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Tweeting from fear: Gender violence against feminists on Twitter during COVID-19[1]

ABSTRACT

The research addresses how gender violence against feminists on Twitter during COVID-19 is produced. Mainly focused in the Catalan cultural context, 462,281 attacks on Twitter were analysed, using virtual ethnography and content analysis. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with key agents. This enabled to (1) analyse the profiles of feminists subjected to attacks and those who attack them, (2) identify the characteristics of this violence: how it appears, to which subjects it refers and what the trigger is, (3) identify which axes of inequality intersect in the attacks. The results determine that there are specific typologies of aggressors, that there is a correlation between the political-social agenda and the attacks, essentially on female politicians and journalists, and that they tend to happen collectively as personal aggressions that get worse if they intersect with racial issues, for example.

KEYWORDS

digital gender violence
anti-feminism
intersectionality
Twitter
virtual ethnography
social networks

1. This article is part of Diana Morena-Balaguer's doctoral thesis project.

2. Social media refers to digital channels and platforms, including social networks, that enable users to create and share content, engage with others, and build online communities.

INTRODUCTION

Presentation of the problem, context and conceptual definition

Digital platforms are understood as a set of technological tools that allow users to interact and perform certain online activities, such as, in the case of social networks, to connect and communicate. Social networks are a social space for debate and interaction, and they have been broadly used by feminism to spread awareness of gender inequality. In relation to that, this research draws some general lines of continuity with the works that have addressed its uses for feminism activism (Jorge and Farrugia 2017; Herrero-Diz and Ramos-Serrano 2018). Nevertheless, it focuses on a different and specific topic which is the analysis of violence against users with publicly feminist stances in this space (to whom we will henceforth refer, for the sake of brevity, simply as feminists).

To explore the in-depth analysis of this problem, we must begin by considering that violence that takes place offline is spread and reproduced in digital spaces. At the same time, in these spaces particular and specific attacks also occur. Thus, new forms of violence are generated due to the specificities of the platforms and the ways in which messages are communicated and disseminated digitally (Freed et al. 2017). For example, in addition to allowing aggressors to be anonymous and act together as a group, digital spaces help this violence to go viral, easily spread and even to be normalized (Donestech 2017). Furthermore, the ease to which a message can be shared, the option to do it at any time, its speed of transmission as well as the difficulty curbing publications or controlling their spread are characteristics inherent to digital spaces that determine the forms of violence that occur in them.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of digital communication and spaces has increased (Kemp 2021). This is mainly due to the context and the conditions imposed by the pandemic: when the population was confined in their homes, the internet became a means of communication that enabled them to maintain social contact and, in many cases, their professional activity. In addition, the forms of digital entertainment (such as the use of social media)[2] became a means of escape for citizens, especially the younger population (González-Andrio et al. 2020). At the same time, Twitter has risen as an object of analysis, especially for social sciences (Ledford 2020); it provides useful data while simultaneously allowing interaction between real-life citizens. In fact, it developed a way of communication that Henry Jenkins theorized back in 2008 when he talked about *Convergence Culture*. Therefore, it is sensible to focus our study on this particular social network.

Once framed the subject of analysis in order to conceptualize it, we will begin with a broad definition of gender violence which includes the different forms of violence stemming from the cis-heteropatriarchy system and which is aimed at people on the grounds of their gender position, gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation. This non-binary conception, that goes beyond the victim-offender binomial (Dunn 2020), adopts and incorporates the violence to which women are subjected on the grounds of their gender position in the patriarchal system, but it also considers gender as an inherently violent system that has multiple dimensions (Dunn 2020). In this regard, the violence to which women are subjected for merely being women, also known as violence against women (VAW), is a type of gender violence understood as a broader concept which includes the imposition of a gender position and identity based on the sex. The negation and pathologization of bodies that

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do not fit with the sexist binary logic and non-normative gender identities and the stigmatization of non-normative gender expressions, and lesbophobia, homophobia and biphobia, among others, would also be included in this definition (Dank et al. 2014).

