



Perceptions and behaviors of university students in the face of online hate speech: a comparative analysis between Spain and Italy

Percepciones y comportamientos de estudiantes universitarios frente al discurso de odio en línea: un análisis comparativo entre España e Italia

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ABSTRACT

Hate speech is evidence that social networks do not always favor modern democracies; there are more and more issues related to their misuse, putting Western values at stake. This phenomenon has increased with the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this paper is to investigate in Spanish and Italian university students their perceptions of hate speech such as sexting, grooming, cyberbullying, to analyze their online behaviors as victims and aggressors and to explore the forms of hatred towards people who have played a relevant role in the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a quantitative-descriptive methodology, 418 university students from both countries participated, recruited through non-probabilistic sampling. The results obtained show that in both countries there is an increase in the perception of hatred during COVID-19. In this context, the most increased forms of violence are sexting, gender violence and cyberbullying; among the most affected categories are healthcare workers, supermarket workers, and people with disabilities. Therefore, the results highlight the need to address hate speech with an educational approach oriented towards both critical and responsible media literacy as well as respect for diversity, interculturality, and emotional education.

RESUMEN

Los discursos de odio son una evidencia de que las redes sociales no siempre favorecen las democracias modernas; cada vez hay más problemáticas relacionadas con un mal uso de estas, poniendo en juego los valores occidentales. Este fenómeno ha aumentado con la pandemia del COVID-19. El objetivo de este artículo es investigar con estudiantes universitarios de España e Italia las percepciones que tienen sobre los discursos de odio tales como sexteo, «grooming», ciberacoso, analizar sus comportamientos en línea como víctimas y agresores, y explorar las formas de odio hacia personas que han tenido un papel relevante en la pandemia del COVID-19. Mediante el uso de una metodología cuantitativa-descriptiva, participaron 418 estudiantes universitarios de ambos países, reclutados con muestreo no probabilístico. Los resultados obtenidos evidencian que en ambos países hay un aumento de la percepción del odio durante el COVID-19. En este sentido, las formas de violencia más incrementadas son: sexteo, violencia de género y ciberacoso; entre las categorías más afectadas se encuentran los trabajadores del sector sanitario, de supermercados y las personas con discapacidad. Los resultados ponen de relieve la necesidad de tratar el discurso del odio con un enfoque educativo orientado tanto al sentido crítico y responsable de los medios de comunicación como al respeto a la diversidad, la interculturalidad y la educación emocional.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Hate Speech, Cyberhate, Covid-19, Social Networking Sites, University Students, Comparative Study.
Discurso de Odio, Ciberodio, Covid-19, Redes Sociales, Estudiantes Universitarios, Estudio Comparado

1. Introduction

Hate speech research is an interdisciplinary field where intercultural, media-educational and applied research approaches converge. Since the Internet became part of people's daily lives, violent communication exchanges and socially negative attitudes have characterized a part of online relationships. In recent times, due to the advent of social networks on the one hand and the pandemic on the other, online manifestations of hate have increased considerably. In fact, social networks have been configured as scenarios in which episodes of intolerance and violent expressions directed at people who have an ethnic or religious background, a different sexual orientation or a disability are consummated.

Although online hate is recognized as a social problem on a global scale (Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2020), to date there is no univocal definition of "online hate" in the literature. Hate speech (Waldron, 2012) indicates any expression (written or oral, verbal or nonverbal, explicit or implicit), containing insults, offenses, or any form of discrimination against individuals or specific social group (Gheno, 2019; Hammooode et al., 2022). Authors such as Galán del Rey (2017) and Megías et al. (2020), define it as a type of symbolic violence that is detrimental to diversity. Other authors propose something similar (Amores et al., 2021; Paasch-Colberg et al., 2021), although they qualify that these are narratives that, depending on their intensity, can be constituted as hate crimes, and occur in the online world as well as in the real world. It is therefore a harmful discourse that feeds on misinformation, and whose purpose is to cause harm to the recipient (Anindita, Sadiyah, & Khoiriyah, 2022; Civilá, Romero-Rodríguez, & Aguaded, 2021; Megías et al., 2020; Paris-Albert, 2021; Richardson-Self, 2018). However, online hate acquires specific characteristics (UNESCO, 2015) such as permanence in time, itinerant nature of the message, anonymity and transnationality of the contents.

