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Disinformation and Sexual and Gender Diversity in Spain: Twitter Users' Response, and the Perception of LGBTQI+ Organisations

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Abstract: Increased disinformation has been able to flourish in the digital environment. Much of the fake news that circulate social networks is directed against vulnerable groups, such as the LGBTQI+ community. These contents often include hate speech, which has recently experienced a notable increase in Spain. Based on a quantitative and qualitative methodology, the purpose of this research study was, first, to explore the social audience's reaction to four pieces of pseudo-information against LGBTQI+ people posted on Twitter by *Mediterráneo Digital* between 2018 and 2020, to determine the extent to which this content was considered true or rejected by users of this social network through their comments (N = 596). The four selected publications were considered fake news by recognised verification platforms. Secondly, in addition to the above analysis, six in-depth interviews were carried out with representatives of Spanish LGBTQI+ organisations to explore their perception of this situation and how they addressed disinformation. The results indicated that a high percentage of the responses posted on Twitter consider disinformation against this social group to be true, although a significant proportion of comments also intervened in the conversation to reject these messages. Activists believed pseudo-media (websites that try to imitate conventional news sites but do not respect the diligence and principles of journalism), and social networks are largely responsible for the increase in disinformation, and considered the production of truthful information, educational actions, and collaboration with other groups to be successful strategies in combating disinformation.

Keywords: disinformation; LGBTQI+; Twitter; LGBTQI+ organisations; hate speech; social audience; activism; pseudo-media



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1. Introduction

Spain is a benchmark country in terms of social acceptance and recognition of the rights of the LGBTQI+ community, as reflected in various surveys (Adamczyk and Liao 2019; Córdoba 2021). The 2019 Special Barometer on Discrimination in the European Union showed that 91% of the Spanish population agreed that gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, ranking behind only Sweden and the Netherlands. The same poll revealed that 83% of Spanish citizens believed that trans people should be able to change their documentation to adapt it to their gender identity, the highest percentage in the entire European Union. Likewise, 63% agreed that public documents should include a third box in the gender category for non-binary people, while the European Union average was 46% (European Commission 2019). Another study carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2020 in 34 countries around the world indicated that 89% of Spaniards believed that homosexuality should be accepted by society, a percentage that, again, was only surpassed by Sweden and the Netherlands (Pousher and Kent 2020).

One year later, in 2021, an Ipsos survey in 27 countries found that Spain—more than any other country—supports the idea that LGBT people should openly show their sexual orientation or gender identity around other people: 73% of Spaniards agreed, well above

the global average of 51%. Once again putting Spain in first place, 64% of Spanish people believe that LGBT people should be able to show their affection in public, compared to 37% of those in other countries around the world (Ipsos 2021). That same year, YouGov published another study stating that 91% of the Spanish population would support their child, sibling or a close relative if they declared themselves gay or bisexual, the highest percentage in the eight countries surveyed, and 87% would support them if they had a transgender or non-binary identity (Nolsoe 2021). More recently, a survey carried out by 40dB for the newspaper *El País* and Cadena Ser indicated that 56% of the Spanish population favourably valued the new Equality Law promoted by the Coalition Government for trans and LGBTI people, ensuring their rights (Hermida 2022).

However, these positive data on Spanish society's support for sexual and gender diversity contrast the figures for hate crimes and hate speech directed against the LGBTQI+ community. The Ministry of Home Affairs has been carrying out an official annual record of these events since 2015. The latest report released, relating to 2021, indicates that hate crimes committed due to the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity were the second most common in Spain, with a total of 466 registered events, and were only surpassed by those related to cases of racism and xenophobia (Ministry of Home Affairs 2022). They represented 25.86% of all hate crimes and incidents that the Government was aware of; a 68.23% increase of the previous year's data. If we look only at hate crimes committed on the internet and social networks, the increase in those directed towards the LGBTQI+ community was 87.50% in just one year, totalling 60 new events, according to data from the Ministry. Hate speech against LGBTQI+ people is, thus, a growing problem in Spain. These data, therefore, remind us that although there has been progress in the social and legal rights of LGBTQI+ people in Spain in recent decades, discrimination against this group is not a thing of the past and it is still present in the work, education and social spheres, among others, such that there is still a long way to go until real equality is achieved for this social group (Córdoba 2021). This challenge is even greater in a polarised environment (Masip et al. 2020) that sees much disinformation (Sádaba and Salaverría 2022) directed towards social minorities (Wright and Duong 2021). The fusing of these two phenomena is a clear risk in maintaining the pillars of democratic societies (Bennett and Livingston 2018; McKay and Tenove 2021).

The objective of the research was twofold. On one hand, to explore the social audience's reaction on Twitter to pseudo-news about LGBTQI+ people and to measure to what extent their response translated into hate speech. On the other hand, to analyse the way in which the organisations that work for the rights of this vulnerable group perceived and addressed the problem of disinformation about this social minority.

1.1. The Rise of Disinformation through Social Networks and Its Social Impact

The phenomenon of disinformation is not a problem that has emerged from the new and currently existing communication dynamics. False content, whose purpose is to confuse and manipulate public opinion, has existed since the beginning of public life (Valero and Oliveira 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018). However, the current technological environment has made it easier than ever to spread these messages and the intervention of artificial intelligence in their production (Gómez-de-Ágreda et al. 2021), their international reach (Gutiérrez-Coba et al. 2020; Sánchez-Duarte and Rosa 2020) and their consumption through echo chambers (Törnberg 2018; Rhodes 2022) ensure they have a highly influential impact on citizens. The current hybrid communications ecosystem (Chadwick 2013), with the fragmentation of audiences and the democratisation of the content production process, has favoured the intensification of the problem of disinformation. This is a concept preferable to that of fake news (Levi 2019; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2019), which the European Commission defines as any form of false, inaccurate or misleading information that has a clear purpose "to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Commission 2018, p. 10).

This definition is key, since the disinformation that has clearly experienced significant growth in recent years is not the sort that inadvertently fails to correlate with reality, but

rather the sort that is designed with the obvious objective of achieving a specific purpose. Thus, along with the current technological possibilities and the credibility crisis affecting the mainstream media (Lee 2018), there are two other decisive elements that can help us understand the rise of disinformation: first, the rise of populism (Fawzi 2019) and current political polarisation (Gaultney et al. 2022); and second, the manufacturing of content that is profitable and can be consumed over the internet (Cooke 2017; Taylor et al. 2020) with a simple click of the mouse. Politics and economics are, therefore, the two key factors to understanding the appearance of websites dedicated to propagating hoaxes and conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019).