What we have called gender violence in social networks refers to the gender violence that takes place online, specifically on these social networks designed for connecting and communicating with others. It is important to mention that this concept has still not been clearly outlined on a theoretical level, and consequently, we can find different terms to refer to it in literature on the subject: digital VAW (Núñez Puente 2011), machoist online violence (Vergés-Bosch and Gil-Juarez 2021) hate speech against women (Zuban and Rabbia 2021), digital misogyny (Barker and Jurasz 2019), gender cyberviolence (Igareda et al. 2019; Proyecto Una 2020) and more recently, cyber anti-feminisms (Bonet-Martí 2021).

In any case, beyond the need to move forward in the conceptualization of this field of analysis, there is no doubt that this violence is a widespread and concerning phenomenon. According to what has been published to date, violence in the digital sphere is especially aimed at and affects women who are already subjected to analogical violence, teenage girls and women with more visibility and public relevance or who challenge gender roles. Studies conducted on an international level show the seriousness of the problem in this regard (EIGE 2017). For example, the report published by the FRA (2014) highlights how 11 per cent of women aged 15 or above in Europe have received digital communications (mails, SMS or on social media) which they consider to be sexually offensive or inappropriate. At this point, it is important to mention that the scope and effects on other groups discriminated against on the grounds of gender such as, for example, the trans community, are aspects that have practically not been addressed.

However, the literature that addresses the subject has considered that, when other axes of inequality intervene and intersect with these elements – such as origin, ethnic or religious differences and other expressions related to gender beyond being a woman –, an intersectional perspective must be adopted for its analysis (Calala Fondo de Mujeres 2020; Hackworth 2018). According to the Troll Patrol report (Amnesty International 2018), which analyses thousands of tweets that mention 778 female politicians or journalists from the United Kingdom and the United States, racialized women (Black, Asian, Latin and Mixed Race) are 34 per cent more likely to be attacked in violent, abusive and problematic texts than the rest. More specifically, Black women are especially vulnerable and the possibilities of being attacked on Twitter increase by up to 84 per cent for them (Amnesty International 2018). In this way, the characteristics of the digital sphere broaden the possibilities of re-victimizing groups that are already subjected to offline violence, connecting both spaces and leading to overlapping violence (Freed et al. 2017). Therefore, it is important to incorporate the intersectional perspective into the analysis of online gender violence, and to consider how different axes of inequality impact and constitute specific discriminatory experiences.

In the Catalan context, the little research conducted to date shows that violence in the digital sphere specifically aimed at feminist is frequent. The report published by the foundation Calala Fondo de Mujeres (2020) concludes that 82.61% of the participants in the study have been affected by digital violence and 65.21% have been attacked on Twitter. Another aspect highlighted is that a frequent pattern that triggers the attacks is posting political

messages and opinions (81.52%), publishing opinions that criticize VAW or sexual violence (68.48%) or criticizing people or organizations that are against women's rights (60.33%) (Calala Fondo de Mujeres 2020). In turn, the work carried out by Antígona (Igareda et al. 2019), although not specifically aimed at analysing the violence received by feminists, presents similarly concerning figures. The report stresses that the women surveyed who are relevant in the public eye have suffered an increase in the intensity of some of the violence received in the digital sphere compared to the total sample. This violence responds, therefore, to a counter-feminist movement (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Bonet-Martí 2020) in the sense that it occurs when these people share their opinions and, specifically, when these opinions are associated with gender issues. Furthermore, these attacks have an element of misogyny (Bonet-Martí 2020), in that the feminists are attacked on the grounds of their gender.

Dunn (2020) explains in detail some of the forms and expressions of online gender violence such as harassment or the repeated sending of offensive messages to a victim from a person or group, stalking, fraping, gaslighting, grooming, sealioning and the sharing of private images and information without consent, among others (Dunn 2020). Below, we set out those that are most relevant in our analysis, and we expand on them with other references:

– Harassment, which consists of using technological tools to intimidate, bother, embarrass and hurt someone. It can include the use of insults, false accusations, prejudices and, often, graphic content and offensive audio-visuals. When it takes the shape of a gender attack, it has a sexualized connotation towards the victim or reinforces gender roles (Henry and Powell 2018). It can be sporadic or persist over time and it can be performed both by people who the victim knows and by strangers (Amnesty International 2018). Furthermore, it can be perpetrated by a person or by a group (Marwick and Caplan 2018). Some studies identify that this form of digital violence often occurs towards people in positions of leadership or with a public presence (Calala Fondo de Mujeres 2020; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016; Iyer et al. 2020), such as female politicians, academics and journalists.
– Threats and intimidation are very frequent (Wilk 2018). Multiple reports and research works have analysed how this type of gender violence functions in the digital sphere with female journalists (Barton and Storm 2014), academics (Veletsianos et al. 2018), politicians and human rights activists (Amnesty International 2018), who face rape and death threats, among others, especially if they talk or write about gender issues (Dunn 2020).
– Insults and disparaging remarks. These two practices are vast and can be combined and include a diversity of other more specific practices. On account of its relevance in this research, we must highlight sealioning, a harassment practice in which the aggressor bothers or annoys the victim with malicious questions cloaked in false ignorance and polite manners. They do not have any real interest in the response and their aim is to exhaust the victim's patience. The practice is often perpetrated by a group that acts in a coordinated manner (Johnson 2017). Mansplaining, in turn, has also been identified as usual in the violence analysed in the digital sphere. The neologism is used to designate the use of paternalistic language by men towards women, usually employed when they believe they can explain the same story or phenomenon better. The research by

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1.   Koc-Michalska et al. (2021) concludes that Twitter is particularly prone to
2.   this practice that mainly affects young women, with higher education and
3.   leftist tendencies.
4. –   Other practices considered to be online gender violence would be: the
5.   dissemination of unauthorized or non-consensual sex images, which
6.   consists of publishing intimate images or videos online. It is common that
7.   the perpetrator is a former partner who seeks to publicly embarrass and
8.   humiliate the woman; attacks with a technological component, which
9.   consist of the use of spy and malware programmes with which they access
10.   the screen, webcam and microphone to obtain images, files and audios
11.   from the infected devices.
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13.   All of these forms of violence can take place at the same time as polit-
14. ical violence or attacks on expression in the public sphere, as occurs when
15. they take place online on social networks. The impact, far from being merely
16. individual, has implications on a social level: it seeks to discriminate against
17. certain groups and to reduce their participation in the vast communication
18. and collective debate space created on these networks. The aim is to intim-
19. idate, silence and paralyse by generating a fear of expressing oneself freely
20. online.
21.   Despite its importance, at present the phenomenon is not clearly regu-
22. lated on a legal level. In the specific case of digital VAW, it is considered that
23. it is a type of violence that has incredibly significant consequences and, in
24. the European sphere, member states are encouraged to legislate and develop
25. public policies that recognize this problem (EIGE 2017).
26.   On a state level, in Spain there is no regulation of gender violence in the
27. digital sphere. We only find a reference and definition in the Autonomous Law
28. 17/2020, which modifies the Catalan Law 5/2008 of women's right to eradi-
29. cate VAW, and all those 'online acts of violence against women and misog-
30. yny committed, instigated, amplified and aggravated, partially or wholly, with
31. the use of information and communication technology' (Law of the Rights of
32. Women to Eradicate Sexist Violence; Law 17/2020 2020).
33.   As regards the timeframe, this case study focuses on a one-year period
34. between the months of March 2020 and March 2021, coinciding with the
35. onset and evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. The significance of this
36. period relies in which screen time increased exponentially due to the increase
37. in work and leisure time online has already been mentioned. Regarding loca-
38. tion, it is always problematic to try to geographically situate practices that
39. take place in the digital space insofar as their functioning is not limited by
40. territorial borders. Despite this, it is important to mention that in the crea-
41. tion of the sample, we favoured the inclusion of Twitter accounts of people
42. and organizations in Catalonia, but we have also included profiles from Spain
43. due to their relevance or because of what, in terms of profiles, they could
44. contribute to the study. Thus, the findings of this study can be to a certain
45. extent extrapolated to other contexts insofar as they analyse violence in a
46. digital sphere that functions globally although specific contextual elements
47. are considered.
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50. ### Objectives
51. The general objective of the research presented in this article is to under-
52. stand how gender violence against feminists takes place on Twitter and what

characteristics it presents during the timeframe of the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The specific objectives addressed are:

– to analyse the profiles of the Twitter accounts of feminists who are subjected to attacks, and of the aggressors
– to identify the characteristics of gender violence against feminists on Twitter: to determine how the violence appears, to which specific topics and contents it refers and what is the trigger
– to identify which axes of inequality intersect in the content of the attacks.

