Hate narratives and counter-narratives on X: A study on digital violence against women in politics

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How to cite this article / Standard reference:

Martín-Gutiérrez, Ángela, Moreno-Delgado, Alicia, & Said-Hung, Elias (2026). Hate narratives and counter-narratives on X: A study on digital violence against women in politics. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 84, 1-26. https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2026-2459

ABSTRACT
Introduction: This study analyses hate speech as a form of media violence towards female politicians on social networks, focusing on the comments generated in Spanish news media publications on the social network X. **Methodology**: A qualitative-quantitative analysis of 37,249 publications from five digital media during January 2021 was carried out. Publications featuring female politicians as protagonists were manually selected. Three types of discourse were identified: hate (extreme and offensive), counter-narratives or upstander discourse, and neutral discourse. **Results:** The analysis revealed that haters, mostly men, have a greater reach and activity in disseminating hate messages. On the other hand, upstanders, mainly associated with women, participate less and have less impact. This highlights the lack of counterweights to hate speech on X, a space prone to misogynistic messages, mostly insults and uncivil expressions. **Discussion:** The results show an imbalance in digital debates, with haters dominating in reach and impact. This scenario underlines the need to implement

more effective moderation strategies and to encourage greater participation of counter-narratives, especially in spaces run by news media. **Conclusions:** X debates facilitate the dissemination of misogynistic discourse, predominantly in the form of insults. To mitigate this phenomenon, it is essential to strengthen counter-narratives, engage more users and implement active moderation measures, supported by an institutional framework, to curb the perpetuation of digital hate.

Keywords: hate speech; misogyny; digital media; social networks; counter-narrative; politics; offensive speech.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online communication platforms have led to an increase in the number of instances of various types of discourse, many of them hate speech, as they serve as virtual spaces where it is difficult to identify audiences. This fuels extreme and offensive thoughts and messages that would otherwise be more difficult to bring together (Bustos et al., 2019). According to the latest Raxen Report, there are over 600 websites in Spain that promote hate speech, particularly impacting the Spanish-speaking world (*Movimiento Contra la Intolerancia*, 2016). In accordance with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2021), between July and September 2020, almost 2,000 pieces of content were removed from X (formerly Twitter) for violating its hate speech policy.

The disintermediation of the media between citizens and the political class, and the universalization of social media, among other factors, have shaped the way in which public opinion emerges (Pont-Sorribes & Suau-Gomila, 2019). Social media, due to its characteristics based on global interaction, its going rapidly viral on the web, and the ability to send messages anonymously—or even under a false identity—encourages the spread of hatred against any group or discourse present on social media, as is the case with women (Bustos et al., 2019).

This climate can be defined as political and media violence because they are forms of harassment that normalize hate speech in institutional discourse and are perpetuated with the media's collaboration (Levin, 2022).

This study focuses on hate speech as a form of media violence against female politicians in the digital environment of social media as a context for communication (Suau-Gomila et al., 2022), and the role that the media and its users-readers play in mitigating this type of expression when confronted with the presence of such messages (Wong et al., 2021; Fabbri, 2022).

Therefore, this study examines different types of speeches, including hate speech (extreme and offensive), counter-narrative or upstander speech, and neutral speech used in digital news media on the social network X. Additionally, an attempt is made to identify some of the characteristics of individuals who promote hate speech messages as well as those who actively oppose them, beyond the speeches used, the centrality in appearance and gender roles, and the use of anonymity, and other traits discussed by authors such as Obermaier and Schmuck (2022), Eslen-Ziza (2022) or Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021).

This study delves into the role of digital media in amplifying hate speech directed at female politicians. By analyzing the dynamics on platform X, it reveals a significant prevalence of misogynistic and offensive messages posted primarily by men, which surpass counter-narratives in reach and impact. In the field of communication, this research highlights the dual role of news media: their capacity to amplify hatred, but also to promote counter-narratives. It also emphasizes the ethical responsibility of the media to moderate digital debates and provides valuable insights for enhancing digital journalism practices.

1.1. Literature review

The relationship between social media and hate speech has prompted studies that highlight hatred toward vulnerable groups, such as migrants and refugees, and the reinforcement of race or religion-based stereotypes, with an emphasis on gender (Sánchez Ortega, 2022; Valdez-Apolo et al., 2019; Merino-Arribas & López-Meri, 2018). Misogyny, in particular, has been the basis for hate speech against women (Rivera-Martín et al., 2022), which has been amplified on social media (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2021; Villar-Aguilés & Pecourt-Gracia, 2021; Martínez-Valerio, 2023). Other studies have examined hate speech against political institutions (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022) and criticism of the Ministry of Equality and its legislative works (Juárez-Rodríguez et al., 2021). These studies have highlighted gender bias in the hatred expressed toward institutional figures. Finally, research carried out from an ethical and deontological communication perspective highlights the threat that hate speech poses to human rights (Torres & Taricco, 2019).

For the purposes of this paper, hate speech is defined as "harmful content that incites hatred or directly attacks a person or group based on their identity, origin, religion, or sexual orientation" (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022, p. 3). In the case of misogynistic hate, it appears as a form of male supremacy and incel culture characterized by extreme hostility towards women. It is intertwined with anti-feminist movements and broader extremist ideologies, as discussed by authors such as Dafaure (2022), O'Hanlon et al. (2023), Kupferschmidt (2024), and Falkenberg et al. (2024).

The media's fundamental role in the symbolic construction of reality (Couldry, 2019) directly impacts the definition of social inequalities and the reinforcement of stereotypes that normalize sexism and the objectification of women. Groups such as the manosphere exploit this on social media. These spaces allow for the rapid dissemination and normalization of misogynistic content. This content often portrays men as victims of feminism and labels feminist movements as conspiracies. It also directs attacks at social agents who represent positions contrary to their own (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022; Dafaure, 2022). Therefore, hate speech against women can be understood in this sense as a form of media violence where the news media assume not only a role as agents promoting violence through the different news approaches used when covering events led by female public figures, but also through the way in which users are managed on social networks such as X, and the role they assume when limiting the exposure of narratives that reproduce symbolic violence directed against women in this type of context (Bernal-Triviño, 2019; Nau, 2021; Shroff & Nayak, 2023).

According to Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022), one problem that often arises on social media is the toxicity of messages that impact on certain groups and contribute to weakening democracy. Women, especially female politicians, are particularly affected by this discourse, as they are often the target of a growing trend of discrediting. These findings align with those of Esposito and Breeze (2022), Eslen-Ziya (2022), Hussain et al. (2022), Shroff and Nayak (2023), and Weaving et al. (2023), who conducted studies in the United Kingdom, Turkey, Pakistan, the Philippines, Brazil, and the United States, respectively. These studies highlight the attention that female politicians are receiving as targets of misogynistic hate speech and anti-feminist rhetoric on social media, given the reactions they generate from certain types of users as agents who challenge traditional gender roles through their political actions.

