Feminism as a polarizing axis of the political conversation on *Twitter*: the case of #IreneMonteroDimision

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Abstract

The fragmentation of the Spanish party system has led to a growing political polarization, particularly evident on the Internet. The discursive strategies of political actors online, combined with the particularities of communication on social media platforms such as the disinhibition effect, echo chambers, and filter bubbles, are likely to promote a state of tension among digital citizens. This tension is particularly pronounced in gender issues, which have become key positions of political parties, with convergence of sexism in the community and a highly reactive misogynistic online culture that turns female politicians into easy targets. Starting from the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision, which conveys a paradigmatic criticism movement against the Spanish Minister of Equality, an analysis of the social conversation on *Twitter* is developed to determine its intentionality, tone, and orientation, as well as the themes and users that generated the most tension. In this way, multimodal content and discourse analysis is applied to the 418 tweets with the greatest interaction and explicitly directed at the minister. The hypothesis is that the criticism of Irene Montero goes beyond the management of her Ministry to place her at the center of a power struggle in which political ideology, hate speech, and antifeminism converge. The study has shown that attacks on Montero extend to the Executive and the feminist movement; they are promoted by a mass of politicized and polarized profiles, with constant activism and a tendency towards contagious replication of messages. These practices, as well as the participation of artificial profiles, allow us to appreciate signs of astroturfing; behind this seemingly natural critical reaction, there are orchestrated movements of antifeminist and far-right profiles (gender trolling), but also of trans-exclusionary feminists opposed to legislation promoted by Montero.

Keywords

Polarization; Gender; Misogyny; Hate speech; Social networks; Social media; Women; Politicians; Political polarization; Public image; Astroturfing; Feminism; Antifeminism; Bots; Hashtags; *Twitter*.

1. Introduction

One of the terms that best defines the current context of Spanish politics is "tension": growing political polarization has led to a state of continuous tension that citizens consider worrying (*CIS*, 2022). Although high polarization characterizes twenty-first century politics (**Fiorina**; **Abrams**; **Pope**, 2006), it is particularly relevant in the current Spanish context (**Garmendia**; **Lorenzo-Rodríguez**; **Riera**, 2022).

The changes during the past decade have complexified a political system that functioned as a de facto two-party system. In 2015, two new parties –*Podemos* (left-wing populism) and *Ciudadanos* (center-right)– obtained significant representation in the *Congress of Deputies*. In 2019, *Vox* repeated this feat for the far right.

This fragmentation of the ideological arc stimulated an ideological and affective polarization of the Spanish citizenry (**Gidron**; **Adams**; **Horne**, 2020; **García-Escribano**; **García-Palma**; **Manzanera-Román**, 2021) while forcing the positioning of parties to differentiate themselves around issues of interest to obtain an increasingly volatile vote (**Méndez-Lago**, 2020). Within these essential topics (**Stokes**, 1963) are issues related to gender and equality (**García-Escribano**; **García-Palma**; **Manzanera-Román**, 2021).

The electoral emergence of *Vox*, which made opposition to gender ideology its main objective in defense of conservative values (**Aladro**; **Requeijo**, 2020; **Arroyo-Menéndez**, 2020), led to a [re]positioning of the remaining parties with respect to realities such as equality policies or violence against women. Although anti-feminism and anti-genderism are recurrent elements in the discourse of the radical right in Europe (**Arranz**, 2022), their inclusion in the political-social debate in Spain has revealed fissures in the understanding that elites and citizens have of equality.

Although *Organic Law 3/2007* from March 22, for the effective equality of women and men, was pioneering in terms of public policies, it did not lead to the transformation of Spanish society to the same extent, hindered by a deep-rooted patriarchal culture (**Guerrero-Vizuete**, 2018). The creation of the *Ministry of Equality* (2008-2010) generated a wave of criticism of the government of the socialist Rodríguez-Zapatero, personalized in the figure of Minister Bibiana Aído. Her youth and limited experience, rather than her management, systematically placed her among the members of the executive branch who were the worst rated by citizens (*CIS*, 2009; 2010), even though **Mata**, **Luque**, and **Ortega** (2010) noted the absence of correlation between gender, age, and rating.

These attacks targeting women, along the lines of the new anti-feminism (**Bonet-Martí**, 2020), occurred once again with the creation of the *Ministry of Equality* during the left-wing *PSOE–Podemos* coalition government (2020-2023). In a decade of unprecedented advances in formal equality, Minister Irene Montero (*Unidas Podemos*) has been criticized for various aspects of both her private and public life. Despite her activist and militant trajectory within *Podemos*, Montero's relationship with the former Vice President of the Government, Pablo Iglesias, has led to a sexist and misogynist discourse regarding her access to power[1], encouraged by some political elites and accompanied by negative citizen ratings (*CIS*, 2021; 2022).

Social perception regarding Irene Montero evidences a greater polarization around the trust and feelings provoked by political leadership (**Torcal**, 2020). This reality became clear with the approval, in 2021, of the Draft Bill for the real and effective equality of trans people and for the guarantee of the rights of LGTBI people. Despite being the result of the work of two ministries, those of Equality and Justice, their identification with Montero has strained their relationship with the most conservative factions as well as part of the feminist movement.

1.1. Women and politics: inequalities in the online and offline spheres

Politics has traditionally been male territory. Although *Organic Law 3/2007* contributed to gender balance (**Verge**, 2012), reality reflects a cloak of equality (**Lagarde**, 2003): women access positions of political responsibility and are recognized, but they are also questioned and suffer disqualifications, verbal attacks, denigrating treatment, and even physical aggression or sexual harassment on the basis of their personal sphere (**Soriano**, 2019).

In the media, despite parity in representative positions, women account for barely 20% of informative subjects in the area of politics (*GMMP*, 2020), often receiving a biased, more trivial, and familiar treatment than their male colleagues (**Sánchez-Calero**; **Vinuesa-Tejero**; **Abejón-Mendoza**, 2013).

> In Spanish politics, gender issues are the backbone of ideological and emotional positions

These practices, which undermine the presence and relevance of women in politics and affect their public and private image, transferred to the digital arena and have become more developed. On *Twitter*, female politicians have less relational potential and influence than their male counterparts (**McGregor**; **Mourão**, 2016) and less amplification of their messages among the user community and their own party profiles (**Guerrero-Solé**; **Perales**, 2021).

