

HOAXES, SOCIAL NETWORKS, RIGHTS, SECURITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH: TWO RELATED CASE STUDIES

BULOS, REDES SOCIALES, DERECHOS, SEGURIDAD Y SALUD PÚBLICA: DOS CASOS DE ESTUDIO RELACIONADOS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This paper critically and rigorously examines the current role of social networks as producers and amplifiers of hoaxes on issues of rights, security, and public health. It addresses sexual aggressions, on the one hand, and the social and cultural consequences of the new wave of infections caused by monkeypox, on the other. As a starting hypothesis, social networks have been considered as elements increasingly used for the establishment and expansion of hoaxes that, more and more, tend to transmit hate speech. **Methodology:** To verify this assumption, the article develops a qualitative methodology consisting of analysing, comparing, and testing the veracity of the messages published on the indicated topics. **Results:** As a result, it was found that social networks have become platforms for the propagation of all kinds of fallacies capable of stigmatizing certain groups in two very sensitive areas of society: security and public health. **Discussion:** This has been possible through the trivialization of complex problems, criminalization of certain social groups and constant appeals to the purely visceral and emotional, arousing emotions that can reap political benefits. **Conclusions:** Therefore, it is concluded that the current crisis in its different dimensions (economic, social, health, ecological, media, political) generates a tendency towards the consolidation and expansion of criminalizing behaviours and messages.

Keywords: Hate speech; social networks; social rights; extreme right; radicalism.

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RESUMEN

Introducción: El presente trabajo examina, de manera crítica y rigurosa, el rol actual de las redes sociales como productoras y amplificadoras de bulos en cuestiones de derechos, seguridad y salud pública. A lo largo del mismo se han abordado las agresiones sexuales, por una parte, y por otra, las consecuencias **sociales** y culturales derivadas de la nueva oleada de infecciones provocadas por la viruela del mono. Como hipótesis de partida, las redes sociales han sido consideradas como elementos cada vez más usados para el asentamiento y la expansión de bulos que, cada vez más, tienen a transmitir discursos de odio. **Metodología:** Para constatarla, el artículo utiliza una metodología cualitativa consistente en analizar, comparar y contrastar la veracidad de los mensajes publicados con las temáticas indicadas. **Resultados:** Como resultado, se ha comprobado que las redes sociales se han convertido en plataformas para la propagación de todo tipo de falacias capaces de estigmatizar a ciertos colectivos en dos campos muy sensibles de la sociedad: la seguridad y la salud pública. **Discusión:** Esto ha sido posible mediante la banalización de problemas complejos, criminalizaciones a determinados grupos sociales y apelaciones constantes a lo puramente visceral y emocional, despertando emociones que pueden granjear beneficios a nivel político. **Conclusiones:** Por tanto, se concluye que la situación actual de crisis en sus distintas dimensiones (económica, social, sanitaria, ecológica, mediática, política) genera una tendencia hacia la consolidación y expansión tanto de conductas como mensajes criminalizadores.

Palabras clave: Discurso de odio, redes sociales, derechos sociales, extrema derecha, radicalismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within contemporary Western societies, one of the topics that occupies and concerns all its actors to a greater extent is related to the unprecedented power acquired by global communication platforms, such as social media in particular and the internet in general. In this regard, the way in which new mass communication devices can promote the expansion and amplification of any type of message greatly worries both academics and society as a whole, especially when the discursive line of the messages is based on hoaxes, prejudices, and hatred towards certain groups. For this reason, the present study aims to continue contributing to the scientific understanding of the impact that these new forms of social communication have had on such messages, which is why two recurring topics will be addressed: sexual violence, nationality, sexual orientation, and infectious diseases.

1.1. State of the art on the issue and causes of sexual violence

The problem of sexual violence, especially against women, is one of the most pressing social issues in practically every country in the world. In fact, according to a recent study by the World Health Organization (2021), during the year 2018, 30% of women worldwide experienced some form of physical, sexual, or both types of violence. Therefore, it is a widely distributed problem that is susceptible to various sensitivities, half-truths, and deliberate lies aimed at simplifying a very complex and multifactorial issue. Regarding the subject matter of this article, a growing sector of political leaders and society, primarily conservative groups, have automatically associated sexual assaults with foreign perpetrators, specifically individuals of Maghrebi origin, a community identified by certain factions as potentially more dangerous. To a lesser extent, individuals of Hispanic American origin are also considered as part of the same community.

These accusations, of which examples will be presented later from the social network Twitter, often ignore, out of ignorance or interest, several relevant aspects. Firstly, although in Spain few sectors question that violence and sexual assaults against women are extremely serious issues, it is true that, compared to other countries in the region, the rates of femicide by their partners (when the perpetrator is male) tend to be lower than those recorded in Germany, France, Finland, Lithuania, or Switzerland (López et al., 2018). Secondly, it is striking that individuals or groups spreading hoaxes, simplifications, exaggerations, or biased truths about the complex relationship between violence against women (especially sexual assaults) and nationality have managed to establish the false discourse that the main problem of violence against women comes from so-called stranger-perpetrated sexual assaults (SPSA). In this regard, the classic study by Rand (2008) already demonstrated that the majority of sexual assaults against women occur within the victim's known environment, especially within the family and closest circle of attachment. This condition underscores the severity and complexity of a problem that some reduce to single-factor elements such as the habits and relationships between women and men in certain countries and regions. In addition to Rand's work (2008), many other studies have emphasized the same issue, such as De la Cruz (2014), Puyol and Salinas (2016), or Valle et al. (2018).

Within Spain, one of the best analyses conducted to date on SPSA was directed by Giménez-Salinas et al. (2017), where overlooked or distorted realities by misinformation spreaders are exposed. For instance, this research identifies three profiles of offenders in SPSA with unknown victims: i) those occurring in public spaces, ii) those occurring in residences, and iii) those occurring in rural areas. Additionally, the Bayesian network analysis utilized by these same authors to predict and identify offender and victim profiles demonstrates that, in the case of serial sexual offenders², the percentage of Spanish perpetrators (52%) is significantly higher than any other nationality. Additionally, it should also be considered that some statements made by representatives of the Spanish ultraconservative right-wing stem from the reductionist premise of associating SPSA as the main issue, which overlooks sexual assaults with known victims, which are the most difficult to bring to light.³ Furthermore, it is also important not to forget that a significant percentage of cases have not yet been solved (around 49%, according to Gil, 2020), so it is simplistic and fallacious to summarize sexual assaults as a "foreigner problem."

