

The portrayal of sex in online media as conflictive, feminized behavior far from hedonic pleasure

Rubén Olveira-Araujo; José-Luis Argiñano

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Rubén Olveira-Araujo ✉

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4797-8746>

Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea
Facultad de las Ciencias Sociales y de la Comunicación
Sarriena Auzoa, 48940 Leioa, Spain
ruben.olveira@ehu.eus



José-Luis Argiñano

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8191-6309>

Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea
Facultad de las Ciencias Sociales y de la Comunicación
Sarriena Auzoa, 48940 Leioa, Spain
jose Luis.arguinano@ehu.eus

Abstract

Sex is news. Sex is widely present in the media, from news pieces on abuse, pornography, and scandals to reports on hedonic practices and erotic tendencies. To investigate its portrayal in the media, we carried out a quantitative content analysis ($n = 950$) of the journalistic pieces in which sex appears, published in the Spanish online media *eldiario.es*, *el-pais.com*, and *abc.es* during 2019. In addition, a distinction is made between three dimensions of sex: sex as a condition ("sex that one is"), sex as behavior ("sex that is done"), and sex as an attribute ("sex that one has"). The results of this study indicate that more than two-thirds of the analyzed news pieces address sex as a behavior with potential negative consequences. Likewise, the terminological analysis reveals the feminization of news about sex, especially with regard to sex as a condition. Consequently, the online press does not advance beyond the hegemonic image but is rather limited to disseminating stereotypes established in society and thereby contributes to maintaining and propagating sexophobic and erotophobic attitudes. This scenario suggests a lack of communication strategies to report on sex, with the exception of those incorporating the gender perspective. However, when understood based on a prism of power relations, this approach only intensifies the discourse against it. These findings underscore the need to rethink media narratives about sex and adopt other propositional approaches for framing sex as a value.

Keywords

Sex; Journalism; Media representation; Online newspapers; Digital journalism; Content analysis; Sexophobia; Newsworthiness criteria; Terminological analysis; Communication strategies; Feminization.

1. Introduction

Sex is a core dimension that traverses human nature. As such, its position in various cultural products, such as the media, comes as no surprise (Manning, 2021). Sex is widely present in the media, from news pieces on abuse, pornography, and scandals to reports on hedonic practices and erotic tendencies. Its portrayal in the media is extremely important given that, according to the agenda-setting theory, the media are capable of shaping the collective imagination in the long term, giving prominence to some issues and frames over others (McCombs, 2006). This theory is rooted in the phenomenal or limited effects approach, according to which the media, rather than creating or modifying values, reinforce those that already exist (Klapper, 1974). In this way, they influence public opinion and the values and attitudes of citizens (Lippmann, 2003; McCombs; Shaw; Weaver, 2014; Melek; Ulucay, 2019); That is, to a certain degree, it can be concluded that the media may have the capacity to empower or problematize not only erotic encounters but also social interactions between the sexes and the experience of living as a sexual being.

When deciding which topics to publish and which features to include, journalists are guided by a set of professional and organizational values (Wolf, 2000) known as newsworthiness criteria (Martini, 2000), among which conflicts or struggles between the relevant parties stand out (Armentia-Vizueté; Caminos-Marcet, 2009). More generically, it is found that negative news attracts greater attention (Shoemaker, 2006) due to the conviction in the communication sector that bad news generates greater audience interest (Sarráis, 2020). As a result, the media favor negative over positive events in their coverage. Likewise, media attention patterns favor news with dramatic content (Nisbet; Brossard; Kroepsch, 2003), an effect which is reinforced by the presence of the young victim, in an attempt to increase audience figures (Olivar-de-Julián; Díaz-Campo, 2020). This can translate into the sale of news as entertainment, for example, with links between sensationalism and crime (Almuiña-Fernández; Martín-de-la-Guardia; Pelaz-López, 2016).

“Distinguishing between the different notions and dimensions of sex not only is essential to clarify and specify the object of study but also favors a correct interpretation of the results”

Although the transformation from paper to online media has relaxed the straitjacket imposed by the limited physical space of the former and widened the scope of journalistic work (Iglesias-García, 2012), the capacity of the media to offer news remains limited. They thus continue to be forced to select and rank, thus resorting to newsworthiness criteria. The internet has also not eradicated the effects of vertical transfer; indeed, it is still the media that influence the audience and to a lesser extent the other way around, despite the possibility for the reader to become a producer or prosumer (Meraz, 2011).

Most literature on sex and the media has focused on analyses and the influence of television programs and fictional audiovisual products, whether that be non-explicit or pornographic content (Coyné *et al.*, 2019). The presence of sex in video clips, song lyrics, and video games has also been addressed (Ward, 2016). Regarding media and journalistic content, almost all investigations have addressed sex from a gender perspective, i.e., from a point of view in which the woman appears pushed into the background by the man because of heteropatriarchal power relations. This positioning has led to a focus in academic literature on two central points of view:

- The objectification of women;
- Aggressions labeled with the adjective “sexual”.

Within the former group, work on the treatment of prostitution and trafficking of women stand out in the media (Sobel, 2016; Sobel; Friedman; Johnston, 2019; Suppiah *et al.*, 2019; etc.). On the other hand, research in the latter group focuses on coverage of rape and “sexual” assaults (Baum; Cohen; Zhukov, 2018; Biressi, 2019; etc.) and, to a lesser extent, abuse of minors (Christensen, 2018; Gjika, 2020). Other relevant works in this area offer alternative approaches such as analyses of the treatment of sexual scandals (Juntunen; Väliverronen, 2010), albeit from a negative viewpoint of sex.

