Stances on hate speech: Population opinions and attitudes

María-Dolores Cáceres-Zapatero; **Gaspar Brändle**; **María-Antonia Paz-Rebollo**

María-Dolores Cáceres-Zapatero
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9703-1756

*Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Unidad Departamental de Sociología:
Metodología y Teoría
Avda. Complutense, 3
28040 Madrid, Spain
caceres@ucm.es*

Gaspar Brändle
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7554-3611

*Universidad de Murcia
Facultad de Economía y Empresa
Departamento de Sociología
30100 Espinardo (Murcia), Spain
gbrandle@um.es*

María-Antonia Paz-Rebollo ✉
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6664-0647

*Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Departamento de Periodismo y
Comunicación Global
Avda. Complutense, 3
28040 Madrid, Spain
mapazreb@ucm.es*

Abstract

This research aims to know the opinions and attitudes of the Spanish population towards hate speech through a survey of 1,022 persons of both sexes and over 16 years of age. The results show a high awareness of hate speech: participants could identify these messages, assess their different intensities of severity, and understand the harm it causes. This high awareness may be because almost half of the sample has felt alluded to by these types of messages at some point. This group is more proactive in denouncing and counterattacking hate messages, although it is more frequent to remain on the sidelines. There is a hierarchy in the ratings in which racist and sexist comments are considered more severe than those directed at other minority groups (e.g., homeless people). Among the main reasons why people publish these expressions, participants point to the education of the authors, in particular, the rudeness and disrespect that are also perceived as a generalized aspect in today's society. The polarized Spanish political context is seen as beneficial to the appearance of these messages, as well as the lack of a democratic culture that respects ideological diversity. What is most interesting is that although there is awareness of the seriousness of hate messages in other spheres and towards various groups, hate speech has become normalized in politics, as previously stated.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The objective of this research is to understand the Spanish population's opinions regarding and attitudes toward hate speech (HS), using a nationwide survey. These types of speech are socially and culturally constructed; they represent an agreement among people about which messages are hateful and which are not (**Papcunová** *et al.*, 2021). However, the indicators that characterize these expressions are subject to interpretation and change over time. This means that hate in the media and on social networks (SN) has a subjective nature that varies depending on the context, the country, and even each individual (**Salminen** *et al.*, 2018). Thus, there is no universally accepted definition, and the concept is constantly being modified in public and political debates. **Tontodimamma** *et al.* (2021) identify, however, the following common features in the different definitions: the targeting of a group or an individual as a member of a group; the presence of content that expresses hatred, hostility, and prejudice and causes harm and incites wrongdoing; the public nature of the speech; and, finally, a context that makes backlash possible.

Hate can be directed toward groups in power, but usually the main target is groups that are vulnerable because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion, among other aspects such as intellectual or physical disability and political preferences. This trend increases when people belong to two minority groups, for example, being a Black woman (**Morales**; **Grineski**; **Collins**, 2019), because hatred is a part and a symptom of intergroup conflicts and subordination (**Schweppe**; **Perry**, 2021). This type of speech may also promote hatred of entire belief systems, such as Islam (**Cervone**; **Augoustinos**; **Maass**, 2021), but it is unclear whether praising a group that clearly expresses hatred (neo-Nazis, for example) is considered HS, according to some studies (**MacAvaney** *et al.*, 2019).

Generally the primary objective of these messages is to connect with like-minded people to support their cause (**Hawdon**; **Oksanen**; **Raesaenen**, 2017). However, some authors believe that that intention is not a defining feature, since it is usually posted or verbalized regardless of whether it elicits response or affects the group (**Malecki** *et al.*, 2021). This discrepancy is due to the fact that the HS expressed has a variety of intensities and objectives: It can stigmatize, discriminate, and produce harm, or simply engage users in debate (**March**; **Marrington**, 2019).

These remarks use explicit but also less obvious means (metaphors, irony, and sarcasm) to legitimize themselves. Of these methods, humor stands out, as it is used to mask offensive content and cross the boundaries of what is off-limits. The consequences of this hate speech, whether outright or subtle, are very serious since they perpetuate prejudices, stereotypes, and group hierarchies and are used to justify violent actions.

Measures taken by online platforms to deter this speech are based on debatable concepts of harm and violence (**DeCook** *et al.*, 2022), and automated control systems (**Aljarah** *et al.*, 2020) prove ineffective against some rhetorical forms (**Udanor**; **Anyanwu**, 2019); furthermore, terms must be constantly updated because users modify them to circumvent controls. Content moderation is also disputed because it is perceived as a form of censorship that limits freedom of expression (**Paz-Rebollo**; **Cáceres-Zapatero**; **Martín-Sánchez**, 2021), which is why the academic literature relies on users' initiative to counter hateful content.

1.1. The perception of hate speech

Individuals intervene in response to a comment if they perceive its seriousness and if they feel obliged to act (**Leonhard** *et al.*, 2018). Both the responses and the perception of these aggressions are conditioned by existing regulations, social values, each country's cultural and historical tradition, and the dynamics of public opinion (**Udapa**; **Pohjonen**, 2019), as well as by people's day-to-day experiences on the internet, their sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, educational level, and political ideology, among others), and individual attitudes.

Some research has focused on the younger population, because this is considered to be the age group that spends the most time online and is therefore at a higher risk of encountering and being affected by these messages, but the results are not definitive. After interviewing the student body of a Polish university in Wrocław, **Malecki** *et al.* (2021) concluded that they are able to distinguish between cyberbullying, HS, and trolling. However, **Rad** and **Demeter** (2020) surveyed adolescents in four countries at different educational levels and state that, although young people are familiar with HS, they find it difficult to define and to understand what mechanisms trigger it. In this study, a representative sample of the general Spanish population were surveyed because more and more adults are interacting on social networks (*INE*, 2021).