This premise of nationality independence in criminal acts is also supported by Cazorla (2021), whose study demonstrated that, despite the relative magnitude of offenders of foreign origin, Spanish citizenship is the most frequent among those accused and convicted of sexual assaults. This contradicts the recurring discourse proclaimed by the radical right through different media outlets, which exclusively focuses the issue of gender violence on the foreign population. This discourse is supported by the fact that a significant number of tweets published by political leaders and media outlets within the same ideological environment contain messages that may constitute incitement to hatred. In fact, as will be observed later through some of the analyzed messages, the tactic of these discourses is to appeal to the visceral and emotional reactions of the recipients, generally

² According to Giménez-Salinas et al. (2017), a serial sexual offender is defined as an individual who commits more than one sexual assault within the past year.

³ Sexual assaults with known victims and those with unknown victims differ in that in the former, the perpetrator belongs to the victim's family or social/work environment, while in the latter case, the offender and the victim do not have any prior acquaintance in any context..

individuals with racial, ethnic, or national prejudices, with the aim of provoking, shocking, and polarizing. This turns immigrants, particularly those of Maghrebi and Sub-Saharan origin, into guilty and single-causal agents of sexual assaults (Camargo, 2021). This discursive characterization of migrants coincides with the results obtained in other fields by Fernández et al. (2020), who noted, following the well-known Aquarius case, that hate speeches tend to prioritize, reinforce, and spread preconceived prejudices in the social imaginary about verifiable facts. Unfortunately, this scenario is embedded in a significant increase in the circulation of confusing and false information regarding immigrants in Spain (Notario and Cárdenas, 2020), as well as a moment of intense debate regarding whether fake news can constitute hate crimes (Fernández, 2021).

Within the Spanish state, far-right parties champion and systematically reproduce discourses filled with misinformation, exaggerations, rumors, half-truths, and falsehoods. In this regard, Reyes's work (2019) analyzed how this party, during the 2018 Andalusian electoral campaign, spread a series of fake news regarding immigration in this region, especially focusing on Muslim origin immigrants. The key to the success of these discourses, as pointed out by the author, lies in instrumentalizing real problems such as economic or citizen insecurity and automatically associating them with external threats such as immigration. This postulate directly contradicts the work of Ortiz Viera (2021), which demonstrates that within the Spanish legal framework, there are no privileges based on racial factors, different rates of use of public services, crime rates, or access to the job market. However, this stance is exploited by more radical sectors, such as the aforementioned VOX⁴ party, which propagated the idea that immigrants receive a higher amount of social benefits compared to the native Spanish population. However, in the case of unemployment benefits, only 8.6% of the recipients of these benefits were immigrants in 2018 (Ortiz, 2021).

Within this process of racial victimization, one of the most recurring topics of the Spanish ultraconservative right has been the criminalization of unaccompanied foreign minors (known as MENA, "menores extranjeros no acompañados" in Spanish), a group associated by this political spectrum with delinquency in general and, specifically, with sexual assaults. In fact, as explained by Calvo (2020) and Uceda (2020), VOX has instrumentalized the issue of unaccompanied minors to increasingly associate immigrant minors with all types of criminal activity, which is why they have spread rumors and misinformation extensively. Furthermore, certain investigations, such as the one conducted by Ruiz and López-Riba (2020), emphasize that the problem of overrepresentation of foreign youth in juvenile detention centers does not stem from their criminal behavior but from the selective application of Spanish criminal law on these minors.

On the other hand, regarding the issue of public insecurity, according to what is commonly reflected in surveys on citizen security, such as the latest Spanish General Social Survey of 2015, sexual assaults rank third in terms of concerns about security, along with physical assaults or robberies with violence (Caro et al., 2021). However, this circumstance and its relationship with the foreign population are often used by the extreme right to target specific neighborhoods in certain Spanish localities, once again using immigration as an

⁴ <https://acortar.link/V62vDi>
<https://acortar.link/Ub3GGx>

argument or a sole causal agent, as evidenced by recent official statements from the VOX party. In this regard, the research by author Español (2021), focused on one of the major bedroom communities in the southern outskirts of Madrid, Fuenlabrada, demonstrates that the insecurity issue in this area is largely due to spatial overcrowding, insufficient resources, and precarious conditions rather than a clash of cultural identities.

In this context, social media represents a new form of communication and social and political expression, whose growing volume makes it increasingly difficult, according to the informal "Brandolini's Law" (Benavente, 2020), to discern between truthful information and falsehoods, well-founded opinions and hate speech (both covert and explicit), or objective data and biased or even invented information. This is due, among other reasons, to the feedback loop generated by the user community (Cantón et al., 2019). Paradoxically, this situation does not mean that the so-called fake news (noticias falsas, falseadas, or bulos in Spanish, according to Fundéu, 2017) have been introduced for the first time in history, despite their current conception dating back to the 19th century (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016), as some of them have existed for several millennia (Ortiz-de-Guinea & Martín, 2019). However, while in the past the most involved agents in media manipulation were political leaders, journalists, or cultural and economic elites (Elías, 2018), there has been a certain "horizontalization" or democratization of distorted information today (Barrientos-Báez et al., 2018). In fact, one of the characteristics of the so-called post-truth era (Keyes, 2004) lies in the high capacity to amplify and rapidly propagate all kinds of opinions based on the multitude of existing channels (new platforms, mobile applications, websites, or social networks) available to virtually any user (Camargo, 2021; Elías, 2018), whose anonymity contributes to the falsification of information (Del Hoyo et al., 2020).