This negative portrayal of sex in the media is essentially observed through female sexuality and its association with a kind of adversity, from unplanned pregnancies or genitally transmitted infections – commonly identified as sexually transmitted diseases or infections (STDs or STIs) – to abuse or rape (Ward, 2003). In contrast, male sexuality is not reflected in the media in a problematized way but rather appears as a natural fact albeit including aggressive components (Durham, 1998; Joshi; Peter; Valkenburg, 2011).

2. Sex from the sexological viewpoint

So far, we have discussed sex as though it had but a single meaning. However, sex as a concept is so polysemic that it can refer to very different realities and constructs, sometimes resulting in a degree of misunderstanding (Sáez-Sesma, 2017). At least two factors influence this potential confusion (Landarroitauregi, 2016):

- In the West, sex has been epistemologically shaped through different notions;
- Intellectually, different dimensions have been intermixed through the shared use of the semantic root “sex.”

Distinguishing between the different notions and dimensions of sex not only is essential to clarify and specify the object of study but also favors a correct interpretation of the results. Indeed, each notion and dimension probably corresponds to a different representation due to its intrinsic characteristics.

Note that we focus herein on the dimensions of sex, leaving its epistemological conceptions for future research. Also, considering the multiplicity of views that include sex as an object of study –such as the gender perspective (Hernández-García, 2006) or queer theory (Butler, 2004)– this work is based on the sexological approach and, more specifically, on substantive sexology [*sexología sustantiva*] (Amezúa, 2003; Landarroitauregi, 2001). This approach is characterized by an integrative viewpoint that, by understanding sex in a holistic way, offers a solid conceptual framework to allow, among other analyses, consistent differentiation between the different fields encompassed by sex.

Broadly speaking, three dimensions of sex can be distinguished:

- The first, which refers to sex as a sexual condition or “sex that one is,” is related to the fact of being different (and unique) because of sex;
- The second refers to sexual conduct or “sex that is done”; that is, it limits sex to practices and, to a lesser extent, desires;

- The third, the result of the endocrinologist John Money's distinction between sex and gender, refers to sexual attributes or "sex that one has."

From a sexological viewpoint, the condition of "sex that one is" is ranked above the behavior of "sex that is done" and the attributes of "sex that one has," in such a way that sex is defined as that

"multifactorial condition –present in at least the biological, psychological, and cultural domains– that specifies and differentiates intersexually and dimorphically classifies individuals of the majority of living species, promoting a function that we call the desire for union and that, potentially, provides synergy" (Landarroitajuregi, 2016).

Even so, one cannot ignore that Western society understands sex in a genital sense and, more so, as something that is done with the genitals. One could even go further to say, as something that is done with the genitals to procreate –consciously or unconsciously– a new generation. And of course, everything that does not generate degenerates (physiologically, psychologically, and morally). In other words, the dimension of "sex that is done" is ranked above the others, and being further understood as a source of danger, a negative weight is added that makes this risk justifiable when this behavior is related to procreation but not in other cases. This way of understanding sex, which is known as the paradigm of the *genus* (Landarroitajuregi, 2012), is sexophobic, since it exhibits a fear or animosity towards sex, but above all erotophobic, since this fear and antipathy are focused especially on its behavioral dimension.

The aforementioned research on the portrayal of sex in the media deals with sex as behavior or "sex that is done."

Some literature in the communication field also considers sex as a sexual condition or "sex that one is," in which the

gender perspective predominates (Braumüller; Emberger; Hartmann-Tews, 2020; Murphy; Rek, 2019; etc.), as well as on the various features associated with sexual diversity, such as those included in the acronym LGTB and that mainly stem from queer theory (Åkerlund, 2018; Billard, 2016; etc.). However, we did not find any papers addressing sex from a holistic perspective.

Regarding their portrayal of sex, Spanish online media propagate the journalistic maxim of "Bad news is good news"

The objective of this study is to analyze the portrayal of sex in online media. With the aim of offering a comprehensive overview of this subject and to lay the foundations for understanding the coverage of such a complex construct in the media, the three above-mentioned dimensions of sex are applied as one of the most basic differentiations with greater conceptual scope. Specifically, this work aims to answer the following research questions:

- How is sex portrayed in online media?
- What are the main differences depending on the different dimensions of sex?

3. Methods

To answer these research questions, a quantitative content analysis was carried out (Krippendorff, 2004). This technique is capable of systematically extracting the components, internal relationships, and transformations of media coverage to enable reproducible and valid inferences.

3.1. Sample

The analyzed sample ($n = 950$) comprises articles published during 2019 in the online newspapers *eldiario.es*, *elpais.com*, and *abc.es* containing the semantic root "sex." The sample was collected in three phases. Firstly, the media to be analyzed were selected by convenience sampling, considering their nationwide coverage, general scope, circulation, and editorial line. Indeed, the three selected newspapers are among the ten most widely consumed online media in Spain based on the number of unique users (Comscore, 2019) and represent different positions on the editorial spectrum, from the conservative *abc.es* to the progressive *eldiario.es*. Meanwhile, note that, while *elpais.com* and *abc.es* are digital extensions of conventional media (in both cases, the printed press), *eldiario.es* is a digital native.

Next, the articles for the period 2019 that included the semantic root "sex" at the beginning of a word were downloaded; for example, this thus included "sex," "sexual," and "sexuality" but not "homosexual" or "transsexuality." To carry out this search, the search engine of the medium itself was used in the case of *abc.es*, while for *elpais.com* and *eldiario.es*, given the limitations of their search engines, the newspaper archive and sitemap were used, respectively. Likewise, other non-sex-related declensions of "sex," such as "sexto" ["sixth"] were also eliminated. The resulting corpus for analysis was formed of $n = 16,378$ pieces.