The current digital infrastructure is the best ally to this political–economic context, which uses it to alter the traditional communication ecosystem and move towards a digital public sphere characterised by disintermediation (Salaverria and León 2022). In this new public sphere, the mainstream media no longer play the role of the reliable interpreters of reality that they used to play for such a long time; instead, it is where information and data circulate without an interpretative framework (Masip et al. 2019). It is the internet—and particularly social networks—that now determines the guidelines of the public debate, notably affected by the fake news that circulates and goes viral on it. In fact, social networks are an essential element in understanding how disinformation content is produced, proliferated, and disseminated (Tandoc et al. 2018; Shu et al. 2017) to the point that, as if it were an epidemic, these platforms use social contacts to spread these messages, in a clear analogy to viral infections (Strand and Svensson 2019).

Social networks have placed users at the centre of the communications process. On one hand, digital communication technologies have decentralised the power to produce, publish, and distribute content (Kalsnes 2018), which facilitates the proliferation of message networks without any source of trust (Hasen 2013). On the other hand, regarding consumption, social networks are currently some of the main sources of information for citizens (Gottfried and Shearer 2016; Newman et al. 2021), which makes it easier for the falsehood and lack of verification of some content to go unnoticed by users, who assume that the messages received in their personal networks are true (Eger et al. 2020).

According to a December 2022 survey conducted by the *Pew Research Center* with citizens from 19 countries with advanced economies, the decentralisation of the communications process favoured by social networks is viewed positively by the majority of society; 57% of the individuals consulted believe that these platforms are a positive contribution to democracies. However, the study also presents results that qualify this perception. For example, “a median of 84% across the 19 countries surveyed believe access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors” (Pew Research Center 2022, p. 6); furthermore, “the internet and social media are generally seen as disruptive, with a median of 65% saying that people are now more divided in their political opinions” (Ibid., p. 17). The percentages are somewhat higher in the case of Spain, where 85% and 66%, respectively, of the population support those statements, which shows the public’s concern about the impact of social networks on disinformation and political polarisation.

However, the problem of disinformation is not exclusive to political issues, electoral campaigns or international relations, it also poses a threat to the protection of human rights from a global perspective to the extent that it can give rise to the dissemination of false narratives about minority and vulnerable groups. Through their dehumanisation, these messages seek to deny members of these groups their very citizenship and full rights. As pointed out by Grambo (2018, p. 1299), “from merely biased coverage to utter fabrications, a wide variety of disinformation packaged as ‘news’, has impacted religious, ethnic, and racial groups”; for example, in the US, where these social minorities have been affected by the growing polarisation affecting the country. Fake news impact minority groups, confirm stereotypes, validate prejudices, and promote discrimination towards these communities and division in society (Wright and Duong 2021). The way in which disinformation during the COVID-19 crisis pointed to the Asian, Muslim or Jewish communities as responsible for the

spread of the virus in different regions is a clear example of how lies were put at the service of xenophobia and antisemitism in the context of an infodemic (Doncel Martín 2021).

The circulation of these types of messages can have serious consequences in the way in which minorities are perceived and treated by the rest of the population. Believing fake news and distrusting the conventional media is a clear predictor of holding prejudiced views towards minority groups as they foster feelings of threat and anxiety (Wright and Duong 2021). It even happens when people know how to recognise disinformation, “We may reject the content of these claims, but nevertheless prime ourselves to respond fearfully to members of the minority group. Repeated exposure may result in the formation of implicit biases, which are themselves ground-level representations” (Levy 2017, p. 32). Among other social minorities, LGBTQI+ people have traditionally been victims of fake news, being accused of championing a clandestine agenda that aims to destabilise countries and societies (Strand and Svensson 2019).

1.2. Hoaxes about LGBTQI+ People, Disinformation and Hate Speech

Despite there having been continuous disinformation and hoaxes about the LGBTQI+ community for decades, the number of messages about this population has increased significantly in recent years. On occasion, this type of discourse emerges from political far-right populists, who have found that attacking these people reinforces their ideological and moral positions, and builds a certain “sexual panic” that helps them legitimise certain forms of government and exercise social control. An example of this would be the former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, who in his electoral campaign accused an educational programme called *Escola sem homofobia* (schools without homophobia) (which he called “gay kits”) of being an instrument for the “deviant” sexual indoctrination of minors (Osuna and Soforza 2019). Messages of this type have also circulated in countries such as the US and Poland (Rosińska 2021).

Disinformation about LGBTQI+ people has a greater diffusion capacity the more it resonates in a given sociocultural context and its dominant values (Lelo and Caminhas 2021). An example of this is what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions such as the United Nations (2020) and organisations such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA 2021) identified and denounced discriminatory discourse against the LGBTQI+ population, which was used as a scapegoat when it was accused, without any foundation, of being responsible for the spread of the disease in countries in Africa and Central Asia, although similar messages also circulated in Europe and the United States. In South Korea, for example, the media were complicit in the dissemination of messages that associated, without any type of proof, the COVID-19 infectious disease with non-normative sexual orientations, which risked the stigmatisation of the group (Amnesty International 2021). A similar phenomenon occurred with the appearance of the first cases of monkeypox in Spain in May 2022, when various pseudo-news items tried to associate the disease with gay men, establishing a link that favoured the double stigmatisation of the group (Carratalá 2023).

The discriminatory and stigmatising attitude that is often observed in certain discourses of the ‘information disorder’ (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) characterises hate speech as another expression of disinformation. In fact, both share very clear distinctive elements, such as the use of stereotypes, prejudices, dehumanising strategies and the absence of empirical evidence and expert knowledge (Hameleers et al. 2022). As Kyaw (2021, p. 98) notes, “hate speech and fake news have a symbiotic relationship in creating effective and lasting disinformation narratives”. Therefore, although initial classifications suggested considering hate speech “mal-information” when interpreting it as messages based on reality (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), it is clear that fake news seeks to stigmatise and discriminate against vulnerable social groups (Segura 2021). Thus, these expressions correspond to “the more pernicious and deliberately manufactured use of fake news to target specific individuals or minorities based on race or religion sow confusion, and/or incite conflict” (Marston 2022).