On the other hand, despite the fact that major social media platforms are owned by powerful economic conglomerates, the so-called "Fifth Estate" (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016), many user groups manage to disseminate all kinds of messages through them, including falsehoods, sometimes even bypassing editorial control or direct censorship. It is no wonder that the major companies that own the main social networks have the real ability to turn misinformation into political propaganda through programmed and biased algorithms (more quantitative than qualitative, Elías, 2018), thus influencing the behavior and opinions of users (Cantón et al., 2019; Ortiz-de-Guinea & Martín, 2019). Ultimately, despite the growing difficulty in detecting fake news (Del Hoyo et al., 2020) due to the complexity of the resources used and the challenge of refuting or unmasking their origins (Benavente, 2020), contemporary society must emphasize the importance of educating citizens in critical thinking, enabling them to distinguish rigorous and scientific content from pseudoscientific ones. Despite the paradoxical nature of this situation, it has become so urgent that the current Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation provides citizens, through the Internet Security Office (OSI)⁵, with a series of campaigns, questionnaires, articles, and even manuals on good practices, detection, and reporting of hoaxes and fake news.

Returning to the influence of social media, although false comments can affect any social sphere (Cano-Orón et al., 2021), there have been numerous studies and scientific approaches published in recent years that focus on truthfulness (examples include the

⁵ <https://www.osi.es/es/campanas/bulos-fake-news-fraudes>

works of Barrientos-Báez et al., 2018; Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016, or Cantón et al., 2019), violations of human rights (e.g., Benavente, 2020; Bernabé & Rueda-Moyano, 2022; Camargo, 2021, or Fernández et al., 2020), or health (e.g., Mas, 2020; Ramón et al., 2020) related to the comments shared on these platforms. Furthermore, although these unintentional or deliberate opinions that omit the truth are generally categorized as fake news (Del Hoyo et al., 2020), certain authors like Ortiz-de-Guinea and Martín (2019) prefer to directly address them as disinformation, as they consider the term "fake news" to be part of the new populist political ecosystem that tends to view the media as enemies of truth and freedom.

Following this same line of thought, the thesis of Cano-Orón et al. (2021) also emerges, defending the idea that disinformation is a social phenomenon that extends beyond the realm of communication and is fueled by political and ideological disputes, as well as various prejudices related to a particular topic. In addition to social media, this information reality is also being embraced by less serious or more sensationalist media outlets. In fact, as highlighted by Cano-Orón et al. (2021), Del Hoyo et al. (2020), and Elías (2018), driven by economic motives, some media companies have eroded trust by employing disinformation dynamics with the clear intention of maximizing profits through enticing but deceptive clickbait strategies. This disinformation context also reinforces certain conspiracy narratives as it exacerbates the legitimacy crisis that media outlets have been facing for several decades (Del Hoyo et al., 2020; Elías, 2018). Media outlets have also been responsible, for example, for the growth of digital violence against women journalists, as documented by studies like that of Morena et al. (2022).

On the other hand, authors like Barrientos-Báez et al. (2018) start from the premise that in a society driven by communication, it is inevitable to have mass access to various sources of information that are just a click away, regardless of their quality and/or truthfulness. This is further compounded by the tendency to prioritize a particular ideological discourse over the search for factual truth, which, by its very nature, is complex and multifactorial. A clear example of this situation was the campaign against the Muslim community launched on social media following the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in April 2019. At that time, users, organized to associate Islam with the decline of Europe, spread all sorts of stigmatizing messages about the Muslim community. As a result, the main searches related to Islam on social media led directly to identifying this religion as a threat to Western civilization.

As a result, these new forms of virtual socialization serve as an ideal vehicle for various variants of traditional harassment, the spread of hatred, and social paranoia (Contreras y Rodríguez, 2022). The effects of these aspects on misinformation and dissemination mechanisms have become more sophisticated and widespread, posing a danger not only to fundamental rights but also to the integrity of a particular community (Cantón et al., 2019; Fernández et al., 2020; Uceda, 2020). Any criticism or intervention in this regard must start from this objective premise: new technologies can rapidly and easily spread highly positive messages, but they can also disseminate all kinds of falsehoods and hate campaigns, which, according to Cantón et al. (2019), can lead to physical, verbal, or psychological acts of aggression against members of the targeted communities, such as immigrants and individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, particularly gay individuals. Furthermore, it is important not to forget that the role of social media and the internet as platforms for hate speech is well-documented in the scientific literature (Barrientos-Báez

et al., 2018; Benavente, 2020; Cantón et al., 2019; Fernández et al., 2020; Contreras y Rodríguez, 2022).

Therefore, based on all the aforementioned points, this article analyzes the role played by social media, applications, and websites in generating, channeling, and spreading discourses that not only lack scientific evidence but also undermine recognized and fundamental rights of minorities, while contributing to the proliferation of prejudices against certain groups. To do so, starting from the credibility and dissemination achieved by social media platforms (especially Twitter) and certain forums, two case studies will be analyzed. The first case study focuses on the complex relationship between sexual assaults and foreigners, while the second case study examines the stigmatization of certain social groups and its relationship to the transmission of infectious diseases.

1.2. Hoaxes, Public Health, and the Identity of Sexual Minorities: A Critical Review

Issues related to public health are extraordinarily sensitive due to several factors. Firstly, they affect basic rights of citizenship, and secondly, health is a field where all kinds of superstitions and frauds have traditionally proliferated, which in the era of digitalization and the growth of pseudoscientific theories rapidly amplify through the megaphone of social media (Mas, 2020). This scenario has been clearly demonstrated during the recent SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, where the proliferation of a myriad of scientific-medical-health hoaxes on social media, websites, and digital platforms only served to trivialize and distort their content (Bernabé and Rueda-Moyano, 2022). Therefore, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has also highlighted the need and usefulness of having information verification platforms (fact-checking) to combat the scourge of misinformation. In this way, "fact-checking organizations have been able to leverage these same social media platforms to combat online misinformation and encourage user participation with the aim of making them co-responsible for the spread of truth" (Ramón et al., 2020).

However, fact-checkers do not necessarily have to be independent actors solely responsible for ensuring the accuracy of information disseminated on social media. They can also become agents who control social media themselves, deciding when something is considered publishable or not based on the interests of certain groups (Lobato et al., 2021; Míguez-González et al., 2022; Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022). As a result, the distinction between true expressions and new fallacies has become a fragile, imprecise, and blurry line, which is exploited by purveyors of fake news to spread opinions imbued with various biases.