The expression "hate speech" was introduced in the 1990s, and the exploration of this phenomenon, as well as the commitment to counteract it, are not new in the world of education. In recent years, it has focused on racial hatred and anti-Semitism, having evolved in contemporary society to include religious minorities, especially Muslims (Binny, 2022), as well as women, LGBTQI+ people and disabled individuals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new categories of people representative of online hate have emerged, e.g., virologists who provided medical and life-related advice in the pandemic by participating in TV shows and talk shows (Barile & Panarari, 2020; Nazem et al., 2023). Healthcare workers became targets on which to vent frustration and aggression over restrictions (Pasta, 2021). Therefore, it is important to investigate how hate speech has evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting categories of people who were not previously considered.

This approach to hate speech is carried out from different methodological approaches and theoretical approaches. Psychology reflects on this feeling, considering it as an affective disorder defined by a constant need to hurt someone or something. Hatred arising in rivalry, resentment, anger, in the dynamics that animate social differences, in the desire for revenge, ends up increasing these emotional states increasingly charged with violence. According to Sternberg's "triangular structure theory of hatred" (2007), this feeling is characterized by the same dynamics identifiable in love: intimacy (denied), passion and commitment (Bagnato, 2020). From this perspective, hate should not be understood as the antithesis of love; the opposite of hate is not love but indifference. Those who hate, like those who love, want to keep the object of their feelings to themselves. The person who hates lives with his object of hatred on a daily basis, just like the person who loves. Hate, like love, generates dependence on another, and the disappearance of this other can leave the person in sadness and discouragement. Returning to the characteristics, to speak of denial of intimacy means to observe distances from something perceived as negative. It is the "cold hatred" or that feeling of repulsion for the other that pushes the person to take distance from the different perceived as repugnant; an example of this is racial prejudice. Passion has to do with the definition of hatred as anger or fear. In this sense we must speak of "warm hatred" or those who, filled with rancor, attack or flee from the other perceived as harmful. Finally, "cold hatred" understands hatred as excessively belittling the other through contempt and perceives others as inferior.

Sociology, for its part, has reflected on hatred through the so-called "sociology of emotions" that was born in the 1920s with Simmel (1921); recently, new advances in research have defined it as a means of responding to perceived threats. In particular, hatred is interpreted as a social process whose characteristic elements are: the subject possesses a value system that includes intolerance towards groups or individuals, the subject's belonging to a group that shares his or her values, and the perception that his or her values are recognized and justified by the surrounding world.

At the cultural level, hate feeds specific ideologies that seek to justify the emission of aggressive behaviors with

the sole intention of claiming superiority (Bagnato, 2020; Rungfasangaroon & Borwornnuntakul, 2022). Today, digital media have become an integral part of people's lives, they have invaded multiple dimensions of everyday practices; it is a topic of scientific relevance to analyze the impact that their effects have on individual and social life in terms of educational challenges. The continuous overexposure that occurs on the Web through the production and sharing of content, pushes the individual to also have to endure negative manifestations that are of increasing concern worldwide. To try to understand the reasons for the expansion of the hate speech phenomenon, it is necessary to reflect on the advent of Web 2.0. With it, the social nature of the network has come to the forefront. Boyd (2008), in relation to the nature of the social relationships that characterize "connected publics", speaks of four characteristics: 1) the permanent and consistent recording of the traceability of online communicative exchanges; 2) replicability, i.e. the possibility of duplicating content on the network, 3) scalability, i.e. the enormous potential of the visibility of digital content, and 4) searchability.