Simultaneously, there has been an increase in sexism, hate speech, and other forms of violence against women politicians, which negatively affects their experiences on the Internet (**Esposito**; **Zollo**, 2021) and situates gendered hostility as a digital discursive practice (**Khosravinik**; **Esposito**, 2018).

Tromble and **Koole** (2020) and **Conroy** *et al*. (2015) noted the sexism that women politicians in the digital sphere face on a daily basis. Although oftentimes portrayed as paternalism or condescension (**Beltrán** *et al.*, 2020), hostile manifestations are more frequent, be it through uncivil (**Southern**; **Harmer**, 2019) and aggressive behaviors (**Dhrodia**, 2018), misogyny and hate speech (**Esposito**; **Zollo**, 2021), or gender misinformation (**Sessa**, 2020). Women political leaders and representatives are even recipients of hatred aimed at the party, ideology, or government to which they belong (**Martínez-Rolán**; **Piñeiro-Otero**, 2020). These forms of violence are integrated into an anti-feminist backlash (**Wilhelm**; **Joeckel**, 2018) characterized by extreme misogyny, reactivity, and a propensity for personal attacks (**Bonet-Martín**, 2020).

Asymmetries in women politicians' communication should be understood as part of a power struggle in which hate ideology, misogyny, and false narratives converge (**Cuthbertson** *et al.*, 2019) to intimidate, silence, and even expel them from the virtual debate. **Cassese** and **Holman** (2019) thus point to hostile sexism as a predictor of greater criticism of public representatives, with attacks that also undermine the pluralism of voices, since social networks allow politics to circumvent the barriers of traditional media to reach the citizenry.

1.2. Social networks as spaces of gender inequality

Certain characteristics of interactions in online environments, such as invisibility, asynchrony, dissociation between the virtual and the real, or the minimization of authority, can lead to the development of behaviors that would be unthinkable face-to-face (**Suler**, 2004). Although this disinhibition effect is not essentially negative, its interaction with ambient sexism (**Glomb** *et al.*, 1997) and with a misogynistic online culture called the manosphere (**Nagle**, 2017) makes ideas marginalized in the "official discourse of political correctness" (**Haller**; **Holt**, 2018) that affect the user community visible, regardless of whether it is directly targeted by harassment or violence.

Social networks have proven to be hostile territories for women, who often face experiences that are unimaginable for male users (**Vogels**, 2021). This toxicity, especially relevant on *Twitter* (**Frenda** *et al.*, 2018), presents a coercive component that manifests itself through harassment or bullying strategies (**Richardson-Self**, 2018), some of which are particularly harmful, such as gender trolling (**Mantilla**, 2013).

Research on political communication on *Twitter* has focused on leadership (**López-García**, 2016), analyzing, on the one hand, representatives (mostly male), and on the other hand, other political agents. In both cases, the perspective of presence or party/ideology, rather than the gender variable, predominates. However, the feminist or gender perspective also has studies of interest. For example, hashtags have allowed us to study collective narratives (**Fallarás**, 2019), counter-discourses (**Núñez-Puente**; **Fernández-Romero**, 2019), community interaction and organization (**Idoiaga-Mondragon** *et al.*, 2019), polarization (**Larrondo**; **Morales-i-Gras**; **Orbegozo-Terradillos**, 2019; **Blanco-Alfonso**; **Rodríguez-Fernández**; **Arce-García**, 2022), and more recently, the anti-feminism of *Vox* online (**Lacalle**; **Martín-Jiménez**; **Etura-Hernández**, 2023).

In contrast to the idea of polarization as the emergence of distant or opposing social groupings, **Robles** *et al*. (2022) point to the trend toward isolation and breakdown of communication between the different poles. This idea is observed in social network dynamics such as echo chambers, which reinforce the distances between groups by enhancing individualized discourses and crossed disagreements (**Jamieson**; **Cappella**, 2008; **Colleoni**; **Rozza**; **Arvidsson**, 2014) or bubble filters (**Pariser**, 2011; **Piñeiro-Otero**; **Martínez-Rolán**, 2020), resulting from the informative personalization of algorithms.

The restriction in the exchange of information between gay users is particularly prevalent in individuals with more radical positions (**Barberá** *et al.*, 2015). Although **Cardenal** *et al.* (2019) have questioned the correlation between information restriction and political polarization, the fact that algorithms enhance the visibility of more extreme messages/accounts (**Bellovary**; **Young**; **Goldenberg**, 2021) favors their normalization and, with this, the entrenchment and radicalization of the positions they hold (**Ramírez-Dueñas**; **Vinuesa-Tejero**, 2020).

Finally, within the digital context, it is worth noting that sociopolitical agents find new ways to control the communicative and propagandistic discourse, thanks to the use of bots and strategies –such as astroturfing, which tries to replicate the appearance of spontaneous movements of natural citizen support– but which in reality are driven by small groups with large resources to establish mainstream opinions, criticism, or support for political leaders (**García-Orosa**, 2021; **Kovic** *et al*., 2018; **Piñeiro-Otero**; **Martínez-Rolán**, 2020).

> The hashtag analyzed is used cyclically and often driven by political and/or politicized accounts, reaching the position of trending topic on several occasions

2. Method

In this context of tension in Spanish politics, in which gender issues are the backbone of ideological positions (**Ruiloba-Núñez**; **Valenzuela-Samaniego**, 2021), it is necessary to identify their expression in the digital arena, with special emphasis on the manifestations of sexist hate speech around political representatives. For this purpose, this research analyzes the conversation on *Twitter* against the Minister of Equality Irene Montero[2] for embodying public equality policies in Spain and for being the political figure of the *PSOE–Podemos* government (2020-2023) with the worst citizen ranking (*CIS*, 2021; 2022).

The choice of *Twitter*, in line with studies such as **Fox** *et al*. (2015), **Frenda** *et al*. (2019), or **Tromble** and **Koole** (2020), lies in the weight of political conversation on this platform, its open and public nature, and its configuration as a hostile space for women.

The main objective of the research is therefore to analyze the social conversation around Irene Montero on *Twitter* to determine how polarization, misogyny, and hate speech affect her image. This objective is supported by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What topics and intentions make up the criticisms of Minister Irene Montero on *Twitter*?
- RQ2: Who are the most successful critics, and to whom do they direct their message(s)?
- RQ3: What are the characteristics of the construction of such criticism?