According to Cuesta and Bengochea (2020), the phenomenon of misinformation in a vital field like health is enhanced by the recurrent practice, among many young people, of not actively consulting scientific health platforms. This is why medical hoaxes spread quite easily through their social circles, direct contacts (via applications like WhatsApp or Telegram), social media platforms (YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram), as well as through more or less famous individuals. However, the research by Cuesta and Bengochea (2020) highlights a significant attitudinal change, in the sense that when young individuals have—or believe they have—a health issue, they are more inclined to seek diverse and scientifically rigorous information. In contrast to this circumstance, collaborative

initiatives like Salud sin Bulos⁶ (Health without Hoaxes), a platform created in 2018 through the cooperation of 40 scientific organizations to combat fake news about nutrition on social media (Mariscal, 2020), are a clear example of how scientific outreach must adapt to new forms of communication, particularly among the youth, to counter all kinds of fallacies circulating on the internet and social media regarding public health issues.

Regarding the second case study addressed in the article, the new outbreak of monkeypox in May 2022 and the proliferation of all sorts of hoaxes against the gay and bisexual community, it should be noted that as of June 5, 2022, the WHO confirmed 780 cases of monkeypox in 27 non-endemic countries, indicating a moderate level of risk (Europa Press, 2022). Furthermore, some scientists suggest a high possibility that monkeypox will not lead to an uncontrolled outbreak like that of SARS-CoV-2 (Magraner, 2022). Before analyzing the specific hoaxes and prejudiced misinformation spread against the gay and bisexual community in relation to the new monkeypox outbreak, and how they are disseminated on social media, it is important to establish some scientific premises about the virus.

Firstly, monkeypox is an infectious disease transmitted from animals to humans (a viral zoonosis) endemic to Central and Western Africa but has spread to other countries. This disease was already documented in various areas of the African continent in the late 1950s (Dionis, 2022). Generally, it is a self-limiting illness with symptoms that can last up to 4 weeks (with an incubation period of one to two weeks) and can cause severe cases (very similar to those of smallpox). Moreover, while monkeypox can be transmitted more invasively through sexual contact (Martín, 2022), it can also be transmitted through close contact with lesions, body fluids, respiratory droplets, or contaminated materials (World Health Organization, 2022). For these reasons, it is not considered a sexually transmitted disease like HIV (RTVE, 2022; VerificaRTVE, 2022).

2. OBJECTIVES

Based on all the information presented in the previous section, the main objective of this study is to analyze the role played by social media, applications, and websites in producing, channeling, and spreading hate messages or harmful content that lacks any scientific evidence. In this regard, among the various topics addressed in scientific literature (e.g., cyberbullying, religious aspects, anti-vaccination movements, or migration), the focus has been placed on messages that undermine the basic rights of specific minority social groups (immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community) and, at the same time, affect sensitive areas such as health and public safety.

To achieve this objective, starting from the relative credibility and dissemination achieved by social media platforms (especially Twitter) and specific forums, two case studies will be analyzed. The first case study explores the complex relationship between sexual assaults and foreigners, while the second case study examines the stigmatization experienced by certain social groups and its connection to the transmission of infectious diseases.

⁶ <https://saludsinbulos.com/>

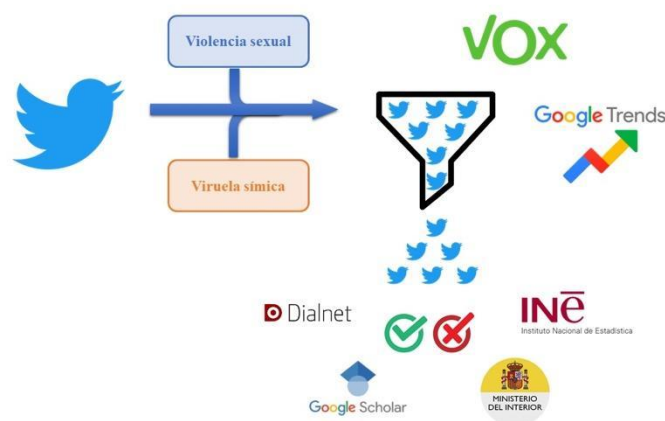
3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used was based on a qualitative analysis that focused on contrasting opinions expressed on a social media platform with data from various bibliographic sources. To conduct the study, the methodology outlined in Figure 1 was followed.

Firstly, one of the social media platforms with the highest number of users in Spain and Latin America, where Spanish is the second most commonly used language (Centro Virtual Cervantes, 2022), was selected: Twitter.Next, an exhaustive sweep of the information posted on Twitter and related to two specific topics was carried out. The first topic was the issue of sexual violence and its relationship with certain minority groups of foreigners, while the second topic focused on the link between public health (the new outbreak of monkeypox) and a series of prejudices surrounding the LGBTQ+ community. The tweets were classified based on two criteria: i) hate messages included and ii) the dissemination of hoaxes or misinformation. Regarding the impact of the tweets on society, it was deemed appropriate to measure the level of visibility each content received in relation to the total number of users on the social media platform in Spain. Given the overwhelming volume of daily tweets (approximately 9,000 per second), the search was narrowed down based on two fundamental premises: i) origin and ii) temporality.

Regarding the origin, posts from various accounts self-identified within the ideological and political spectrum of the conservative right in Spain were considered. This included accounts associated with the VOX⁷ party, as well as those described in bibliographic references on Twitter. Regarding temporality, the period immediately following the dissemination of the posts was considered as the time of maximum media impact. This is because events on the internet unfold at a rapid pace and have a short lifespan. To quantify this temporality, the tool Google Trends was used. It allows for tracking the number of searches related to one or more keywords over a specific time frame.

Figure 1. Study methodology.



Source: Author's own work.

