR 300–10: +EUR 6000
Catholics	Nominal (dummy)	1: Catholics 0: Other religious affiliation
Rating personal economic sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating current economic sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating prospective economic sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating current political sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating prospective political sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Attitudinal, issues and post-materialist values		
Ideological self-placement	Quantitative	0: Left–10: Right
Nationalist self-placement (Autonomous Communities)	Quantitative	0: Minimal nationalism–10: Maximum nationalism
Spanish nationalist self-placement	Quantitative	0: Minimal nationalism–10: Maximum nationalism
Spanish sentiment	Ordinal	1: Only Spanish–5: Only from Autonomous Community
Independence	Nominal (dummy)	1: Independence 0: Other issues
Sexual freedom	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
European integration	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Trust in political establishment	Quantitative	0: No trust–10: Maximum trust
Trust in democratic institutions	Quantitative	0: No trust–10: Maximum trust
Representation of interests	Quantitative	0: None–10: A lot
Satisfaction with democracy	Quantitative	0: None–10: A lot
Multiculturalism—Immigration	Quantitative	0: Multiculturalism–10: Immigration
Public services—Taxes	Quantitative	0: Public services–10: Taxes
Freedom—Safety	Quantitative	0: Freedom–10: Safety
Populism		
Will of the people	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
People’s decisions	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Differences elite—people	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Representation of ordinary citizen	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Politicians talk too much	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Consensus	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Disaffection		
Search for interests	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Complex politics	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Lack of worry	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Influence of vote	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Informed	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Disaffection	Quantitative	0: No disaffection–10: A lot of disaffection
Interest in politics	Quantitative	0: No interest–10: A lot of interest
Leadership		
Rating political leaders	Quantitative	0: Very bad–10: Very good
Sympathy and emotions		
Sympathy towards VOX	Nominal (dummy)	1: Sympathy towards VOX 0: Other parties
Emotional presence	Nominal (dummy)	1: Presence of emotion 0: Absence of emotion

Source: authors’ own creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

Table A2. Variables introduced in the explanatory models of the hope towards Abascal.

Variable	Type	Interpretation
Presence of hope for Abascal	Nominal (dummy)	1: Presence of hope 0: Absence of hope
Structural elements		
Gender	Nominal (dummy)	1: Male–0: Female
Age	Quantitative	0–98
Level of education	Ordinal	1: Uneducated–6: University
Interest-bearing assets	Nominal (dummy)	1: Interest-bearing assets 0: Other employment situation
Interest-bearing liabilities	Nominal (dummy)	1: Interest-bearing assets 0: Other employment situation
Non-interest-bearing assets	Nominal (dummy)	1: Interest-bearing assets 0: Other employment situation
Level of household income	Ordinal	1: Up to EUR 300–10: +EUR 6000
Catholics	Nominal (dummy)	1: Catholics 0: Other religious affiliation
Attitudes towards politics and institutions		
Trust in political establishment	Quantitative	0: No trust–10: Maximum trust
Trust in democratic institutions	Quantitative	0: No trust–10: Maximum trust
Representation of interests	Quantitative	0: None–10: A lot
Satisfaction with democracy	Quantitative	0: None–10: A lot
Will of the people	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
People’s decisions	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Differences elite—people	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Representation of ordinary citizen	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Politicians talk too much	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Consensus	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Complicated politics	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Lack of worry	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Influence of vote	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Informed	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Disaffection	Quantitative	0: No disaffection–10: A lot of disaffection
Interest in politics	Quantitative	0: No interest–10: A lot of interest
Cultural elements		
Multiculturalism–Immigration	Quantitative	0: Multiculturalism–10: Immigration
Public services—Taxes	Quantitative	0: Public services–10: Taxes
Freedom—Safety	Quantitative	0: Freedom–10: Safety
Sexual freedom	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
European integration	Quantitative	0: Strongly disagree–10: Strongly agree
Perceptive elements		
Rating political leaders	Quantitative	0: Very bad–10: Very good
Rating personal economic sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating current economic sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating prospective economic sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating current political sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Rating prospective political sit.	Quantitative	0: Really bad–10: Really good
Ideological elements		
Sympathy towards VOX	Nominal (dummy)	1: Sympathy towards VOX 0: Other parties
Ideological self-placement	Quantitative	0: Left–10: Right
Nationalist self-placement (Autonomous Communities)	Quantitative	0: Minimal nationalism–10: Maximum nationalism
Spanish nationalist self-placement	Quantitative	0: Minimal nationalism–10: Maximum nationalism
Spanish sentiment	Ordinal	1: Only Spanish–5: Only from Autonomous Community
Independence	Nominal (dummy)	1: Independence 0: Other issues
Media		
Frequency of information monitoring in the media	Ordinal	1: Never or hardly ever–6: Every day or most days
Social media information	Quantitative	0: None–10: A lot
Social media participation	Quantitative	0: None–10: A lot
Political landscape		
Rating management of government and opposition	Quantitative	0: Very bad–10: Very good
Rating inauguration	Quantitative	0: Very bad–10: Very good
Rating coalition	Quantitative	0: Very bad–10: Very good

Source: authors’ creation based on the data of the post-electoral study of the November 2019 general election conducted by Political Research Team.