The [Council of Europe \(1997\)](#) defined hate speech as messages that “spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”. It is speech whose language is manifestly pejorative and discriminatory, directed at a person or group simply because of who they are ([United Nations 2019](#)). As with any type of disinformation content, hate speech has also found a space for its online dissemination due to the anonymity and speed that the internet facilitates, among other reasons. Thus, hate speech posted online is more tolerated and more complicated to control than hate speech expressed in physical spaces ([Keen and Georgescu 2020](#)). Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram or Facebook have proven to be forums that allow these messages to circulate freely, often without control and with impunity, “hate speech has alarmingly permeated our society and social media have become the most suitable means of propagation” ([Arcila-Calderón et al. 2022](#)).

The data recorded by the [Ministry of Home Affairs \(2022\)](#) confirm the role of digital channels in the dissemination of hate speech in Spain; during 2021, 37.83% was disseminated over the internet and 22.29% through social networks. Part of those messages is directed at the LGBTQI+ population. This discourse corresponds to all “online communication or expression which advocates, promotes, or incites hatred, discrimination or violence, against any individual or group, because of their sexual orientation, or gender identity” ([Galop 2021](#)). Social networks have, therefore, become hostile spaces for the LGBTQI+ community. According to a study developed by the organisation [GLAAD \(2022\)](#), “40% of all LGBTQ adults, and 49% of transgender and non-binary people do not feel welcome or safe on social media”. When social networks were rated on providing a safe space on a 100-point scale, none of the main social networks reached a rating of 50: Instagram (48%), Twitter (45%), Facebook (46%), YouTube (45%), TikTok (43%).

Despite the efforts of public institutions to observe and monitor the scope of hate speech online, the official data that exist seem to not reflect the reality of the problem, partly due to under-reporting. For this reason, initiatives have been launched in recent years by social observatories and organisations to obtain a more precise analysis of the discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+ people in Spain. The Valencian Observatory against LGBTphobia published its first report on hate crimes and incidents based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the Valencian Community in April 2018 ([Observatorio Valenciano contra la LGTBfobia 2018](#)). According to it, 79 crimes and incidents motivated by hate and discrimination occurred during 2017 in this region alone, compared to the 217 that the government recorded throughout the state ([Ministry of Home Affairs 2018](#)). If we add the incidents on social networks that this report classified as hate speech (11), verbal attacks (21) and threats (18) together, we can conclude that, in reality, the Observatory counted 50 events where hate was disseminated through words. The Ministry only registered 27 cases of hate speech linked to sexual orientation or identity that same year in the entire country. More recently, in 2021 the Lambda organisation carried out a programme called “Al loro!”, whose objective was to identify and record LGBTphobia discriminatory content and hate crimes on social networks to raise awareness on the problem of attacking members of the LGBTQI+ community. Throughout that year, Lambda identified 511 LGBTphobia messages ([Lambda 2022](#)), mostly insults, mockery and false information. Only 2% of these attacks were condemned or reprimanded socially. This report showed Twitter to be the social network that had the most LGBTQI+ discriminatory messages circulating, with 85% of the cases, followed by Facebook, with 9.5%, and Instagram, with 5.5%. According to the study, the reason Twitter tops this list is because it is the easiest platform to post messages anonymously. That same year, the Ministry of Home Affairs only registered 60 hate crimes committed against the LGBTQI+ community on the internet and social networks ([Ministry of Home Affairs 2022](#)).

Parallel to the efforts of the organisations to uncover the real extent of the problem, other recent investigations have tried to shed light on how hate messages against the

LGBTQI+ community circulate on social networks. Studies carried out by [da Silva and da Silva \(2021\)](#) and [Carratalá \(2022\)](#), for example, focused on how a large part of the comments on news items published on Facebook demean and discriminate this social group. The way in which users of social networks intervene, commenting on the coverage of news related to the celebration of LGBTQI+ Pride has also been the subject of study. Research by [Martínez Valerio \(2022\)](#) analysed the comments made to the publications of the Instagram accounts of five prominent Spanish newspapers; the author found that the majority were favourable to the LGBTQI+ collective, although she also observed a small percentage of messages that could be considered hate speech. [Rivera-Martín et al. \(2022\)](#) obtained different results after analysing the comments on news items published by five large Spanish newspapers on their Twitter accounts during the 2021 Pride week. The authors concluded that there are still many people who reject sexual and gender diversity, and there are those who encourage and applaud expressions of contempt and animosity towards the LGBTQI+ community through derogatory, hostile and homophobic discourse. However, until now, the analysis of the social audience's comments to publications related to LGBTQI+ people has not been made on disinformation messages or pseudo-news, whose content this research study is focused on.

Thus, in accordance with the above, and based on the objectives set at the beginning of the work, we would like to outline the following two research questions as a basis on which to structure this study:

RQ 1: How does the social audience respond to hoaxes about the LGBTQI+ community that circulate on Twitter?

RQ 2: How do Spanish LGBTQI+ organisations perceive and address disinformation?

2. Materials and Methods

To answer the research questions that guide this study, we carried out two analyses, which together combine quantitative content analysis techniques and qualitative techniques, basing our empirical work on a methodological triangulation.

First, and with the aim of answering RQ 1, we collected the hoaxes spread on Twitter between 2018 and 2020. To narrow down the messages whose reactions were going to be analysed, we decided to focus on publications about the LGBTQI+ community disseminated by the pseudo-media organisation *Mediterráneo Digital* that were later proven false by at least one of the two main Spanish verification platforms, Maldita and Newtral, both associated with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) ([Rojas Caja 2020](#)). We decided to focus the analysis on content published by *Mediterráneo Digital* on Twitter, and subsequently proven false, because this pseudo-media organisation has been one of the main sources of disinformation in Spain in recent years ([Palau-Sampio and Carratalá 2022](#)), especially on issues that affect social minorities and vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQI+ people ([Carratalá 2023](#)). It should be noted that Twitter and Instagram are the only two social network platforms that this pseudo-media organisation uses to disseminate the content initially published on its website, since Facebook closed its page in June 2020. *Mediterráneo Digital* is considered a pseudo-media outlet insofar as its editorial proposal coincides with websites that try to imitate the design and style of conventional news sites ([Rathnayake 2018](#)) but does not respect the diligence and principles of journalistic production ([Del-Fresno-García 2019](#)), and generates pseudo-information in the sense of false or imprecise information ([Kim and Gil de Zúñiga 2021](#)).

A specific search for verifications carried out between 2018 and 2020 by the Maldita and Newtral platforms through their websites identified four pieces published by *Mediterráneo Digital*. Table 1 lists the headlines under which these pieces were disseminated, the date of publication and the date the news items were proven false.