In this complex situation, the pandemic had a great impact, affecting the consumption of information and news through social networks (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Demirdağ, 2022). This is because the pandemic, which represents the greatest health challenge that humanity has had to face in this century (OMS, 2021), has had consequences not only in the field of health but also in different spheres of the social space (Ahmed et al., 2020). One of its greatest impacts has resulted in having to endure an information overload that has led to greater dissemination of fake news and greater "toxicity" of messages posted on social networks, particularly Twitter (Aleixandre-Benavent, Castelló-Cogollos, & Valderrama-Zurián, 2020). A study published by the Reuters Institute of the University of Oxford (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2020) found that, in the United States, for example, the percentage of toxic messages posted on Twitter during the pandemic was 25% at the most difficult times. Added to this is the fact that international mobility restrictions emerged during the pandemic. Suffice it to say that, by mid-March 2020, 93 countries had already closed their borders (Pedroza, 2020). International health authorities had even recommended giving priority to movements considered essential such as emergencies, humanitarian activities, return to country of origin and supply of basic necessities (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). However, there is a fine line between the restrictions, partly recommended and partly imposed, by governments and the instrumental use of the pandemic as an argument against international migration considered a threat to the security of states, particularly in Germany, France, Italy, Spain and other European countries (Vega Macías, 2021).

From these references, there are many investigations that address hate speech, but few that do so from an educational approach, and even fewer focused on a population of young university students born between 1995 and 2010 belonging to "generation Z". In this sense, the works of Bazzaco et al. (2018) provide a series of indicators that allow establishing a clear differentiation between hate speech and hate crime, taking into account the content and form of the message, the sender and receiver, the intentionality and channel through which the message is transmitted, as well as the geographic location and social, economic and political climate in which it is carried out. From another perspective, the work of Al Serhan and Elareshi (2019) based on Allport's (1954) scale on prejudice and discrimination, provides us with a gradation of hate levels configured in a pyramidal structure that scales hate speech from prejudicial activities (level 1) to genocide (level 5). Other research is dedicated to delve into the roles that can be exercised within online hate speech, all with the aim of deepening this problem. Exercising the role of troll, "hater" or "stalker" makes us see the need not to stigmatize certain groups because labels increase the depersonalization and vulnerability of the victims; hate speeches are not consubstantial to any particular group. In the first instance, there are neither victims nor aggressors, but rather interchangeable roles (Gao, Liu, & Yaacob, 2022; Megías et al., 2020).

In short, these studies show that the university is no stranger to this problem and lines of research are emerging that focus on the study of individuality versus diversity, emotional education and the narrativity of victims and aggressors in order to build consistent counter-narratives. Therefore, it is necessary to deepen the study of university students' perception of online hateful behaviors, extending the study to a transnational scope that allows comparing different realities. Two apparently similar countries, such as Spain and Italy, approach the issue of online hate differently. Spain is more attentive to raising awareness through information campaigns and national educational projects and has a specific law defining and punishing online hate speech. In Italy, however, awareness campaigns lack national coordination and enforcement of legislation is often lacking (Jubany & Roiha, 2016; Qozmar et al., 2023).

Comparing these two realities is useful to draw guidelines for the construction of a common European policy framework to promote guidelines on responsible and prosocial citizenship with digital literacy (Gaffney et al., 2019) to prevent negative online situations.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Hypothesis and Objectives

Social media has contributed to generating new forms of hate communication (Wachs et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an exponential increase in the use of social media to communicate, and this has increased the risk of becoming online victims or aggressors toward groups of people about whom forms of hate already existed, e.g., homosexuals, women, minors. The combination of these conditions led to the generation of forms of hate towards groups of people who played specific roles during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., virologists) or who were targeted for their professions or conditions (e.g., supermarket workers, healthcare workers, vulnerable people) through communication channels. University students belong to “generation Z” and are the first generation in history to have access to the internet and social tools from birth. However, they are not always able to distinguish hateful content, becoming promoters of actions and content that are not recognized and therefore not skillfully managed.

Based on these considerations, our study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate what are the perceptions of a sample of Spanish and Italian university students in relation to the increase of already known online hate speech (e.g. sexting, grooming, cyberbullying, etc.).
2. Analyze their online behaviors as victims and aggressors based on their hate speech.
3. To explore their perceptions regarding the level of online and offline dissemination of forms of hatred towards groups of people who played specific roles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

This study involved 418 university students from Spain and Italy; specifically, 216 Spanish students ($M=85$ $F=131$) and 202 Italian students ($M=78$ $F=124$), selected by “snowball” sampling. This is a non-probabilistic type of sampling that does not allow inferring the entire population covered by the survey, but has the advantage of involving subjects who are more motivated to respond.