In the case of Spain, studies such as those carried out by Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Roldán (2021), as well as those by Juárez et al. (2021), are in line with international studies, such as those highlighted in the previous paragraph, in highlighting the toxic environment faced by female politicians in Spain. This group is particularly targeted by hate speech on social media. They are often the target of strategies that spread hateful messages and seek to undermine or marginalize their representation in Spanish politics on social media.

Other studies have highlighted how some sexist women disparage those women who are not sexist (Kaul de Marlangeon, 2019) and how sexist expressions are used differently toward women and men (Verduzco Arguelles et al., 2020), the discursive resources used to spread hatred towards women (in this case, those involved in politics), the use of anonymity for such purposes, and the potential ideological links of those who use digital communication platforms to devalue women (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022; Carrillo, 2020; Hussain et al., 2022; Eslen-Ziya, 2022).

The culture of participation (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008) has enabled the visibility of historically underrepresented groups. Although the rise of social media has boosted feminist action and promoted the creation of communities with similar ideas and social objectives (Baer, 2016; Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2020), the problem with this type of digital communication scenario is that it is also considered a place for spreading and normalizing hostility toward vulnerable social groups and women. All of this favors the spread of hate speech within the current digital communication framework (Francisco & Felmlee, 2022).

Although incitement to hatred is considered one of the limits of freedom of expression (Teruel-Lozano, 2017), this type of message has found fertile ground in today's digital social media and its lack of regulation (Cabo-Isasi & García-Juanatey, 2017). Disparagement, misleading accusations, gaslighting intended to destabilize the sense of reality and perceptions toward certain individuals or groups, and extreme criticism directed at them are particularly evident in the case of women who hold public office, represent institutions, or have a certain degree of power in the public sphere (Graves & Samp, 2021; Sigma Dos, 2021; Borah et al., 2022).

As Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021) and Kupferschmidt (2024) point out, social media, especially platform X, has become an exceptional channel for the manosphere and political hatred. It has facilitated the meeting of individuals and groups through "polarizing" users (Ging & Garvey, 2018), who highlight and reinforce hatred directed at female politicians. As Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022) rightly note, this requires further research focused on female political figures in institutions to help us better understand this phenomenon.

2. OBJECTIVES

The goal of this study is to provide an overview of the discourse directed at women in politics, as seen in comments published on news content shared by Spanish digital media outlets on X. To achieve this goal, the following specific objectives will be fulfilled:

- SO1: Determine the types of discourse directed at women in political office based on comments published alongside news contents shared on X by digital news media.
- SO2: Identify the levels of hate speech promoted by comments posted by users participating in debates about news contents associated with female politicians on X by digital news media.
- SO3: Identify the main themes or topics addressed in comments published around news contents directed at women in politics on digital news media on X.
- SO4: Establish the profile of users who disseminate hate speech and counter-narratives to this type of speech, around news contents published on X by digital news media, studied in relation to women who hold political office.

The hypothesis guiding this work is:

> Spaces for debate surrounding the news contents published on X by digital news media function as platforms for promoting offensive and discriminatory hate speech against women in the political sphere.

This hypothesis is based on the findings of authors such as Sepúlveda Legorreta and Flores Treviño (2019), and Plaza del Arco et al. (2021), among others considered in this work, regarding the prevalence of hate speech such as misogyny, the subject of analysis, on social platforms such as X, based on the exposure of different levels of intensity of the expressions used by users for this purpose. In our case, these users participate in the debates generated around the informative content published by digital news media in this type of communication context.

3. METHODOLOGY

The work is based on exploratory-descriptive research, carried out using a qualitative-quantitative approach, in which the case study was all comments associated with news content related to women in politics, both in Spain and internationally, in five of the main news media in Spain: *El País*, *ABC*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, and *20 Minutos*. These media outlets were selected within the framework of the project on which this work is based, taking into account the number of followers, percentage of weekly readers, and social media popularity, according to Statista (2024a; 2024b) and Newman et al. (2020).

All news content and comments associated with these digital news media, taken as a case study, were collected between January 2021 and June 2022 based on a CRISP-DM methodology and the API 2.0 of Platform X (formerly Twitter). A total of 395,326 news items and 2,427,042 comments were collected and pre-processed, assuming the findings of Ruiz-Iniesta et al. (2024), as shown in Figure 1. This process resulted in the final identification of 328,325 pieces of content and 2,128,978 comments.

Figure 1. *Preprocessing of the collected data for analysis.*
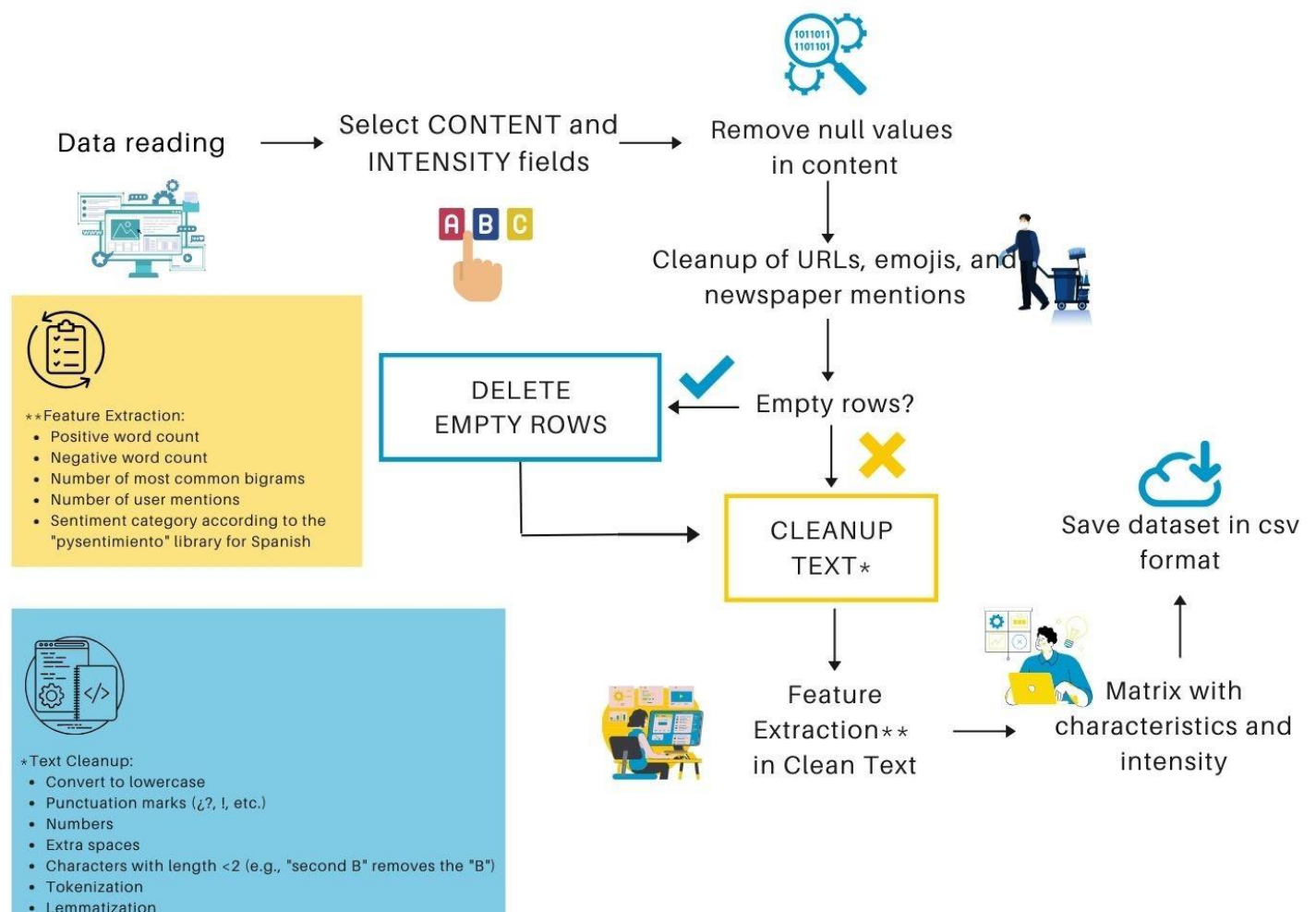
Source: Elaborated by Said-Hung et al. (2024), based on the criteria of Ruiz-Iniesta et al. (2024).