Table 1. Pseudo-news published by *Mediterráneo Digital* object of study.

	Headline	Publication Date	Proven False by Maldita	Proven False by Newtral
N1	The Government will ban Father's Day and Mother's Day so as not to offend gays ¹	21 October 2018	22 October 2018	24 February 2021
N2	The Health Department has warned that HIV will soar in Madrid during LGBTI Pride week	30 June 2019	5 July 2019	7 July 2019
N3	The Government allows the celebration of Gay Pride in Madrid despite the coronavirus	30 April 2020	30 June 2020	Was not verified
N4	The Government will create a new hand-out for LGBTI people	30 June 2020	Was not verified	2 July 2020

Source: Maldita (<https://maldita.es/>, accessed on 15 December 2022) and Newtral (<https://www.newtral.es/>, accessed on 16 December 2022).

The four selected cases correspond to the second type of classification made by Doncel Martín (2021) of fake news and hoaxes that attack minority groups; that is, the one that identifies informative constructions that, following the structures of the media and using an apparently objective tone, seek to informatively validate an accusation made against a certain social community through fake evidence. The study subjects the reactions generated by these four pseudo-information pieces on Twitter to a quantitative and qualitative content analysis to evaluate the social audience's response on this platform. First, we examined the engagement associated with each of the publications through the calculation of likes, retweets and comments. This initial approach to the tweets allowed us to consider and to observe whether, comparatively, some topics generated greater engagement than others. Next, the qualitative study of the reaction focused solely on the comments that Twitter users made on each of the pieces considered. These comments were collected manually. The manual coding of the responses to the four *Mediterráneo Digital* publications was based on a coding sheet that contemplated the following variables related to how users evaluated the certainty of the publication: (1) The comment lends credibility to the publication; (2) The comment denies the publication; (3) The comment doubts the veracity of the message; and (4) The response does not allow the veracity it lends to the publication (others) to be established. Finally, two other issues were analysed. On one hand, the number of responses that believed the publication to be true and expressed a hostile message towards the LGBTQI+ community, and thus, were considered hate speech, was counted. On the other hand, the number of messages that rejected the pseudo-news item—and also accused *Mediterráneo Digital* of being a source of spreading disinformation and fake news—was also counted. To guarantee reliability and consistency, the single coder carried out a test to measure the stability of the results obtained at two different times (test–retest or intracoder test), with two months between tests. The test was performed on 25% of the sample and, after verifying total agreement, the coding of the rest of the tweets continued.

Next, in order to answer RQ2, the study was complemented with a qualitative analysis based on six interviews with managers from organisations that work to defend the rights of LGBTQI+ people in different regions throughout Spain. The semi-structured (Rubin and Rubin 2005) and in-depth (Taylor and Bogdan 1990) interviews were divided into two large blocks, following the two dimensions of framing tasks defined by Benford and Snow (2000): diagnostic framing (What is the problem? How is it defined?) and prognostic framing (How do we solve the problem?). Firstly, it was an attempt to find out what diagnosis would be

given to the issue of disinformation against this social group by committed activists who are knowledgeable of the LGBTQI+ population's reality. This block included seven questions: Do you think that the LGBTQI+ community is a target population of disinformative actions or fake news? Would you say that there has been an increase in disinformation about the group in recent years? Since when? Do you think that some members of the collective are especially targeted by this type of action? Who do you think are those mainly responsible for generating and disseminating disinformation against LGBTI people?

We then asked about their opinion on how the phenomenon should be dealt with and what could be carried out to stop hoaxes against this community being generated. This second part included questions such as: How do you think activism can address the problem of disinformation? Has your organisation taken any specific actions on this issue? Do you remember any denial/denunciation from your organisation regarding any hoax/disinformative content? Do you consider the alliance between social organisations and other actors, media, public institutions, to be necessary?

All interviews were carried out electronically through the Blackboard Collaborate and Zoom platforms between May and December 2022. The people interviewed are listed in Table 2. The names have been omitted to conceal the participating subjects' identity. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The analysis of the responses looked for similarities and points of disagreement across the main categories included in the questionnaire that was used during the interviews.

Table 2. List of people interviewed.

Person Being Interviewed	Organisation	Area of Operation
A	Lambda	Valencia
B	Castelló LGTBI	Castellon
C	Diversitat	Alicante
D	SOMOS	Aragon
E	No te prives	Murcia
F	Colectivo GAMÁ	Canary Islands

Source: Prepared by the author.

The presentation of the results will consequently be divided into two parts. The first part will describe the findings obtained from the content analysis of Twitter's social audience's reactions to the hoaxes about the LGBTQI+ community and the second part will outline the conclusions drawn from the interviews carried out with the activists.

3. Results

3.1. The Social Audience's Reaction to Disinformation about LGBTQI+ People

The analysis of Twitter users' reaction to the fake news disseminated by *Mediterráneo Digital* about the LGBTQI+ community was unbalanced given the different hoaxes considered. As can be seen in Table 3, the social audience's engagement for pieces N1 and N3 was evident, but much lower in the case of the other two publications. The fake news that claimed that the government was going to allow the Madrid Gay Pride celebration to take place despite the coronavirus, published on 30 April 2020, when all of Spanish society was still confined at home because of the pandemic, was the item that most generated audience interaction, with a total of 1440 reactions. It was the piece that registered the most activity in terms of comments, retweets and likes. The sum of all of the reactions was 49.7% of the total reactions to the four pseudo-information analysed. In proportional terms, the interaction resulting from this tweet was especially notable in terms of likes (53.3% of the total of the four publications), the number of times it was shared, also numerous (49.6%), and comments (46.1% of the total sample). The last pseudo-news item analysed related to the creation of a government subsidy for LGBTQI+ people, and was the one that generated

the least reactions, with only 112 interactions (3.9% of the total). The comments on this piece were only 4.2% of all those analysed.

Table 3. Social audience engagement to the hoaxes spread by *Mediterráneo Digital*.

	Comments	Retweets	Likes	Total No. of Reactions
N1	266	626	157	1049
N2	30	141	124	295
N3	275	823	342	1440
N4	25	68	19	112

Source: Prepared by the author.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 596 comments to the four publications according to the four categories on which the quantitative content analysis is based.