Regarding the perception of the seriousness of these messages, ideology has been considered an important variable, but there is no consensus in this regard either. For example, in the United States, data indicate that conservatives consider HS to be less serious than Democrats do (**Costello** *et al.*, 2019), but the study by **Frischlich** *et al.* (2021) in the German population found no significant association between engagement in antisocial behavior and voting intention. The relationship between political radicalization and the rise of extreme right-wing groups in the dissemination of messages of hate both in Spain (**Paz-Rebollo**; **Mayagoitia-Socia**; **González-Aguilar**, 2021) and in other countries (**Maatta**; **Suomalainen**; **Tuomarla**, 2021) seems clear.

Gender significantly shapes the perceived degree of offensiveness of HS: Women rate messages that directly incite violence as more offensive than men do (**Bautista-Ortuño** *et al.*, 2018), and it is more important to them than whether they agree or disagree with the statement (**Wojatzki** *et al.*, 2018), regardless of the setting in which it occurs (**Czopp**;

Monteith, 2003). That being said, the assessment of severity is also influenced by belonging to a group targeted by hate (**Bautista-Ortuño** *et al.*, 2018) and, in this sense, it should be taken into account whether the population –both the general population and young people– has been exposed to online hate often because they belong to a vulnerable group (**Hawdon**; **Oksanen**; **Raesaenen**, 2017; **Costello** *et al.*, 2016).

Regarding how users can respond to this speech, direct public intervention that offers a counterargument to the message writer (**Hangartner** *et al.*, 2021), refuting their ideas in support of the victims, are reported. Indirect interventions –which involve reporting these messages to the managers of social networks, thus avoiding confrontation with the aggressor– are also mentioned. Although the latter predominate, it should be noted that, in general, observers very rarely react (**Kunst** *et al.*, 2021) to avoid potential social repercussions (**Woodzicka** *et al.*, 2015).

Ultimately, the increase of HS in recent years and the continuous exposure to it lead to widespread desensitization and normalization (**Soral**; **Bilewicz**; **Winiewski**, 2018), which is currently a challenge for social researchers. The search for solutions requires knowing what the public thinks about these practices. Their opinions and attitudes may provide clues for evaluating possible interventions against HS and as to the motives that drive them to act.

2. Objectives and research questions

Identifying and quantifying hate is not an easy task because of the vastness of digital and media communication and the diverse social contexts in which hate is disseminated, as explained above. For this reason, and for that mentioned above, this research pursues two main objectives:

GO1: To understand the opinions and attitudes of the Spanish population regarding hate speech.

GO2: To analyze whether the variable "having felt that hate speech in the media and on social networks had been directed at them at some point" influences perception and awareness of such speech.

To address these objectives, the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1. What is people's perception of their own ability to identify hate speech, and how do sociodemographic variables influence this self-perceived ability?

RQ2. In which areas do citizens notice more hate, how has this evolved in recent years, and which groups do they consider to be the most frequent targets of hate speech?

RQ3. What do they think are the reasons that lead to such speech, and what suggestions do the general population have to fight back against it?

RQ4. Does having felt as though HS had been directed at them influence the actions they take to deal with it, their perception of the seriousness of this speech, and their attitude toward this phenomenon?

3. Methodology

A quantitative methodology has been used, based on the design, application, and analysis of a survey of our own creation, to broadly analyze the perception of HS. The tool was designed by the research team (the authors of this paper), checked by the experts of the company in charge of applying it (*Fundación iS+D*), and tested in a pilot test. A qualitative convenience sample,[1] which was not part of the final sample, was conducted to detect possible flaws in understanding and general structure (organic sequence of the questions and sections). No errors or biases were detected, but the design of the questionnaire was improved by slightly modifying the wording of some of the examples of HS used so that they would be more understandable when read outside of their original context. The final questionnaire is structured in 18 closed questions,[2] conducted online (*computer-assisted web interviewing*, *CAWI*) via e-mail, and lasts 10-15 minutes. The questions inquire about respondents' reported ability to identify hate in messages, the groups they consider most likely to be on the receiving end of such speech, the reasons behind such speech, and whether or not HS has increased in the last five years. Another block of questions relates to having felt as though these messages were directed at them and how this situation has affected the reception of and reaction to such messages. Finally, they were asked about the perception of severity of HS, how they assess the rhetoric used, and what actions in their opinion should be taken. The examples of hate speech included in this questionnaire to measure the population's perception of its severity have been created bearing in mind the *Anti-Defamation League*'s pyramid of hate (*Anti-Defamation League*, 2015), which classifies different levels of severity of hate speech; they have also drawn from previous research on the presence of hate on *TikTok*, *Twitter*, and *Facebook* (**Herrero-Izquierdo** *et al.*, 2022) and from comments posted to the digital press (**Bonaut**; **Vicent-Ibáñez**; **Paz-Rebollo**, 2021). These items reflect a gradation in the severity of hate speech –including derogatory and hurtful terms; disparagement of personal characteristics, humiliation and moral disqualification, and insults; and physical threats and appeals for violence and extermination– which provide a sample of the different rhetoric and groups that are usually objects of hate in Spain.

3.1. The population and sample

The general population residing in Spain, older than 16 years of age, was evaluated to develop an extensive and in-depth study of their experiences with HS. The sample, sociodemographically representative of the Spanish population, was composed of 1,022 subjects of both sexes, respecting the population distribution by age groups. The sampling was

calculated on the simple random assumption, with quotas for sex, age, *General Media Study* (*EGM*)[3] status, and autonomous community by Nielsen area (Catalonia and Balearic Islands [Northeast]; Levante; Andalusia [South]; Central; Northwest; North Central; Canary Islands; Barcelona Metropolitan Area; Madrid Metropolitan Area). The margin of error was ±3.1% with a 95% confidence level (*p* = *q* = 50%). The fieldwork was conducted by the *Fundación iS+D* between April 27 and 29, 2022.