The age range was between 18 and 46 years ($M=21.96$ $SD=3.293$),s 46 years ($M=21.96$ $SD=3.293$). The students are undergraduate and master’s degree students at the University of Seville (Spain) and the University of Calabria (Italy). The methodology adopted is quantitative-descriptive, useful both to better conceptualize the phenomenon under study and to formulate hypotheses that will be subjected to empirical control in subsequent research. Data were collected through the administration of an online questionnaire designed ad hoc, from October to December 2021 using two platforms: Google Forms for Spain and Limesurvey for Italy.

At the beginning of the procedure, the student had access to all the information related to the objective, confidentiality and anonymity of the research, as well as the possibility of being able to interrupt his or her participation at any time without having to provide a justification. The average time to complete the questionnaire was approximately 20 minutes.

The research design was conducted in accordance with the research ethics standards established by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Seville and the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP).

2.3. Design of the Instrument

The instrument used for data collection is a self-report questionnaire developed ad hoc and divided into two sections: a) Sociodemographic information and b) Social networks and hate speech.

The first dimension incorporates variables such as age, sex and studies completed by the participants. The dimension on social networks and hate speech is structured in 3 groups of questions: Increase in hate speech with 7 items that are measured with a Likert scale from 1 to 4 points. The second dimension, acted or experienced aggression, is structured by questions in which the participant has to answer whether he/she was aggressor or victim through 11 different forms (e.g. identity theft, insults, image manipulation, etc.).The last dimension, new forms of online and offline hate in times of COVID-19 pandemic, investigates the spread of new forms of hate through 13 items for and 13 items against on specific categories of people; the response options being “no”, “yes, mainly online”, “yes, mainly offline”.

2.3.1. Reliability and Validity Analysis

To determine the degree of reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient is applied. This index

measures the degree of agreement between the different items. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire as a whole is 0.887. This value indicates that the questionnaire presents a good level of reliability. Dimensions D3 Online hatred during COVID-19 (6 items) and D4 New forms of online hatred during COVID-19 (26 items) have a coefficient of 0.833 and 0.912 respectively. Dimensions D1 Aggressor situations and D2 Victim situations have a coefficient of 0.667 and 0.669 respectively. All of them are within the established limits.

To determine the internal validity of the questionnaire, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of principal components was performed. We previously applied the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin sampling adequacy test and Bartlett's test of sphericity in order to verify the relevance of carrying out the aforementioned analysis. For the interpretation of the KMO value, the indications of Kaiser (1974) were taken as a reference. It should be specified that, of all the dimensions presented above in the reliability analysis, only D3, which refers to the forms of online hatred during COVID-19, is susceptible to this analysis because it is the interval variable. The result obtained in the first test is .793 and in Bartlett's test we obtained a Chi-square = 964.152 $gl = 15$ and Sig. = .000, which indicates that it is pertinent to proceed with the factor analysis. The exploratory factor analysis applied yields a single factor that explains 54.664% of the total variance, with a significance level of $p = .000$. The values obtained for each of the items are racism ,740; xenophobia ,733; cyberbullying ,730; gender violence ,777; grooming, 764; sexting ,688.

2.3.2. Data Analysis Techniques

With the data collected in the two countries, a single data file was created and analyzed with the IBM SPSS Statistic program, version 26. The results showed that the sample was unbalanced by gender, with a greater presence of women. Similarly, according to the respondents, it was not possible to create groups with respect to age. This is an unintentional selection bias which, however, did not prevent controlling for the variable Country, on which subsequent bivariate analyses were performed to identify any correlations and differences between two or more variables.

3. Results

The results obtained in relation to the research objectives of the study are presented below.

3.1. Forms of Online Hatred

In relation to the first research objective, the results shown in Table 1 provide the information obtained. In general, we can highlight that in both contexts an increase is perceived in all forms of online hate presented to the participants. A more detailed analysis of the same, taking into account the sum of the "quite a lot/much" scores, we can see that in both countries they perceive the increase of cyberbullying. In the case of Spain there is a higher perception in the increase of sexting (89.3%). And in the case of Italy there is a greater perception of the increase in cases of racism (77.7%) and gender violence (84.2%).