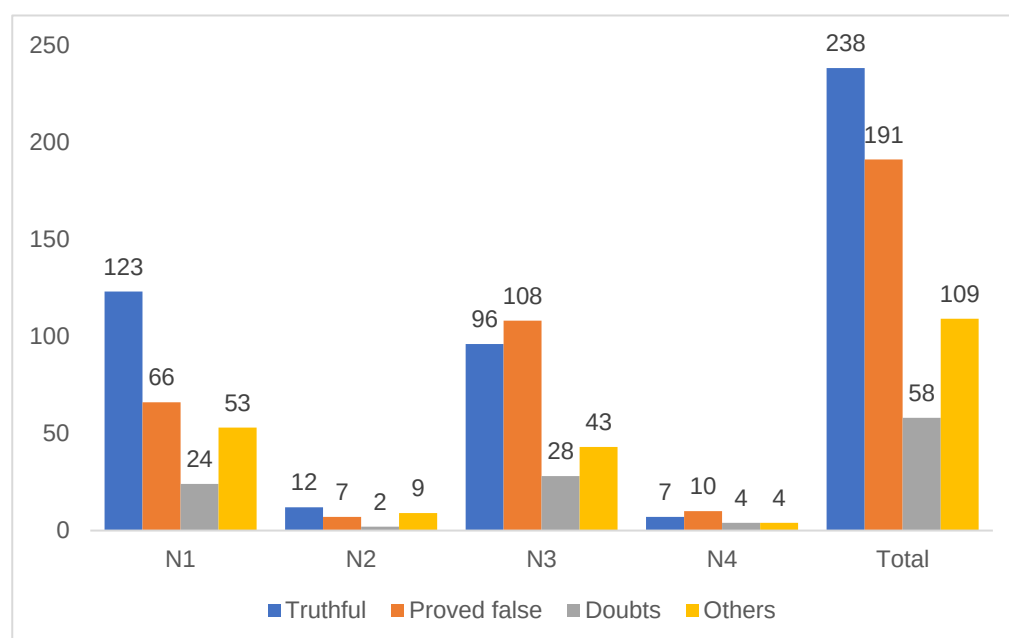


Figure 1. Distribution of social audience comments on Twitter. Source: prepared by the author.

As shown in the graph, the analysis data indicate that comments believing the pseudo-information in the message was true predominated. This type of gullible opinion (238 comments) represented 39.9% of the total reactions of Twitter users. On the other hand, comments that sought to reject the information (191 responses) accounted for 32% of the total. Opinions expressing doubts about the truthfulness of the news (58 comments) were seen less frequently (9.7%). Conversely, 18.3% of the comments analysed (109 responses) did not manifest the user's position regarding the pseudo-information, but were simply expressions addressed to other participants in the discussion, without directly alluding to the *Mediterráneo Digital* post.

Categorising the comments to each piece allows us to highlight certain differences. The audience's reaction to both N1 and N2 follows the general dynamics, and therefore, comments that believed the pseudo-information was true predominate, since they represent 46.2% (123) (N1) and 40% (12) (N2) of the total comments that accompany these publications (compared to 24.8% (66) and 23.3% (7), respectively, of messages that seek to reject the news pieces). Here are two examples of the comments: "Are we all turning into idiots?? Who does this supposed equality benefit? Why should rights be taken away from me to give

to only a handful of other people? I will continue to celebrate Mother’s and Father’s Day, whether the government likes it or not!!!” and “We must stop this totalitarian delusion. This government must be thrown out. I am so offended I feel sick”, both expressed by users who commented on N1. In the case of N3 and N4, the majority of the comments refuted the pseudo-information. In the first case, they represented 39.3% (108) of the total comments (compared to 34.9%–96 who believed it), while in N4, 40% (10) of the opinions rejected the message (compared to 28%–7). The comments that refuted the veracity of the information pointed out that, in reality, the Pride celebration “is online” (N3) or described the publication as “junk journalism” (N4).

Figure 2 shows the messages that can be categorised as hate speech towards the LGBTQI+ community from the total number of comments that believed the content of the pseudo-news published by *Mediterráneo Digital* was true.

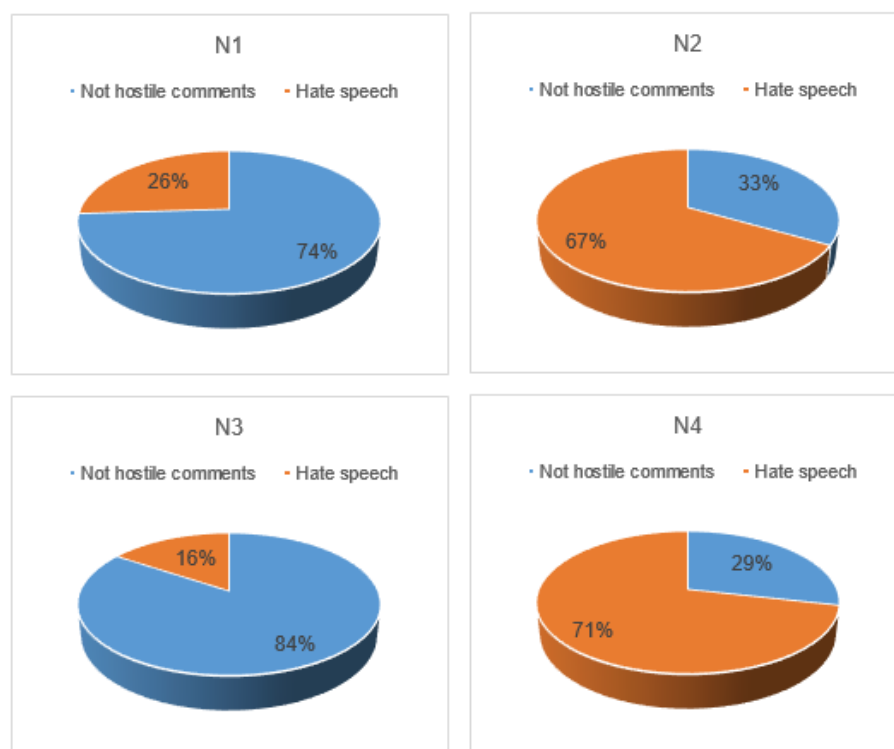


Figure 2. Presence of hate speech in the comments that believed the pseudo-information posted. Source: Prepared by the author.