> " People with a higher level of education, higher social class, and left-wing ideology felt more competent at identifying this speech. No significant differences were observed between women and men, or according to age group "

3.2. Variables

For this study, a series of variables were selected and measured with the data collection tool designed and applied to the sample for this research. These variables are as follows:

- *Sex:* This variable was measured with three categories: Female (50.6%), Male (48%), and Other[4] (1.4%).

- *Age:* The questionnaire included an open-ended question addressing the age of the surveyed population (minimum: 16 years; maximum: 93 years; mean: 48.74 years; deviation: 16.98 years). For subsequent analyses, this variable was recoded into the following categories: 16-24 years (10.4%), 25-54 years (51.2%), 55+ years (38.5%).

- *Level of education:* The education variable was measured with eight categories: no formal education (unfinished primary studies; 1.4%); first degree (school certificate, general basic education [GBE] 1st stage, more or less 10 years; 2.2%); second degree, 1st cycle (school diploma, or GBE 2nd stage, 1st and 2nd secondary education [1st cycle], up to 14 years; 11.8%); second degree, 2nd cycle (vocational training 1st and 2nd years, senior high school, Unified Multipurpose Baccalaureate, 3rd and 4th of secondary education [2nd cycle], university orientation course, pre-university studies, 1st and 2nd of high school (39.7%); third degree, 1st cycle (equivalent to technical engineer, 3 years, universities, technical engineers, architect (14.4%); bachelor's degree, 2nd cycle (university-level, higher graduates, colleges, technical universities, etc.; 17.1%); third degree (master's; 11.4%); and third degree (doctorate; 2%). For subsequent analyses, this variable was recoded into the following categories: No formal education (1.4%), Elementary (14%), Secondary and high school (39.7%), and University (44.9%).

- *Class:* The class variable[5] had seven categories: very low (7.6%); low (15.7%); lower middle (12.9%); middle (27.3%); upper middle (12.6%); upper (15.7%); and upper upper (8.2%). For subsequent analyses, this variable was recoded into the following categories: Lower (23.3%), Middle (52.8%), and Upper (23.9%).

- *Ideology:* Respondents were asked to identify where they saw themselves on a 10-point ideological self-placement scale, where 1 meant extreme left and 10 meant extreme right (minimum: 1; maximum: 10; mean: 4.77; deviation: 1.86). For subsequent analyses, this variable was recoded into the following categories: Right (27.2%), Center (31.1%), and Left (41.7%).

- *Self-perceived ability to identify hate speech:* Respondents were asked to indicate to what degree they believed they were able to distinguish derogatory, insulting, or disparaging speech toward a person or group based on their race, sexual orientation, ideology, religion, nationality, ethnicity, etc., in the media and on social networks. This was measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = never and 5 = very much; minimum: 1; maximum: 5; mean: 4.11; deviation: 0.79).

- *Feeling as though hate speech has been directed at you:* The population participating in this study was asked if any derogatory, insulting, or belittling speech they had read or heard on social networks, in the media, or through any other channel felt as though it singled them out or was directed at them. Yes (43%), No (46.8%), or Don't know/prefer not to say (10.2%).

- *Main reason why you felt as though the hate speech was directed at you:* The main reason why these people had felt as though some derogatory, insulting, or belittling speech that they had read or heard on social networks, on the media, or through another channel singled them out or was directed at them (the list of reasons indicated and their response frequencies can be seen in Graph 3).

- *Actions taken in response to hate speech:* Respondents were asked about the frequency, based on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = never and 5 = very often) with which they had taken some action when seeing/hearing derogatory, insulting, or belittling speech (the list of items measured and a summary of the mean scores for each item can be found in Table 1).

- *Perceived severity of hate speech:* Respondents were required to rate the intensity of severity that they attributed to 17 real instances of speech extracted from social networks and comments sent to the digital press. The items were selected to represent a variety of groups and apparent intensities of hatred –from derogatory name-calling to explicit reference to acts of violence against groups and individuals. They were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = not at all serious and 5 = very serious; see Table 2 for the list of items measured and a summary of the mean scores for each item).

- *Attitudes toward hate speech:* Respondents were asked to show their degree of agreement with a series of items in relation to derogatory, insulting, or belittling speech toward a person or group due to their race, sexual orientation, ideology, religion, nationality, ethnicity, etc. They were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = not at all serious and 5 = very serious; see Table 3 for the list of items measured and a summary of the mean scores for each item).

4. Analysis of results

4.1. Opinions and attitudes of the Spanish population toward hate speech on social networks and in digital media

To measure the population's self-rated ability to identify speech that contains hatred or contempt toward groups or individuals, a 5-point Likert-type scale was used (where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much), the results of which showed high self-awareness (mean score: 4.11). However, this perception varied according to some sociodemographic characteristics (Graph 1). People with a higher level of education, higher social class, and left-wing ideology felt more competent at identifying this speech. No significant differences were observed between women and men, or according to age group, unlike the results obtained by other authors (**Kenski**; **Coe**; **Rains**, 2020).

The internet is currently the most significant space, although not the only one, for open and public dissemination of HS by virtue of its accessibility and rapid dissemination owing to the virality's amplifying effect, which can turn a particular comment into a mass phenomenon. In this sense, it is interesting to know where there is a greater presence of hate speech. The overall perception (measured from a Likert scale: 1 = never and 5 = very often) was that such speech frequently occurs in a variety of contexts and media, especially on SNs (mean score: 4.33), followed at some distance by sporting events (matches, for example, 3.87), demonstrations (3.79), and electoral events (3.49). Thus, mass events (recreational or political), which bring together similar people, were identified as places where people dare to openly express their ideas, whereas in the traditional media (television, press, radio), less hate was detected (3.29).