Finally, the minimum size of the corpus sample to guarantee representativeness with a confidence level of 99% and error margin of 5% was calculated ($n = 640$). Using random sampling proportional to the size of each cluster, a slightly larger sample than necessary was then drawn ($n = 950 > n = 640$).

3.2. Tools applied

The corpus was obtained by using the web scraping technique via several web spiders developing for this work in the Scrapy open-source framework (Kouzis-Loukas, 2016). For the random sampling of the clusters, the *Random* library of the Python programming language was applied. On the other hand, the coding protocol (see Annex) was obtained by combining part of the proposals by Argiñano and Oliveira-Araujo (2019) for the analysis of sex in the media together with two additional variables: *Famous people* and *Minors*.

More specifically, the variables *Media title* and *Month* were obtained from the metadata of each article. Regarding the variable *Dimension of sex*, each document was coded as follows:

- “Sex that one is” when the semantic root “sex” refers to the condition of being different (for example, sexes, sexual differentiation, etc.);
- “Sex that one has” when it refers to both physiological and psychological attributes (sex hormones, sexually transmitted diseases, etc.);
- “Sex that is done” when it relates to behavior and desires (practicing sex, sexual attraction, etc.).

Regarding the variable *Predominance*, the coding was carried out based on the position of the semantic root “sex” in the structure of the text and its frequency. Thus:

- When it appeared only once in the body of the news without being related to the headline, it was categorized as a *Mention*;
- When it appeared on more than one occasion or was related to the headline, it was coded as a *Subtopic*;
- When it was present in the headline or first paragraph, it was qualified as the *Topic*.

The variable *Tone*, on the other hand, was used to assess whether the semantic root “sex” was related to *Positive*, *Neutral*, or *Negative* aspects, while the *Theme* variable included two large categories:

- General news, including sections such as *Society*, *Politics*, or *Economy*;
- Entertainment, including *Culture*, *TV*, *Sports*, etc.

Finally, the *Famous people* and *Minors* variables reflected the presence of famous figures (celebrities, politicians, people involved in well-publicized cases, etc.) and of minors in relation to the semantic root “sex.”

The coding phase was carried out with the assistance of the qualitative analysis software *NVivo* (*QSR International*, 2020), which among other features enables analysis of the most used terms. The results obtained were analyzed using the statistical program *SPSS* (*IBM Corp.*, 2016).

3.3. Procedures

Once the sample had been obtained, coding was carried out using the protocol described above with the article as the unit of analysis. This process was carried out by two coders who were initially trained using 20% of the sample. To ensure the reliability of the results, an intercoder reliability test was performed using another 10% of the sample. On average, a Cohen Kappa coefficient of 0.83 (SD = 0.11) was obtained, with a range among the variables of 0.7–1. The rest of the sample was then coded, including the training subsample, and cases in which doubts remained were reconsidered afterwards. Likewise, an analysis of the most widely used terms was added to this coding process to triangulate the results of the *Sex dimension* variable and explore the attributes of the documents.

For the analysis, basic descriptive statistics applicable to qualitative and semiquantitative variables were applied, as well as test statistics such as chi-squared, Cramer’s *V* or Somers’ *d*. On the other hand, a two-phase cluster analysis was applied to establish the most common types of news pieces. Although this method calculates the optimal number of clusters based on the information provided, nearby clustering levels were also explored. To evaluate the cluster analysis, the silhouette coefficient was used, following the quality criteria of **Kaufman** and **Rousseeuw** (1990).

4. Results

4.1. General portrayal of sex

The technique applied to capture the corpus from the online newspapers *eldiario.es*, *elpais.com*, and *abc.es* recovered a total of 16,378 news pieces published in 2019 and containing the semantic root “sex.” Among the three newspapers, the highest volume corresponded to *eldiario.es* (50.4%), followed by *abc.es* (30.3%) and *elpais.com* (19.4%). The news pieces in the analyzed sample ($n = 950$) revealed a neutral temporal trend, with no major changes observed among the months of the year, as well as a clear tendency to highlight the negative aspects of sex, with positive news being practically absent (Table 1). Sex was coded almost as many times as the main topic than as a mere mention throughout the text and, to a lesser extent, as a recurring subtopic. General news sections were the preferred location for these pieces, pushing the entertainment sections into the background. Regarding the people involved, famous people were limited to less than one-third of the news pieces and minors to one in five. Beyond these findings, statistically significant differences were found between some of the variables, the main results of which are presented below.

4.1.1. Tone

As mentioned above, news pieces about sex on Spanish online media exhibited a clear tendency to highlight its negative aspects (“This is our secret: sexual abuse of minors shouldn’t be covered up” [“Este es nuestro secreto: los abusos sexuales a menores no deben silenciarse”], *abc.es*, June 2019). To a lesser extent, they were presented from a neutral viewpoint, while hardly any news pieces adopted a positive tone (“Exercises for women to improve their sexuality” [“Ejercicios para ella que mejoran su sexualidad”], *elpais.com*, December 2019). However, statistically significant differences were observed regarding the variables *Predominance*, *Theme*, *Minors*, and *Media title*.

In this way, a direct correlation of moderate intensity was observed between *Tone* and *Predominance*, with the relevance of sex being greater as its negative image increased, $\chi^2(4, N = 950) = 62.24, p < 0.01, d = 0.30$; and conversely, the

more neutral or less negative its presentation, the lower its predominance within the article. This negative view was also detected more frequently in the general news sections. In the entertainment sections, on the other hand, it was more commonly presented in a neutral or positive way. The analysis by subsections (in which, due to their characteristics, test statistics could not be applied) revealed that they all conveyed a mostly negative view, mainly:

- In *Politics*, related to legislation (“The Congress supports the elimination of the difference between abuse and sexual assault” [“El Congreso apoya que se suprima la diferencia entre el abuso y la agresión sexual”], *abc.es*, February 2019);
- In *Sports*, linked to news of abuse and aggression (“The video of Neymar with the woman who accuses him of rape emerges” [“Sale a la luz el video de Neymar con la mujer que le acusa de violación”], *abc.es*, June 2019).