Of the total number comments that we analysed, 60 of them—one in ten—were considered examples of hate speech because they expressed discriminatory, hostile or violent messages against LGBTQI+ people. This occurred among those comments that believed the content of the publications published on the *Mediterráneo Digital* Twitter profile were true. If we look at only this type of message (those that believed the pseudo-news contained in the posts was true), the percentage of messages that we categorised as hate speech increased to 25.2%—one in four. As can be seen in Figure 2, the presence of hate speech is inversely proportional to the publication of comments by the social audience. In other words, in those publications that did not receive many comments, N2 and N4, the most prevalent reaction among users who seemed to believe the fake news was hate speech. In the two pieces that had a much higher reaction from Twitter users, N1 and N3, the percentage of hate speech of the total amount of opinions that believed the messages was significantly lower.

As noted, comments categorised as hate speech openly express disdain and hostility towards LGBTQI+ people. The following messages are noteworthy examples: “Fags are always vexatious, the retards should be put back into their cave” (N1), “It would have been

a joy to see homosexuality categorised as a mental illness and treated with electroshock last century” (N1), “Hopefully they’ll all get infected and realise that the [Pride] festival might kill them and it is the last one the celebrate. You have to be an idiot, they have everything, their sex is normalised, equality, but they continue to play the fool with orgies. If you like it, you’ll do it whatever the cost.” (N2), “Hopefully, they’ll be none left afterwards” (N2), “this country is run by ETA, the LGBT community and gender quangos.”² (N3), “They are retarded” (N4), in relation to LGBTQI+ people, and “Is this disease so feeble?” (N4), in reference to homosexuality.

Figure 3 shows the extent to which the Twitter social audience that reacted to these pseudo-information used the comments to accuse *Mediterráneo Digital* of being a troll and spreading fake news and disinformation.

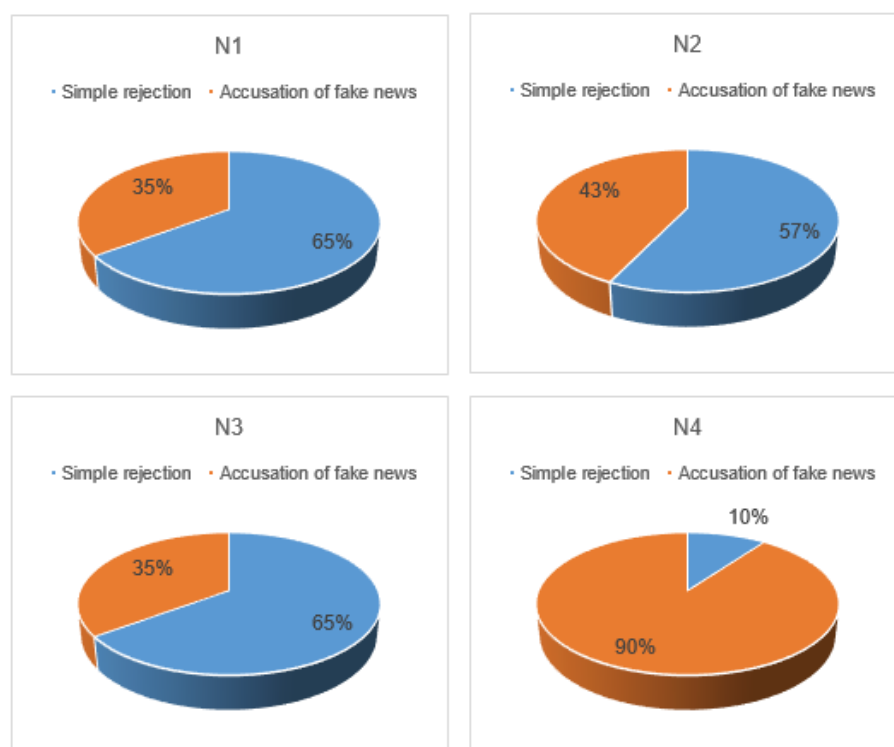


Figure 3. Comments from the social audience calling out *Mediterráneo Digital* as a source of fake news. Source: prepared by the author.

Around 12.4% of the total of 596 comments that make up our sample are messages that accuse *Mediterráneo Digital* for being a source of disinformation on the internet. These are not comments that simply refute the specific post, they go further by pointing out that the media outlet itself contains fake news that does not deserve any credibility. This type of comment represents 38.7% of those that reject the messages contained in the publication (191). While these types of expressions represented 40% of the comments to pieces N1, N2 and N3; in N4 they were the clear majority, representing 90% of the comments rejecting this publication.

The social audience censors the activity carried out by the pseudo-media outlet through these types of comments, and by using statements such as the following, “This is fake news, I don’t know how you have the nerve to call yourself journalists. The headline reads “the government will prohibit” but then the body of the news states that: “the observatory against LGBTphobia recommends [...] the government study...”. You want to deceive, but the worst thing is that you succeed.” (N1), “And then you call yourselves journalists? You should call it crappy science fiction. From lie to lie and it’s my turn next.” (N1), “This seems to be a crap newspaper funded by VOX³. It spews journalistic rubbish” (N2), “It is Fake news that attracts homophobes like moths to a light; they believe it because they only

have sufficient brain cells to shit" (N3), "The @MediterraneoDGT professional media outlet is based on misinforming, creating hoaxes and sensationalism" (N3) and "fake news and generating hate?????" (N4). The critical reaction of these users even mentions the possibility of reporting *Mediterráneo Digital* to the police, "Either you delete the tweet or I duly inform the police?" (N2) and "Report filed. Let's see if they close you down once and for all, imbeciles" (N4).

3.2. Activism against Disinformation

3.2.1. Diagnosis of the Problem

The interviews with representatives of organisations that fight for the rights of LGBTQI+ people included questions regarding the diagnosis of the disinformation problem that affects this community. Asked if they believe that this social group is a target population for disinformation actions or fake news, the six interviewees agreed that that was the case. For many, in fact, it is a problem that is not new at all, but has a long history. As expressed, for example, by Interviewee B:

"The disinformation is not current, it is historical disinformation. In the Holocaust, what was the largest victim population? The Jews. And the second? LGBTI people and nobody knows about it, it doesn't appear anywhere... That is historical disinformation, just as crimes of sodomy in the Middle Ages are not usually noted nor that when two women lived together they were accused of witchcraft and burned...".

Interviewee E also observes this history:

"We have been a target population for a long time, and especially since the LGBTI community has been used as a political instrument, by parties and organisations, to use us for votes and pretend that they are helping us, or, quite the opposite, to present us as an axis of power that only seeks to indoctrinate the population and take advantage of it."