On the basis of the analysis of the content and multimodal discourse of the messages, as well as the profiles of the critics, we intend to test the following hypotheses:

- H1: Criticism of Irene Montero on *Twitter* transcends her management of the Ministry, affecting her political and public image on the basis of personal attacks and subjective judgments about her actions and statements.
- H2: The social conversation reflects the political and social polarization fostered by far-right accounts with attacks on feminism and with a second stream of criticism from trans-exclusionary feminists.
- H3: The messages show a high level of emotionality, false narratives, and insults that promote their categorization as hate speech.

For this purpose, a quantitative and qualitative analysis sheet was developed on the basis of **Losada** *et al.* (2021), **Piñeiro-Otero** and **Martínez-Rolán** (2021), **Zamora-Medina** *et al*. (2021), and **Zamora-Martínez** *et al*. (2020) with the following categories and variables:

- Positioning of the message: in favor of or against Irene Montero, or not assessable.
- Interaction results: number of retweets, quotes, comments, and likes of the tweet.
- Formal features of the message:
    · Elements of discourse: text, image, video, or their combination.
    · Type of image: snapshot, collage, GIF, photo, tweet, other.
    · Use of hashtags, mentions, and URLs as well as being a reply to another tweet.
- Message content:
    · Purpose: criticism, put-downs and taunts, insults, threats, other
    · Status within the pyramid of hate: not applicable, stereotyping, insensitive comments and jokes, identity blaming, use of nicknames to ridicule, name calling, bullying, other higher forms of hate such as discrimination or threats.
    · Subjects: sex work, conciliation, gender violence, sexual violence, Trans Law, child custody, political management, personal life, feminism, other.
    · Objective of the criticism: Montero as a person, Montero as a minister, the feminist movement, *Podemos*, the Government, other.
    · Argumentation: not applicable, ethos (value in the source), pathos (emotional value), logos (value in the piece of information).
    · Keywords and insults.
- Critics: analysis of recurring users (seniority, anonymity, bot, hater).

To narrow down the study universe, the following hashtag was selected: #IreneMonteroDimision (and its variant #IreneMonteroDimisión), which conveys a paradigmatic movement of criticism against the minister, and all the tweets issued with this hashtag during November 2021 were downloaded. This month was chosen as it is the month in which the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (November 25) is held, and it also included relevant events such as the pardon of Juana Rivas, the crime of Igualada, and the opening of a *TikTok* account by Irene Montero. With these criteria, the initial universe contained 35,467 units of analysis. Subsequently, the messages –not including retweets– that quoted @IreneMontero were selected, a discursive practice that gives visibility to the message and makes the minister a participant in the criticism. This double screening resulted in a corpus of 1,118 tweets, from which those with the highest interaction (sum of retweets, quotes, comments, and likes) were chosen, with a final study sample consisting of 418 units.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (v.26), and inter-coder concordance was calculated with a pretest on a 10% sample, reaching 0.743 with Fleiss's Kappa formula, which guarantees the reliability of the results.

3. Results

3.1. Introduction: origin of the hashtag

The hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision appeared on *Twitter* in 2020 after Irene Montero took office as minister (on January 13), and its use was motivated both by her actions or statements –from her public and private life– as well as by facts linked to feminism (sexist crimes, laws, sentences, etc.). Although usually negative in nature, the hashtag was occasionally used as counter-speech in support of the minister.

This hashtag is used cyclically, often driven by political and/or politicized accounts, and became a trending topic on several occasions (*Trendinalia*, n.d.). According to *Hashtagify*, the most common spelling (98%) is #IreneMonteroDimision, although 2% of users use only lowercase or the tilde. It correlates with hashtags such as #GobiernoDimision, #SanchezDimision, #IreneVeteYa, #ViolenciaVicaria, #ADEsYoutuber, or #TeamVox, and among the most influential regular accounts are political agents such as @JuanfraEscudero, @Macarena_Olona, and @javiernegre10.

3.2. Positioning, reach, and format of messages

Regarding the positioning of the messages in the sample, none in favor of the minister were recovered, although two tweets had wording that was insufficient to determine their orientation.

The repetition of two texts (not as retweets but as spontaneous publications) by different accounts throughout the study period had high levels of success and established the existence of an orchestrated visibility and dissemination strategy. This astroturfing strategy, which presents as spontaneous and natural citizen criticism messages covertly pushed by political actors (**Kovic** *et al.*, 2018), also implies harassing behavior according to the pyramid of hate proposed by the *Anti-Defamation League* (*ADL*). The messages were:

> "Hi @sanchezcastejon, @IreneMontero could you please inform the public when and where the Emergency Committee will be held for the brutal torture and rape of a 16-year-old girl, which almost cost her her life, perpetrated by a group of males? Thanks #IreneMonteroDimision"

> "Good morning. Has @IreneMontero or @sanchezcastejon resigned yet? #IreneMonteroDimision #IreneVeteYa #SanchezTraicionaMujeres #FeminismoNoVotaTraidores"

Figure 1. Examples of the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision critical of her political management (left) and private life (center) and in support of her (right). Source: *Twitter* (Dec. 2020).

Translation of Figure 1

Esto tiene que cambiar @libertaaddexp76	Pasando el día @pasandoeldia1	GoRocko @go_rocko
They are probably people like you…because I don't know anyone like that [Picture of Irene Montero with text: THE MINISTRY OF MONTERO "MEN GIVE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL TO WOMEN TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEM"] 5:54 p.m. Dec. 25, 2020 55 retweets 13 quotes 180 likes	Irene Montero in 2016: "Let me tell you, let me tell you, it's because I have never done my tax returns" In 2018 she bought a huge house worth more than 1 million euros and in 2019 she had three kids, but remember that she said: "it is impossible to live in this economic system" [Screenshot of video of Irene Montero] 11:11 a.m. Dec. 27, 2020 138 retweets 7 quotes 158 likes	You are a coward of a hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision doesn't even have 3,000 tweets and we respond with #TodasconIrene, which already has more than 20,000 tweets Honorable people are like that… When they touch one of us, they touch all of us. Thank you for everything, @IreneMontero [Screenshot of *Twitter*: Trending in Spain #TodasconIrene 20,200 Tweets 4:55 p.m. Dec. 20, 2020 100 retweets 7 quotes 211 likes

The first text, a reproach to Montero's inaction before the rape of a minor in Igualada and for calling the victim "woman," appears in 79 tweets (18.99% of the sample) posted by 76 different accounts. This publication even expanded to extend the criticism to @IgualdadGob, @Pam_Angela_, @VickyRosell, and @DelGobVG, institutional agents with jurisdiction in the area of gender violence.