The exception to this rule was the *Television* category, in which most of the news was evaluated as neutral.

Among the three selected newspapers, *eldiario.es* clearly presented the highest percentage of negative tone coding, followed by *abc.es* and *elpais.com*. When focusing on the texts with a positive angle, the opposite tendency emerged. In other words, the softest and least aggressive texts about sex were found on *elpais.com*, while *eldiario.es* presented a more intense exploration of the negative aspects of sex. The negative tone was also intensified when it coincided with the involvement of minors (“Cases of sexual abuse and child abuse in Madrid double” [“Se duplican los casos de abusos sexuales y maltrato infantil en Madrid”], *abc.es*, March 2019). In fact, the coding of news including minors with a neutral or positive tone was testimonial. In contrast, the presence of famous people did not present statistically significant results in relation to tone.

Table 1. Differences in the analyzed variables versus *Tone*

Tone	Negative		Neutral		Positive		Total		χ^2	V
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Predominance										
Topic	314	42	28	15	8	35	350	37	62.24***	0.45 ^a
Subtopic	200	27	47	25	7	30	254	27		
Mention	229	31	109	60	8	35	346	36		
Theme										
General news	630	85	122	66	12	52	764	80	43.95***	0.21
Entertainment	113	15	62	34	11	48	186	20		
Famous people										
Present	234	31	51	28	10	43	295	31	2.65	-
Minors										
Present	177	24	19	10	2	9	195	21	18.16***	0.13
Media title										
<i>abc.es</i>	218	29	62	34	8	35	288	30	19.99**	0.145
<i>elpais.com</i>	126	17	50	27	8	35	184	20		
<i>eldiario.es</i>	399	54	72	39	7	30	478	50		
Total	743	100	184	100	23	100	950	100		

Note: n = 950. χ^2 = chi-squared test; V = Cramer's V.
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
^a Goodman and Kruskal's γ is used instead of Cramer's V.

4.1.2. Predominance

Sex was coded almost as many times as the main topic as a mere mention throughout the text and, to a lesser extent, as a recurring subtopic. As mentioned above, it was observed that a negative portrayal of sex was more frequent when it was the main topic, while its neutral presentation became more common with its decreasing predominance in the article. Likewise, it was found that the presence of minors intensified the predominance of sex, χ^2 (2, N = 950) = 38.7, p < 0.01, V = 0.202. In this way, in news pieces in which sex and minors appeared together, it was more frequent for sex to be (part of) the main topic (52%) and, to a lesser extent, a subtopic (30%) or mere mention (18%). No statistically significant differences were observed with respect to the other variables.

4.1.3. Theme

In the sample obtained, news considered to correspond to the general sections (*Society, Politics, Economy, and Opinion*) was in a clear majority compared with those coded as entertainment (*Culture, Television, and Sports*). This difference was stronger for *eldiario.es* (86% and 14%, respectively) compared with *elpais.com* (73% and 27%) or *abc.es* (76% and 24%), χ^2 (2, N = 950) = 18.02, p < 0.01, V = 0.138. As mentioned above, negative views of sex were found more often in the former than the latter (Table 2). Similarly, significant differences were observed depending on the presence of famous people and minors, χ^2 (1, N = 950) = 110.26, p < 0.01, V = 0.341 and χ^2 (1, N = 950) = 5.48, p < 0.05, V = 0.19, res-

pectively. Specifically, the former were more frequent in the entertainment than general news sections (63% and 23%), while the reverse was true for the latter (14% and 22%).

These results confirm the predominance of the general news sections, with more than half of the articles that contained the semantic root “sex” being published specifically in the *Society* section (59.2%), followed by the *Politics* (14.3%), *Culture* (13.1%), *Television* (4.7%), *Opinion* (4.7%), *Economy* (1.9%), and *Sports* sections (1.8%). This general trend showed nuances when analyzed by title, $\chi^2 (1, N = 947) = 78.779, p < 0.01, V = 0.288$. For example, compared with *eldiario.es*, *abc.es* and *elpais.com* showed a greater propensity to address sex in the *Television* and *Sports* sections (“The strident sexual confessions of a young woman on *First Date*” [“Las estridentes confesiones sexuales de una joven en *First Date*”], *abc.es*, December 2019), while *eldiario.es* was the most likely to deal with it in *Politics* and *Economics* pieces compared with the other newspapers (“Sánchez to Álvarez de Toledo: ‘Yes, yes, yes. Consent is essential to define whether sexual assault occurs’” [“Sánchez, a Álvarez de Toledo: ‘Sí, sí, sí el consentimiento es fundamental para definir si hay agresión sexual’”], *eldiario.es*, April 2019).

Note that *Culture* and *Television* were the only sections in which the tendency to publish negative news was reversed, $\chi^2 (1, N = 950) = 21.147, p < 0.01, V = 0.149$ and $\chi^2 (1, N = 950) = 37.239, p < 0.01, V = 0.198$, respectively.