Table 1: How Much do You Think Hate Speech has Increased? During the Covid-19 PAndemic?

	Spain and Italy		Spain		Italy	
	None/Little	Fairly/Much	Nothing/ Little	Fairly/Much	Nothing/ Little	Fairly/Much
Racism	30,2%	69,9%	37,5%	62,5%	22,3%	77,7%
Xenophobia	34,3%	65,8%	37,1%	63,0%	31,1%	68,8%
Cyberbullying	14,6%	85,4%	14,4%	85,7%	14,9%	85,1%
Gender violence	21,0%	79,0%	26,0%	74,1%	15,8%	84,2%
Grooming	34,2%	65,8%	35,1%	64,8%	33,1%	66,9%
Sexting	18,2%	81,8%	10,7%	89,3%	26,2%	73,8%

3.2. Role of Aggressor

In relation to the second research objective, 167 (40%) of 418 subjects answered this question; the modalities in which the participants exercise online violence are in the variants of spreading rumors, insulting other people and disseminating compromising videos or photos, with percentages of 49.1%, 34.1% and 23.4% respectively.

Going deeper into the data on the profile of the aggressor, according to the country variable (Spain/Italy), in Table 2 we find that, with the exception of the variable related to the dissemination of videos or

photos online, where Spain presents a higher percentage in this form of online violence, in the rest of the situations it is the Italian context that acquires higher percentages.

Table 2: Contingency Table of Online Aggressor by Countries.

		Spain	Italy	Responses	% of Cases
Insults towards another person	NO.	20	37	57	34,1%
	% in Country	22,5%	47,4%		
Insults towards another person with the participation of a third party	NO.	8	20	28	16,8%
	% in Country	9,0%	25,6%		
Threats	NO.	0	12	12	7,2 %
	% in Country	0,0%	15,4%		
Social Networking Account Theft	NO.	2	26	28	16,8%
	% in Country	2,2%	33,3%		
Theft and impersonation	NO.	4	10	14	8,4%
	% in Country	4,5%	12,8%		
Disseminate private information	NO.	9	23	32	19,2%
	% in Country	10,1%	29,5%		
Compromising videos or photos	NO.	22	17	39	23,4%
	% in Country	24,7%	21,8%		
Image manipulation	NO.	6	20	26	15,6%
	% in Country	6,7%	25,6%		
Social exclusion in networks	NO.	4	23	27	16,2%
	% in Country	4,5%	29,5%		
Spreading rumors	NO.	43	39	82	49,1%
	% in Country	48,3%	50,0%		

In summary, we can say that the role of aggressor is configured by three online behaviors: insults to other people, compromising videos or photos, and spreading rumors. If we analyze this aggressor profile according to country of origin, we can conclude that in both countries the most repeated behavior is spreading rumors, to which we can add insulting other people in Italy.

3.3. Role of Victim

From the role of victim, 247 (59.1%) of 418 subjects responded to this question, the situations of online violence suffered are the fact of receiving insults (47%), the spreading of rumors (36.8%) and the theft of their accounts in social networks (30%). Once again we see how the participant's country variable interferes. Starting with the origin of the participants, in Table 3 we find the associated information. In the case of Spain, the victim profile would be around the actions of insults to me, with and without the participation of third parties, threats, identity theft and impersonation, dissemination of compromising videos or photos and rumors. In the case of Italy, we find account theft in social networks, dissemination of private information and exclusion in the networks.

Table 3: Contingency Table of Online Victims by Countries.