Finally, the main statements made from the aforementioned accounts on the Twitter social network were compared with the results published in various repositories of

⁷ According to what is reflected on the party's own website, <https://www.voxespana.es/>, their political project can be summarized as "the defense of Spain, the family, and life."

scientific information (e.g., Dialnet, Teseo, or Google Scholar), as well as official entities (e.g., the National Institute of Statistics or the Ministry of the Interior). Additionally, through temporality, the possible media impact that these statements have had on society as a whole will be quantified.

4. RESULTS BY STUDY THEMES

4.1. Foreign individuals and sexual assaults on social media. Hoaxes, myths, and realities

4.1.1. Official data

Before presenting the results regarding manipulation, fake news, and hoaxes propagated on social media justifying the connection between sexual violence and immigration, it is worth noting the data on sexual offenses provided annually by the National Institute of Statistics (INE). Based on this data, Table 1 reflects the different percentages available for the five categories into which sexual offenses are divided⁸ according to nationality.

Table 1. *Sexual offenses by nationality (2021).*

| | Total cases | Spanish population (absolute) | Foreign population (absolute) | Spanish population (relative) | Foreign population (relative) |
|--|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Sexual Assaults | 55 | 36 | 19 | 65,45 | 34,55 |
| Sexual Abuse | 176 | 156 | 20 | 88,64 | 11,36 |
| Sexual Harassment | 1 | 1 | 0 | 100 | 0 |
| Exhibitionism and sexual provocation | 20 | 18 | 2 | 90 | 10 |
| Prostitution and corruption of minors | 66 | 52 | 14 | 78,79 | 21,21 |

Source: Author's own work based on INE (2022).

As can be seen in Table 1, during 2021 (the latest year with available data), the percentage of sexual assaults committed by foreign population accounted for 34.55% of the total,

⁸ Organic Law 10/2022, of September 6, on comprehensive guarantee of sexual freedom, defines sexual violence as "acts of a sexual nature that are non-consensual or that condition the free development of sexual life in any public or private sphere, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the exploitation of prostitution by others" (the law eliminates the distinction between sexual abuse and sexual assault; previously, Spanish legislation differentiated between abuse and sexual assault, where the former did not involve direct or physical violence or the threat of such violence, unlike the latter). Additionally, it is important to note that the Ministry of Interior of the Government of Spain (2022) distinguishes the following types of sexual offenses: sexual abuse (with and without penetration), sexual assault (with and without penetration), child pornography, exhibitionism, corruption of minors and persons with disabilities, sexual harassment, and sexual provocation.

while they represent only 11.47% of the population in Spain (INE, 2022). However, it is important to make not only a methodological clarification but also a clear analytical, heuristic, and epistemological one: these data cannot be analyzed in isolation, but they need to be contextualized and examined in relation to the intersecting factors that contribute to the complex and distressing reality of sexual violence, particularly against women. These factors go far beyond national or ethnic origin, understood as a kind of "cultural essence."

Table 2. *Deaths due to gender-based violence by autonomous communities (2022).*

| | Number of Cases | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Total victims | 49,0 | 100,0 |
| Andalucía | 11,0 | 22,4 |
| Aragón | 2,0 | 4,1 |
| Asturias | 1,0 | 2,0 |
| Islas Baleares | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| Canarias | 2 | 4,1 |
| Cantabria | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| Castilla-La Mancha | 7,0 | 14,3 |
| Castilla y León | 3,0 | 6,1 |
| Cataluña | 7,0 | 14,3 |
| Comunidad Valenciana | 3,0 | 6,1 |
| Extremadura | 1,0 | 2,0 |
| Galicia | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| Madrid | 7,0 | 14,3 |
| Murcia | 2,0 | 4,1 |
| Navarra | 1,0 | 2,0 |
| País Vasco | 1,0 | 2,0 |
| La Rioja | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| Ceuta | 1,0 | 2,0 |
| Melilla | 0,0 | 0,0 |

Source: Author's own work based on INE (2023a).

In fact, as can be seen in Table 2, the first result of the research is that rates of violence against women (fatal victims) are much lower in territories with a higher proportion of population of an ethnic-religious origin that far-right associates automatically and

immediately with sexual violence, namely Arab-Muslim, in the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla. In this regard, it is worth noting that the far-right is not even consistent with its own discourse, as according to its explanatory and interpretative model, it should also explain the lower rates of violence against women by appealing to territorial-cultural essences, which it does not do because it would imply talking about a "Spanish essence" (or "Andalusian," for example, since it is the autonomous community where rates are usually higher).

Therefore, to delve deeper into this comparison and present the next result, in Table 3, it can once again be verified that there is no cause-effect relationship between the percentage of Maghrebi or Latin American immigration and violence against women that tragically results in homicide. For instance, while Andalusia had a rate of 22.4% of gender-based violence in 2022, with a non-EU immigration rate of 6.26%, Aragon, with a migration rate of 7.61%, experienced a rate of 4.1%. Thus, this comparison clearly and significantly demonstrates that there is no direct and reductionist causal link between immigrant population and sexual offenses. This phenomenon is very complex, and the factor of national or ethnic origin is just one element (and even when considering the national, racial, or ethnic factor, it needs to be included within a broader framework with a deeper comprehensive perspective).

Table 3. *Percentage of non-EU foreign population by autonomous community (2022).*

| | Percentage of non-community population |
|----------------------|--|
| National Total | 8,24 |
| Andalucía | 6,26 |
| Aragón | 7,61 |
| Asturias | 3,22 |
| Islas Baleares | 11,87 |
| Canarias | 7,36 |
| Cantabria | 4,6 |
| Castilla-La Mancha | 5,8 |
| Castilla y León | 3,74 |
| Cataluña | 12,49 |
| Comunidad Valenciana | 10,16 |
| Extremadura | 2,1 |
| Galicia | 3,17 |
| Madrid | 9,91 |
| Murcia | 12,91 |
| Navarra | 8,04 |
| País Vasco | 6,76 |

| | |
|----------|-------|
| La Rioja | 8,34 |
| Ceuta | 5,66 |
| Melilla | 12,93 |

Source: Author's own work based on INE (2023b).