Notes

- ¹ For further reading on the terminological debate see: [Jaráiz Gulías et al. \(2020\)](#).
- ² This is a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) carried out between 14 January and 22 February 2020, with a sample size of 1000 units. The universe is comprised of a population over 18 years of age and residing in Spain and the sampling method is simple random sampling with proportional affixation according to sex and age quotas. The error for the sample $\pm 3.1\%$, for a 95% level of trust and according to the principle of maximum indeterminacy $p = q = 0.5$.
- ³ In the April 2019 general election, VOX got 2,688,092 votes, which translates into a 10.26% of the valid votes and 24 seats, and in the November general election of the same year, they got 3,656,979 votes, a 15.08% of the valid votes and 52 seats, according to Spanish Ministry of Interior.
- ⁴ Table 3 shows the values of the odds ratio and the heterocedasticity-robust standard errors.
- ⁵ Table 4 shows the values of the odds ratio and the heterocedasticity-robust standard errors.
- ⁶ Degree of agreement with the statement ‘Through voting, people like me can influence what happens in politics’ and ‘Politicians talk a lot but do very little’, respectively.

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Article

Perceptions of Trust in the Context of Social Cohesion in Selected Rural Communities of South Africa

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Abstract: Although nuances around the definitions and contextualization of social cohesion subsist, this paper views social cohesion through the lens of social cooperation and togetherness within a collective in geopolitical terms, expressed in the attitudes and behaviours of its members. In many countries, including South Africa, social cohesion remains an ideal to strive for and achieve. Extant studies suggest that trust is one of the key factors in building social cohesion. As such, this paper aims to explore trust in the context of social cohesion. This study attempts to address the knowledge gaps regarding the views, feelings, and experiences around trust and also make a contribution to the qualitative inquiry of trust in the context of social cohesion in rural communities of South Africa. Accordingly, the perceptions and experiences of people in two rural communities (Lambert's Bay and Philippolis) regarding trust in the context of social cohesion were explored. A qualitative methodology was employed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of trust. A total of 19 participants were interviewed, comprising of community stakeholders and parents. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data in face-to-face interviews with participants. Data collected were analysed using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis. The study found that trust among community members in both Lambert's Bay and Philippolis was limited. In instances where there was trust, it was mainly amongst participants who know each other compared to individuals who do not know each other. Thus, in both communities, generalised trust continues to be a challenge.

Keywords: trust; social cohesion; community; low socio-economic; South Africa



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1. Introduction

Trust features prominently in the debates around South Africa's transformation. It is often highlighted as a requirement for building a united, democratic, peaceful, and prosperous South Africa. It is listed in the National Development Plan as one of the interventions that can address South Africa's persistent interracial and ethnic divisions and conflicts NPC (2012). Equally, it is considered to have the potential to contribute to envisaged social integration (Bornman 2011; Mmotlane et al. 2010). Noticeably, national efforts to promote social cohesion in South Africa have also elevated the issue of trust. Trust as the key ingredient of social relations and integration is regarded as a key aspect of social cohesion. Ndinga-Kanga et al. (2020) argue that the declining or non-existent trust among citizens impacts negatively on social cohesion. Furthermore, Ndinga-Kanga et al. (2020, p. 407) emphasise that "one of the key measures of social cohesion in social science literature is interpersonal trust or the level of trust individuals in a society place in others". In South Africa, the residue of the distrust inherited from apartheid remains prevalent and evident. The distrust is still observably based on race, gender, class, ethnicity,

and geography (Struwig et al. 2013). In particular, the level of trust differs according to the demographics of communities. This view is constant with You's (2012) assertion that many studies have found that trust is higher and easier to maintain in homogenous societies. According to You (2012), in homogenous societies, it is easier to trust similar rather than dissimilar. In addition, communities that are homogenous are those in rural areas while urban communities are fundamentally diverse (Hajdu et al. 2020).

Research on trust in South Africa has largely focused on the public trust in government (Askvik 2008; Government Communication and Information System 2014; Institute for Justice and Reconciliation 2018; Pillay 2017; Gouws and Schulz-Herzenberg 2016). There is also evidence of limited research on trust in urban areas (Mmotlane et al. 2010). However, there is no published empirical work on trust between citizens in rural areas of South Africa. In particular, there is a lack of research that explores the perceptions of trust in the context of social cohesion in rural communities of South Africa. The research question for this study is "what are the perceptions and experiences of trust among community members of Lambert's Bay and Philippolis?" The Integrated Development Plans of the municipalities under which Lambert's Bay and Philippolis are located categorise these two towns as rural. Both towns are essentially homogenous in race, language, culture and class, which suggests the possibility of a high prevalence of particularised trust. The small population in these areas suggests that even though there's some diversity, the people know each other well and have regular contact. In this regard, it is the aim of this paper to explore trust in the context of social cohesion in Lambert's Bay and Philippolis.

1.1. Social Cohesion in South Africa

The concept of social cohesion has multiple definitions. According to the OECD (2012), there is no single, universally accepted definition of social cohesion. A detailed review of the literature shows that there are many different definitions of social cohesion. The reason for the absence of a single definition and meaning stems from the term being variously appropriated (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Burns et al. 2018). The literature also shows, that different countries, authors and researchers approach social cohesion to respond to their own societal challenges. However, this paper adopts the definition of Delhey et al. (2018), which defines social cohesion as the quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviours of its members. According to Ballard et al. (2019), the definition of social cohesion should be broad enough for people to embed a wide variety of ideas which reflect their own concerns and beliefs.