4.1.4. Media title

Regarding the different media, *eldiario.es* clearly presented the highest percentage of negative tone codings, followed by *abc.es* and *elpais.com*. Likewise, this online newspaper also gave higher priority to the general news sections, especially *Society* and *Politics*, compared with the other two. Meanwhile, *abc.es* offered news on sex including minors in its articles more frequently than *eldiario.es* or *elpais.com* (47.5%, 36.9%, and 15.6%, respectively). In some cases, they appeared as direct victims (“Cases of sexual abuse and child abuse in Madrid double” [“Se duplican los casos de abusos sexuales y maltrato infantil en Madrid”], *abc.es*, March 2019) but in others as under the protection of the Church or victims of the education system (“Bishop of Solsona (Lleida, Spain) says that ‘gender ideology permeates’ teaching material” [“El obispo de Solsona dice que la ‘ideología de género impregna’ el material didáctico”], *abc.es*, February 2019), or as victims of allegedly exclusive feminist policies (“Feminism in Pixar drawings and double moral standards” [“El feminismo en los dibujos de Pixar y la doble moral”], *abc.es*, June 2019). No statistically significant differences were observed with respect to the media titles and the presence of famous figures.

4.2. Sex dimensions

In addition to sex as a whole, it was also assessed in this study based on the three dimensions illustrated in Fig. 1. The coding revealed that the most frequent dimension used in the media was “sex that is done” or sex as behavior (“A bully who asked 45 Spanish and Latin American girls for photos or sex has been arrested” [“Detenido un acosador que pidió fotos o sexo a 45 niñas españolas y latinoamericanas”], *abc.es*, March 2019), corresponding to 79% of the sample. This was followed by “sex that one is” or sex as a condition (for example, “An Irish school allows its students to wear skirts or trousers regardless of their gender” [“Un colegio irlandés permitirá a sus alumnos llevar falda o pantalón sin importar su sexo”], *abc.es*, July 2019), present in 19% of cases. Finally, the dimension of “sex that one has” or sex as an attribute (“‘El Palapati’, in charge of manually reviewing the sexual attributes of each new pope” [“‘El Palapati’, encargado de revisar manualmente los atributos sexuales de cada nuevo pontífice”], *abc.es*, May 2019) was limited to 2%. Note that statistically significant differences were found between the dimensions of sex and all the variables described above (Table 2). Even so, not all of them presented the same degree of association: while an intermediate degree of association with *Tone* was observed, the relationship with the others was weak.

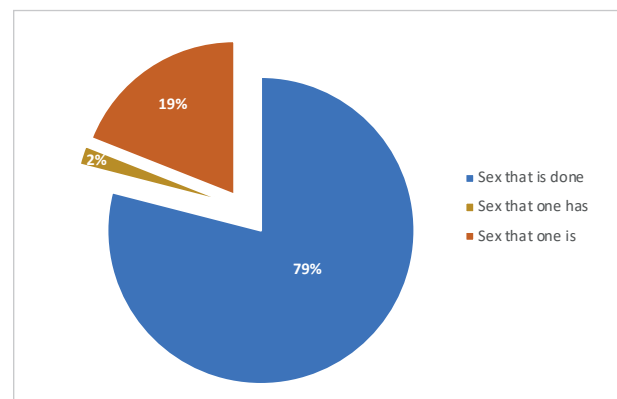


Figure 1. Dimensions of sex in the analyzed journalistic pieces.
Note: $n = 950$

From these relationships, the following findings could be extracted:

- “Sex that is done” appeared more frequently as the main topic and to a lesser extent as a mere mention. “Sex that one is,” on the other hand, exhibited the opposite trend. In both cases, sex appeared as a subtopic in a similar percentage;
- In the “sex that is done” dimension, the tone was polarized, presenting sex fundamentally in a negative and rarely in a neutral way. In addition, despite their low number, practically all of the positive evaluations were found in articles on “sex that is done.” However, regarding “sex that one is,” no such polarization was observed.

In general, *abc.es* was the online newspaper most prone to include texts about “sex that is done,” and *elpais.com* the least. In contrast, this trend was reversed with respect to “sex that one is.” Despite the greater presence of sex in general news than entertainment sections, “sex that one is” was published even more frequently in the former to the detriment of the latter, while “sex that is done” exhibited the opposite trend. Likewise, it is noteworthy that more famous people and minors were counted in articles on “sex that is done” than on “sex that one is.”

Table 2. Differences in the analyzed variables according to the variable *Sex dimension*

Sex dimension	Sex that is done		Sex that one is		Total		χ^2	V
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Tone								
Positive	22	3	1	0	23	2	125.401***	0.367
Neutral	89	12	86	48	175	19		
Negative	642	85	92	52	734	79		
Predominance								
Topic	317	42	31	17	348	37	46.013***	0.222
Subtopic	197	26	49	28	246	26		
Mention	239	32	99	55	338	36		
Theme								
General news	586	78	165	92	751	81	19.048***	0.143
Entertainment	167	22	14	8	181	19		
Famous people								
Present	258	34	32	18	290	31	18.202***	0.140
Minors								
Present	178	24	17	9	195	21	17.540***	0.137
Media title								
abc.es	238	32	45	25	283	30	3.321	-
elpais.com	139	18	40	22	179	20		
eldiario.es	376	50	94	53	470	50		
Total	753	100	179	100	932	100		
Note: To prevent the low frequency of "sex that one has" ($n = 18$) from interfering with the statistical calculations, this category was omitted from the analyses. Therefore, $n = 932$. $\chi^2 =$ chi-squared test; $V =$ Cramer's V . * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$								

4.3. Cluster analysis

The two-stage cluster analysis provided information on the *Sex dimension*, *Predominance*, *Theme*, and *Tone*¹ variables according to five large clusters or news profiles (silhouette coefficient = 0.6). The largest cluster corresponded to 32.2% of the analyzed corpus ($n = 293$). It comprises articles published in general news sections (100%) where sex is presented as negative (100%) behavior (100%), as either a subtopic (47%) or a mere mention (53%). The second cluster included 27.1% of the sample ($n = 246$). It exhibited the same characteristics as the previous cluster, except with sex as the main topic (100%). Therefore, regardless of predominance, 59.3% of the sample ($n = 539$) were articles published in general news sections that presented sex as negative behavior.