The issue becomes even more evident when looking at the category of sexual abuses, where the percentage of foreign perpetrators reaches 11.36%, as shown in Table 1. Therefore, as a result of this research, it is explicitly demonstrated that in this type of sexual offense, the foreign population as perpetrators is not overrepresented, considering that the percentage of foreign citizens in Spain currently stands at 11.47%, as previously mentioned.

Even more illustrative are the types of crimes such as exhibitionism, sexual provocation, prostitution, and corruption of minors, as in these cases the absolute and relative magnitude of Spanish nationals is clear, especially considering that for prostitution and corruption of minors, it is suggested, according to the information provided by the INE (2022), that there may be more victims of foreign origin (primarily victims of trafficking) that go unreported. This fact highlights that what the political, social, and ideological sectors subjected to criticism in this study are actually exposing has less to do with real situations of sexual assault and abuse, but rather with the prejudiced and oversimplified targeting of certain groups (in this case, the immigrant community).

4.1.2. Messages focused on distorting reality

Within this criminal context, the results of this research will now present multiple examples of misinformation and hoaxes published both on the social media platform Twitter and on various websites and forums.

For instance, on May 10, 2022, the official Twitter account of the VOX Parliamentary Group in the Spanish Congress (at that time, with 170,000 followers) echoed the comments made by its spokesperson, Espinosa de los Monteros (with nearly 400,000 followers), and posted the following message: "69% of gang sexual assaults committed in Spain are committed by foreigners." Essentially, as highlighted in both the introductory section and the previously discussed results, this message corresponds to an incomplete statistic as it does not consider other sexual assaults committed by a single perpetrator, within the family nucleus or the victim's environment, scenarios that seem to be of no concern to those who wield this kind of discourse. As can be observed, the aforementioned VOX leader only mentions that specific type of sexual assault, excluding those committed by a single assailant as well as those occurring within the family environment, which tend to be reported to a lesser extent.

As mentioned earlier, a serious, complex, and multifactorial issue is reduced to a single dimension of reality: the racial or ethnic component. The dissemination of these types of messages, which are often half-truths or extremely simplified realities, aligns with what Camargo-Fernández (2021) postulates regarding the potential of social media and the internet to amplify and disseminate, seemingly anonymously, messages of hatred, hoaxes, unverified news, etc.

VOX intersperses these messages with speeches such as the following, published on their official Twitter account on October 24, 2021: "When multiculturalism takes hold in your

neighborhood, the same thing always happens: degradation, thefts, assaults, and rapes. These foreign criminals must be deported, and the politicians and subsidized media that have opened our doors to them must be held accountable." A tweet that directly associates multiculturalism with some of the worst social ills. This is also evident in a subsequent tweet by the VOX Parliamentary Group in the Valencian Community, posted on February 11, 2022: "What has become a rare case in Spain is for there to be no brawls, group rapes, or someone getting killed with a machete." This statement reinforces what was previously mentioned: from the perspective of critical discourse analysis of this political party, the rhetoric seeks to scandalize, terrorize, and divert public opinion towards immigration, blaming this sector for virtually all the social ills affecting Spanish society. Days later, the official VOX profile in the Spanish Congress directly linked immigration to sexual assaults (see Figure 2), a connection that not only simplifies but also overlooks a significant number of sexual assaults that occur in Spain (some of which, especially those that occur within the family or in environments where the perpetrator and victim know each other or have been in a relationship, are underrepresented in the statistics).

Figure 2. Example of one of the messages of the political party VOX on the social network Twitter.

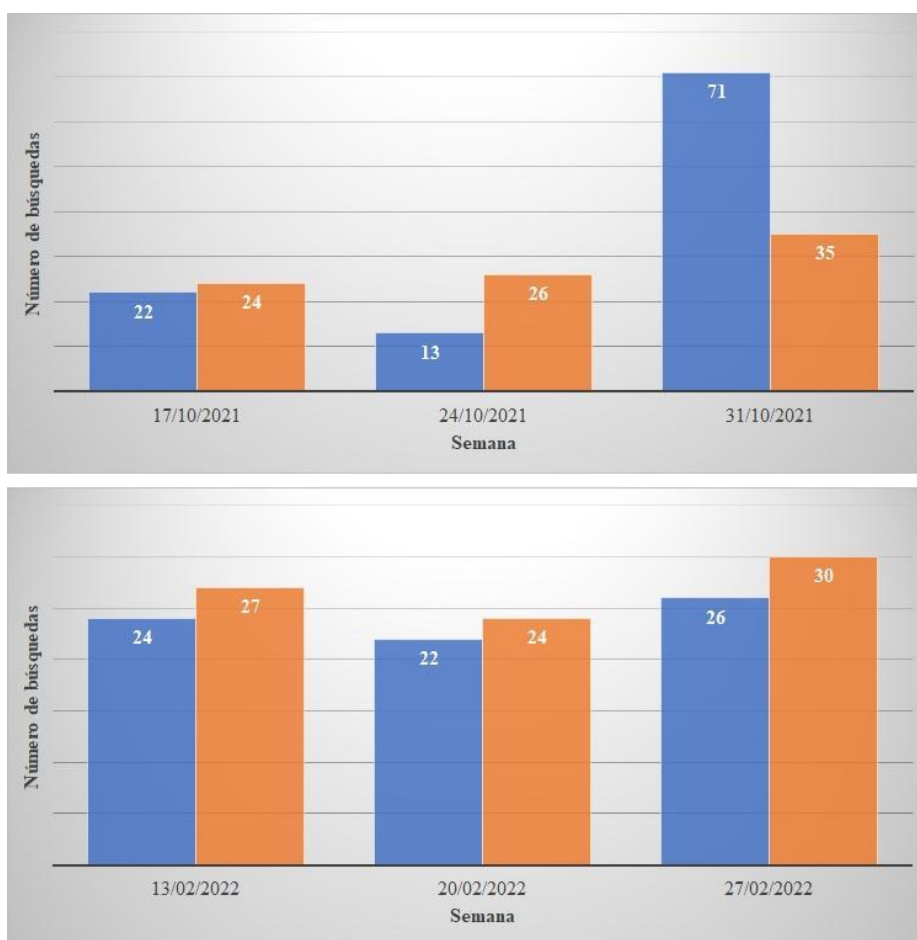


Source: Extracted from Twitter.

https://twitter.com/vox_congreso/status/1470753465655824391

Regarding the significance of this type of messaging that focuses on criminalizing certain social groups, it can be quantified based on the various searches conducted on the internet following their publication. In this regard, using the Google Trends tool, the number of times the words "rape" and "immigration" were searched together on Google during the week before and after the publication of the aforementioned tweets was obtained (Figure 3). As can be observed, the impact of these messages has increased the number of searches for both concepts individually, but especially when combined. This indicates the influence of this type of messaging on the collective imagination.