In the South African context, social cohesion has a short history, which can be located predominantly in post-apartheid South Africa. Social cohesion is uniquely conceptualised as an effort to bolster the sluggish social transformation in South Africa, especially nation-building (Palmary 2015). At the core of its unique context-specific conceptualisation, the role of social cohesion is to get South Africans to affirm each other's common humanity and address "the divisive effects of racism; class divisions; social fragmentation; language; spatial exclusion; sexism; unemployment; crime and inequality" NPC (2011). The National Development Plan 2030 puts social cohesion at the heart of South Africa's social transformation agenda to promote tolerance, social interaction, inclusion, and solidarity in communities. Fundamentally, social cohesion is being used to harness and enhance relationships between people, irrespective of their diversity. It is widely regarded as an effective way of addressing segregation and exclusion, which continue to reproduce and reinforce the racial, ethnic, and tribal identities of South African society NPC (2011).

Likewise, Steyn and Ballard (2013) state that social cohesion in South Africa has become part of the effort to address the historical context of ethnic hostility, racial segregation, and the dire mismanagement of diversity. Njozela et al. (2019) add that social cohesion is envisaged to promote tolerance, social interaction, inclusion, and solidarity in communities. It is also important to highlight that social cohesion, according to de Beer (2014, p. 3), envisages that:

a community or society that is cohesive to the extent that the inequalities, exclusions and disparities based on ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, age, disability or any other distinctions which engender divisions, distrust and conflict are reduced and/or eliminated in a planned and sustained manner. This, with community members and citizens as active participants, working together for the attainment of shared goals, designed and agreed upon to improve the living conditions for all.

There is a discernible unanimity in the literature that social cohesion is not a natural process but an aspiration that must be consciously promoted and nurtured. For example, [Koonce \(2011\)](#) asserts that social cohesion is the by-product of various activities and conditions that can be recognised ex post. [Chan et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Fenger \(2012\)](#) argue for an appropriate social architecture for social cohesion that needs to be visible and felt. This social infrastructure is also referred to as the indicators, aspects, dimensions, or constitutive elements of social cohesion. According to [Tabane and Human-Vogel \(2010\)](#), [Koonce \(2011\)](#), [Fenger \(2012\)](#), and [Ballard et al. \(2019\)](#), these dimensions constitute behavioural attitudes as well as institutional elements that are intrinsic for meaningful social cohesion to take place. In other words, social cohesion only becomes noticeable when these dimensions are present. [Ballard et al. \(2019\)](#) list social cohesion as having five dimensions, which include (i) common values and civic culture, (ii) social order and social control, (iii) social solidarity and reduced inequality, (iv) social networks and social capital, and (v) territorial belonging and identity. Similarly, [Lefko-Everett et al. \(2016\)](#) lists trust, identity, belonging, solidarity, tolerance, and inclusion as some of the dimensions of social cohesion. Authors such as [Chan et al. \(2006\)](#), [Tabane and Human-Vogel \(2010\)](#), [Koonce \(2011\)](#), [Fenger \(2012\)](#), and [Ballard et al. \(2019\)](#) identify trust as one of the social characteristics, dimensions, or aspects that are supportive and reinforce social cohesion. Observably, all these dimensions are critical to buttress social cohesion in South Africa. However, as indicated in the introduction, this article focuses on trust. Like all other dimensions of social cohesion, it is doubtful that social cohesion in South African communities is possible without trust. The concept and its relationship to social cohesion is discussed below.

1.2. The Concept of Trust

There are different definitions of trust. The quantity and diversity of definitions of trust have resulted in various authors conceding that trust lacks conceptual clarity ([Delhey and Newton 2005](#)). Similar to terms that are part of everyday communication, trust is equally used to refer to various aspects by different people to the extent that it is loosely appropriated to mean many different things. This problem is also more pronounced where trust is used interchangeably and erroneously with terms such as loyalty, integrity, and credibility ([Sheppard and Sherman 1998](#)). However, we felt that of the many definitions of trust, the following two definitions are adequate for the purposes of this paper. [Rossouw and Van Vuuren \(2004\)](#) define trust as a social phenomenon, based on a history of interaction that facilitates a reciprocal faith in another person's intentions and behaviour. [Von der Ohe et al. \(2004, p. 6\)](#) define trust as a relationship with the "express belief in the positive intent and commitment to the mutual gain of all parties involved in the relationship". These definitions highlight common threads, which are faith, expectation, and belief. Importantly, these definitions highlight a critical aspect of trust, which is to obtain assurance on the sincerity, reliability, dependability, and ability of something or someone's behaviour.

These definitions present trust as a rationally based behaviour involving the knowledge of another person and being able to predict his/her behaviour ([Rompf 2012](#)). Another important factor of trust is affective. [Colquitt et al. \(2007\)](#) describe the affective factor of trust as involving feelings and moods and emotions. The affective component of trust is based on shared goals, beliefs, values, and even identities among the parties. These factors are necessary for a person to develop confidence in the other person that the person will behave as expected ([Rompf 2012](#)). Studies relating to trust put forth that mutually trusting relationships bind people and communities together. Equally, trust involves mutual respect

and a shared sense of connectedness amongst a group of people or two individuals. That is, if people in a community hold each other accountable for their actions over time, a foundation is built that allows for the development of trust. Thus, accountability precedes the development of trust and the social and economic prosperity of communities (Knack and Zak 2003). Arguably, people who trust one another exchange ideas, goods, and services within local community boundaries, all of which work well for local economic development as well as social cohesion (Bottoni 2018; Stern and Coleman 2015). Therefore, building trust in the local community represents a viable strategy for economic development and social cohesion (Knack and Zak 2003).