Given that there is a high presence of hate and that it is related to the practices of disseminating and sharing this speech, subjects were asked about the frequency (measured on a Likert scale: 1 = never and 5 = very often) with which people, with whom they maintain different degrees of closeness, perform these actions. A "third-party effect" of sorts was discovered in the responses; that is, respondents believed that people in general (mean score: 3.37) shared and disseminated this speech much more than their acquaintances (2.42), friends (2.17), or relatives (2.03) and, of course, much more than themselves (1.76). In other words, the sharing and spreading of hate in the media and social networks was considered quite natural; although probably for reasons of social desirability, it was recognized to a much lesser extent in oneself. However, it was acknowledged that it is an increasingly common practice: More than 7 out of 10 respondents (72.9%) answered that HS had increased over the last five years, with more than half of the sample stating that it had increased significantly and only around 1 in 10 respondents stating that it had decreased to varying degrees or has remained unchanged.

There was also agreement that there are various groups and individuals who are the target of denigrating and hateful speech. The most common recipients of this type of speech that fosters prejudice and intolerance –if not direct violent attacks– were, in their opinion (measured on a Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = very often), immigrants (mean score: 4.28) and LGTBIQ+ individuals (4.25), followed by political actors (3.99), women (3.91), and the Roma people (3.88). The groups that, in their view, received hateful comments less frequently were the elderly (3.25), celebrities (3.51), people
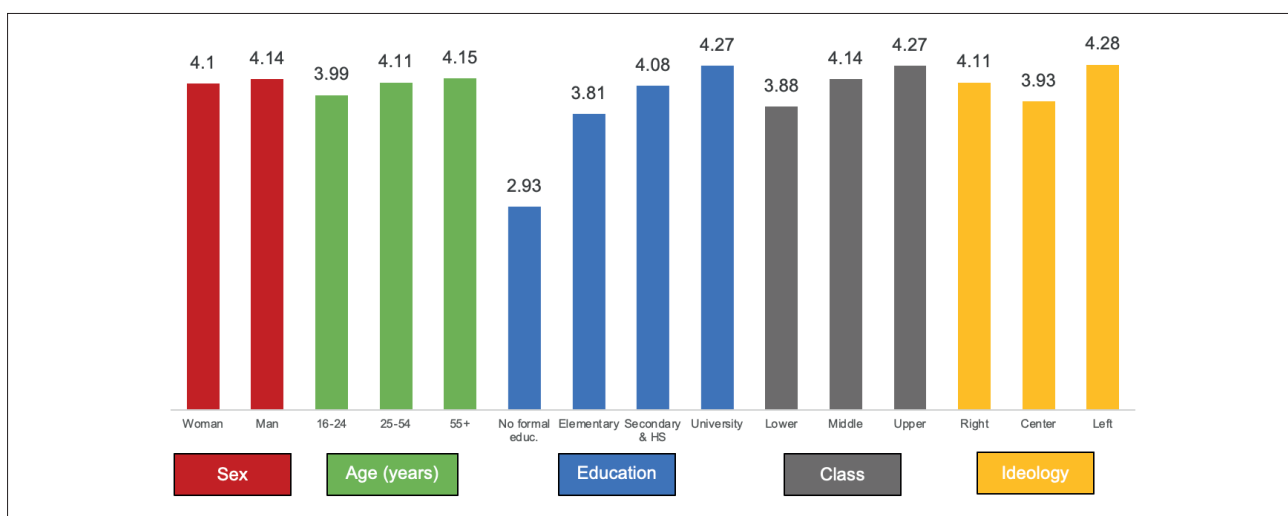
Graph 1. Self-perceived ability to identify hate speech –differences according to sociodemographic variables (mean score).
Note: Minimum value 1 and maximum value 5. The difference of means was statistically significant in the variables education, class, and ideology (Anova Sig. F. Fisher <0.05) and not significant in the sex and age groups (Anova Sig. F. Fisher >0.05).

with certain religious beliefs (3.62), people with a physical or mental disability (3.65), and homeless people (3.71). These responses are close to the reality of criminal acts registered in Spain, except in the case of anti-Roma sentiment, which represents a very low percentage of reports (*Ministry of the Interior*, 2021).

In regard to the main reasons why people post this speech, respondents pointed to the writers' upbringing, specifically the rudeness and lack of respect that was also perceived as a widespread theme in today's society (46.6%), but they also mentioned the context, both that

> In regard to the main reasons why people post this speech, respondents pointed to the writers' upbringing, specifically the rudeness and lack of respect that was also perceived as a widespread theme in today's society (46.6%), but they also mentioned the context, both that of social networks and the political situation, in which this hate speech occurs

of social networks and the political situation, in which this hate speech occurs. Among the characteristics of social networks, anonymity –which disinhibits this type of behavior– was specifically mentioned (22.2%). Regarding the country, it was believed that a very divided, polarized society such as Spain promotes the proliferation of these messages (10%). However, there was also a portion of the population who took into consideration the perpetrators' objectives and emotional issues, such as doing harm (12%) or letting off steam (3.4%). A minority of respondents saw it as simple fun (2.3%) or even as a strategy to gain more followers on social networks (2.3%).

Given the high presence and seriousness of HS in society, the subjects were invited to take a position on some proposals that could be implemented to change this situation. The responses obtained reflected the existing political and social debate between those who defend freedom of expression and those who believe that speech equals crime, even if there is no direct incitement to violence. Here, although only 4.1% believed that nothing should be done in this respect because it would limit freedom of expression, the majority are indirectly in favor of this right. A total of 53.6% supported the teaching of values in schools, which was also the most frequently mentioned solution among those not explicitly suggested in the questionnaire, which were extracted from the "Other" category that was recoded a posteriori ("education at home," in "values", "promoting culture," and "respect"). Of the respondents, 4.2% were in favor of more general activities such as campaigns to raise social awareness. Those in favor of limiting freedom of expression proposed stricter community standards or guidelines that penalize these practices on social networks (20%), for example, by removing the writer from the social network, through penalties on their account, or by deleting these messages, and 14.1% believed that severe general legislation should be enacted. It is surprising, however, that eliminating anonymity was hardly mentioned as a solution, since this is one of the reasons cited when explaining the presence of hate on SNs and in the media.