The second tweet, published 31 times (7.45%) from two different users, criticizes the Government and the *Ministry of Equality* in particular for promoting the so-called Trans Law, considering it detrimental to feminism[3].

Regarding its impact on the community, the message about the Igualada rape had a greater repercussion than the rest, with an average of 52.24 interactions per broadcast, including likes (M = 35.35) and retweets (M = 15.67). However, it was observed that unique tweets generated more conversation (comments) than those that simply repeated the message.

Two important insights can be drawn from these data:

1) more than a quarter of the tweets with the highest impact on #IreneMonteroDimision is criticism orchestrated by pressure and harassment groups; and

2) such messages seek to implicate Pedro Sánchez, leader of the Government and the *PSOE*, as well as other entities and government representatives.

These results show the success of astroturfing-type strategies –created and promoted by interested users– as well as their political intentionality of wearing down the government coalition and the image of the president together with that of Irene Montero.

Regarding the type of formal construction of the message, the predominant format was unaccompanied text (82.93%), although tweets with images or videos registered the most interactions ($p \leq 0.01$ with the Kruskall-Wallis test). Thus, while the average number of interactions was 48.41, tweets with an image (12.99% of the sample) or video (1.92%) achieved an average of 134 and 160 interactions, respectively. The images include real photographs of the minister in aggressive poses during her political activity, as well as collages whose intent is to ridicule (Figure 3).

The inclusion of hyperlinks to expand the content is an additional practice mainly aimed at sharing media news (10 out of 11 publications), although the use of screenshots of the news as a more visual and permanent formula is more common.

Figure 2. Messages with higher interaction

Translation of Figure 2

Mosquetero @loquepaque	Belén @Belen_Larioss	ALI #TeamVox @alixx05
#IreneMonteroDimision the most pathetic minister in the history of Spain, @IreneMontero #PodemosNuevaCasta #ComunismoEsMiseria [A collage of photos of Irene Montero, one with text saying: We got rich from tricking poor people.] 6:24 p.m. Nov. 5, 2021 427 retweets 21 quotes 947 likes	Protests in support of the woman who was raped at San Fermín. Can someone tell me why @IreneMontero mobilized heaven and earth in this case and with the girl from #Igualada the silence is deafening? #ChicasVox52 #YoSiTeApoyo #MonteroDimision [Photo of protest.] 11:22 p.m. Nov. 18, 2021 420 retweets 10 quotes 718 likes	Last night in Madrid everything was lit up in purple for the feminist fight. While girls in care from the Baleares shouldn't be a part of this fight because no one demands justice for them. Right, @IreneMontero? #IreneMonteroDimision #TeamVox #LevantandoEspaña [Photo of Irene Montero.] 8:09 a.m. Nov. 26, 2021 239 retweets 15 quotes 469 likes

Figure 3. Memes and photos that generate an aggressive image of Irene Montero

Translation of Figure 3

Meme with picture of Irene Montero and another woman that says: - Rallies are prohibited now, man… - That's better because it's hard for me to rally any concentration, anyways (a play on the word "concentración" in Spanish).	Meme with pictures of Irene Montero and text: You were with Palestine until you could dress in Valentino. -Diary of a communist.	Two photos of Irene Montero.

Other hashtags utilized make use of references to the minister (#IreneVeteYa, #IreneCierraAlSalir, #IreneDimiteYa), sexist violence, and the LGTBI and trans communities. Two topics also stand out: the political party *Vox*, present in six hashtags (#TeamVox, #PrimeroVox, #SoloQuedaVox, etc.), and another coming from the entertainment world, a reaction to Montero's public praise of the 2021 docudrama in which the famous Rocío Carrasco reveals the violence she suffered at the hands of her ex-partner Antonio David Flores. With the hashtag #MareaAzul (35 tweets) the support movement for Antonio David identified him as a victim, accusing Montero of being subjective and the Mediaset producer of lying.

Six out of ten tweets in the sample respond to other publications (254 tweets), mostly by Irene Montero (33.41% representing 139 tweets), whom they question for greater visibility. However, the success of spontaneous posts is higher (Kruskall-Wallis, $p ≤ 0.01$) than responses (M = 78), both to @IreneMontero (M = 35 shares) and to other users (M = 13).

Regarding mentions of other accounts, 164 tweets did not include any additional reference to the minister (31.42%), while 252 (60.58%) included at least one. These could be to anonymous users to motivate their participation, however, on many occasions they sought to extend the criticism to politicians or institutions: @sanchezcastejon (128 mentions, which drops to 50 if repeated tweets are excluded), @IgualdadGob (23), @Pam_Angela_ (9), @VickyRosell (9), and @DelGobVG (8).

3.3. The content of the criticism: purpose, level of hatred, topics, recipients, and argumentation

The overall results show a clear predominance of criticism (52% of the messages) against Irene Montero and her actions, followed by disparagement (28%), insults (10%), and threats (10%). If the two repetitive tweets, classified as criticism and threats, respectively, are eliminated, a slight percentage variation is observed.