The third cluster includes 19.9% of the sample ($n = 181$). This cluster is made up of articles that valued sex in a neutral way (97%), published in general news sections (64%), in which it appeared as a mere mention (59%) as either a behavior (49%) or condition (51%). The fourth cluster includes 11.6% of the analyzed corpus ($n = 105$) and comprises articles published in entertainment sections (100%), mainly as the main topic (42%), with sex as behavior (98%) being presented in a negative way (100%). Finally, the fifth cluster includes 9.2% of the sample ($n = 84$) and is composed of articles that present sex as a condition (100%) with negative consequences (100%) in general news sections (100%) as mentions (42%).

“ The presence of sex in online media through the adjective sexual suggests that sex is used not only as a descriptor but also as an enhancer of dispute or conflict ”

At a 99% confidence level, it was estimated that 54–62% of the corpus belongs to the first two clusters, that is, articles published in general news sections where sex is presented as negative behavior. Between 16% and 23% of the articles valued sex in a neutral way, mainly published in general news sections with a mere mention of sex. Between 9% and 14% were articles published in entertainment sections that presented sex as negative behavior. And 7–12% of articles were published in general news sections, especially with sex as a mention, and presenting sex as a negative condition.

4.4. Analysis of the most frequently used terminology

The analysis of the terminology used most frequently in the texts of the sample (Table 3) revealed a grouping into three main semantic fields:

- The first, as expected given the criteria used to select the analyzed corpus, is that related to the explicit use of sex through the terms “*sexo/s*” [“sex(es)”] and “*sexual/es*” [“sexual”], which can also be extended to include “*género/s*”

["gender(s)"]. Likewise, it is worth noting the greater use of the semantic root "sex" as an adjective ("*sexual/es*" ["sexual"]) than as a noun ("*sexo/s*" ["sex(es)"]).

- The second is linked to the sexual identity of the people involved through the terms "*mujer/es*" ["woman/women"] and "*hombre/s*" ["man/men"]. The frequency of the former was considerably higher than that of the latter, evidencing the feminized aspect of news on sex. When it was preferred not to refer to sexual identity, the use of "*persona/s*" ["person/people"] was frequent, especially in the plural.
- The third semantic field is related to violence through the terms "*violencia*" ["violence"], "*víctima/s*" ["victim(s)"], and "*abuso/s*" ["abuse"] ($n = 649$, including both singular and plural forms), "*acoso*" ["harassment"] ($n = 191$), etc.

Regarding the dimensions of sex, in the news pieces about sex as a condition or "sex that one is," the broad semantic field of sexual identity was more frequent, including both the noun "*sexo/s*" ["sex(es)"] as well as "*género*" ["gender"] in addition to "*mujer/es*" ["woman/women"] and "*hombre/es*" ["man/men"], which in both cases can also refer to this set of related meanings. In the journalistic pieces about sex as conduct or "sex that is done," on the other hand, the semantic field related to violence was more frequent, which can also include part of the adjectives "*sexual/es*" ["sexual"], e.g., "*violencia sexual*" ["sexual violence"], "*víctima sexual*" ["sexual victim"], "*acoso sexual*" ["sexual harassment"], etc.

Other frequently terms included "*año/s*" ["year(s)"], among other uses being an attribute of the people involved and being mentioned repeatedly, as well as numbers ("*dos*" ["two"], "*tres*" ["three"], etc.) and words such as "*solo*" ["only"], "*caso*" ["case"], and "*favor*" ["favor"]. It is worth highlighting the use of the terms "*vida*" ["life"], which appeared more in news about sex as behavior, and "*gobierno*" ["government"], which had greater institutional presence in texts about sex as a condition. Although less frequently used, the terms "*menor/es*" ["minors"] and "*joven/es*" ["young people"] (between singular and plural, $n = 780$ and $n = 689$, respectively) also appeared in news about sex, especially in those related to "sex that is done," and LGTB/I (between both, $n = 220$).

Table 3. The terms used most frequent in the news, analyzed by *Dimension of sex*

Sex dimension		Sex that is done		Sex that one is		Total	
	Term	<i>n</i>	No. of articles	<i>n</i>	No. of articles	<i>n</i>	No. of articles
1	años	1,785	2.37	328	1.83	2,154	2.27
2	mujeres	1,271	1.69	511	2.85	1,798	1.89
3	sexual	1,242	1.65	34	0.19	1,293	1.36
4	personas	766	1.02	311	1.74	1,102	1.16
5	dos	799	1.06	173	0.97	993	1.05
6	violencia	714	0.95	143	0.80	864	0.91
7	mujer	644	0.86	180	1.01	840	0.88
8	solo	607	0.81	138	0.77	753	0.79
9	caso	606	0.80	134	0.75	746	0.79
10	vida	596	0.79	105	0.59	721	0.76
11	hombres	450	0.60	233	1.30	695	0.73
12	sexuales	637	0.85	8	0.04	659	0.69
13	año	454	0.60	170	0.95	637	0.67
14	favor	516	0.69	100	0.56	629	0.66
15	día	478	0.63	129	0.72	622	0.65
16	poder	487	0.65	101	0.56	598	0.63
17	pasado	480	0.64	103	0.58	596	0.63
18	género	413	0.55	151	0.84	582	0.61
19	gobierno	406	0.54	169	0.94	581	0.61
20	tres	468	0.62	93	0.52	569	0.60
21	sexo	338	0.45	221	1.23	567	0.60
22	ahora	450	0.60	105	0.59	566	0.60
23	mundo	398	0.53	122	0.68	538	0.57
24	víctimas	488	0.65	35	0.20	527	0.55
25	víctima	474	0.63	11	0.06	485	0.51

Note. Given the low frequency of news pieces on "sex that one has" ($n = 18$), they are not included in the table.