From a qualitative-quantitative analysis perspective, given the amount of data collected and the exploratory approach taken in this study, all messages were grouped by calendar month so as to randomly select one of these months to achieve the main objective of this study. Of the 18 months collected, January 2021 was randomly selected as the reference month for the proposed study.

The total amount of news content collected during January 2021 (N = 37,249) was reviewed manually in order to identify those that featured a woman in politics, with the aim of carrying out the analysis proposed in this article. A total of 29 news items were identified, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, which made up the sample of cases from which the comments related to them were extracted for the development of this work.

Table 1. *Number of news contents featuring women in politics, January 2021.*

Media	20 Minutos	ABC	El Mundo	El País	La Vanguardia
No. of News	7	0	7	14	1

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2. *Informative content in digital news media taken as case studies, January 2021.*

Media	ID	News Headline	No. of Comments	No. of retweets	No. of Likes
La Vanguardia	1-VAN	The mayor criticizes the regional government (Generalitat) for merely imposing restrictions..	18	4	5
El País	1-PAI	🔴 BREAKING NEWS | Díaz Ayuso refuses to bring forward curfew: "If you want to ruin the hospitality industry, don't count on me."	403	1 thousand	2 thousand
	2-PAI	Shyamala, Kamala Harris' mother managed to raise two daughters as a single mother while getting a tenured teaching position and conducting a groundbreaking cancer research.	243	302	972
	3-PAI	"Ayuso was in a hurry to start vaccinating, but Madrid has barely administered 3,000 doses. The Community plans to immunize people only from Monday to Friday because the healthcare staff has not been reorganized to work on weekends."	96	260	248
	4-PAI	Kamala Harris wore purple, the color of feminism, to make history. "I am here thanks to the women who came before me. "	64	950	4 thousand
	5-PAI	" 📺 LIVE TV| Carolina Darias, Minister of Health: "My priority and urgent goal is to contribute to managing the pandemic and stopping the spread of the virus through co-governance."	35	25	38
	6-PAI	"The Portuguese far-right candidate attacked his left-wing bloc rival, Marisa Matias, for wearing lipstick" "like a doll." Thousands of women have responded him by defending the use of lipstick.	30	92	282
	7-PAI	Kamala Harris's stepdaughter lives in New York, studies at the renowned Parsons Center, and runs her own clothing brand. The coat she wore to the inauguration has stolen the show.	22	38	137
	8-PAI	"Amid of the third wave of the coronavirus, Isabel Díaz Ayuso's government is counting down the minutes until the health situation allows it to lift the restrictions imposed this Monday on the hospitality industry and shops, which must close at 9 p.m. "	12	14	21
	9-PAI	"Melania Trump left Washington with her husband on one arm and a $75,000 handbag in the other, symbolizing arrogant vulgarity." Boris Izaguirre writes.	237	200	373
	10-PAI	Ayuso said, "Visit Madrid but let it in peace. Many Catalans come here wanting to be more Catalan—Catalans in freedom. They even come to speak Catalan. Madrid is freedom." http://bit.ly/3tkfa6e	228	515	379

	11-PAI	VIDEO | Ayuso said, " It's a crime in Catalonia, considering its climate, to have everything closed." https://bit.ly/3acNkQw	146	414	274
	12-PAI	The president of Madrid compares the efforts of healthcare workers fighting the pandemic to those of business owners overcoming the crisis. "We are here to support businesses," she assured.	100	94	90
	13-PAI	"Díaz Ayuso defends her handling of the crisis, claiming that the storm exceeded forecasts. "No one warned me that it would be of such magnitude," she said, despite the fact that AEMET and Civil Protection had been issuing warnings since Tuesday.	68	85	160
	14-PAI	"Cifuentes's master's degree sits on the bench with its holder because many higher education institutions are failing, and the social significance of knowledge and learning has been exploited for paltry profits."	27	41	111
El Mundo	1-MUN	"Meritxell Budó is donating a 1-O ballot box to the *"Cap Nena sense Joguina"* (No girl without a toy) campaign. The government spokeswoman takes advantage of the Three Kings Day to make politics in favor of the Catalan independence."	347	367	173
	2-MUN	"Nancy Pelosi says that impeaching Trump is" "a matter of the utmost urgency.""	43	70	213
	3-MUN	Vox, Orbán, and Fratelli: Abascal is inaugurating a new Madrid-Rome axis that challenges the Le Pen-Salvini duo.	18	19	38
	4-MUN	*Junts per Catalunya* candidate Laura Borràs says, "The army needs a vaccine against the Francoism that runs in its blood."	217	67	90
	5-MUN	In her statement to the judge in the Master case, Cifuentes says: "I don't really defend my work. I submit it and explain it in general terms."	32	62	51
	6-MUN	Ayuso is accusing the government of "changing the rules of the game" with vaccines: http://socy.es/lp4os4	25	47	94
	7-MUN	Ayuso begins the process of passing a Madrid law to counteract Celaá's law.	12	50	173
20 Minutos	1-20M	Ayuso asks citizens to help remove as much snow as possible before it turns to ice.	110	242	255
	2-20M	"Ayuso assures that Madrid will vaccinate every day: "With the available public and private resources. Even at night.""	10	15	20
	3-20M	"Colau: "The concrete blocks are ugly and will disappear between this year and next year.""	3	1	1
	4-20M	Isa Serra says, "I wouldn't be surprised if, in a few years, we see Abascal entering Congress wearing horns." http://ver.20m.es/9u4s92.	41	17	91
	5-20M	Ayuso brands Illa a "minister on the run" and calls on the central government to develop a "strategy" for the vaccination campaign http://ver.20m.es/hn0ir3.	11	4	11
	6-20M	"The president of Congress talks to the Pentagon to take control of the nuclear codes away from Trump." http://ver.20m.es/sperj4.	9	33	44
	7-20M	"Calvo and Montero try to ease tensions and agree to present LGTBI and trans laws in February." http://ver.20m.es/dsej01.	7	2	6