Figure 3. Number of searches on Google Trends the week before and after the tweet was published. Note: The blue color represents "rape" and the orange color represents "immigration."



Source: Author's own work based on Google Trends.

On the other hand, regarding Twitter users who are not affiliated with political groups but have the ability to make their messages go viral, one of the most prominent profiles is "Caso Aislado" ("Isolated Case" in English).⁹ It has around 60,000 followers (as of March 2023) and its purpose, as indicated in the profile itself, is the "Analysis of current events. Cases of imported insecurity due to illegal immigration and multiculturalism in Spain and Europe." In other words, it openly relates what it considers illegal immigration to all types of crime, including sexual offenses. Additionally, within this account, weekly messages can be read that indeed associate immigrants with all kinds of serious criminal acts. However, in many of these messages, the necessary source to verify the information is omitted. This is another notable result that emerges from this research.

⁹ https://twitter.com/CasoAislado_Es

To give just three examples (see Figure 4), on June 8, 2022, this account "reported" that two individuals of Moroccan origin were involved in sexual abuses against minors in the town of Elda, Alicante. On June 1, 2022, the group mentioned the imprisonment of three individuals involved in a sexual assault in Pulpí, Almería, emphasizing with the following words: "Confirmed: the three rapists are Moroccans." On May 22, 2022, they also echoed another case of sexual assault in Córdoba, immediately highlighting the national origin of the perpetrator. It is worth noting that all of these messages have a relatively high resonance on Twitter, as in some cases, they easily surpass over 1,000 individuals who share, quote, or like the tweets from the account.

Figure 4. Messages no. 1, 2 and 3 of Isolated Case.



Source: Extracted from Twitter. <https://acortar.link/1336um>

Another semi-institutional profile, named "Josema Vallejo" and representing the group "Policía Siglo XXI," disseminated the message shown in Figure 5 on March 10, 2022, on his Twitter account. Once again, this message only considers a part of reality, simplifying the problem, which has serious social consequences, to a single variable (foreigners or immigrants) and a single cause, thus ignoring the complexity of this phenomenon and silencing assaults committed by nationals, as well as those that go unreported within the family context. Regarding the complexity of the phenomenon of sexual assaults, particularly those that generate the most social and media alarm (group sexual assaults), recent meta-analyses such as Torre-Laso (2020) present a multifactorial explanatory model of sexual violence used internationally. This model highlights the interaction between different situational and individual factors. In the case of situational factors, we refer to biological predispositions, personality traits, developmental factors, and sexual

preferences. In the case of individual factors, we consider the internalization of sociocultural factors, individual cognition, attitudes and beliefs, as well as norms, myths, values, and socially held beliefs, including the so-called rape culture.

Figure 5. Messages from the representative of the Siglo XXI Police group.



Source: Extracted from Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/JosemaVallejo/status/1501913586964258818>

There are also accounts with tens of thousands of followers, such as the pseudonym "Sheldon."¹⁰ with 130,000 followers (March 2023), which are also dedicated to spreading all kinds of rumors and statements that are either half-truths or deliberately false. For example, this profile posted the following on May 25, 2022: "There is much talk about the increase in gang rapes, and little is said that this increase is marked by the rise of immigrant gangs. Someone has to say it."¹¹ This discourse, it is worth emphasizing, exclusively identifies the problem of gang rapes (known as "manadas") with certain groups of foreigners or immigrants, while overlooking the fact that the majority of sexual assaults are committed by other types of perpetrators.

Messages like the ones mentioned on Twitter are a clear example of what researchers like Ortiz-de-Guinea and Martín (2019) argue, in the sense that both figures within the ideological-political spectrum of far-right populism and individual personalities associated with this world are based on a constant suspicion of any media that does not spread their prejudiced rumors of various kinds. This is a recurring theme in all the

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/numer344>

¹¹ https://twitter.com/numer344/status/1529569797540823045?cxt=HHwWioCymY_oj7oqAAAA

materials analyzed for this research: a systematic mistrust of any media and conspiracy theories related to this mistrust. However, it should be noted that mass media, particularly the most sensationalist and tabloid-like ones, have greatly contributed to solidifying this climate of irrational distrust towards mainstream media, as pointed out by Morena et al. (2022). These dynamics are also supported by the tense atmosphere of disputes, confrontation, and socio-political and ideological polarization, in connection with the research findings of Cano-Orón et al. (2021).

Another account, with almost 130,000 followers (as of March 2023), called "Mi otro yo"¹² (My Other Self), declared on April 13, 2022, that the Spanish government was silencing "the rapes committed by immigrants."¹³

In conclusion, as can be seen, although the analyzed messages constitute only a small sample of what can be found on social media, all these profiles also share the conspiracy theory thesis that the authorities are silencing the nationality of sexual offenders, when the reality, quite different, shows that disaggregated data on sexual offenses by nationality is available for consultation both from the INE and the Ministry of the Interior. Furthermore, according to these sources, sexual offenses have multiple causes, and therefore the problem cannot be reduced to a single factor, let alone blame entire communities.

4.2. Public health and prejudices based on sexual orientation. The case of monkeypox

4.2.1. Messages focused on distorting reality

Once the main aspects of the disease have been described, as was done for the previous case study, the following will present and contrast a series of messages shared on social media platforms (Twitter) and well-known reference websites, both in Spain and the Spanish-speaking world. These examples will illustrate the modus operandi of new discursive orders that propagate fallacies and prejudiced discourses, especially on such a sensitive topic as public health.