The tweets with the highest interaction are those whose aim is to insult (M = 80), which are positioned globally and in all its variables (retweets, comments, and likes) ahead of those with the purpose of criticizing (M = 50), belittling (M = 37), and threatening (M = 36). Insults such as "dishonest", "traitor", "vile", "incompetent", "stupid", "hypocrite", "shameless", "brat", "slag", "moron", "thief", "scammer opportunist" and disqualifying expressions such as "ministry of inequality", "ministry of trans equality", "minister of irrelevance", "ministrans", and "ministre" and "ninistra" –sexist plays on words
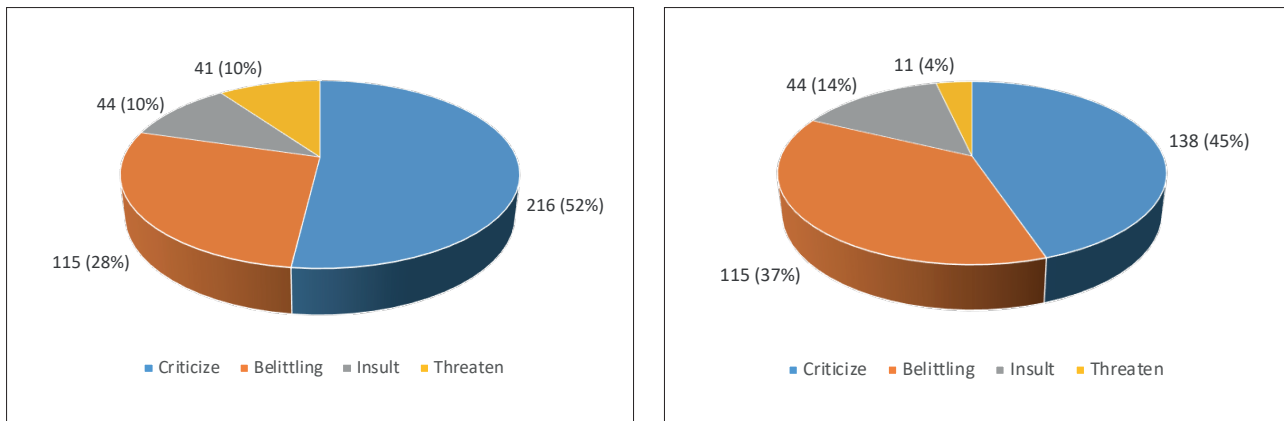
Graph 1. Comparison of purposes of all tweets and non-repeated tweets
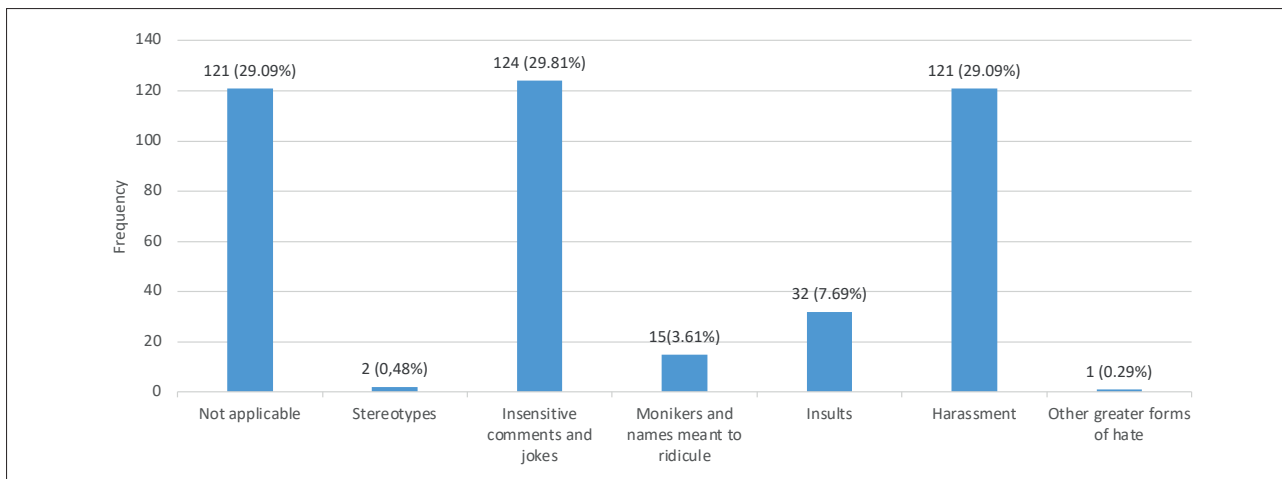
Graph 2. Classification of tweets in the pyramid of hate

for "minister" – were collected. These terms are included in almost a third of the unique messages (31.7%), data that show the degree of affective polarization, especially hatred, directed toward Irene Montero.

Using the *ADL* pyramid of hate and based on *Allport*'s work from the 1950s on prejudice and discrimination, the analysis carried out made it possible to identify these negative manifestations against Montero as hate and to determine their severity. Seven out of ten messages in the sample (295 tweets) presented some manifestation of hate in a clear way. Almost a third of the analyzed tweets could be conceived as harassment; another third, insensitive comments and jokes; and a tenth included insults (7.69%) and monikers or names meant to ridicule (3.61%).
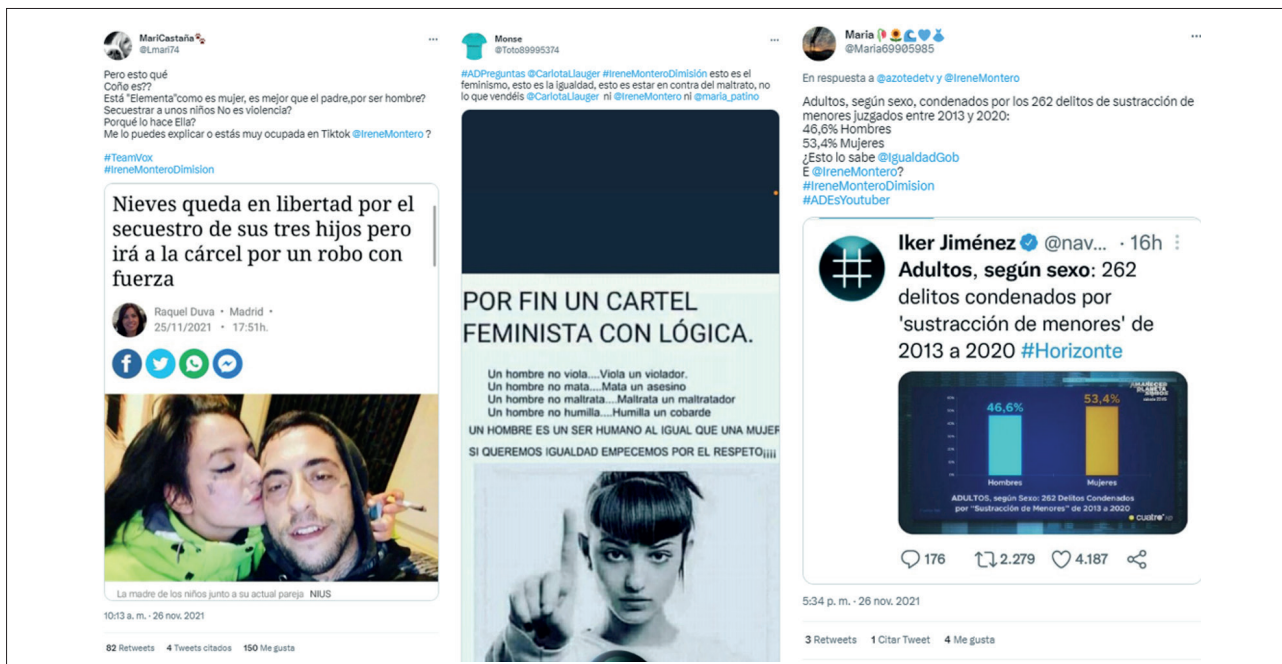