METHODOLOGY

The research combines two methodological strategies. On the one hand, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the social network Twitter using virtual ethnography techniques, and a content analysis of these was performed to respond to the research goals. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted in different stages of the research with people identified as key sources of information. The interviews complement, broaden and provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that was then combined with the results of the virtual ethnography and the social network content analysis.

Virtual ethnography and social network content analysis

To collect the data we decided to focus on the social network Twitter. This is because, on the one hand, it is especially used to expose political opinions (Larrondo et al. 2019) and for activism (Turley and Fisher 2018). On the other hand, its design – which requires brief and appositive lexical-grammatical text constructions – and the dynamics of use that have been established, promote the proliferation of hate speech against women and other groups discriminated against on the grounds of gender when they use the application. This has been affirmed by works (e.g., Núñez-Puente and Fernández-Romero 2018) which justify that this social network deserves particular attention when addressing the phenomenon. As shown in the report *Las violencias machistas en línia hacia activistas* ('Gender violence online towards activists') (Calala Fondo de Mujeres 2020), 82.61 per cent of the participants in the research were subjected to violence in the digital sphere and specifically 65.21 per cent of them were attacked on the social network Twitter.

Analysis sample

Using the 'snowball' technique (without intervention from the participants), we tracked the interactions of a variety of feminists' Twitter profiles, compiling an extensive list of the profiles that could be considered in the study. The collection of Tweets was done through the Twitter API. As the information collection process progressed, the list was refined, selecting and limiting the number of profiles to be studied to 50, in order to obtain a broad and representative amount of data that would not saturate the analysis. These profiles make up an analysis sample that includes both users with a high influence capacity and a large number of followers, and others with less and practically no influence, and few followers, in order to observe how this affects patterns

Table 1: Summary of categories included in the sample analysis.

Organizations	5
Journalists	4
Politicians	11
Experts	11
Cyber-activists	2
Anonymous	11
Others	6

of violence. Furthermore, diverse profiles were selected which we grouped together in the following categories according to how they are presented on Twitter and how they are used (see Table 1):

The category of 'organizations' includes the accounts of five organizations associated with defending women's rights and lives. The second category includes the profiles of four 'journalists'. The third category corresponds to eleven 'politicians' who are currently active. The fourth category groups together the profiles of eleven 'experts', people recognized for their specialized work in diverse fields such as law or academia. Thus, these first four categories of profiles correspond to specific identifiable people or groups who use Twitter to express themselves as an extension or expansion of the professional and/or activist tasks that they develop offline.

By comparison, the next categories group together profiles in which social media are the central space where the people behind them develop their feminism in activist tasks. In this regard, two 'cyber-activists' have been included in the sample, who use information and communication technology and the internet to participate in feminist movements. The second-last category in the analysis sample is made up of a selection of eleven accounts of two types of 'anonymous users': those who use a pseudonym and those who use a name and image that identifies them as individuals offline, but who are not publicly recognized.

Lastly, in the category of 'others', we have included profiles that did not fit into the previous categories, – like a comedian and a singer –, but which were considered to be of interest and to contribute variety to the sample.

Data collection procedure[3]

We collected and classified all the analysed tweets that presented gender attacks in an analytical matrix (see Table 2). By *gender attacks* we understand all violence that is instigated on the grounds of the gender of the attacked person: on the grounds of their sex, gender identity or expression and with the stereotypes and prejudices stemming from this. Moreover, we also collected the replies to the tweets, the retweets and their corresponding comments. In this way, this matrix groups together all the interactions that present gender attacks.