5. Discussion

Based on the results of the procedure applied in this study, it was observed that Spanish online media follow the journalistic maxim of “Bad news is good news” regarding sex, since they systematically present it as something negative (Sa-r-raís, 2020; Shoemaker, 2006). In addition, conflict or dispute seems to be another of the main newsworthiness criteria (Armentia-Vizueté; Caminos-Marcet, 2009; Wolf, 2000) for news about sex. In fact, violence has a strong presence in such news, especially where sex appears as behavior, as also indicated in previous works (for example, Baum; Cohen; Zhukov, 2018; Biressi, 2019; Gjika, 2020). In this way, the audience is made aware of the negative and conflictive nature of sex, while its positive aspects are hidden.

Furthermore, the presence of sex in online media through the adjective “sexual/es” [“sexual”] suggests that sex is not only used as a descriptor but also as an enhancer of dispute or conflict. As pointed out by Landarroita Jauregi (2016), if harassment, abuse, attacks, violence, and many other such crimes are already a scourge in themselves, they seem to become even more abhorrent through the addition of this adjective; That is, beyond being a topic, sex also seems to act as a reinforcer of the newsworthiness criterion based on conflict, in accordance with studies indicating that dramatization receives greater attention from the media (Nisbet; Brossard; Kroepsch, 2003).

Apart from being something negative, sex is also presented as a behavior. That is to say, the *genus* paradigm (Landarroita Jauregi, 2012), based on which sex is understood as a potentially negative behavior carried out especially with the genitals, is the main mindset in Spanish online media currently. Considering that, according to agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2006), the media have shown themselves capable of shaping public opinion in the long term through the cumulative nature of their cognitive effects while through this influence they have tended to reinforce the previous positions of the receiver (Klapper, 1974), Spanish online media contribute to the reproduction, reinforcement, and legitimization (in short, the maintenance) of the hegemonic mindset on sex. Therefore, they neither distance themselves from the hegemonic image of sex, nor act as instigators of a debate on sex, but rather limit themselves to propagating stereotypes established in society that ultimately contribute to the maintenance and propagation of sexophobic and erotophobic attitudes.

Most such news is published in general news sections, dealing with issues of “public interest,” that is to say, where the topics and frames considered important by online media are published. Therefore, the media give relevance to sex as behavior of a negative nature. Specifically, more than half of the articles (clusters 1 and 2) exhibit these three characteristics, being news pieces in the *Society* or *Politics* sections about the risks, suffering, and violence entailed by “sex that is done” or, rather, those behaviors labeled with the adjective “sexual.” An important part of the literature addresses such news, such as the works of Baum, Cohen, and Zhukov (2018) or Biressi (2019).

The data also suggest that a greater predominance of sex in the news is related both to the conception of sex as behavior and to the negative tone that accompanies it, confirming that online media give relevance to sex as behavior with potential negative consequences. On the other hand, the lesser the importance given to sex in the news, the lesser its negative weight. About one-fifth of the articles on sex, mainly published in general news sections, simply mention it in passing and present it in a neutral light (cluster 3). This suggests that sex is hardly considered when it plays a descriptive role, whereas it tends to become the main topic or at least a subtopic when it acts as a reinforcer of the newsworthiness criterion based on conflict through dramatization.

Spanish online media limit themselves to propagating stereotypes established in society that ultimately contribute to maintaining and spreading sexophobic and erotophobic attitudes

Although sex appears mainly in general news sections, around one-tenth of these articles are published in entertainment sections, which also present sex as behavior with a negative character (cluster 4). These sections, which are more related to “public interest,” also include characteristics of gossip magazines such as sensationalism or the journalistic tendency to attract attention by resorting to ghoulish coverage and the trivialization of social life (Almuiña-Fernández; Martín-de-la-Guardia; Pelaz-López, 2016). Likewise, there is also a greater presence of famous people, especially celebrities.

These data lead us to believe that this tendency for sensationalism is accentuated in the presence of famous people, who are sometimes presented as the perpetrators of different types of sexual violence, although in general it seems that their inclusion tends to reduce the negative presentation of the news. This finding suggests that journalists sometimes use celebrities to implicitly justify the presentation of a playful or at least unproblematic image of sex. However, this presentation of sex as positive or neutral behavior, when carried out from the particularity and anecdotal style typical of celebrities, usually with humor, is trivialized and therefore questionable.

Pieces published in general news sections that present sex as a condition with potentially negative consequences make up the remaining tenth (cluster 5), i.e., news that alludes to discrimination based on sex. Although the rise of the feminisms has increased the visibility in the media of violence explicitly labeled with the adjective sexual that takes the form of behavior, the gender perspective has reinterpreted the “sex that one is” as a source of implicit and structural violence through a focus on the power relations existing between the sexes, to the detriment of other conceptions of it. Therefore, this has introduced a negative connotation of sex as a condition, giving rise to the incorporation of discrimination based on sex into the media. However, more than as a main topic, this occurs as a recurring marginal point, given its transversal nature.

Among the attributes of news about sex, a clear feminization can be observed that corresponds to the cultural problematization of the female sex, previously as a behavior (in the *genus* paradigm) and now also as a condition (through the gender perspective). As mentioned above, the feminisms as a social movement that seeks the recognition of women and all things feminine, have promoted the transition of these problems from the private sphere to the space of public debate.

“ The paradigm of *genus*, based on which sex is understood as a potentially negative behavior carried out especially with the genitals, is the main mindset currently present in Spanish online media ”

This degree of feminization is even stronger in news about sex as a condition, since the gender perspective reveals the negative discrimination that women suffer with respect to men due to the mere fact of being a woman. On the other hand, although sex as negative behavior is also associated with women, it is not related to women per se, which seems to explain its reduced presence. As the sex of men is not culturally problematized, except when it becomes the origin of violence labeled with the adjective sexual, it is not surprising that they appear to a lesser extent than women.