Trust is a key determinant as well as a catalyst for social interactions and relationships. It has the ability to cross the borders of familiar relationships to broader societal relations. According to Welch et al. (2005) trust lies at the heart of all positive relationships. Importantly, trust happens between individuals or groups well known to each other, as well as between individuals or groups that are complete strangers (Welch et al. 2005). Stolle (2002) explains these two types of trust as particularised and generalised trust. Particularised trust is described as a practice that places faith only in their own kind (Uslaner 2002). Particularised trust exists among people who know one another and have everyday interactions, such as friends, neighbours, and co-workers. It is “based on first-hand knowledge of individuals and is embedded in personal relations that are strong, frequent and nested in wider networks” (Allum et al. 2007, p. 3). Freitag and Bauer (2013) emphasise that in addition to knowing one another, or knowing something about them, they often share a common identity. Forrest and Kearns (2001) emphasise that in particularised trust, relationships are established between or among only those in the immediate circle or community or neighbourhood. It is also described as an identity-based trust, which is conferred on the basis of group membership (Fiedler and Rohles 2021).

Identity-based trust is described as a trust relationship where a person may not directly know another involved person, but these two people belong to the same group based on ethnicity, nationality, religion, or language (Fiedler and Rohles 2021). This means that homogeneity, identity, and affiliation are central in the identity-based relationship. Commonly, particularised trust creates a relationship in which people restrict their engagement and social activities to their own kind. Thus, particularised trust reflects social strains, where each group in a society looks out for their own interests and places little faith in the good intentions of others. It is observed that informal networks tend to be confined to situations where there are high levels of particularised trust. Berggren and Jordahl (2006) argue that particularised trust benefits for in-group but is undesirable for society at large. Unlike a particularised trust, generalised trust actually encourages taking a risk with strangers. In particular, generalised trust explains the ability to trust generally without prior knowledge and familiarity. Therefore, generalised trust is regarded as a trust relationship between strangers. Stolle (2002) states further that generalised trust differs from particularised trust in that it deals with unknown groups and/or strangers and does not predominantly depend upon specific situations. Uslaner (2002) describes generalised trust as resembling a chicken soup of society in that it makes all kinds of social interaction run smoother (Uslaner 2002). Consequently, generalised trust links people who are different and unfamiliar from themselves.

According to Helliwell and Putnam (2004), generalised trust entails trusting people that one does not know personally. It reflects a bond that people share across society, across economic and ethnic groups, religions, and races (Berggren and Jordahl 2006). In addition to fundamentally strengthening and assessing the well-being of societies, generalised trust contributes to social solidarity. Generalised trust is becoming relevant due to the mobility of people. It is very rare that communities remain homogenous, meaning that as different people move into communities, these communities become diverse. Arguably, the diversity of communities weakens particularised trust while establishing the need for generalised trust. Importantly, generalised trust concerns the expectancy about the trustworthiness of strangers; that is, people we do not have any information about (Bekkers 2012; Uslaner

2002). Hence, generalised trust is widely regarded as indispensable for human beings and communities to function successfully and engender the necessary cooperation and inclusivity (Halpern et al. 2011). It is also essential in promoting social relations and engagement, especially in diverse societies. It is, accordingly, generalised trust that is a dimension of social cohesion.

1.3. Relationship between Social Cohesion and Trust

The definition of social cohesion that we adopted for this paper emphasises interactions between members of society, as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that trust, either in a personal, social or institutional context, is a critical feature of social relationships. Theoretically, trust has been linked with social cohesion. Hence, it is widely accepted that trust and social cohesion are related. The relationship between trust and social cohesion has long been established. Authors such as Phillips and Berman (2008) and Burekul and Thananithichot (2012) indicated that research has established trust as one of the key factors in building social cohesion. It is the view of Struwig et al. (2013, p. 407) that “one of the key measures of social cohesion in social science literature is the interpersonal trust or the level of trust among individuals in a society”. Similarly, Blake et al. (2008) found that most researchers acknowledge that a high level of social cohesion is often reflected in high levels of trust. Quite significantly, a report by the United Nations suggests that the presence or absence of social trust, measured as trust between citizens within countries, is a fruitful way to analyse social cohesion (Larsen 2014). However, Hooge (2007) cautions that a preoccupation with trust as an indicator of social cohesion is sometimes unjustifiable since trust is but one of the dimensions of social cohesion.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2011, p. 51), a comprehensive description of a cohesive society is offered as one that “works towards the well-being of all the members and promotes trust”. Trust provides the cohesiveness necessary for the development of meaningful social relationships. Thus, it has the ability to facilitate the cohesiveness that is necessary for the development of meaningful social relationships. It is considered essential for social solidarity, cooperation, unity, and engagement. Likewise, trust is a fundamental element of socially cohesive societies and potentially serves as a social lubricant to facilitate solidarity, cohesion, consensus, and cooperation. This means that the erosion of trust could harm social cohesion in communities and societies in general. Notably, high levels of trust can be a good thing to promote a cohesive society, a factor to consider for rural communities.

1.4. Trust in South Africa

In South Africa, trust—in particular, a lack of generalised social trust—is a problem. Authors have found that South Africans do not trust each other (Burns et al. 2018). There is unanimity in the literature that the problem of the lack or low levels of trust in South Africa largely emanates from apartheid precisely. Apartheid was a policy that promoted, enforced, and legalised social divisions, prejudice, and state-sponsored racial animosity. Burns (2012) maintains that the apartheid induced distrust and non-cooperation among people and communities. The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB 2015) and Posel and Hinks (2013) have echoed similar sentiments, that there is a significantly high level of mistrust between members of the different racial groups, individuals, and groupings within South African society. Academic research has demonstrated convincingly that in South Africa, individuals trust those who are similar to themselves, and in most cases, this is based on racial and ethnic identities. In support of this view, Hofmeyr and Govender (2015) argue that one of the explanations for the lack of trust is that un-reconciled persons in South Africa seldom have contact with each other because of the legacy of the apartheid system that separated persons racially, according to economic class, and geographically. Therefore, it is common to have heterogeneous communities with high levels of particularised trust,

while there are visibly low levels of generalised social trust. Specifically, it is widely acknowledged that interracial trust is significantly lower.