Figure 4. Irene Montero criticized for generalizing a negative image of men

Translation of Figure 4

MariCastaña @Lmari74	Monse @Toto89995374	Maria @Maria69905985
But what the hell is this?? She is fundamental because she is a woman, she is better than the father, because he is a man? Kidnapping children is not violence? Why does she do it? Can you explain this to me or are you too busy on Tiktok @IreneMontero?	#ADPreguntas @CarlotaLlauger #IreneMonteroDimision this is feminism, this is equality, this is being against mistreatment, not what @CarlotaLlauger nor @IreneMontero nor @maria_patino are selling	In response to @azotedetv and @IreneMontero Adults, according to their sex, condemned for 262 counts of child abduction, sentenced between 2013 and 2020: 46.6% men, 53.4% women Do @IgualdadGob and @IreneMontero know that?
#TeamVox #IreneMonteroDimision	[Screenshot of poster.]	#IreneMonteroDimision #ADEsYoutuber
[Screenshot of news article.] 10:13 a.m. Nov. 26, 2021 82 retweets 4 quotes 150 likes		[Screenshot of tweet from Iker Jiménez.] 5:34 p.m. Nov. 26, 2021 3 retweets 1 quote 4 likes

With respect to the topics (not exclusive), contrary to initial predictions, only two of the tweets analyzed refer to Montero's personal life compared with the majority that refer to her political management (84%). The main topics, in order of importance, are sexual violence (37.8%), feminism (20.1%), the *Trans Law* (15%), and gender violence (13.8%).

In "other issues" (10.9%), there was criticism of the use of language, especially inclusive language; statements or publications by Montero on social networks and traditional media; and the case of the "blue tide." In this sense, although the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimisión has a literal application, given its link to the political and economic management of the minister (considered ineffective, negative, or based on nepotism), the hashtag's meaning is reinterpreted to provide a common narrative and ground for issues of different nature and entity, some of them poorly planned or outside the institutional agenda.

Likewise, this hashtag conveyed opposing perspectives within the *Twittersphere*. In defense of feminism, #IreneMonteroDimision was used for the petition, in the form of a demand, for the reform of laws on gender violence, abortion, or the very concept of woman, accusing Montero of harming women and even children. Simultaneously, it was used to denounce the persecution and blaming of men by legislation and public policies on issues such as gender violence or custody agreements.

The analysis of the recipients of the "hate" indicates that personal criticism (personal relationships, low capacity) accounted for barely 3.6% of the tweets against Irene Montero, compared with 98.1% of messages directed at her role as minister. Other common targets of attacks were the government (40.5%, 20.59% if repetitive tweets are excluded) and feminism (18.3%). It is noteworthy that only 2% of the tweets mentioned her party (*Podemos*).

Figure 5. Argumentation with unsourced data and data from unknown or subjective sources

Translation of Figure 5

Maria @Maria69905985 Nov. 26, 2021 Adults, according to their sex, condemned for 262 counts of child abduction, sentenced between 2013 and 2020: 46.6% men, 53.4% women Do @IgualdadGob and @IreneMontero know that? #IreneMonteroDimision #ADEsYoutuber 14 comments 92 retweets 115 likes	aranzazu espeso @aranzazuespeso Nov. 5, 2021 In response to @ContraBorrado Let's see if I understand, 1. Trans women cannot be pregnant, 2. Trans men are women that are transitioning to men 3. If you are a man, you don't have the intention to be pregnant. 4. So who are the people who can be pregnant who aren't WOMEN??? @IreneMontero @PSOE #IreneMonteroDimision 2 comments 15 retweets 46 likes
Mallorca @patcorde Nov. 9, 2021 Since we have had this government, cases of rape have increased. What is @IreneMontero doing with the 500 million, spending it on "pink oppresses" #IreneMonteroDimision #ElSuicidioDeEspaña #PrimeroVox [Screenshot of 6 different news articles with text written on it: ISOLATED CASES??? SERIOUSLY???] 8 comments 84 retweets 104 likes	Aníbal Iberia Hispania @AnibalIberia For the #rapists, I ask for the #deathpenalty #deathpenalty #deathpenalty #deathpenalty From @IreneMontero, I want #IreneMonteroDimision #IreneMonteroDimision [Photo of Irene Montero with headline from news article.] 9:26 a.m. Nov. 4, 2021 1 retweet 2 likes

Regarding argumentation, the research allowed us to determine that a majority of the messages are lacking argumentation (52.3%) or are based only on personal perceptions and opinions (*pathos*, 38.7%), as opposed to reasoning based on external sources (*ethos*, 2.7%) or data (*logos*, 5.3%).

However, ethos and logos achieved a higher volume of interactions (both M = 74) than messages based exclusively on personal opinions (M = 50) or without argumentation (M = 43) ($p \leq 0.05$ by Kruskall-Wallis). In this context, it should be noted that many of the arguments based on logos used not only data without citing sources, but also media headlines with misleading links (Figure 5).

3.4. Analysis of posters: evaluation of the accounts promoting the hashtag

Within the social conversation around #IreneMonteroDimision throughout November 2021, nearly 800 accounts were identified that used the hashtag on at least two occasions. A preliminary study of these accounts revealed a majority of anonymous users, with behaviors compatible with bots or fake accounts, and three main themes: trans-exclusionary feminism, support for Antonio David Flores (#mareaAzul), and *Vox*.