Other interviewees concurred, and also stated that there has been a recent increase in the phenomenon of disinformation against this community. Interviewee C noted that:

"if we take a historical tour of events at national and international levels, we see that the LGBTI collective has been and is a target group. We can see it happening right now very clearly with monkeypox, which has been used to stigmatise gay men."

According to some interviewees, gay men are precisely one of the groups within the LGBTQI+ community who are particularly affected by disinformation and fake news. Interviewee A stated it:

"Traditionally, it has been gay and bisexual men that have been the most visible, and it is this identification with the feminine part that ignites machismo, which is why it is that group that has been most attacked in this sense, historically".

Currently, however, the target of disinformation is shifting towards "trans people, mainly trans women, who are receiving the most attacks." The six people interviewed concurred with this last idea since, as highlighted by interviewees D, E and F, trans women have been at the centre of disinformation regarding the debate on the law put forward by the progressive coalition government.⁴

The political aspects surrounding the problem of disinformation and hoaxes against the LGBTQI+ community were noted by the different interviewees, for example, when they were asked since when they thought there had been an increase in this phenomenon. For several of them, 2018 was a key year for this when the extreme right-wing party, VOX, was voted into one of the Spanish regional parliaments for the first time, in Andalusia. Interviewee A states:

“We associate the increase to when VOX was voted into the institutions, although it has always been a common theme... But the extreme right being voted in legitimised that discourse in some way.”

Interviewee B notes: “Since VOX were voted into the institutions, it has given them a very big microphone, and a lot of money.” Without mentioning this party, Interviewee D noted that the disinformative discourse, especially against trans people, “has been brewing for 3–4 years [...] one more consequence of the social polarisation we currently have.”⁵ In other cases, interviewees believed that the increase started a few years prior to that mentioned earlier, as indicated by Interviewee C, who dated it to the financial crisis of 2008,⁶ when “a very favourable context” where “social rights were supported” gave way to grave economic problems that resulted in “social issues becoming less important”. The approval of same-sex marriage in 2005 is, for Interviewee E, the turning point:

“There was a huge movement headed by the People’s Party and the Church demonstrating against the law and accusing us of everything [...] the fake news started there as they said that, if equal marriage existed, the rights of heterosexual people would be eroded.”⁷

When asked about the channels or platforms used to disseminate disinformation against LGBTQI+ people, several of the interviewees agreed that the main one was pseudo-media outlets, especially *Okdiario* and *Mediterráneo Digital*: “There are media outlets, which I find difficult to call media outlets, that are dedicated precisely to this and that have found support on the internet” (Interviewee A), “*Okdiario*, *Okdiario* and *Okdiario*” (Interviewee B), “There are media outlets that are spreaders of hate [...] I call *Okdiario* a propaganda manual [...] *Mediterráneo Digital*, *Estrella Digital*...” (Interviewee C), “There are digital media outlets that do not fact check information [...] *Okdiario* has said atrocities” (Interviewee E). Along with them, social networks are seen as spaces for the circulation of hoaxes against this community: “Social networks have been a channel to spew hate [...] very rapid consumption, very little thought and very simple messages” (Interviewee A), “the greatest damage is done by social networks, most of all Twitter; it is the most dangerous thing in the world to me” (Interviewee C), “In the last 2–3 years, social networks have been very popular, especially Twitter and Instagram, where I constantly see disinformation [...] on social networks hate is free and available to everyone” (Interviewee F).

3.2.2. The Answer to the Problem

After the diagnosis, the interviewees were asked about whether the problem of disinformation could be managed through activism. Truthful information, supported by data, is for many of the interviewees a key tool. Interviewee A states:

“The main way is to disseminate truthful information... In the end we always move slower and reach fewer people than hoaxes do, but by repeating it, people learn... And always be a reliable source of the information we give, HIV issues, trans or LGBT people, Chinese water torture, until society learns”.

Interviewee D points out that “the strategy we have used is often one based on data, because data is indisputable.” These opinions are shared by other interviewees, who also believe that working with the media is essential:

“We believe that respect for diversity can be attained through forceful political advocacy actions [...] always being present in the media, taking every opportunity possible for interviews [...] disseminating research and studies” (Interview F),

“I really like working with journalists who take the issue seriously and call you with questions. A sensitive media is essential” (Interviewee C).

In addition, working in educational environments is also important. Thus, Interviewee B notes that the fight against disinformation is also addressed “by being visible, being everywhere. [...] Going to all events, being involved in society, organising pride events, all

sorts of events, giving talks at schools”, and similarly, Interviewee E notes, “There are many videos and short films on our website... we carry out film screenings, literary contests, talks at schools, conferences...”. Interviewees A and C also highlight the need for educational action, while Interviewee F talks about training journalists.

When they were asked whether they remembered any specific action taken by their organisations to reject a specific hoax, all except one interviewee were able to provide an example. They included actions carried out to prove the following stories were false: information disseminated by the police about a trans girl accused of breaking lockdown during the pandemic (Interviewee C),⁸ the treatment of monkeypox being a disease spread by gay men (Interviewee D), accusations of indoctrination when giving talks at schools (Interviewee E) and falsehoods about the supposed negative impact that the new trans law would have on women (Interviewee F). In these cases, the organisations of the people interviewed took an active role in publicly denouncing the disinformation. Only Interviewee A confirmed that her organisation

“tried not to reproduce the hoax when it came to rejecting it. We try not to directly comment on it or give it a specific mention. The rule is to ignore hoaxes, but providing information that helps people understand that it is not true is essential”.

In the fight against disinformation and hoaxes, LGBTQI+ organisations understand that they cannot walk alone. The people interviewed believe that alliances with other entities and actors are key, as is the attention of politicians. Interviewee C believes that “an alliance with the media and third sector entities is very important [...] what is not seen, does not exist and what does not exist cannot be regularised”. Interviewee F, for their part, understands that

“without alliance, synergy, coordination, there is no progress [...] we are always at the Administration’s work tables [...] in all areas, health and education, [...] we always try to support other entities that, in an cross-sectional and transversal manner, work the different realities, we are not only LGBTI people”.

This reciprocal support and collaboration with other organisations is also highlighted by Interviewee E (who mentions a platform against discrimination,⁹ “a part of the feminist Platform”, Mujomur)¹⁰ and Interviewee A:

“neighbourhood networks made up of other groups that are not LGBT but are affected by the extreme right, feminist groups, migrants... we are all the same focus of hatred. The enemy is always the same and the more people they find blocking them, the easier it is: cross-sectionality is key”.