That NDP 2030 NPC (2011) mentions the lack of trust as a persistent challenge afflicting social integration in South Africa. According to the NPC (2012, p. 314), “South Africa as a “society still reflects low levels of trust, as groups tend to prioritise their immediate interests”. Mmotlane et al. (2010, p. 2) concede that efforts aimed to transform apartheid “have not translated into a considerable increase in trust”. Similarly, Sibusiso (2016) highlights that the data from the South African Reconciliation Barometer indicates that 81% of people felt that one must be very careful when dealing with other people. In addition, the study conducted in partnership between Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) and the University of Johannesburg highlights that fragmentation, division, and polarisation breed distrust among citizens. Similarly, the South African Local Government Association (SALGA 2010) indicates that there is a lack of trust among Africans and white people. BusinessTech (2014) states that “the number of Africans saying they would never trust whites increased from 68% in 2009 to 73% in 2013. Over the same period, the perception by whites had increased from 40% in 2009 to 50% in 2013”.

2. Methodology

This exploratory study was conducted in the rural towns of Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis. Lambert’s Bay is situated in the Western Cape. According to the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) of Cederberg Local Municipality (2020), Lambert’s Bay is a rural coastal fishing, agriculture, and forestry town. Lambert’s Bay, together with Elands Bay and Leipoldtville, constitute a ward with a population of 9141, with coloured people constituting 70% of the population (Cederberg Local Municipality 2022). The IDP of Cederberg Local Municipality (2022) describes Lambert’s Bay as a low socio-economic area. Lambert’s Bay is one of the towns under the Cederberg Local Municipality where a high percentage of community members receive different social security grants from the South African Social Security Agency (Cederberg Local Municipality 2022).

Philippolis is one of the towns of the Kopanong Local Municipality. The IDP of (Kopanong Local Municipality 2020) states that Philippolis is situated in the south of the Free State province. The IDP of Kopanong Local Municipality (2021) describes Philippolis as a low-income and poor area. In terms of the Kopanong Local Municipality (2021), Philippolis has only 549 employed people out of a population of 3640 who are above the age of 15 years old. The majority of the people are employed predominantly in the agricultural sector. Philippolis has a diverse population consisting of Africans at 70%, coloureds at 25%, and whites at 5% (Kopanong Local Municipality 2021). Sesotho and Afrikaans are the two most-spoken languages in Philippolis.

An exploratory qualitative design was used for this study. In-depth interviews were undertaken in order to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of people in Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis regarding trust. Black and Street (2014) state that the exploration of perceptions in a research project assists in developing insights into a complex phenomenon. Thus, perceptions of people in these communities regarding trust constitute a significant indicator of the nature and level of social relations and integration and ultimately social cohesion. It is worth noting that perceptions of the people who participated in the study may not necessarily be truthful and not reflect objective reality. Quite often, the perceptions of the people do not occur in a vacuum but are shaped by geographic and socio-political dynamics. In this regard, perceptions serve as a starting point to better understanding the subjective opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of the people. Hence, the study has explored the peculiarities of the Philippolis and Lambert’s Bay communities.

Study participants were accessed through local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) from both Philippolis and Lambert’s Bay. These NGOs recruited participants purposefully to gather data. A total of 19 participants were interviewed with eight in Lambert’s Bay and eleven in Philippolis. The decision to conduct this number of interviews was not based on a statistical approach but guided by the overall aim of the study, which was mainly

qualitative. The selection of the participants from the NGOs was based on a purposive sampling method. This sampling method was deemed appropriate as families and stakeholders are viewed as fundamental agents that contribute to the broader functioning of society (Botha and Booysen 2014). Furthermore, this sampling method allowed the research participants to be selected for a “... purpose to represent phenomena, group, incident, location or type in relation to a key criterion” (Creswell et al. 2016, p. 85). A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data in a face-to-face interview with participants. During the interviews, the researcher helped the participants describe their perceptions and experiences by asking them prepared questions and follow-up questions without any suggestions or leading questions. In addition, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Subsequently, all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. A qualitative content analysis was used to reveal people’s perceptions and experiences of trust. The qualitative analysis guided the process to obtain a valid and replicable inference of the related data to enable the development of new insights. The data were then analysed using Braun and Clark’s thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2013). In particular, the thematic analysis approach was used to firstly engage with descriptive information in order to become familiar with the emerging information and secondly develop codes. These codes were generated manually to enable the researcher to summarise, make connections, and develop concrete and coherent new insights that were identified inductively. In accordance with Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic themes were generated from the relevant codes.

3. Results and Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the perceptions of people in low socio-economic communities regarding trust and social cohesion. In order to assess the concept of “trust” within the community, questions regarding social trust and generalised trust were asked (Lau and Ataguba 2015). Two key themes emerged related to social trust and generalised trust. These included (1) trust among community members and (2) trust in general. The first theme, trust among community members, included a sub-theme, “the lost wallet/purse scenario and trust” and the second theme, trust in general, was further characterised by a sub-theme, “trusting people in general”. The two themes differ in terms of the type of questions that were asked of participants. In the first theme, a hypothetical scenario was given in order to assess social trust among community members. Social trust was explored based on trusting an individual within a hypothetical situation in order to understand whether individuals can also be found to be trusting in real situations. In the second theme, the responses from residents involved the general trust of people based on their real-life situations. Contrasting with social trust, general trust extends in a more abstract manner towards people as a broad unit with an unselective or unspecific situation, thus making this more inclusive to all. The understanding of general trust relies on most people being trustworthy, despite not knowing them personally or socially (Uslaner 2002). Conversely, Misztal (1996, p. 72) further stipulates that social trust falls on a continuum from the personal (particular) to the abstract (general).