As pointed out above, as a general rule, media representation of sex is limited to reproducing the elements of the hegemonic ideology (Klaper, 1974) that pass the filter of newsworthiness criteria, at least in the absence of internal journalistic strategies or different external factors. Based on the results of this work, and under the aforementioned assumption, it can be hypothesized that, immersed in their daily routines, journalists are not concerned about the image of sex that they convey, with communication strategies to address this issue not being apparent. The exception is professionals who consider it from a gender perspective. However, when understood from a prism of power relations, they only intensify their discourse against it. In this way, the potential of the internet to broaden topics and media frames is diluted by the force of journalistic norms and habits (McCombs, 2006), maintaining the effects of vertical transference in news on sex, that is, the influence of the media on their audiences (Meraz, 2011).

The data also suggest that the editorial line of each online medium affects the process of construction of news about sex. Progressive media, such as *eldiario.es*, tend to incorporate the gender perspective to a greater extent, thus increasing not only the amount of news about sex, but also the negative weight associated with it. On the other hand, the most conservative media, such as *abc.es*, prioritize the family, attacking sex in a more aggressive fashion in articles involving minors but not the others. In fact, they resort to news pieces in which “sex that is done” is presented as an appropriate activity to maintain the indissoluble character of Catholic marriage, insofar as it potentially fulfills a procreative function.

5.1. Limitations, strengths, and future research

The present work suffers from certain limitations. The main ones are related to the analyzed corpus itself. On the one hand, the usage of the web scraping technique depends on an adequate structuring of the websites and is thus subject to their limitations. Given the deficiencies of some of the search engines of the online media analyzed, producing a large number of results, this obstacle was addressed in such cases by using different search methods, such as the newspaper archive or the sitemap of the online newspaper. However, this also means that news was obtained from each medium in a different manner, thus representing a factor that has not been controlled for in the analysis of the results.

On the other hand, the analyzed corpus was selected based on the presence of the semantic root “sex.” The analysis thus favors news items that (claim to) deal explicitly with sex, while additional reports that address sex implicitly through other lexemes were rejected. Considering the hypertrophy of the semantic root “sex” (Landarroitajauregi, 2016), which is used even when other lexemes or more specific terms exist to refer to such constructs, it has been considered that the loss of validity regarding the generalizability of the results is minimal. Furthermore, given the general nature of this research, this decision made it possible to optimize the research effort by limiting the analyzed corpus to news that claims to address sex explicitly.

This study addresses the portrayal of sex in the media in a holistic way, subsequently distinguishing based on a se-
xological approach between the different dimensions of sex to enhance the explanatory power of the results. At the methodological level, it is worth noting not only the statistical instruments used and the randomization and inference of the results for the analyzed period, but also the verification of the analysis protocol for use in subsequent research. Combining the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological dimensions mentioned above, the evidence obtained, on the one hand, helps to improve understanding of the portrayal of sex in the media and, in addition, offers tentative explanations regarding some of the elements that influence the construction of news about sex.

Given the overwhelming hegemony of the portrayal of sex as behavior, future research efforts could aim to dig deeper into this dimension, with a special emphasis on journalistic pieces that present hedonic practices and erotic desires in a positive or neutral way.

6. Conclusions

Although online media may have the capacity to transcend the limitations of the traditional press by expanding the topics and media frames they cover, as far as sex is concerned, they do not distance themselves from the hegemonic image or act as instigators of a debate on sex, rather limiting themselves to the dissemination of stereotypes established

in society. In this way, they contribute to the maintenance and spreading of sexophobic and erotophobic attitudes. Sex is represented as a behavior with potential negative consequences and, thereby, linked to the feminine. In fact, the greater the negative weight, the greater the predominance of sex in the journalistic pieces. Furthermore, it seems that sex functions as a reinforcer of the newsworthiness criterion based on conflict. This scenario suggests a lack of communication strategies to report on sex, except for those incorporating the gender perspective. However, when understood from a prism of power relations, they only intensify their discourse against it.

These data emphasize the need to rethink media narratives about sex, such that they are not limited to preventing and denouncing the negative aspects that derive from inadequate social management of sex, but also include other propositional ways of framing sex and its variety in consideration of their value.

7. Notes

1. In addition to the “sex that one has” ($n = 18$), for the cluster analysis, the documents encoded in the positive category ($n = 23$) were also ignored within the variable *Tone*, so the size of the subsample for this analysis is $n = 903$.

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9. Annex

Coding protocol

Variable	Categories	Criteria
Media title	<i>eldiario.es</i>	Online media in which it was published.
	<i>elpais.com</i>	
	<i>abc.es</i>	
Month	January	Date of publication.
	February...	
	December	
Sex dimension	Sex that one is	Refers to the condition of being different (for example, sexes, sexual differentiation, etc.).
	Sex that one has	Refers to both physiological and psychological attributes (sex hormones, sexually transmitted diseases, etc.).
	Sex that is done	Related to behavior and desire (having sex, sexual attraction, etc.).
Predominance	Topic	The semantic root sex is present in the heading or the first paragraph.
	Subtopic	Appears on more than one occasion or is related to the headline.
	Mention	Appears only once in the body of the news without being related to the headline.
Tone	Positive	The semantic root "sex" is related to positive, neutral, or negative aspects.
	Neutral	
	Negative	
Theme	General news	<i>Society, Politics, Economy, Opinion, Other.</i>
	Entertainment	<i>Culture, TV, Sports.</i>
Famous people	Yes; No	Whether or not they appear, at least once, throughout the piece.
Minors	Yes; No	