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As shown in Table 2, a total of 2,614 comments were identified, which were manually collected. Of this total, 11 comments were eliminated by X during the analysis process applied in this study in May 2024. This equate to 0.42% of the total comments that comprise the final sample taken into account for the development of the

proposed analysis. This percentage is lower than that reported by entities such as the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2023) and NATO (Bergmanis-Korät & Haidechyk, 2024) which highlight that more than 80% of messages containing hate speech on social media (especially on X) are not deleted, despite the existence of a policy of moderation and removal of this type of expression on this platform (X Help Center, 2023).

As with all the information content collected in January 2021, these messages were pre-processed to identify news items related to the subjects of the study addressed in this paper.

To achieve the objectives (SO1, SO2, and SO3) proposed in this study, two researchers analyzed the comments. They carried out the analysis manually and individually. Then, they triangulated the results, establishing a classification of the information according to the discourse type categories identified by Nayel and Shashirekha (2019) and the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (Oberaxe) (2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The categories used in the analysis, along with some illustrative examples, are shown below:

- Extreme hatred, associated with discourse that incites violence. Examples: "That corrupt, shameless woman should be locked up in jail and stoned to death. Conspirator." (Comment on a news item in *El Mundo*); "Let's hope she dies soon!" (Comment on a news item in *El Mundo*).

- Offensive hate speech, associated with discourse that represents personal or collective offenses, incites discrimination, and reproduces stereotypes and falsehoods. Examples: "A fool is a fool, but the media pamphlets give her wings. How is it possible to go three days without getting vaccinated? It's indecent" (comment on an *El País* news item); No shame, no brain. I hope she has big tits, because in the pro-independence underworld, that's what matters. You're sick... total *catanazis*" (comment on an *El Mundo* news item).

- Counter-narratives (upstander), associated with discourses that defend groups targeted by hatred. Examples: "We shouldn't be so harsh on this woman, it's understandable that she's asking for help, and we all need to help out" (comment on a *20 Minutos* news item); "Long live politicians like you. May the resistance continue" (comment on an *El Mundo* news item).

- Neutral, associated with discourse in which no hatred appears.

In terms of intensity levels of hatred, the reference point is that established by Blanco-Valencia et al. (2024):

- Intensity level 1 – Hate associated with uncivil messages
- Intensity level 2 – Hate associated with malicious messages or abusive language
- Intensity level 3 – Hate associated with insults
- Intensity level 4 – Hate associated with veiled or explicit threats

According to this scale, offensive hate is classified as intensity levels 2 and 3, while extreme hate is classified as intensity level 4. Therefore, in the development of this work, messages expressing hate of intensity level 1 that focus more on incivility will not be considered. In this study, intensity level 1 is associated with more neutral speech by users.

With regard to SO3, this paper proposes a thematic categorization of the topics that appeared in users' comments expressing extreme and offensive hatred. This served to identify the most recurrent terms in the 2,614 comments collected, around the informative content published by digital news media about women in politics in January 2021.

These terms were extracted using word clouds that allowed us to identify all the terms associated with each of these comments. A total of 1,498 terms were identified and manually reviewed to eliminate those with no

semantic value (e.g., stop words). Of these, 98 terms related to the different types of hate speech observed in the analyzed comments were identified and classified according to their association with specific themes or topics based on the work of authors such as Forgas (2010), Sepúlveda Legorreta and Flores Treviño (2019). The categories under which the terms were classified are as follows: Contempt and Personal Insults, Mental Health Problems and Disorders, Violence and Threats, Corruption and Crime, Sexism and Objectification, and Extremist Ideology and Politics.

Regarding SO4, an analysis was conducted on the Bios of all accounts that posted comments associated with hate speech and counter-narratives in 30 news items identified in January 2021. Of the 886 users identified, only 53 accounts were selected for study, as they were associated with the aforementioned discourse. The Bios analysis focused on extracting descriptive data related to: gender stated in their profile, years of activity on X, number of followers and following, total number of contents published, as well as the total number of likes generated by each of these accounts.

4. RESULTS

Regarding the type of discourse and hatred levels directed toward female politicians (SO1 and SO2), Figure 2 shows how most of the comments associated with the contents identified in the news media taken as a case study fall within the category of offensive hate speech directed at this type of social agents, followed by neutral discourse and a very low percentage of upstander messages or messages aimed at counteracting the dissemination of hate speech.

The media outlets with the highest percentage of messages containing offensive hate speech are *20 Minutos* and *El Mundo*, with more than 15 points above the overall average. Meanwhile, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* are the media outlets with a higher-than-average percentage of comments with neutral discourse, with *El País* being the only news outlet with a higher-than-average percentage of messages with upstander discourse, aimed at combating the hate speech identified in this study.