4.2. Being a target of hate speech as a determinant factor

One of the main objectives of this research was to analyze whether having felt that hate speech in the media and social networks was directed at you could influence the perception of and sensitivity to such speech. When respondents were asked about this, 43% of the sample answered that they had felt that some hate speech had been directed at them, 46.8% answered no, and 10.2% answered "I don't know/prefer not to say."

On the basis of an analysis of the relationship between variables using the chi-square statistic (Graph 2), a certain sociodemographic profile can be drawn of those subjects who, at some point, felt that this derogatory speech referred to some of their personal and/or group characteristics. Women, younger people, and those on the left of the ideological scale were more likely to feel that HS had been directed at them; however, their level of education or the social class to which they belonged did not lead to differences in this regard.
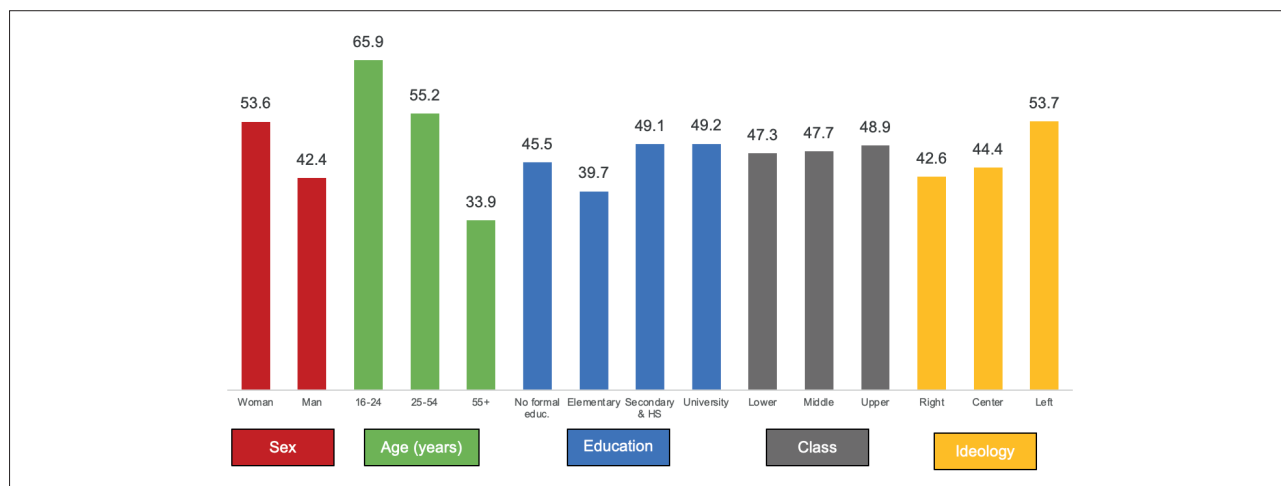
Graph 2. Those who have felt that hate speech was directed at them –differences according to sociodemographic variables (percentages).
Note: Association of variables: The result is statistically significant for the variables sex, age, and ideology (chi-square sig. <0.05) and not significant for the variables education and social class (chi-square sig. >0.05).
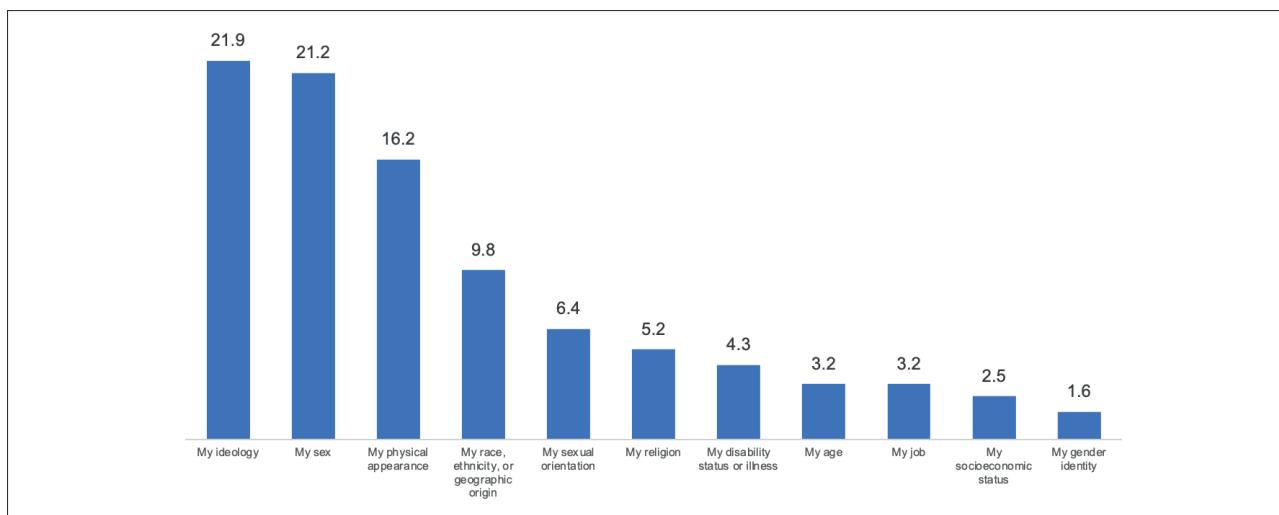
Graph 3. Main reason you felt that hate speech had been directed at you (percentages)

The main reason for which the subjects reported having felt that this denigrating speech was directed at them was for their ideology, followed closely by their sex and, more distantly, by their physical appearance. Gender identity and socioeconomic status were the least reported reasons (Graph 3).

When it came to understanding whether there were differences in terms of stance, opinions, and attitudes between those who had felt that HS had been directed at them and those who had not, it is interesting to note, first of all, that almost one in five respondents acknowledged that they had sometimes, often, or even very often shared and disseminated this speech, with this being more common among those who felt that they hate speech had been directed at them (24.4%) compared with those who had not felt that it was directed at them (11.3%). Therefore, having felt that hate speech had been directed at oneself increases the practice of disseminating such speech; this practice is not attributable to becoming desensitized to this issue. In contrast to this, the data show, as we will demonstrate below, that these subjects develop a kind of activism in favor of actions that can raise public awareness of HS.