Attacks were understood to be direct insults and other forms of violence such as mansplaining and sealioning. Since Twitter, on account of its characteristics, is a social network that eliminates the majority of non-verbal communication, when it was not clear if comments or replies were attacks, they were ruled out in order to avoid false positives that could alter the sample. In this

3. The research incorporates public data and information published on the social network Twitter. Despite this, the profiles making up the analysis sample have been rendered anonymous, maintaining only the necessary information. Moreover, the data extracted has been codified for exclusive access by the research team. These were saved on a private database, which is the responsibility of the team and to which no person outside the research work has had access. Nor have they been shared online. As regards the interviews conducted, they were recorded after receiving informed consent from the participants, who are aware of the purpose and characteristics of the research and how to contact the research team. The people interviewed are aware that said recordings will only be saved for the time strictly needed to carry out the research and that they can withdraw their participation at any time prior to the publication of the results.

Table 2: Simplified analytical matrix.

Code to identify the attack			
Brief description, date and context of the attack			
Victim	Name	Aggressor	Name
	Profile image		Profile image
	Profile information		Profile information
	Number of followers		Number of followers
	Indicate if they identify as part of a group		Indicate if they identify as part of a group
Type of attack		*Ideological or personal*	
Sexual	Violence in the sexual sphere	Sexual harassment	
		Inciting a sexual attack	
		Sexual threats	
		Sharing of sexual content without consent	
		Grooming (harassment with sexual abuse)	
Physical	Violence that seeks to cause physical harm	Monitoring of movements	
		Physical threats and death threats	
Psychological	Violence that seeks to generate a psychological impact	Intimidation (provoking a state of fear)	
		Hounding (Stalking. Obsessive persecution)	
		Publication of personal information	
		Insulting and offending someone for being a woman or other motives or aspects related to gender	
		Gaslighting (manipulating the other person's perception of reality)	
		Derogatory remarks or *mansplaining*. (Explaining something in a condescending and paternalistic way)	
		Sealioning (hounding with incessant, malicious and insincere demands with the aim of triggering a debate)	
		Disparaging remarks (discrediting, belittling)	
		Blackmail (coercion with threats)	
Inherent to the medium	Violence that is specific and exclusive to digital fields	Hacking of the attacked account	
		Censorship (forcing the removal of information posted by the attacked person)	
Trigger of the attack			
Own initiative	The attack is instigated by the aggressor account and without any previous direct contact or link with the victim		
Reply	The attack occurs in response to a tweet or comment made by the victim		
Collective action	The attack is part of a collective campaign of disparaging action		
Others	Other triggers not considered previously		

Table 2: Continued.

Code to identify the attack		
Brief description, date and context of the attack		
Intersection with other axes of inequality		
Gender	Gender diversity is attacked from a heteronormative perspective	Gender identity
		Gender expression
		Sexual orientation
		Sexual practices
Origin	The origin of the victim is attacked from a racist perspective	Race or ethnicity
		Nationality
		Skin colour
Cultural diversity	The cultural diversity of the victim is attacked from a pro-western perspective	Language
		Culture
		Religion
Class	Disdain for the socio-economic class to which the victim belongs	
Age	Derogatory remarks about the age of the victim	
Physique	Attack on the grounds of a person's physical image	
Physical disability	Attack on the grounds of a person's physical abilities	
Others	Intervention of other axes of inequality	

way, when an attack is not evident, the interaction is not included unless the person receiving it replies and makes it clear that they have felt attacked.

In relation to each act of gender violence identified, information about the profile of the attacked account and of the aggressor accounts are included. In addition, data related to the content of the attack are also included, such as the date and context of the post and content of it. The data are collected and codified to establish whether it is an 'ideological' or 'personal' attack. We have considered 'ideological' attacks to be those in which the attack takes the form of an ideological argument not specifically targeting the attacked person, but the group to which they belong. By 'personal' attacks we refer to those cases in which the specific person behind the profile is attacked with comments aimed directly at them. Additionally, how the attack began is also considered. In this regard, it is recorded whether it occurs as a reply to a post, if it is instigated by the aggressor, if it responds to an orchestrated and collective attack or if the attack is triggered by other causes. We also note down and classify which type of violence the attack presents (sexual, psychological, seeking to cause physical harm or perpetrated using forms that are specific and exclusive to the digital sphere) and if the attack presents elements that involve other axes of inequality in addition to gender (on the grounds of origin, social class, etc.).