Figure 2. *Percentage distribution of messages by type of discourse and media outlet.*
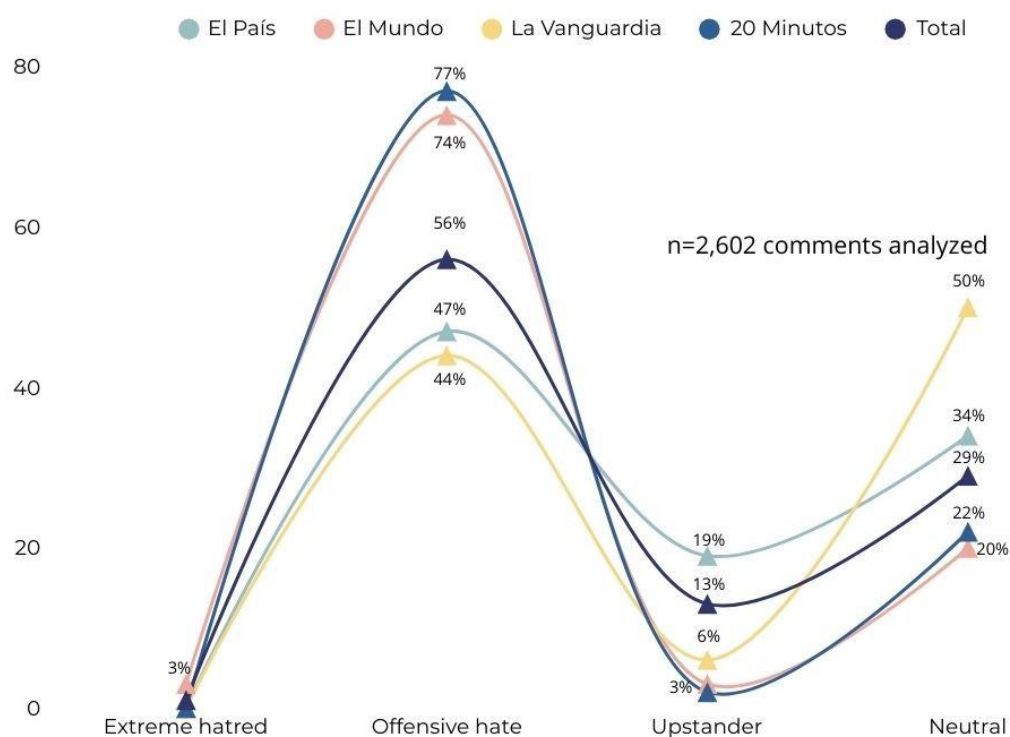
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Beyond the fact that extreme hatred would be associated with intensity level 4 used in this study (19.7% of hatred detected), most of the offensive discourse (43% of messages identified with this type of discourse) is concentrated at intensity level 3, that is, it involves the use of expressions associated with insults directed at the protagonists of the news content published by the digital news media considered in this study. Meanwhile, hatred of intensity level 2 (associated with malicious messages or abusive expressions) would barely be represented, accounting for less than 1% of the total messages with this type of discourse in the sample of comments analyzed in this study.

Although offensive hate speech seems to dominate the context surrounding the news content published by the analyzed media outlets, it is clear that some media outlets are more prone to offensive hate speech than others, with this type of message being more prevalent in news stories featuring female politicians. Meanwhile, there does not seem to be a context oriented toward combating messages containing hate speech directed at women through counter-narratives.

An examination of the type of news content (see Table 3) reveals that news stories featuring offensive hate speech (≥50%) predominantly concern the stance of prominent female politicians on specific issues related to: the pandemic or criticizing other political figures for this reason (case of Isabel Díaz Ayuso, President of the Community of Madrid), criticizing Donald Trump's role during the attempted assault on the United States Congress (case of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States Congress), supporting Catalan independence (case of Laura Borrás and Meritxell Budó, JunsXCataluya politicians), expressing opposition to certain aspects related to urban planning in the cities under their control (case of Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona), or being the target of attacks by other male political figures (case of Marisa Matías, candidate for the left-wing bloc in the 2021 Portuguese elections), warning of the rise of far-right political figures in Spain on the political scene (case of Isa Serra, deputy for the Podemos Party in the Community of Madrid), and the alliance of these figures with other political representatives (case of Giorgia Meloni). However, there is also a greater concentration of hate speech around news stories that, while not based on these figures' positions, did attempt to take a more focused approach to human interest and fashion (case of Kamala Harris, Vice President-elect of the United States).

It is striking that the only news content with a higher percentage of messages with upstander discourse (≥50%) was not directly associated with an active female political figure, but rather with a personality in a secondary role, such as Melania Trump and the outfit she wore during her husband's departure from the White House.

Table 3. *News content with the highest percentage of messages containing hate speech and upstanders.*

Media	ID	News Headlines	Percentage of offensive hate speech (≥50%)	Percentage of upstander speech (≥50%)
El País	1-PAI	🔴 BREAKING NEWS | Díaz Ayuso refuses to bring forward curfew: "If you want to ruin the hospitality industry, don't count on me."	73,5%	
	2-PAI	Shyamala, Kamala Harris' mother managed to raise two daughters as a single mother while getting a tenured teaching position and conducting a groundbreaking cancer research.	57%	
	3-PAI	"Ayuso was in a hurry to start vaccinating, but Madrid has barely administered 3,000 doses. The Community plans to immunize people only from Monday to Friday because the healthcare staff has not been reorganized to work on weekends."	67%	
	6-PAI	"The Portuguese far-right candidate attacked his left-wing bloc rival, Marisa Matias, for wearing lipstick" "like a doll." Thousands of women have responded him by defending the use of lipstick.	64%	
	7-PAI	Kamala Harris's stepdaughter lives in New York, studies	59%	

		at the renowned Parsons Center, and runs her own clothing brand. The coat she wore to the inauguration has stolen the show.		
	9-PAI	"Melania Trump left Washington with her husband on one arm and a $75,000 handbag in the other, symbolizing arrogant vulgarity." Boris Izaguirre writes.		81,9%
El Mundo	1-MUN	"Meritxell Budó is donating a 1-O ballot box to the *"Cap Nena sense Joguina"* (No girl without a toy) campaign. The government spokeswoman takes advantage of the Three Kings Day to make politics in favor of the Catalan independence."	88%	
	2-MUN	"Nancy Pelosi says that impeaching Trump is" "a matter of the utmost urgency.""	74,5%	
	3-MUN	Vox, Orbán, and Fratelli: Abascal is inaugurating a new Madrid-Rome axis that challenges the Le Pen-Salvini duo.	61%	
	4-MUN	*Junts per Catalunya* candidate Laura Borràs says, "The army needs a vaccine against the Francoism that runs in its blood."	65%	
20 Minutos	1-20M	Ayuso asks citizens to help remove as much snow as possible before it turns to ice.	81%	
	2-20M	"Ayuso assures that Madrid will vaccinate every day: "With the available public and private resources. Even at night.""	70%	
	3-20M	"Colau: "The concrete blocks are ugly and will disappear between this year and next year.""	67%	
	4-20M	Isa Serra says, "I wouldn't be surprised if, in a few years, we see Abascal entering Congress wearing horns." http://ver.20m.es/9u4s92.	58,5%	
	5-20M	Ayuso brands Illa a "minister on the run" and calls on the central government to develop a "strategy" for the vaccination campaign http://ver.20m.es/hn0ir3.	90,9%	

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.1. Thematic axes associated with hate speech

Considering the main terms extracted from the 876 comments containing extreme or offensive hate speech within the 29 news items associated with female political figures in the digital news media, taken as case studies, it is possible to identify the main thematic axes associated with the hate speech being discovered (SO3), which are divided into 10 categories, as shown in Table 4.