Starting with Twitter, within hours of the first cases of monkeypox being detected in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries, partly due to certain inaccurate information that spread regarding the relationship between the gay community and the virus, as well as the first identified outbreak in a gay sauna in Madrid, multiple Twitter accounts launched the hashtag #ViruelaDelHomo, despite there being no cause-effect relationship between being homosexual and spreading the virus, neither then nor now. It should be noted that many of the referenced messages are deleted by Twitter administrators, so the samples always suffer from a certain underrepresentation, as there have been many more prejudiced and stigmatizing messages that are no longer available on the platform. Once again, using the Google Trends tool, one can observe the correlations between the search terms "monkeypox" and "homosexuality" during three news events related to monkeypox in Spain, when many media outlets reported on the outbreaks between spring and summer of 2022.

¹² <https://twitter.com/Miotroyo2parte>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/Miotroyo2parte/status/1514151459406897153>

Based on the three selected news articles (from May 20, 2022, June 6, 2022, and July 25, 2022, respectively)¹⁴It can be observed that the correlation between "monkeypox" and "homosexuality" shows a considerable increase, although in a more irregular and less pronounced manner compared to the correlation established for the issue of sexual assaults in relation to immigration. The use of "homosexuality" experiences a significant rise when cases of monkeypox increase and become a cause for concern, particularly in early summer of 2022. In fact, in certain time intervals, the use of the term "homosexuality" associated with "monkeypox" surpasses (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Evolution and relationship of the number of searches on Google. Note: in blue, "monkeypox"; in red, "homosexuality".



Source: Extracted from Google Trends.

To give just one more example, a private profile, identified with a seemingly real name, "Yizbeleni Gallardo,"¹⁵ posted the following on June 8, 2022: "The upcoming crisis. Monkeypox is primarily transmitted through physical contact. The main theory is that it is mainly sexually transmitted among homosexuals. Mantamar is a gay beach club. They are calling out to everyone who went to the place...".

However, even more concerning is that political parties like VOX have linked monkeypox, with varying degrees of subtlety, to "drug-addicted homosexuals" (Nova, 2022). This was even demonstrated by a spokesperson for this Spanish political group¹⁶, exemplifying how there are still political parties that echo what a portion of society expresses on social media, apps, and websites in the form of hateful, prejudiced, stigmatizing, and discriminatory messages.

In conclusion, all the results obtained in this research, as previously outlined, confirm the thesis that the blaming of the gay community for a public health problem for which they are not responsible falls within the discourse of hate loaded with prejudices, in this case based on sexual orientation (Gelibter, 2022). It serves as a clear example of hysteria in which a disease spreads and, at the same time, stigmatizes a group of people who are not responsible for its spread (De Santos, 2022).

¹⁴ <https://acortar.link/mmbKEb>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/Yizis>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/GuillermoDiazCs/status/1532436127734452234>

<https://www.phmk.es/i-d/ante-el-aumento-de-casos-de-la-viruela-del-mono-debemos-preocuparnos>
<https://acortar.link/EouHTw>

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present research has allowed us to expose the predominant role and dimensionality achieved by social media, apps, and websites in generating and/or amplifying discourses based on stigmatization, prejudice, and even hatred towards certain social groups. According to this research, the hypothesis is confirmed that while fake news and hate speech are not novel topics in the field of communication, they have contributed to spreading messages and discourses of questionable veracity but with a significant impact among a considerable part of both society in general and the public opinion.

In this regard, both in the case of malicious links between immigration and sexual assaults, as well as monkeypox and the homosexual community, it has been demonstrated that verbalized hatred operates based on three basic mechanisms: i) reductionism or oversimplification, ii) accusation, and iii) fear. Firstly, this typology of messages tends to reduce complex and multi-causal issues into linear relationships with a simple cause-effect pattern. For example, in the cases of sexual assaults, an increasing number of people explicitly or implicitly relate and affirm a direct link between sexual crimes and the foreign or immigrant status as the perpetrators of such crimes, especially immigrants from certain geographical regions. On the other hand, alongside this model and approach characterized by analytical reductionism, there is the criminalization of certain social groups that have sometimes been previously stigmatized for similar issues (it is worth remembering, in this regard, the linkage that occurred in the 1990s between homosexuality and HIV, or between crime and immigration). In this sense, there is a tendency to hold responsible, primarily or exclusively, a specific group for the occurrence, spread, or impact of a harmful event on the entire population, disregarding the multiplicity of factors involved and, in some cases, their independence (for example, the case of linking specific sexual orientations, gay men and bisexual men, with monkeypox).

Thirdly, by appealing to basic instincts such as emotionality or fear, this typology of messages, stemming from the aforementioned systematic and irrational distrust of any media outlet (regardless of whether their ethical conduct in addressing various social issues has been proven or not), aims to scandalize and generate a sense of both hysteria and social paranoia, whose direct result is to mask, exaggerate, or if necessary, falsify the actual magnitude of the problem. In this regard, the research has demonstrated the evident role played by social media as democratizing mass amplifiers of expression, but at the same time, they serve as catalysts for certain mood states, generally characterized by prejudice and stigmatization, whose thought structure is aimed at constructing and solidifying different discourses of hatred on sociological foundations.

In conjunction with all of the above, the complex yet clear link between new forms of communication and social expression and the emergence of new discourses of hatred has also been highlighted. Furthermore, this scenario is catalyzed by the general crisis context in which many traditional societies find themselves, societies where economic and health crises, the discredit of politics and traditional media, the questioning of science, or the loss of reference points have only exacerbated the problem of the spread of fake news through any digital medium, thereby generating a range of consequences whose repercussions are yet to be determined and weighed.

Finally, as future lines of research, it may be of interest to conduct a historical-comparative study between current hate campaigns against certain groups (e.g., foreign immigrants) and those from past eras (such as the xenophobic wave that swept through

late 19th-century France), whose relationships can help establish a pattern of temporal recurrence based on the structural problems that have plagued a particular society. Likewise, although it is still a challenging field to explore, it would be relevant to determine to what extent this typology of messages can influence the behavior and future social development of younger social media users.

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