Semi-structured interviews

As a complementary methodology, five semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with people who were deemed to be key informers, because

of their knowledge of the problem studied from their diverse fields of experiences (academic, legal and online work), in addition to, in some cases, personal experiences of violence on social media.

The people interviewed were:

– *Carla Vall:* Criminal lawyer and criminologist, expert in human rights and in how to tackle and prevent VAW.
– *Jordi Bonet-Martí:* Lecturer in the sociology department of Barcelona University (UB). Expert in public policies, social movements and feminist studies. He has published several articles about anti-feminism on social media.
– *Diego Marchante:* 'Genderhacker' on social media. Trans-feminist activist and audio-visual artist. Lecturer in the department of fine art of Barcelona University (UB) and Barcelona International University of Catalonia (UIC).
– *Ramia Chaoui:* Author of the YouTube channel 'RamiasChannel, cuando dos mundos se funden en un mismo canal' ('RamiasChannel, when two worlds merge into one channel'). Activist for the rights of Muslim women.
– *Leila Mohammadi:* She has worked as a lecturer in the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) in Barcelona, in the field of communication, and she works on multicultural projects.

The first three interviews were designed in order to contextualize the data collected before analysing it so that the researchers would have more in-depth knowledge about how gender violence operates in the digital field prior to analysing it. Specifically, these interviews were conducted in the first stages of the research (April and May 2021). The other two interviews, conducted with feminist that are activists on social media, were conducted in the final stage of the research and served to compare the results obtained in the content analysis of Twitter with the experiences and knowledge of the interviewed women (September 2021).

RESULTS

Data on 462,281 gender attacks were collected and analysed, and the results presented in the following subsections were extracted:

Who are the aggressors?

Our analysis has identified six typologies of aggressor account on Twitter:

– *Far right anonymous accounts:* They tend to refer to Spain's medieval past, to the former *glory* of the Spanish Empire and/or to the Catholic religion. They are also characterized by mentioning VOX, the far-right wing party, directly or by including a green heart in the profile. The attacks analysed show that this typology mainly attacks feminists with high public visibility by using misogynous insults such as 'feminazi' or sexual references.
– *Bots:* They are anonymous and false users who send automatic and programmed messages. They are characterized by specifically attacking certain targets: they exclusively attack racialized people, politicians or sympathizers of the left with racist and sexist messages, depending on the profile of the victim account.
– *Stalkers:* These users may or may not be anonymous. They are characterized by developing an obsessive behaviour with one of the feminists: they

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reply to practically every tweet the victim posts with insults and disparaging remarks, and they even generate a relationship of dependence with them.

– *Transphobic feminists:* These women, who generally self-identify as RadFem, do not hide their identity, or remain anonymous. They tend to be the profile that usually initiates mass attacks. In other words, they (via a retweet or a mention) point to a trans or trans-inclusive feminist and encourage other trans-exclusionary women to attack them online.

– *Anonymous accounts of trans-exclusionary women:* They are anonymous accounts that tend to hide their identity using names of first-wave feminists, such as for example, Olympe de Gouges. They especially attack the accounts of trans-inclusive feminists with insults such as 'traitors' and 'mercenaries' in which race and ethnicity also intersect (they tend to attack, e.g., trans-inclusive gypsy women) and, secondly, trans women and men (especially the former).

– *General followers:* They participate exclusively by following collective attacks, spurred on by the desire to annoy, bother and lash out at the feminists under the protection of the group.

Although individual attacks may happen occasionally, it is far more common to find one or two accounts which instigate the aggressions by setting a target while they then wait for it to happen, acting out as a partially organized cyber antifeminist movement (Bonet-Martí 2021). In our investigation we have specified that, in Spain, these accounts are usually the far right accounts and transphobic feminists, which are later followed by users who ideologically relate to the content that the instigator tweets about.

When do the aggressors attack?