As seen in Table 4, the two main strategies used to attack these personalities are derogatory personal expressions (49.12%) and attempts to associate them with corruption or criminality (14.88%). Second place goes to expressions that seek to disparage them on the grounds of mental health (14.4%), sexualize or objectify them (9.44%), attribute extreme right-wing ideological roles to them (5.12%), or threaten or accuse them explicitly (7.04%).

Table 4. *News content with the highest percentage of messages containing hate speech and upstander behavior.*

Word	Nº	Word	Nº	Word	Nº
stupid	37	lost	22	crime	23
disgusting	24	crazy*	23	corrupt	14
motherfucker	21	incompetent	6	jail	9
shit	20	brainless	5	Ayuso's resignation*	9
stupidity	14	sick	5	delinquent	5
bad	13	psychopath	5	thief	5
disgusting woman	12	psychopath	5	liar	5
brain	12	mental*	6	miserable	5
disgraceful*	13	brain	3	Ayuso's criminal management	4

inept	10	insane	2	crook	3
nonsense	10	raving	2	embezzlement	3
scoundrel	10	drugs	2	fool	2
useless	9	fanatic	2	scum	2
foolish	9	unconscious	2	delinquency	2
shame	9	nazi	6	delinquents	2
idiocy	8	*indepes**	8	horns	10
clown	8	fascist	4	whore*	16
immature	7	coupist	4	balls	7
slow-witted	7	*catanazis*	3	pussy	7
retarded	7	supremacist	3	fucking	6
bitch	6	francoist	2	bitch	4
quiet	5	genocidal	2	teats	4
idiot	4	kill	13	asshole	3
imbecile	4	die	10	bitch	2
woman	3	deaths	10		
stupid	3	assassinate	4		
stupid shit	3	undertaker	4		
fat	3	fuck you	3		
irresponsible	3				
pathetic	3				
muzzle	2				
shithead	2				
moron	2				
ignorant	2				
cynical	2				

* Note: Plural and singular terms or misspelled terms have been merged.

Note: Theme categories: Green: Contempt and personal offenses; Red: Mental health problems and disorder; Grey: Violence and threats; Pink: Corruption and crime; Blue: Sexism and objectification; Yellow: Extremist ideology and politics.

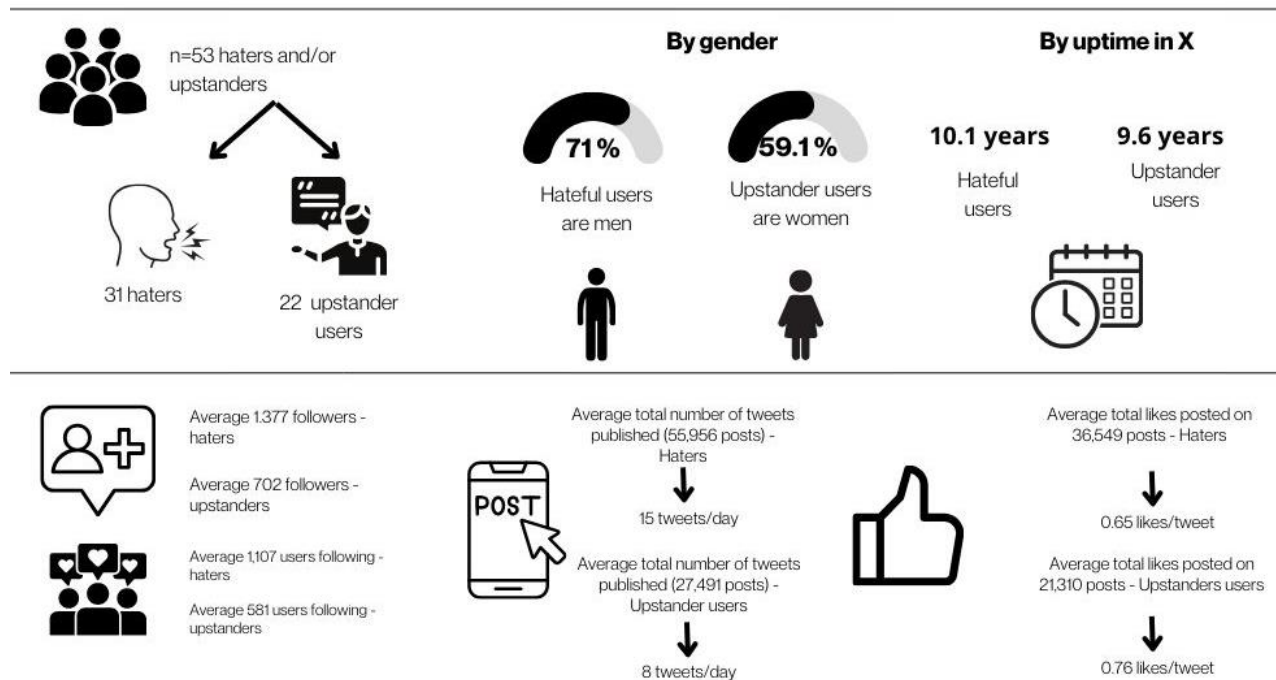**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

4.2. User profiles

Regarding the profiles of users who emit extreme and offensive hate, upstander or counter-narrative discourses, around the news published by the news media taken as a case study (SO4), it is possible to observe in Figure 3 features that facilitate the establishment of differences between each of these types of users. Between both types of individuals, differences can be observed in some of the dimensions analyzed in this paper, which allows for the establishment of profiles between them. In instances where users employ informative content for the purpose of disparaging their female political protagonists, it has been observed that, in the majority of cases, these users are associated with public profiles that indicate their male gender. This is in comparison with those who promote counter-narrative discourses in the comments they publish, which are usually more associated with accounts with a female profile.

In the case of their activity on X, differences can also be seen between both types of users, as represented by the data in Figure 3. In general terms, users who disseminate extreme or offensive hate have an average profile with a greater capacity to disseminate their narratives, compared to users who promote counter-narratives against this type of discourse. This, in view of the greater number of followers and daily activity they carry out on platforms such as X. An activity that is carried out in accounts that have a slightly longer presence on this social platform than upstanders but, above all, their activity and number of followers tend to have a lower capacity to react to the number of daily messages they publish. The data presented herein indicates that, on the aforementioned, although the haters have a greater number of users, followers and active participants on average per day compared to the upstanders, the latter appear to demonstrate a superior capacity to elicit favorable reactions from third parties (readers) in response to their messages when confronted with hate messages disseminated via the news outlets' accounts examined in this study. This is evidenced by the

comparison of the number of likes and messages received for each tweet published by the upstanders with the number received by the haters.