4. Conclusions

The present study that has been carried out confirms that disinformation regarding the LGBTQI+ community is a serious problem in Spain; a high percentage of the responses posted on Twitter consider this fake news to be true, and social organisations perceive it to be a serious threat that, although not new, has experienced a notable increase in recent years.

Firstly, regarding how disinformation is received by Twitter users (RQ1), the results of the study found that a notable proportion of social network users commenting on it believe these messages. Nearly four out of ten answers given to this pseudo-information assume it to be real news. One in four of these reactions express hate towards LGBTQI+ people. The study has also shown that a significant percentage of the comments made on these messages (32%) reject them, thus contributing to ensuring other users also reject them. These opposing tensions in the reaction to disinformation on social networks show a certain ambivalence in the digital space, as it has shown itself to be a forum in which fake news and hate speech can easily spread, and an environment in which participants who are critical about disinformation can counter such content through their responses, with

the purpose of proving hoaxes to be false. Thus, as [Strand and Svensson \(2019, p. 78\)](#) point out: “while we acknowledge that social media plays an important role in the production and circulation of fake news, it similarly also provides organised interests a space where fake news can be contested”.

The findings also establish a clear relationship between the polarising nature of disinformation messaging and its impact on the social audience. Pseudo-information news items N1 and N3, the ones that generated the most reactions, are also the ones that spread a message that is controversial, and thus divide ‘us’ (heterosexual people) and ‘them’ (LGBTQI+ community) by generating grievances (the prohibition of Father’s Day or being given special permission to celebrate Gay Pride in the midst of a pandemic); this results in users writing hostile messages towards this social group through the vulnerability reversal strategy ([Carratalá 2021](#)). This link between disinformation and polarisation should be addressed in greater depth in future studies. Similarly, the results have found that the two pseudo-information news items that gained most rejection reactions were the two most recent, both disseminated during the pandemic (2020), which could be explained by the fact that the social audience was more alert to disinformation at a time when fake news circulated intensely.

The risk that the digital space is used as a forum to spread disinformation is also shared by the representatives of the social organisations interviewed. In their perception of the problem (RQ2), these subjects point to how social networks and pseudo-media have been two key players in the growth of fake news against LGBTQI+ people in recent years. The concurrence of both elements, as this research study has found, can further significantly poison the public space through disinformation. In their responses, the representatives of these organisations also demonstrated a high commitment to combating fake news, which they often described as hate speech, in a more proactive than reactive way. Although many remember having acted to reject a specific hoax, they are more focused on increasing the generation of truthful information, supported by data, and working for the visibility of the community in the public administrations, the media and on the street, collaborating with other collective actors who also suffer the scourge of disinformation. Along with the production of truthful information, education is another priorities; literacy, especially among young people, in matters of sexual diversity and media consumption, was noted as a key tool in the face of the problem of disinformation, which they believe affects gay men and trans women mostly.

The research developed shows two significant strengths that make notable contributions to the study of disinformation about the LGBTQI+ community. On one hand, it addresses the close relationship between fake news and hate speech, focusing also on the threatening confluence of the action of pseudo-media and social networks. On the other hand, the study incorporates the perspective of those who suffer the impact of disinformation, which broadens the discussion on how they perceive it and how they believe it can be combated through collective action. However, the analysis also presents certain limitations that, at the same time, offer opportunities for future work. Probably the most relevant is the limitation of the analysis of the social audience’s reaction to disinformation from the four publications posted by the pseudo-media organization on Twitter. Although the selection of these pieces is based on rigorous criteria (the pieces had been denied by recognised verification platforms), the number of messages that were subjected to analysis is limited.

For this reason, this present study can give way to other research studies that further the analysis of disinformation against LGBTQI+ people circulating on the internet, not only based on the reaction to content proved to be false by professional verifiers, but through more exhaustive research that addresses multiple message types. Similarly, the study of the response to this content could be completed with an analysis of digital audiences through surveys or discussion groups. Finally, research on how social organisations perceive and combat the problem of disinformation requires expanding the case study of the LGBTQI+

community to other vulnerable groups, such as immigrants or people with disabilities, who are also affected by hoaxes and fake news.

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Notes

- ¹ This pseudo-news item was shared six more times from *Mediterráneo Digital*’s Twitter profile after its original publication in October 2018. It was specifically posted on the following dates: 19 March 2019, 21 February 2021, 19 March 2021, 2 May 2021, 19 March 2022, 1 May 2022, thus coinciding with Father’s Day (19 March) and Mother’s Day (first Sunday in May) in Spain. Only the social audience’s response to the first posting has been analysed for our study, as it was the one that generated the greatest number of comments among Twitter users.
- ² It is a derogatory expression used in Spain to refer to state offices or agencies, which exist almost exclusively to give jobs to friends of senior politicians and allow them to collect large salaries for often unnecessary work.
- ³ Vox is a far-right Spanish political party, with representation in the Congress of Deputies since 2019.
- ⁴ The progressive coalition government formed by the Socialist Party and Podemos has pushed for a comprehensive law to expand protections and entrench the rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, which was approved by Parliament in February, 2023. The regulation has been strongly criticised by right-wing political parties and also by part of the feminist movement, which opposes the gender self-determination recognised in the law.
- ⁵ It should be noted that “affective and ideological polarisation in Spain has been growing in recent years: political parties are increasingly far away in their ideological and territorial positions, and the feelings of one party’s voters towards the rest are among the most negative worldwide” (Miller 2020).
- ⁶ The 2007–2008 financial crisis, or the global financial crisis (GFC), was a severe worldwide economic crisis that occurred in the early 21st century. It was the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression (1929).
- ⁷ Prominent members of the Spanish Church, representatives of the main conservative party (Partido Popular) and anti-gender organisations developed an intense campaign of opposition to the approval of same-sex marriage in Spain in 2005, which they considered would end the concept of family as they say it should be understood.
- ⁸ Two Benidorm policemen were suspended in May 2020 for a hate crime after one of them was filmed by his colleague verbally insulting and humiliating a trans woman in the street.
- ⁹ The Region of Murcia has a platform of LGBTIQ+ associations that integrates six organisations that fight for the defense of the rights of these social groups.
- ¹⁰ Mujomur (Young Women of the Region of Murcia) is an association of young women specialised in feminism, gender equality and youth.

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