The highest number of attacks took place during the first wave between March and June 2020 (an average of 42,186 attacks per month). However, an increase in these attacks is observed with each fluctuation of the pandemic. After the first wave, the attacks increased in July and reduced in September 2020, coinciding with the second wave (an average of 27,593 attacks). They increased again in October and did not decrease until December 2020 (an average of 29,809 attacks), in correspondence with the third wave. Following the same trend, the attacks experienced a major upturn in January 2021 until March of the same year with the evolution of another wave of COVID-19 (an average of 39,351 attacks). Before this study we knew that internet consumption had risen (Kemp 2021) but there was not any factual relation between this and the increase of online gender violence. Now we have established one factor that may be an indicator in order to prevent this violence: the amount of time spent in front of a computer.

These fluctuations respond to the way in which some of the accounts of the feminists who make up the analysis sample – mainly those classified as 'politicians' and 'journalists' – receive a lot more attacks in accordance with the ups and downs of the public health crisis, especially at times of great social tension, such as during the first months of the pandemic. However, it is notable that the attacks received by the feminists from other categories do not follow this trend. They are subjected to sporadic and mass attacks that also peak and then drop, but occur at specific times that do not correspond with the fluctuations associated with the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
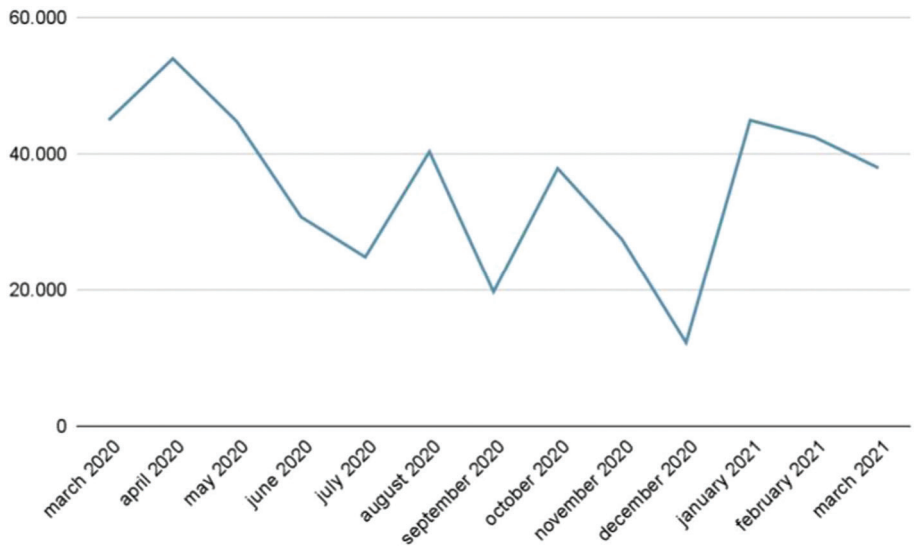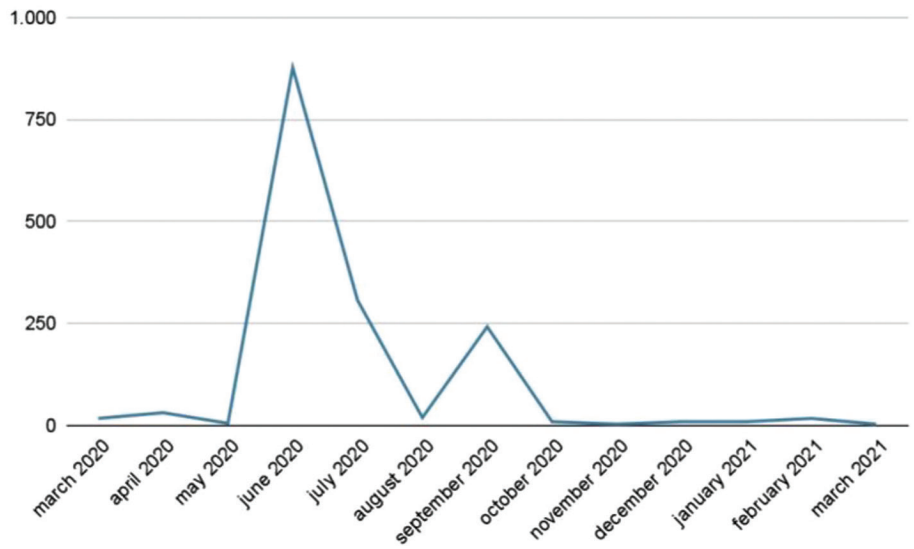
Figure 1: Total number of attacks.