Figure 3. *Profile of users disseminators of hate versus upstanders of the figure*.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5. DISCUSSION

The results shown in this study confirm the hypothesis proposed in this work and in previous studies by Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021). That is, spaces for debate around informative content published by digital media on X have become spaces that promote offensive and discriminatory hate speech against women in politics. The analyzed comments do not become threatening, but rather insulting. That is, they would be more focused on a hate of intensity that would not be considered a hate crime. This added to the fact that those who promote the offensive discourse are not considered to be influencers based on their number of followers. This coincides with the findings of (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021) who state in their study that not all negative comments can qualify as abusive hate speech. As discussed in the results section, the analyzed haters have an average of 1,377 followers. In this scenario, haters do not seem to have effective counterweights, as highlighted by upstanders (average user count of 581). This lack of regulation and response favors the legitimization of prejudices and stereotypes against these public opinion figures.

Regarding objectives 1 and 2 raised in this paper, the presence of offensive speeches directed towards women who hold political office disclosed from the comments posted around the news content shared by the media digital news on X stands out. Additionally, there is a low presence of counter-narrative speeches and a high percentage of users passively participating in the dissemination of messages with hate speech. Studies such as that of Richardson-Self (2021) highlight the scope and impact of online harassment directed at women, as well as the role of digital platforms in contributing to it. Furthermore, these studies reinforce the role of social networks (X, in our case) and digital media channels in promoting the manosphere at the level of Spanish public (Ging & Garvey, 2018; Nayel & Shashirekha, 2019).

This context encourages the amplification of messages containing offensive hate speech directed at female politicians, with levels of intensity that are uncivil, malicious, and insulting (Blanco-Valencia et al., 2024). According to studies conducted by Bustos Martínez et al. (2019), the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2023), and NATO (Bergmanis-Korät & Haidechyk, 2024), social media (especially X) contributes to the prevalence of this discourse toward different groups. These messages, which are disseminated and go viral in a digital environment that does not favor their containment, enhance the ability to promote exclusionary, prejudiced, or stereotypical narratives within public opinion. This phenomenon affects female politicians in Spain and everything they represent at a personal or human level, as well as from an institutional point of view.

Regarding specific objective 3, the main thematic axis associated with the comments published towards female politicians is related to expressions of contempt or personal offenses. In addition, other expressions are shown, although in a lower percentage, linked to acts of corruption or criminality, followed by disparagement for mental health reasons. This communicative context shows a clear hostile climate, directed towards female political agents in Spain. In this sense, the news published by the media themselves in social networks such as X have become spaces where hateful users seem to have a favorable framework for the promotion of prejudices and stereotypes against these social actors. This study identified more hate in some digital media than in others in terms of intensity, type, and number of comments (Figure 2). Specifically, the sample analyzed shows that more offensive hate messages appear in the media profiles of *20 Minutos* and *El Mundo*. *El País* stands out for counter-narrative messages, and *La Vanguardia* stands out for neutral messages. These differences could be due to various factors, such as the editorial line, the audience of each media outlet, the number of followers per outlet, the number of news items they publish, the dissemination of their news information, their reach, etc.

This debate covers topics that influenced the news agenda during the studied period, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Catalan independence, the assault on the U.S. Congress, and male political figures, both nationally and internationally. All, through the constant use of disparaging expressions, challenging their mental state and the assignment of corrupt or criminal traits, as the main strategies of disqualification employed towards this group, from the comments linked to the news published by the digital news media in X.

The results are in line with the studies by Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021), Juárez-Rodríguez et al. (2021), Sigma Dos (2021), Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022) in terms of the special attention being paid to messages containing expressions of hatred toward female institutional figures such as those identified in this study. This is, first, due to their status as a member of the national political sector. Their image is instrumentalized to increase the conflict and polarization of the Spanish political arena, through the normalization of insults (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Roldán, 2021; Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Shroff & Nayak, 2023). And second, because of its function to channel misogynistic character attacks that seek to position sexist narratives and reinforce negative stereotypes (Couldry, 2019). These discourses belittle and stigmatize women in both their personal and professional spheres. In this sense, the spaces of social debate in X, would be favoring the promotion of a type of media and institutional violence directed at women politicians. As Bernal-Triviño (2019), Nau (2021), Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022) or Shroff and Nayak (2023) indicate, a normalization of symbolic violence against towards women and a weakening of democracy are being generated, to the extent that these discourses become established in public opinion.

Thus, media outlets responsible for moderating their social users should play a more active role in containing hate and offensive speeches. This is especially important in the absence of containment mechanisms at the level of the social platforms themselves. Currently, it is a priority for the media to intervene to prevent the loss of veracity of information shared by them on social networks. This can be achieved by positioning debates with a relevant presence of messages containing insulting, disqualifying, and incriminating hate speech (Sepúlveda Legorreta & Flores Treviño, 2019).

As Bustos Martínez et al. (2019) noted, social networks have become favorable spaces for users to generate discourses and take advantage of the difficulty in identifying their profiles. The manual analysis conducted in this

study (specific objective 4) allowed us to characterize users who disseminate hate speech and counter-narratives around news content published by digital news media in X, towards women who hold political office. These findings are relevant for measuring the magnitude of the problem and evaluating the capacity of the media to contain this type of expressions from the contents published by the media themselves, under a digital environment with clear deficiencies at the time of eliminating offensive comments or hate speeches. All this, in order to better understand the toxicity capacity of hate messages directed at female politicians, from the accounts linked to digital news media with presence in X, in the terms exposed by Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022), from the identification of those who promote this type of messages, as well as those who actively confront them (upstanders).

The data suggest significant differences in the profiles of haters and upstanders. The former are mostly men with a large number of followers who participate more actively and are more engaged in confrontation. Their high level of interaction contributes to the virality of their messages. In contrast, upstanders tend to be women with less of a presence in these debates, fewer followers, and less of an impact on containing hate speech. These differences have implications for identifying both profiles and their ability to promote hate or counter-narratives. Furthermore, these findings reinforce the conclusions of authors such as Kaul de Marlangeon (2019), Verduzco Arguelles et al. (2020), Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022), Carrillo Expósito (2020), and Hussain et al. (2022).

The results of this study can serve as a basis for the design of strategies that not only help to better understand misogynist hatred, but also contribute to reduce the gap between haters and upstanders. To do this, it is necessary to encourage greater participation from users who currently act passively. The media must break with the climate of violence that is generated in their digital spaces, a problem pointed out by Levin (2022) and Pont-Sorribes and Suau-Gomilla (2019), who warn about the role of the media in the normalization of these discourses.