		Spain	Italy	Responses	% of Cases
Insults to me	NO.	69	47	116	47,0%
	% in Country	51,9%	41,2%		
Insults about me to others	NO.	30	18	48	19,4%
	% in Country	22,6%	15,8%		
Threats	NO.	30	15	45	18,2%
	% in Country	22,6%	13,2%		
Theft of my Social Media account	NO.	30	44	74	30,0%
	% in Country	22,6%	38,6%		
Theft and impersonation	NO.	25	18	43	17,4%
	% in Country	18,8%	15,8%		
Disseminate private information	NO.	17	17	34	13,8%
	% in Country	12,8%	14,9%		
Compromising videos or photos	NO.	14	7	21	8,5%
	% in Country	10,5%	6,1%		
Image manipulation	NO.	9	8	17	6,9%
	% in Country	6,8%	7,0%		
Social exclusion in networks	NO.	13	23	36	14,6%
	% in Country	9,8%	20,2%		
Spreading rumors	NO.	51	40	91	36,8%
	% in Country	38,3%	35,1%		

Consequently, the role of victim is configured by three online behaviors: receiving insults, theft of my social network account and spreading rumors. If we analyze by country of origin, we can conclude that in both countries the most repeated behavior is spreading rumors and insults against me, to which is added in Italy social exclusion from social networks and the theft of my social network account; in Spain this profile also takes the form of threats, identity theft or impersonation and insults about me to others.

3.4. Hate Speech During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Finally, we address the third objective of this research. For the analysis of this dimension, the variables are grouped according to the following categories:

1. People (health personnel, supermarket personnel, virologists, people from other countries, people with disabilities).
2. Governmental guidelines/decrees (vaccine, Covid certificates, schools).
3. Ideologies (conspiracy, religion, political ideology, sexual orientation).

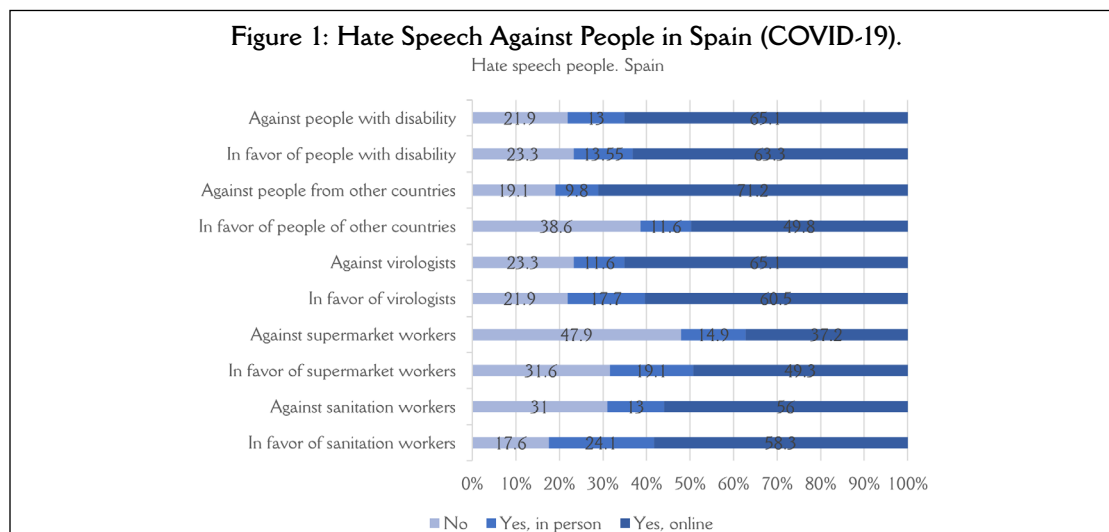
The data obtained are presented in Table 4.