Not only are they more active, but also it was found that having felt as though messages of hate were directed at you at some point increased the self-perceived ability to recognize these expressions, with a mean score of 4.24, compared with 4.05 among those who had not felt as though it had been directed at them (statistically significant difference in means, Anova Sig. F. Fisher <0.001).

Given this proactivity among subjects who felt that hate speech had been directed at them, we confirmed that there were significant differences in how these subjects acted with respect to specific actions, compared with those who had not felt that it had been directed at them (Table 1). For this purpose, a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = never and 5 = very often) was used based on the following statement: How have you acted upon seeing/hearing derogatory, insulting, or belittling speech? The response items were drawn from previous research (**Hangartner**, *et al.*, 2012; **Kunst**; **Porten-Cheé**; **Emmer**, 2021; **Woodzicka** *et al.*, 2015, among others).

Table 1. Actions taken against hate speech

	Total population	**Comparison of means between the population who felt that hate speech was directed at them and those who did not**				
	Total (*n* = 1,022)	Directed at them (*n* = 439)	Not directed at them (*n* = 478)	*t*	*p*	*d*
	M (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)			
I prefer to stay out of conflicts.	3.25 (1.21)	3.16 (1.19)	3.32 (1.26)	−1.93	0.054	−0.131
I prefer to stay on the sidelines because I do not know how to act in these cases.	2.91 (1.20)	2.90 (1.17)	2.92 (1.26)	−0.31	0.757	−0.016
I have left the social network or media outlet where I saw the comment.	2.84 (1.41)	2.89 (1.41)	2.83 (1.42)	0.67	0.505	0.042
I have replied directly to the person who made the comment.	2.66 (1.16)	2.87 (1.16)	2.48 (1.15)	5.09	0.000	0.338
I have reported it to the manager of the social network, media outlet, etc.	2.24 (1.28)	2.58 (1.38)	1.98 (1.14)	7.19	0.000	0.474

Note: Minimum value 1 and maximum value 5. M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

In response to the question "In general, how have you acted upon seeing/hearing derogatory, insulting, or belittling speech?," the results showed that feeling that hate speech had been directed at you had an influence when it came to being more proactive in terms of the actions taken to confront this type of speech. Statistical significance was found for responding directly to the person who made the comment ($p < 0.001$) and for reporting these practices to the manager or person responsible for the social network or media outlet ($p < 0.001$). It was also marginally significant ($p = 0.054$) for staying on the sidelines to avoid conflict, the most common decision, especially among those who had not felt that this type of speech had been directed at them. In all these cases, the effect size (Cohen's *d*) has a small to moderate magnitude.

> ' Women, younger people, and those on the left of the ideological scale were more likely to feel that HS had been directed at them; however, their level of education or the social class to which they belonged did not lead to differences in this regard '

An important dimension in relation to HS is the population's perception of its level of seriousness. To this end, respondents were asked to give their opinion on the degree of severity they attributed to 17 items ($\alpha = 0.93$), measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = not at all serious and 5 = very serious). As mentioned in the Methodology section, the items were selected to represent a variety of groups and apparent intensities of hatred –from derogatory name-calling to explicit reference to acts of violence against groups and individuals (Table 2).

Table 2. Assessment of the seriousness of various instances of hate speech

	Total population	Comparison of means between the population who felt that hate speech was directed at them and those who did not				
	Total (*n* = 1,022)	Directed at them (*n* = 439)	Not directed at them (*n* = 478)	*t*	*p*	*d*
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			
Do you know how to kill 24 African children at the same time? Throwing a grenade and yelling "apple".	4.71 (0.73)	4.79 (0.65)	4.65 (0.79)	2.98	0.003	0.193
I would make immigrants "mandatory volunteers" for testing new drugs and treatments. Since we have to take care of cast-offs, have them at least do something useful.	4.65 (0.74)	4.76 (0.62)	4.59 (0.79)	3.56	0.000	0.239
The shantytown problem could be fixed with dynamite.	4.61 (0.76)	4.70 (0.71)	4.58 (0.76)	2.48	0.013	0.163
What a slut, whore, moron, and asshole.	4.50 (0.84)	4.62 (0.72)	4.43 (0.89)	3.57	0.000	0.235
My parents are fags, my daughter's a tramp, my wife's stupid (but she's got big boobs), and the other kid I don't know.	4.48 (0.84)	4.66 (0.68)	4.35 (0.91)	5.84	0.000	0.386
The solution to squatters: lock them outside and set them on fire if you are going to end up fixing up the houses anyway.	4.45 (0.94)	4.59 (0.86)	4.38 (0.95)	3.39	0.001	0.237
Be honest, sluts: Everyone wants an African man deep down inside.	4.42 (0.92)	4.52 (0.85)	4.37 (0.96)	2.56	0.011	0.165
Dykes are not right in the head.	4.34 (0.95)	4.51 (0.82)	4.23 (1.03)	4.49	0.000	0.301
Muslims are terrorists.	4.29 (0.95)	4.47 (0.83)	4.16 (1.03)	4.99	0.000	0.331
Faggots are running rampant nowadays.	4.23 (1.04)	4.44 (0.90)	4.09 (1.13)	5.23	0.000	0.343
All the little Spanish mongoloids with little flags and cigars for you, what a bunch of human waste.	4.20 (0.97)	4.25 (0.97)	4.19 (0.98)	0.94	0.348	0.062
When are we going to deport the Islamic and African immigrants?	4.16 (1.06)	4.31 (1.02)	4.05 (1.10)	3.77	0.000	0.245
Voting left is voting for ETA and communists	3.84 (1.22)	4.01 (1.15)	3.76 (1.28)	3.16	0.002	0.205
The neighborhood is full of spics.	3.76 (1.10)	3.95 (1.05)	3.65 (1.14)	4.24	0.000	0.274
Their fellow party member in congress nods like a toy dog on a dashboard.	3.70 (1.19)	3.78 (1.17)	3.64 (1.23)	1.70	0.090	0.117
I believe that the rights of Spaniards should come before those of foreigners.	3.36 (1.34)	3.55 (1.32)	3.21 (1.36)	3.77	0.000	0.254
An old (rightist) right-winger rattling on about rightism.	3.33 (1.21)	3.29 (1.23)	3.37 (1.23)	−1.02	0.308	−0.065