The findings of the current study revealed contrasting results. Trust, although limited, was shared amongst participants who knew each other compared to individuals they may not know. The sense of trusting individuals in the community was expressed with a strong sense of affiliation or relatedness based on individuals they are familiar with as opposed to those they are unfamiliar with. The first theme, “trust amongst community members”, reveals that people’s sense of trust is influenced by their sense of belonging, social practices, and expectations. These expectations are continuously affected by past experiences and interactions within their environment. The following section will include the findings of the current study, which encompass themes one and two. The first theme to emerge included trust among community members which presented participants with a scenario of a lost wallet/purse:

3.1. Theme 1: Trust among Community Members

Lost Wallet/Purse Scenario and Trust

The theme of trust among communities emerged from responses aimed at understanding the perceptions and attitudes of trust among community members. In particular, the sub-theme emerged from responses concerning the possibility of someone returning a lost wallet/purse to the owner. In order to understand trust and relationships among participants, participants were given a scenario of the lost wallet/purse. Although trust is seen as a complex concept to explore and understand, various studies have utilised the “lost wallet/purse scenario” question in order to explore the concept of trust among people both locally and internationally (Adjaye-Gbewonyo et al. 2017; Knack 2001; Morrone et al. 2009). The “lost wallet/purse scenario and trust” sub-theme question included a scenario in which the participants were asked to “*imagine you lost a wallet or purse that contained R200.00 and it was found, how likely is that person to return it?*”

The following findings of the sub-theme that asked respondents to assess the likelihood that someone returns a stolen wallet or purse were equally divided between those who believe that their lost wallet/purse will be returned and those who believe it is less likely to be returned. The views on the “lost wallet/purse scenario” were expressed between parents and stakeholders. Parents in both communities expressed that they would not expect the wallet/purse to be returned. Parents from the Lambert’s Bay community indicated the following based on the scenario:

“Maybe it depends on whether the person knows you, then he will return it, but nowadays I don’t believe so”. (Parent: P7, Lambert’s Bay)

Another highlighted the socio-economic status as a reason why it would not be returned to them by saying:

“Never, because we live in a community where every cent helps, and I don’t think that person if he sees he doesn’t have bread in his house, will bring my money back”. (Parent: P4, Lambert’s Bay)

Similar views were expressed by parents in the Philippolis community that were presented with the lost wallet/purse scenario and the likelihood of its return. They expressed their views by stating that it would not be returned.

“Not here. If I leave my wallet there, they won’t bring it, they will say they found my wallet without cash”. (Parent: P11, Philippolis)

Views amongst parents showed a lack of trust in the return of the wallet/purse. However, these views were expressed differently amongst stakeholders in both communities. Although these views were different amongst parents and stakeholders, a stakeholder in Philippolis who was given the same scenario of forgetting one’s wallet/purse at someone’s house and was asked what the chance of returning it stated that:

“Let say 90%. Negative . . . Because it’s obviously . . . We had cases here like for R100 a person got killed”. (Stakeholder: P3, Philippolis)

Stakeholders from Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis both openly expressed that they would more than likely receive their money back from someone they know in the community compared to someone they may not know in the community.

“Yeah! It depends on where you lose the . . . but yeah, it depends on . . . obviously on where you lose it” . . . “I’ve personally never lost something here in Lambert’s Bay that...you know, can give you a direct answer in terms of that. But, I know for certain looking like community, especially when there is no form of income, like the snoek, it’s a form of income for many people. But if there’s no snoek., then the R200 would be seen as money falling from heaven. And they would . . . they will use that for their own takkies or whatever”. (Stakeholder: P1, Lambert’s Bay)

The difference in views between parents and stakeholders is expressed by job opportunities and financial constraints, as participants from Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis further

indicated that loyalty and household income play a contributing role to those who might return the participant's money. One participant expressed this as follows:

Stakeholder: "I think it will [giggles], it will depend on how that household, the neighbours are well-off maybe than me or they are people that are just struggling. I think that it's all about loyalty, but I don't think that some would return it with that amount of money in it, they will just return the wallet". (P1, Philippolis)

One participant who experienced a similar scenario expressed that people can be trusted. The participant view is articulated as follows:

"Close to 95%. That they will bring back. I had a bicycle that was standing outside of my house. And I forgot about it and about two days ago I thought to myself where is my bicycle and then one of the youngsters down the road brought my bicycle back home and he said we found your bicycle so they bring back stuff Yes there is a sense of trust. I leave my house doors open Sometimes I will sleep at night with doors open. So you are safe in that sense Yes. The only thing you won't trust people with is a cell phone. That's why I said 95%". (Stakeholder: P7, Philippolis)

However, one stakeholder expressed that their trust is in those they know within their community and not someone whom they do not know in the community.

"Mostly you can trust people you know in the community Yes, you can trust them unlike people who come and work like example there are people who come from outside going to build a bridge like you can't trust them because you don't know them. But the ones you know from the community is fine". (Stakeholder: P9, Philippolis)

This finding is similar to the findings of [Njozela et al. \(2019\)](#), who reported that respondents' trust was low in the event that a lost wallet would be returned by a stranger. The finding above shows that trust between wallet/purse returns and the responses to the trust questions depended on the participants' own experience within their community. Conversely, [Knack \(2001\)](#) argues that responses to trust questions are based on experience within the participant's own area. The current findings further show that building community trust can be identified as a viable strategy for improving the well-being of community members. At the individual level, numerous studies have explored the association between trust and health by utilising survey questions regarding respondents' perceptions of trust.