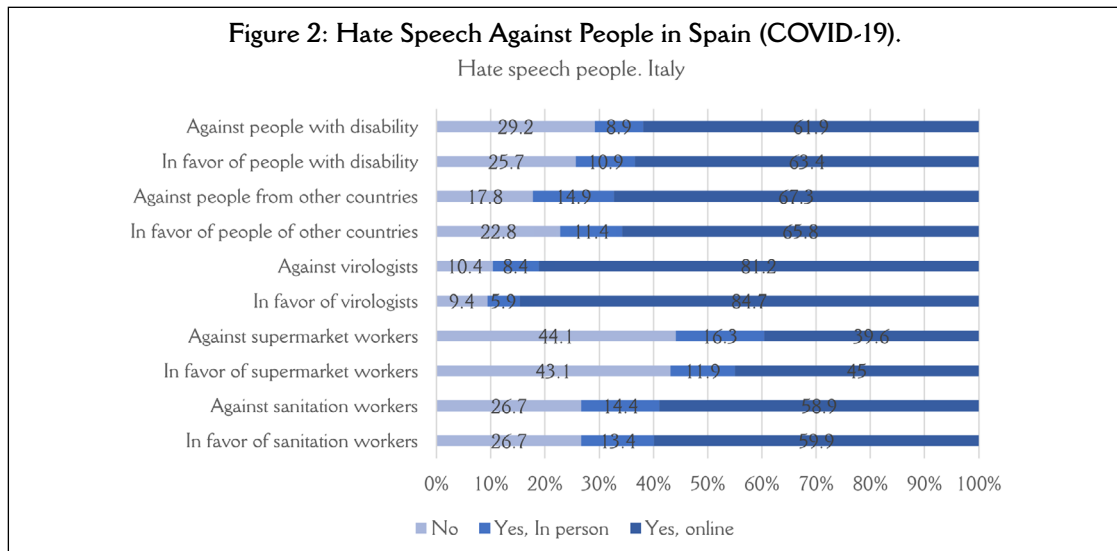
Table 4: Hate Speech.

	Spain and Italy			Spain			Italy		
	No	Yes, in person	Yes, Online	No	Yes, in person	Yes, Online	No	Yes, in person	Yes, Online
In favor of the people	26,03	14,21	59,76	26,48	17,50	56,02	25,54	10,69	63,76
Against individuals	27,13	12,54	60,33	28,52	12,50	58,98	25,64	12,57	61,78
In favor of governmental guidelines	11,72	19,08	69,20	15,51	20,49	64,00	7,67	17,57	74,75
Against governmental guidelines	10,29	19,08	70,63	13,43	18,29	68,29	6,93	19,93	73,14
In favor of ideologies	23,56	13,70	62,74	26,27	14,93	58,80	20,67	12,38	66,96
Against ideologies	23,56	13,22	63,22	26,85	13,54	59,61	20,05	12,87	67,08

In general, we conclude that these new forms of hate violence are significantly manifested in their online variant, exceeding 55% in all cases. If we look at the three macro areas established, the results show that most of the new forms of hate speech refer especially to government actions related to vaccination, COVID certificate, schools, being slightly higher in Italy (in favor 74.75%; against 73.14%) than in Spain (in favor 64%; against 68.29%). However, we thought it would be interesting to include the graphs below regarding hatred towards people, because during the COVID-19 pandemic new categories emerge that are affected by this type of discourse. In Spain, people with disabilities and people from other countries are the most affected by online hate; in Italy, virologists, supermarket workers and health workers are the most affected by online hate.

Figure 1: Hate Speech Against People in Spain (COVID-19).





4. Discussion and Conclusion

When communicative situations arise, points of disagreement can be generated between people, in which individual positions are opposed, which leads to ignoring or even to attacks against those who think differently (Robles et al., 2022). In this sense, the results obtained allow us to affirm that the Internet, even during the COVID-19 confinement, has performed its communicative function by expanding and compensating the need for socialization, but at the same time manifestations of hatred have continued to occur online, in which users expressed emotions related to anger, rage and confusion (Adesokan, Madria, & Nguyen, 2023; Fteiha et al., 2024). Generically, we can conclude that there are no significant differences between the two countries in relation to the spread of online hate during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allows us to hypothesize that the pandemic has had a global effect (Amaral, Basílio-Simíµes, & Poleac, 2022; Hsu & Tsai, 2022; Mora-Rodríguez & Melero-López, 2021). Based on the results obtained, the perception regarding the most increased forms of violence during COVID-19 were: sexting, gender-based violence and cyberbullying.

In addition to social relationships, many young people have had to resort to electronic tools to maintain their romantic relationships during confinement (Lindberg et al., 2020), with an increase in online sexual activities, including sexting (Alpalhão & Filipe, 2020; Lindberg et al., 2020), a practice suggested by public health institutions as a safer alternative to prevent contagion (ISSWSH, 2020). Many young people were accustomed to casual sexual encounters or noncommittal sex, which was largely prohibited during the pandemic (Wignall et al., 2021). Again, sexting and online sexual activities may have been a safer way to satisfy sexual desire. In general, many young people have been confined to their homes with their families, a condition that has drastically reduced their independence (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021) and change of daily habits (Gassó et al., 2021), therefore, online sexual communication has become one of the few available means to express one's sexuality.