Note: Minimum value 1 and maximum value 5. M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

In general, there is a high degree of awareness and sensitivity with respect to HS, with a high level of seriousness attributed to all these examples of hate speech, especially among those who have felt that hate speech was directed at them. In this sense, statistically significant differences were found in 14 of the 17 items between those who felt that hate speech had been directed at them and those who did not, and the magnitude of the effect size (Cohen's *d*) could be considered small to moderate in all items. In particular, speech referring to immigrants was considered to be very serious, although as we have seen, being an immigrant is not the main reason why people felt that HS had been directed at them. However, derogatory political remarks were perceived as less serious, both among those who felt that hate speech had been directed at them and among those who did not.

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Therefore, there seems to be a greater sensitivity toward social issues (gender discrimination, discrimination against immigrants, social segregation) than toward the political sphere and its actors; as we have seen, this is the main reason why more than a fifth (21.9%) felt that they had been objects of hate speech. When it came to comparing the rights of nationals with those of migrants, their view was found to be more ambivalent. In concordance with the rationality people showed with respect to their perception of hate speech, greater sensitivity toward more violent speech, which was considered more serious, was observed compared with derogatory appellations ("spics", "right-winger"), which were considered less serious, except in the case of gender-based insults.

Finally, very negative attitudes toward hate speech were noted (Table 3). In particular, the majority agree (measured on a Likert scale: 1 = do not agree at all and 5 = strongly agree) that such expressions harm the people at whom they are directed and also that these behaviors should be condemned. In both cases, these attitudes were stricter among subjects who had felt that hate speech had been directed at them, with higher and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) means and small to moderate effect sizes (Cohen's *d*). However, there is a lesser degree of agreement that this speech is a reflection of the various opinions in society and that this language is normal on social networks.

This should not be seen as complacency; rather, these responses stem from the respect shown for freedom of expression, as discussed previously, and this is confirmed by the fact that, in these two cases, there are no significant differences ($p > 0.05$) between those subjects who felt that hate speech had been directed at them and those who did not. Meanwhile, a less clear-cut attitude toward the belief that most of these examples of hate speech were truly expressions of hatred –as is commonly held– was observed, with this belief being greater among the subjects who stated that they had not ever felt that hate speech had been directed at them ($p < 0.001$). Perhaps it may be because hate is presented with distinct rhetoric in media, on SNs, and in public environments (metaphors, sarcasm, comical sayings) that may or may not play a part in trivializing this type of speech. In any case, the data obtained showed that humor or irony in this type of speech does not mitigate its derogatory nature, although among those who did not feel that hate speech had been directed at them, there seemed to be more agreement (higher mean and significantly different: $p < 0.05$) on whether this speech could be funny.

Table 3. Attitudes toward hate speech

	Total population	Comparison of means between the population who felt that hate speech was directed at them and those who did not				
	Total (*n* = 1,022)	Directed at them (*n* = 439)	Not directed at them (*n* = 478)	*t*	*p*	*d*
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)			
These expressions are harmful to the people at whom they are directed.	4.32 (0.93)	4.50 (0.81)	4.23 (0.98)	4.57	0.000	0.300
Such conduct should be condemned.	4.14 (0.99)	4.32 (0.89)	4.02 (1.03)	4.71	0.000	0.312
These expressions are a reflection of the different opinions that exist in society.	3.18 (1.13)	3.15 (1.18)	3.23 (1.09)	−0.95	0.343	−0.068
On social networks, such language is the norm.	2.93 (1.18)	3.02 (1.28)	2.90 (1.15)	1.53	0.125	0.099
I do not believe that most of these examples of such speech are hate, as they are said to be.	2.24 (1.08)	2.04 (1.04)	2.40 (1.11)	−4.98	0.000	−0.335
Some of these statements are very funny.	1.76 (0.97)	1.64 (0.83)	1.81 (1.05)	−2.85	0.004	−0.180

Note: Minimum value 1 and maximum value 5. M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This research provides data from the Spanish population in general, of which there is little in the scientific literature on HS, where there is an abundance of sector-specific studies in young people (**Kansok-Dusche** *et al*., 2022) or only in relation to certain topics (**Matamoros**; **Farkas**, 2021). It also introduces the feeling of having had hate speech directed at oneself as a discriminating factor in the subject's perception of these practices.

Regarding Q1, the data showed that there was a clear awareness that HS is a growing social problem, contrary to other research (**Soral**; **Bilewicz**; **Winiewski**, 2018). The results are consistent with those published by **Hopkins** and **Washington** (2020), who, far from seeing the normalization of prejudice, confirmed a reinforcement of egalitarian norms, although they limited their study to HS related to race. The population's self-perceived high ability to identify hate speech can be related to some initiatives at the national and international levels to fight this phenomenon (*EU Recommendation 2018/334 of the European Commission*, *The European Union Code of Conduct on Combating Unlawful Incitement to Hatred on the Internet,* among others), with positive results (*European Commission*, 2020), and equally to the cultural permeability of university generations since the sensitivity toward this issue started specifically on campuses around the world. For this reason, the responses highlighted the importance of the respondents' socioeconomic, cultural, and political ideological characteristics, as opposed to the reduced relevance of the variable age (at odds with what **Schmid**, **Kümple**, and **Rieger** (2022) found) and sex.