After narrowing down the sample, 60 accounts that used the label on at least two occasions were still identified, despite the loss of many of the recurrent posters. In these remaining accounts, we determined their anonymity and their probability of being bots (using the *Botometer* tool) or Irene Montero haters (based on the recurrent use of the label in the past 2 years). Information such as the account's main theme and the date the account was created were also collected. In this process, the absence of identifying elements (photograph, account name, or other data) was noted, demonstrating the correlation between anonymity and negative disinhibition.

> Most of the messages sought to erode the coalition and image not only of the Minister of Equality, but also of the President of the Government

Nine out of ten recurring users can be categorized as haters given their involvement around #IreneMonteroDimision over the past 2 years. Of these, more than half of the accounts presented themselves in the *bio* as radical feminists against the T*rans Law*, 15% identified themselves with the extreme right, and a minority associated themselves with the "blue tide." According to *Botometer*, half of these users were real people, albeit anonymous, and at least a quarter were bots.

Remarkably, half of these accounts joined *Twitter* in 2021, coinciding with the height of criticism surrounding the minister. This limited duration and the repeated use of the hashtag are evidence of the contributory nature of these accounts, which have the objective of making the criticism and hostile opposition against Irene Montero visible.

4. Conclusions and discussion of results

This study of the social conversation on *Twitter* around the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision has allowed for the confirmation of the tension of digital citizenship around gender issues as a projection of the existing political polarization, as well as certain particularities of online discursive practices such as the disinhibition effect, the instantaneousness of publications, or the restriction in the exchange of information.

The personalization of equality policies in Irene Montero, as well as the legislative initiatives of the Government regarding gender, have influenced the behavior of the user community. As supporters of ideological positions, and in line with **Ruiloba-Núñez** and **Valenzuela-Samaniego** (2021), the participation of the radical right –identified with *Vox*– as part of an anti-feminist faction that denies male violence, criticizes the allocation of funds to equality policies, and reproaches the bias of a system against men, is evident. This research has identified the incidence of issues such as custody situations or the weight of the "blue tide," which places Antonio David Flores as a victim of a perverse system and which reflects the participation of "activists for men's rights," a dominant subculture in the Spanish manosphere, which, according to **García-Mingo** *et al.* (2022), is highly politicized and organized, with well-articulated arguments that are able to influence public opinion.

The convergence in the opinions of the radical right and the manosphere refers to an ideological but also affective polarization of the hashtag that manifests itself in personal attacks on Irene Montero, from criticism to contempt and insult. Although these attacks are directed at her management of the Ministry rather than at her private family sphere, they are usually based on subjective opinions and assessments (H1 is partially validated) even with the interference of the discourse of certain political leaders or formations. Tweets such as "#IreneMonteroDimision this is Irene and her idea of #Method she thinks that it means #IToo sleep with men to get ahead", in addition to an attempt to ridicule, and even resemanticize, the hashtags of the feminist movement, project ideas from the public discourse of leaders and representatives of *Vox*, the *PP*, or Cs (see Note 1), confirming **Allcott** and **Gentzhow**'s (2017) premise of the crucial role that political actors play in polarization by disseminating messages whose possible biases will influence citizen perception.

The orientation of the criticism toward the political figure of the minister, which extends to the government and its president, Pedro Sánchez, as well as to other groups such as feminists and trans-feminists, along the lines indicated by Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2020), or to interaction –LGTBI groups[4]– may be due to the selection of the sample itself. All of this indicates that this situation is due, on the one hand, to a conscious use of the mention of @IreneMontero to make her a participant in the criticism of her public facet (as opposed to private aspects that could trigger a punitive response), and on the other hand, to the significant weight of feminist users in the conversation who have a critical perspective regarding who or what poses a threat and why.

Even if these personal attacks against Irene Montero in her role as minister could be identified as part of anti-feminism, as **Bonet-Martí** (2020) points out, their convergence with the discursive practices of trans-exclusionary feminists, the main posters in the sample, lead to their consideration as expressions of affective polarization.

The relevance of trans-exclusionary feminism in the analysis, ahead of far-right accounts and other anti-feminist factions (H2 is partially corroborated), points to the idea of **Robles** *et al.* (2022) of polarization as a rupture of communication between poles (two perspectives of feminism) that is enhanced on the Internet. This ruptu-

> Insults toward Montero appear in almost a third of the messages (31.7%), which shows the polarization and the high level of hatred in the *Twittersphere* toward this political representative

re is evident in the creation of numerous accounts by radical feminists in 2021, in a context of tension due to the approval of the draft bill of the *Law for the real and effective equality of trans people and for the guarantee of LGTBI rights*. While some accounts exhibit behaviors identifiable with bots, others are more or less defined (with nickname and avatar) and take advantage of the

> The few tweets with logos-based argumentation used data without citing sources, as well as media headlines that distorted the connection to the original tweet

ease and speed of communication as well as the anonymity provided by *Twitter* to disseminate their positions and/or attack the management of equality policies. Although the most visible confrontation with the minister stems from this law, there is an important gap around essential issues for radical feminism such as the abolition of prostitution, pornography, or surrogacy. The very definition of the term "woman" and its application to issues such as sexual violence generated a hostile discourse against Irene Montero among the feminist faction, which, although less aggressive in its form than the anti-feminist discourse, registered several instances of harassment.

As for the tweets, the limited adaptation to the platform's language format is evident. Most of the publications are textual in nature, a characteristic that refers to the instantaneousness of their creation/publication and to a certain lack of planning or reflexivity. Images, videos, or hyperlinks are rarely used, although when they are used, it leads to a higher volume of interactions. In this sense, it is possible to point to a greater discursive complexity of the publications from the two anti-feminist factions, whose messages tend to integrate visual content such as photographs, macro images (image-text memes), media captures, videos, or other types of content more frequently.

Mentions and other hashtags are repeated in the sample that extend the attack, especially to the President of the Government and to other political and institutional agents related to the *Ministry of Equality*. This analysis has made it possible to confirm the importance of mentions and hashtags, especially in the discourse of the feminist faction, which constitute the messages in and of themselves, for example: "@IgualdadGob @IreneMontero @sanchezcastejon #IreneMonteroDimisión #AboliciónPornografía". In their messages and labels they occasionally play with words to create derogatory monikers –ministrans or ministre, playing on inclusive language– or with double meanings that give satirical undertones to their criticism of the government's "anti-feminist" drift.