For example, a cross-country study conducted by [Kim et al. \(2011\)](#) found that stronger country-level trust helped with bettering self-rated health, which was controlled for by individual-level trust and other influencing factors. Similarly, in a multi-country study, [Mansyur et al. \(2008\)](#) revealed that there is a strong association between individual and societal trust among non-former Communist countries, which showed that there is a positive influence regarding trust and self-rated health that was present in countries with greater societal trust. However, the views expressed by the current study's participants essentially note that trust is also viewed as a contextual phenomenon, as trusting someone may vary depending on the situation. This denotes that variations of respondents' views are dependent on their own perceptions and attitudes of their experiences within their community as well as outside their community, and this may change over time and circumstances.

Taking the current findings of both rural communities into account, other studies focusing on community determinants of trust and racial attitudes found that neighbourhood socio-economic status is a key factor that can influence negative attitudes and a lack of trust among community members ([Letki 2009](#)). Neighbourhood economic disadvantages are considered to be driving factors that affect particularised trust and social cohesion. [Mmotlane et al. \(2010\)](#) found that patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability contribute to trust throughout a place of residence. Their study found that those residing in formal urban areas indicated higher levels of trust as opposed to those in informal low socio-economic areas.

The second theme to emerge from the data included participants' responses to their general sense of trust in people. With the findings of the first theme, "trust among community members", in mind, the second theme, "trust in general", suggests that social context

and environment largely contribute to the equal split between the participants' views of either trusting others in general or distrusting others in general. The following findings for theme two, "trust in general", show that overall trust continues to rely on contextual factors and underlying social factors that may or may not hinder social cohesion. The subsequent findings for theme two are presented as follows:

3.2. Theme 2: General Trust

Trusting People in General

Participants expressed their views of trust in a general sense based on their own experiences. Responses from both areas, Lambert's Bay and Philippolis, had similar findings with an equal split between whether people can be trusted in general or not. The question that participants responded to stated that "*generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?*" Responses to this question varied, as responses were context-specific and responses were diverse on the basis of the participants' own unique experiences. Two participants, who were split between Lambert's Bay and Philippolis, expressed that they do trust people in general. These views were expressed based on their own experiences and the context of their environment which have influenced their choice in trusting others. The first participant, who expressed their trust in others, indicated that:

"... I'm a very trusting person, so I'll trust most people but in the process sometimes be disappointed but I will always give people the benefit of the doubt. I think here we are more trusting, but in the bigger towns people expect the worst of other people... I think it's the city like that makes people like that, the other things that you read in the newspaper, where the older persons they have been take advantage of". (Stakeholder: P5, Lambert's Bay)

Another participant from Philippolis expressed that their trust in people was due to good experiences with others rather than bad experiences with people. The participant stated the following:

"I haven't from my side, experienced anything... I would say I trust 100% because there hasn't been anything funny by me... And other people's personalities that I have seen, don't look like they will do something bad to me and that isn't what I will do them... But, a person... You will see that time; you didn't think that person was like that... The younger people are really violent and naughty, like with a lot of phones... You hear someone lost a phone and someone won't give it back...". (Parent: P8, Philippolis)

Conversely, participants also presented conflicting feelings towards either trusting or distrusting people in general. One participant's response included reasons for not trusting people based on economic differences and geographic location and trusting those based on groups of people they had known for years compared to those they were not familiar with. The participant further expressed that social context and environment play a large role in whether they would trust or distrust someone. This was stated as follows:

"... I am not a suspicious person, but I tend to feel that it is not genuine... there are very rich people and very poor people, and the average people are... But with the rising prices of petrol and food, it is more expensive in the rural areas... Yeah, you know, the people are friendly... , it depends. At a church everybody is helpful, you know if you phone someone quick to drop something or you, the friends I connect to, you speak to the most, you can... But you won't phone someone you haven't seen in 6 months to ask them... To help you quickly... So, it is your connected friend that you actually see often". (Stakeholder: P2, Philippolis)

Another participant indicated that their trust in others would depend on those who help them and those who become jealous of them. To this extent, people's relatedness to others depended on their trust or distrust. The stakeholder stated the following:

"It is like 50/50 with that one. Some will help you some would be jealous for example one will say. Like continue with whatever you are doing, like study further. People will

encourage you and the other ones will say 'ha, you a volunteer, why you are doing that? You are not going anywhere with it''. (Stakeholder: P9, Philippolis)

The findings suggest that social interactions, social relations, and cohesion can largely influence people's views on trust in general. Essentially, through a series of ongoing interactions between various groups of people, the characteristics of trust dynamics can be affected over time and may lead to trust, distrust, or both. However, these findings are diverse in nature based on people's diverse interactions and experiences within their social environment. Participants from both Lambert's Bay and Philippolis expressed different views based on their contextual experiences relating to trust in general. Therefore, studying trust as well as distrust highlights the importance of acknowledging the diversity in people's perspectives and views.