Regarding Q2, the results indicated that social networks were the main environment for dissemination, and although traditional media are also involved (**Sambaraju**; **McVittie**, 2020), the value accorded to mass gatherings as places of hate is striking. As on social networks, these events promote anonymity and meeting like-minded people. In particular, politicians appeared to be one of the most frequently mentioned groups in messages of hate, and ideology to be one of the causes of feeling that hate speech had been directed at oneself. Undoubtedly, the political polarization generated by the confrontation between a left-wing Spanish government (*PSOE* and *Unidas Podemos*) and the spread of the extreme right (*Vox*) has had an impact on this type of speech, but the seriousness of hate speech against them is recognized regardless of which side it is directed at. This perception is not generally mitigated by a humorous tone, although we discovered a more neutral stance in that not all the subjects surveyed agreed that these examples of hate speech constituted hate.

Regarding measures to control this speech on social networks and in the media, as posed in Q3, the surveyed population mostly rejected legal restrictions that might violate the right to freedom of expression and emphasized the adoption of positive measures that attack the causes of HS, specifically through education, as discussed previously (**Frischlich** *et al*., 2021). These recommendations could be due to the fact that those with a higher educational level perceived themselves to have a higher awareness of HS. It is also possible that the population believed that many of the perpetrators of these messages are young people, and therefore education at school or at home was one of the most supported measures.

This high sensitivity toward HS in media and on SNs, although it is widespread and is determined in part by socioeconomic and cultural variables, can be partially explained by the fact that almost half of the surveyed population has felt that this speech has been aimed directly at them (Q4). Unlike other surveys in which men and younger adults felt more attacked (**Pacheco**; **Melhuish**, 2018), in this study it is evident that, in Spain, women, younger people, and those ideologically situated on the political left consider themselves to be more often attacked by these messages.

Feeling that such speech has been directed at them makes people be more proactive by reporting the facts to the manager of the social network or media outlet and directly replying to people who make hateful comments. The fact that these subjects stated that they have ever shared or frequently share these messages shows that, far from inhibiting their presence on SNs and in the media, they present or assume an upstander rhetoric as a counter-narrative to combat it. However, it is common to choose to stay out of these situations to avoid conflict owing to the social costs of confrontation. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to delve deeper into this question to add nuance for a better understanding of the data and to distinguish which situations or which variables related to the subjects determine proactivity in one direction or the other.

A high dose of rationality is also detected in the perception of the seriousness of hate speech, as people do not seem to be caught up in emotional reactions (e.g., having felt that HS had been directed at them) when making their evaluations. For example, the main reason for identifying with denigrating and disparaging speech was political ideology, but nevertheless this type of speech is not the type that was considered most rigorously. Apart from this widespread rationalization, a certain hierarchy could be observed with respect to the maligned groups. **Woodzicka** *et al*. (2015) note that racist jokes and statements are considered more offensive than sexist ones. Here we see that racist and sexist messages were identified as very serious, especially the latter, possibly due to the campaigns against gender violence carried out by

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the media and the equality policies undertaken by the leftist government in power in Spain. However, speech against homeless people and squatters was not recognized as hate speech to the same extent, in line with what **Burch** (2018) found regarding people with disabilities. It also shows the connection between policy and HS in the responses obtained. The polarized political context in Spain was seen as conducive to these messages, as was the lack of a democratic culture that respects ideological diversity, but what is most interesting is that, although there is awareness of the seriousness of messages of hate in other areas and toward various groups, as noted, in politics hate speech has become normalized.

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This paper presents general data on opinions and attitudes toward HS that are encouraging because of the awareness of the problem, but undoubtedly this is not the same for everyone. The limitations of the study include, in general terms, the possible weakness of the survey as a method for analyzing citizens' perceptions and attitudes, owing to biases such as social desirability, and, specifically, the lack of a context that could modify the results, since respondents were confronted with isolated instances of HS.

In future research, it is necessary to continue advancing and delving deeper into the characteristics of the hate manifested on SNs and in other contexts in relation to user profiles, so as to understand the variables (age, ideological orientation, collective of belonging, etc.) that can contribute to normalizing/proliferating HS, and complete these results by applying other methodologies (in-depth interviews, for example). In addition, it would be interesting to specifically analyze citizens' attitudes about uncivil and hateful political and ideological messages. Finally, research should provide concrete guidelines and practical examples to assess the impact and effectiveness of strategies of educational intervention in the classroom to combat these messages and achieve critical public awareness that prevents the normalization of certain types of radical speech about vulnerable groups and encourages intercultural dialogue, tolerance of diversity, and the development of critical thinking.

6. Notes

1. Formed by nine people with the following profiles:

- 2 women, 20–25 years old, university studies, working;
- 2 men, 30 to 35 years old, university education, working;
- 1 woman, 30–35 years old, higher vocational training, working;
- 1 man, 30–35 years old, secondary school, working;
- 1 woman, 60–65 years old, university education, retired;
- 1 woman, 60–65 years old, no formal education, homemaker;
- 1 man, 60–65 years old, no formal education, retired.

2. The complete questionnaire used in this study is available at **Cáceres-Zapatero**; **Brändle** and **Paz-Rebollo** (2023): *https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22656601.v2*

3. The company that was subcontracted for the fieldwork of this research uses a panel of individuals in which one of the criteria established for the final sample selection was compliance with the socioeconomic classification or status set by the EGM. The EGM divides the population into 7 groups based on a series of indicators such as the level of education and profession of the main provider, the main provider's activity, household size, and the number of individuals with income in the household. The final distribution of this variable (referred to as "*Class*" in our study) can be found in Section 3.2 of the text.

4. For interpretative clarity, the category "Other" of the variable "Sex" was discarded for the analyses carried out, given its practically negligible frequency of response in the questionnaire.

5. This variable was not measured directly in the questionnaire; it is data from the panel used by the company in charge of the fieldwork.

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