Throughout the conversation, personal and emotional messages prevail over publications with rational argumentation. Even in the latter cases, external data and sources of doubtful impartiality or veracity are used. In the argumentation of the radical right and the self-appointed "blue tide," the usual tactics of anti-feminist disinformation highlighted by **Piñeiro-Otero** and **Martínez-Rolán** (2023) can be seen, such as the biased use of current information or the use of false-biased figures to place the focus of the problem of sexual violence on immigration; criticizing the so-called overspending on equality policies; ridiculing awareness-raising actions (#elrosaoprime); or in the case of the wave of support for Antonio David Flores, denouncing a "gender justice" that violates their rights as parents and criminalizes them along the lines of #NotAllMen (**Nicholas**; **Agius**, 2018).

It is noteworthy that, although the "blue tide" is a vehicle for the positions of men's rights activists (**García-Mingo** *et al*. 2022), it is mostly made up of female users, or at least, those who have the appearance of being female.

Criticism is perceived as disqualification using insults, which, in addition to generating greater interaction, also increases harassment and even threats. In summary, the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision is supported by emotive messages, high levels of hate and aggressiveness, and false content (H3 is confirmed). A greater discursive aggressiveness and number of false narratives are observed in the radical anti-feminist right-wing bloc, although the repetition of certain messages by trans-exclusionary feminists and the continuous mention of the minister and even other members of the government –as more or less hidden accusations– reflect harassment strategies that lead to placing some instances in the highest sections of the pyramid of hate.

Likewise, among the most successful messages including the studied hashtag, there is a significant mass of fake accounts and many other politicized and polarized ones with a constant activism that repeats the same messages in a continuous and contagious way. Consequently, what appears to be a real movement of criticism presents clear signs of astroturfing, a growing phenomenon on social networks, in which sock puppets, click farms, and paid contributors and supporters are mixed in to generate content and interaction and influence –in an artificial and non-organic way– public opinion (**Kovic** *et al*., 2018; **Piñeiro-Otero**; **Martínez-Rolán**, 2020).

The findings of this work expand the knowledge on the construction and dissemination of hate speech through the Internet, as well as the actors that promote it and the political consequences. The choice of a polarizing issue such as gender issues allowed for the analysis of ideological as well as affective polarization. The focus on Irene Montero led to the identification of two groups confronting each other: the conservative anti-feminist and the trans-exclusionary feminist, an issue that has allowed us to observe discursive similarities in opposing groups, as well as orchestrated communicative practices. However, limiting

> Recidivist accounts are not recognizable (no photograph, name and surname, or identifying data), which demonstrates the correlation between anonymity and negative disinhibition

the sample to tweets mentioning @IreneMontero may have reduced the presence of criticism and attacks on Irene Montero on the basis of her personal and family sphere, as well as favored the visibility of some topics and protagonists. Future research will extend the analysis of the *Twitter* users with a detailed and systematic study of their totality.

5. Notes

1. Several political personalities have publicly attacked the Minister of Equality with markedly sexist arguments. Among them, Pablo Casado –at that time leader of the *PP* and the opposition– in his inaugural speech at the Judicial Independence and Institutional Regeneration conference, said

> "Enough of so much nepotism. We have a minister because she is the wife of a vice president (...)" (June 28, 2021, *HuffPost*, *https://acortar.link/oJ9qeM*),

placing himself in line with his party colleague and President of the *Community of Madrid*:

> "No one who calls herself a feminist can be in a ministry for being the wife of the vice president" (March 4, 2023, *La Vanguardia*, *https://acortar.link/oJ9qeM*)

or in the Plenary of the *Assembly of Madrid*

> "I have not worked for 40 years for you, who has been put there by your boss, who is the wife of..., to give me lessons" (attack on Montero through Alejandra Jacinto, deputy of *Unidas Podemos* in Madrid, *El Plural*, June 2, 2021, *https://acortar.link/oJ9qeM*).

Also from the parliamentary tribune, Macarena Olona, *Vox* spokeswoman, accused her of

> "representing a woman in Spain who is weak, a victim, who needs a quota to ascend to positions of responsibility, but who then does not mind accessing these positions of responsibility if it is through affective relationships denigrating women" (December 22, 2022, *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, *Pleno y Diputación Permanente* nº 149, p. 50),

or the controversial intervention of Carla Toscano (*Vox* Deputy, November 22, 2022) who accused Irene Montero of

> "insulting the entire judiciary. You have to be made of reinforced concrete to insult professionals who have spent years of their lives studying law and a competitive examination when the only merit you have is to have studied Pablo Iglesias in depth" (*RTVE*, *https://acortar.link/oJ9qeM*).

Other more local political personalities also became famous for the aggressiveness and misogyny of the comments they made against Irene Montero, such as

> "there are women on the left who are where they are because they have been fertilized by an alpha male, that is why they are ministers" by Carmen Herrarte (*Ciudadanos* councilor), in a plenary session of the *Zaragoza City Council* (*La Sexta*, November 22, 2022, *https://acortar.link/oJ9qeM*),

or José María Sainz, Mayor of Villar de Cañas (Cuenca) who in an interview to *EDATV*, pointed out that

> "Irene Montero has sores in her mouth from sucking off the one with the ponytail" (a reference to politician Pablo Iglesias, *El País*, February 9, 2023, *https://acortar.link/sWDBcx*),

a comment that led to the suspension of his membership in the *PP* a few months later.

2. Irene María Montero Gil (Madrid, 1988), member of the *Congress of Deputies* for *Unidas Podemos* (2016) and Minister of Equality (2020) of the left-wing coalition government *PSOE–Unidas Podemos*, led by Pedro Sánchez. As head of this department, Montero has promoted two legislative initiatives: the *Organic Law for the integral guarantee of sexual freedom* (Only Yes Means Yes Law), from August 2022, and the *Law for the real and effective equality of trans people and for the guarantee of LGTBI rights* (Trans Law), approved in June 2022 (preliminary draft from June 2021). Both proposals have been the focus of social and political debate, and have been the object of attacks and opposition from political parties, the media, and citizens.

3. #FeminismoNoVotaTraidores links to hashtags such as #StopDelirioTrans, #LeyTransEsPatriarcal, #NoLeyTrans, or #RespetenALasMujeres.

4. Both in the messages themselves and in the linked hashtags #LGTBIGob or #LGTBTcoe the acronym Q+ is omitted.

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