Women's participation in the online space has always been marked by concerns about their safety and particularly the issue of their vulnerability to online sexual predators (Jane, 2014; Vitis & Gilmour, 2017). Since the onset of the pandemic, the scale of domestic violence has increased, as has online gender-based violence through the sharing of nonconsensual images and videos, including consensual sexting content shared without consent. The increase in this phenomenon may be due on the one hand to the pandemic that has exposed high levels of anxiety and stress (García-Fernández et al., 2022; Servidio et al., 2021), and, on the other hand, home confinement that requires forced and prolonged cohabitation 24 hours a day between aggressors and victims.

Studies on cyberbullying confirm that the high disinhibition provided by being behind a screen pushes people to expose themselves by saying and doing things that in a face-to-face situation they would not do. This is because they have the certainty that they cannot be identified (Smith & Berkun, 2017). Consequently,

being in a homebound condition with the relative increase in time spent using the Internet and electronic tools has contributed to increased levels of cyberbullying (Palermi et al., 2022). In this sense, it becomes necessary to educate by offering strategies to manage conflicts, develop the ability to manage negative emotions and frustration management to avoid hate speech (Wachs et al., 2022).

Regarding the dissemination of forms of online hate in established areas (people, governmental guidelines, ideologies), governmental guidelines must be influenced, thus imposing some restrictions (Mora-Rodríguez & Melero-López, 2021). In this context, people have been forced to be vaccinated in order to have access to services, work, as well as the possibility of moving within the local, national and international territory. The fact that students are perceived as the most affected category is determined by the impact that these measures have on their personal freedom, which was limited.

Moreover, the analysis of the results shows an increase in hatred towards some new categories of people, compared to the categories that had so far been considered by the Pre-COVID hate speech literature, e.g., women, homosexuals, disabled, etc. (Ponziano, 2020). Our results provide that, during this period, the categories most affected by the online hate phenomenon were those directly related to the pandemic, e.g., health care workers, supermarket workers and people with disabilities. These results allow us to advance research on hate speech.

Probably the increase of hatred towards these categories was due to the fact that some of them were more exposed to public opinion. Some, such as virologists, were called to intervene in two phases, the first related to information on the spread of the virus, the second linked to the vaccination awareness campaign. In both cases, their visibility fueled online hate sentiments based on the roles they assumed (Crescentini & Padricelli, 2023).

In general, being an active part of the community leads individuals to take responsibility for their actions, which have repercussions not only on the individual, but also on the community as a whole (Gomez-Baya et al., 2020).

The purpose of the media during the vaccination campaign was also to raise awareness about vaccination for personal and community benefits. The different positions of those who have had media prominence have also made the public take extreme positions that, in many cases have been translated into online hate actions, because the means of communication used by virologists have been many times the social networks. Another important aspect to underline is the hatred towards some other categories such as supermarket staff or health personnel, who on the one hand were considered privileged, being the only ones who could continue to lead an almost normal life, while at the same time being considered as possible spreaders of the virus.

It is necessary to mention the limitations of this study, the first being the focus on two specific contexts, Spanish and Italian, and it may be of interest to extend the study to other contexts in order to consolidate the evidence obtained so far. Likewise, as future lines of research, it would be advisable to deepen the study by addressing the narratives of the participating population, thus delving into the perceptions of the subjects referred to the object of study, as well as the motivations that lead to the perpetration of hate speech (Wachs et al., 2022). In the case of racism, it would be of interest to delve into how it affected people of Asian origin, since this is the continent where the pandemic originated (Odağ & Moskovits, 2024).

In a prospective sense, it would be interesting to investigate with future research whether the data obtained in this investigation have undergone any modification throughout the evolution of the pandemic: identifying whether perceptions are maintained or have changed would allow us to verify whether these categories definitively become part of the target groups of hate speech.

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