For this reason, it is crucial to implement more effective detection, training and moderation measures. These measures should be active and preventive, not just reactive. it is important to encourage critical responses from upstanders and neutral users. Digital media should particularly evaluate the reliability and accuracy of information shared from social media and regularly review and update policies to adapt to new forms of hate speech that may arise (Paasch-Colberg & Strippel, 2022). Additionally, it would be relevant for the media to provide resources and guidelines on how to engage in online discussions in a constructive manner, facilitate an easy-to-use reporting system for users to report inappropriate content to the media, as well as highlight and amplify content that promotes tolerance and respect (Wintterlin et al., 2020). All of this must be supported by an institutional framework that not only acts on threatening hate, but also on less obvious forms of hate, such as uncivil, mean-spirited, and insulting messages.

6. CONCLUSSIONS

In accordance with the objectives set out, the results of this study allow for the conclusion that offensive discourses towards female politicians are prevalent in the comments on news articles disseminated by the digital media in X. Moreover, the absence of upstanders, with sufficient relevance and the inaction of moderation mechanisms, reinforce the normalization of these discourses and the legitimization of gender prejudices and stereotypes.

After analyzing X users' comments, it has been observed that attacks towards policies are mainly focused on personal contempt, followed by accusations of corruption or criminality and disparagement on mental health grounds. These speeches are framed in relevant political debates, which reinforces their impact on public opinion and their instrumentalization to polarize the political scene.

The study has shown that hate-speakers are mostly men with a larger number of followers and greater activity in debates. In contrast, upstanders, who are mostly women, participate less actively and have a more limited impact on containing these speeches.

This confirms the proposed hypothesis. The debates on X regarding news contents published by digital media have become favorable spaces for the dissemination of hate speech against women in Spanish politics. Although these messages do not reach the threshold of hate crime, insults and disqualifications predominate, with a scarce presence of counter-narratives and a high passivity of users.

In light of these findings, the need for the media to assume a more active role in moderating the debates on their platforms is highlighted. To curb the spread of hate speech and strengthen the quality of public debate, it is essential to implement preventive strategies, encourage the participation of upstanders, and improve containment mechanisms.

Although the study shown is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis carried out in a specific period of time, in about 5 of the main digital news media in Spain, it can be considered that this research contributes to the scientific field of communication and gender studies by showing how digital platforms, in particular X, have become spaces where hostility towards female politicians is normalized and amplified. Secondly, it provides a detailed characterization of the profiles of haters and upstanders, allowing a better understanding of the dynamics of interaction and inequality in the capacity to respond to these discourses.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis carried out in this paper reveals a worrying panorama regarding the levels of toxicity promoted in social networks such as X, which could be helping to weaken democratic systems such as the one existing in Spain, as Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022) point out, given the presence of a high percentage of hate detected in the selected period of time for addressing the proposed topic. This hatred does not reach the highest levels of intensity, but rather seeks to get to levels of intensity focused on establishing narrative rhetoric that aims to undermine and marginalize the influence of women in politics. This is done by normalizing sexist prejudices and stereotypes and attempting to associate these personalities with cases of corruption or criminality. In this case study, it would be done by looking for ways to spread hateful messages that help make political debates more polarizing. During these debates, women who play a leading role in politics become the focus of attention in the content shared by the media and amplified by social media users (Falkenberg et al., 2024).

In the case of misogynist hate, this is presented as a form of representation of the male supremacism and incel culture, characterized by extreme hostility towards women, which is intertwined with anti-feminist movements and extremist ideological groups, especially supremacist and conservative, as pointed out by Dafaure (2022), O'Hanlon et al. (2023), Kupferschmidt (2024) or Falkenberg et al. (2024).

The scenario described in this study is in line with previous studies, both in Spain and internationally, such as those mentioned in this paper (Piñeiro-Otero &Martínez-Roldán, 2021; Juárez et al., 2021; Esposito &Breeze, 2022; Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Hussain et al., 2022; Shroff & Nayak, 2023; Weaving et al., 2023). These studies highlight the significant attention that women in prominent roles receive when they are the primary targets of hate speech on social media platforms like X.

This is a time when the affective polarization promoted in social networks, especially in X, is opening an important process of reflection at the level of many news media, both Spanish and international (case *La Vanguardia*, *CNN* and *The Guardian*), as to the relevance of continuing to be in this type of scenarios (*La Vanguardia*, 2024; Soni & Signh, 2024). Whether or not opting for the "way out" as a legitimate response option in the face of the growing level of polarization and disinformation shared from social networks, especially on X, the results in this work point to an equally important need, that of emphasizing the capacity of the media, social platforms and policy makers to take concerted action to help improve the scenario of dissemination of hate speech, such as the one addressed in this research. In this way, it is intended to achieve that women in politics can participate freely in this type of digital communication spaces, without the fear of being preferential targets of hate speech.

In view of the above, it is necessary to advance in several lines of action. Firstly, the implementation of robust tools (based on machine learning) that help in the detection (in real time) and moderation of this type of messages, developing clear community guidelines (codes of conduct) that define inappropriate behavior within the debates and describe the practical consequences of violations.

Secondly, public awareness campaigns should be designed and launched to educate individuals who interact with messages published by users associated with the media. In this way, it would create a scenario in which the presence of haters is counterbalanced by a greater number of users (upstanders) who actively participate in establishing counter-narratives that avoid promoting exclusionary, prejudiced, or stereotyped narratives within public opinion against female politicians and all that they represent at a personal or human level, but also from the institutional point of view.

Other avenues for action raised in this paper suggest the need to review the relevance of policies to combat the dissemination of hate speech from the social platforms themselves. Although these policies exist, institutions such as The Center for Countering of Hate, NATO and the results shown in this paper show how ineffective they are, given the significant percentage of misogynist messages detected, the intensity of hate associated with them, and the elimination capacity that social platforms such as X seem to be providing against the proliferation of this type of messages.

The above requireswork that should be led by the public administrations in charge of regulating the commercial action provided by the platforms, rather than by the media themselves, but considerate must be taken into account that what is shown in this work, is a clear example of the need to move forward in the sharing of a framework of minimum actions that help fight against the proliferation of messages with hate speech, paying special attention not only to those that are threatening, but also those that present lower levels of intensity. Messages that, as shown in this work, are the ones that have more presence within the scenarios of debates promoted around the contents shared by the digital news media studied on X.

Finally, given the nature of this study, it is essential to advance in further research that deepens the understanding of the profile of haters and upstanders, as well as the strategies that both employ for the dissemination and combat of hate speech. It is also relevant to analyze the possible coordination behind the dissemination of these messages and the types of hate speech that generate the greatest response from upstanders. Additionally, exploring the use of advanced natural language processing techniques for a longitudinal analysis of the phenomenon is necessary. These tools would make it possible to identify writing patterns, map interactions between users, analyze the main topics of discussion and examine the relationship between journalistic approaches in news coverage of female politicians and the presence of hate speech directed towards them.

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Conflict of interest: None

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