In addition, a stakeholder was asked "why is there no trust?" and the response was:

"I believe it is the apartheid era. The history, the mentality is still there . . . It is from the adults but now I see it went to children". (Stakeholder: P9, Philippolis)

A similar finding was indicated by another stakeholder that indicated that trust is shared between groups across groups. The statement was expressed as follows:

"Yes and no. There I have to differ again from location side, and I think there is also groups that can trust each other and that can't trust each other". (Stakeholder: P3, Philippolis)

The current study's findings are aligned to findings that found that trust in diverse and heterogeneous environments is limited to between groups rather than across groups (Hooghe et al. 2007). Hooghe et al. (2007) further stipulate that trust is more present in homogeneous settings, as building a sense of trust is easier when it is with individuals we are familiar with, particularly those with whom individuals can share a shared sense of belonging. Similarly, it has been argued by Delhey and Newton (2005, p. 324) that "generalised trust is strongest where we have something in common with others". This includes people with the same social or ethnic background. Critics from the literature, however, claim that occurrences of higher levels of generalised trust are present in mainly homogeneous societies and neglect the role of intra-societal diversity and social contextual history. In addition, the literature argues that the absence of generalised trust, therefore, gives indications of social disintegrations and lower levels of social cohesion. Distrust may therefore be seen as a consequence of inequality and conflict within society (Hooge 2007).

Essentially, a variety of social challenges continues to impact the frequencies of trust and social cohesion across various communities. For example, Letki (2009) puts forth that social challenges such as unemployment, crime, and social exclusion further threaten feelings of alienation and distrust among community members, which negatively impact the sense of community and lead to low levels of social cohesion. The social environment may broadly influence people's behaviour, attitudes, sense of belonging, and decisions. Therefore, to a large degree, understanding trust dynamics involves unpacking the social environment to explore how trust develops and evolves over time. A similar finding was found by Burns et al. (2018) who explored South Africans' understanding of social cohesion. The study found that participants expressed more levels of distrust towards others and the consensus that most South Africans do not trust each other. These views were expressed in light of the high levels of crime, violence, socio-economic and political views, as well as social values.

Supporting findings were found from The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB 2015), which found that trust between individuals and groupings within South African society is quite low. Studies relating to social cohesion indicate that levels of trust (particularised trust) can contribute to how communities are socially engaged or socially disengaged as social cohesion is embedded in the process of social interactions and relatedness. The study reveals that trust plays a large role in social interaction and social activities. However, rural communities in South Africa are further challenged by social inequality, which affects coherence within the community and further contributes

to a lower sense of trust and social cohesion within the community. As such, [Cramm et al. \(2013, p. 142\)](#) reported that the effects of marital status and income can be mediated by neighbourhood services, social capital, and social cohesion. These socio-economic conditions may provide security to those who are vulnerable and increase their overall well-being. Thus, Social cohesion remains a driving factor in contributing to the socio-economic state of trust and well-being.

4. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has limitations. The sample is non-representative and therefore the results cannot be generalised to other communities. The second limitation is that trust is an outcome of social relations, and in this regard, this study should have been predicted on an assessment of the state of relations in these communities. With regard to recommendations, it is important to note that trust is not a natural process. It is an outcome of various historical factors largely shaped by social, political, and economic dynamics. It, therefore, is recommended by this article that various community institutions such as churches, schools, and the municipality must champion trust-building initiatives and processes. This leadership will contribute to building relationships that are crucial to facilitating trust. Municipalities in these areas must particularly conduct their municipal processes in a manner that promotes interaction among local citizens. It is also recommended that community organisations must develop trust-building programmes targeting families. These programmes must focus on assisting families to unlearn social behaviours that only emphasise particularised trust. In this regard, families as the nucleus of society should be conscientious of the significance of generalised trust for social cohesion. Thus, families should practice and promote trust with their immediate neighbours and the community at large.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of trust in the context of social cohesion in two low-income settings and found that trust remains a social concern for social cohesion within a diverse setting in South Africa. The study was implemented in two rural communities—Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis—with two key themes (trust among community members and trust in general) emerging as the core.

The study confirmed that South African communities have a problem with trust. The prevalent perception of participants in Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis is that trust is absent in communities. Consistent with the South African Reconciliation Barometer’s ([SARB 2015](#)) and Parliament of RSA’s (2017) sentiments that there is a significantly high level of mistrust between members of the different race groups, individuals, and groupings within South African society, this study confirmed that trust, in particular particularised trust, is prevalent in Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis. Essentially, the expression of trust amongst individuals in the selected communities was informed based on familiarity, affiliation, or one form of affinity or another. As [Uslaner \(2002\)](#) argues, particularised trust is a practice that places faith only in their own kind ([Uslaner 2002](#)). Notably, the study highlighted that the lack of trust or distrust was particularly exhibited towards unfamiliar faces or groups of people in both Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis.

In addition, the study reinforces a common view in the literature that low socio-economic communities tend to exhibit low levels of trust ([Njozela et al. 2019](#)). Similarly, [Mmotlane et al. \(2010\)](#) have also found that communities characterised by socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability contribute to trust through their place of residence. The high levels of crime in low socio-economic communities such as Lambert’s Bay and Philippolis are also regarded as contributing to low levels of trust among community members.

Lastly, this study provided further evidence that South Africa’s past is very much still affecting the social relations among community members. According to [Letki \(2009\)](#) and [Njozela et al. \(2019\)](#), the persistent social and racial enclaves in diverse low-income communities of South Africa often result in low levels of trust. In particular, the apartheid

racial divisions between Africans and coloureds manifest a lack of trust, even though these communities have been neighbours for decades. Furthermore, this study indicates that the impact that trust plays in social interaction and social activities cannot be deemphasised, especially in rural communities, which are characterized by social inequalities and challenges such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, and a lack of access to resources. These apparent challenges subsequently decrease community coherence, which negatively impacts trust and social cohesion within the community.

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