Figure 2: Specific distribution of attacks to one of the feminists.

The dynamic they present is characterized by showing a drastic increase in one particular month, and decreasing the following month. This is the case, for example, of an anti-racist activist's account which went from zero attacks in May 2020 to 878 in June, then reducing again to 307 in July and zero in August 2020.

The aggressor accounts also attack depending on the political agenda at the time. When an event occurs that offends anti-feminist beliefs (such as

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the 8M, International Women's Day, protests in 2020 and 2021 or the debate on the Trans Law in 2021) or in which there are women in protagonist roles (such as in the Catalan elections in February 2021) the attacks increase and are more vicious. For example, a Catalan politician was the subject of five attacks between March and November 2020, when she was councillor of the Barcelona City Council; but when her candidacy for the Catalan Parliament was made public she received 25, 90 and 34 attacks respectively in the months of December 2020 and January and February 2021. Once again, these results are compatible with previous published literature. Proyecto Una (2020) pointed out the theoretical inconsistency made by the current separation between analogue and digital life. Therefore, we should not speak of separation but rather the overlapping of both axes of our lives. To detect the effects of the so-called 'analogical life' are having on the 'virtual life' only shows that it is impossible to separate one from the other.

What are the features of the attacks?

Most of the attacks (97.51 per cent of the total, in an average of 39.72 per cent of the cases) happen under what we have called *group action*: a coordinated attack, usually instigated by one or various accounts which are well-known and have a voice within the respective community in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of users target the profile of a feminist to harass her, insult her, threaten her or laugh at her. This demonstrates that the goal of the insults is to overwhelm the aggrieved person so that she will retract or leave (temporarily or permanently) Twitter. This shows that the main target is to silence the assailant, which is another proof of the antifeminist (Bonet-Martí 2021) characteristic of these attacks. Although not as frequent as the collective attacks (2.42 per cent of the total), individual actions represent another typology of attack. These tend to refer to the obsessive behaviour of an aggressor account with a feminist, or a paternalistic reprimand (mansplaining) from a user who considers that the victim did not express herself as she should have or that, simply, she has made a mistake according to their criterion and they decide to correct her and/or ridicule her, at times in a persistent and repetitive manner.

Furthermore, we have detected that the attacks mainly happen as a response to the original tweet by the victim (80.91 per cent), while mentions in the aggressor's own profile in the form of a retweet with comment (19.02 per cent of the total) are a secondary type of attack. In this way, we have detected a relation between the type of attack and its seriousness and the type of interaction used to perform the attack. In the direct replies, insults and disparaging remarks of medium seriousness are usual (insults, attacks on victim's reputation, disparaging remarks, etc.) and it is in this type of interaction that more serious attacks appear (death threats, threats to physical and sexual health, etc.). However, in the mentions, which leave a very visible trail on the aggressor's profile, we find instigations for the attack and less intense disparaging remarks, such as mansplaining and sealioning.

Lastly, the analysis detected that, on the one hand, personal attacks, in other words, those aimed specifically at a person and their physical or virtual identity, make up most of the attacks (93.35 per cent of the total). On the other hand, ideological attacks, which do not seek to directly attack the person, but rather the group to which they belong, are much less common (6.60 per cent of the total).

Why do aggressors attack?

The results of the ethnographic analysis show that, in their majority, the users were attacked when they tweeted about feminism: out of the total number of attacks, 166,758 occurred for this reason. However, it is notable that while feminism is the main trigger for the attacks in the entire corpus, in certain analysis categories this affirmation varies; for example, 'anonymous' users received 42 per cent of the attacks for political reasons and only 8 per cent of them referred to feminism.

In terms of which axes of inequality intersect in the content of the attacks, our analysis shows that race, sexual orientation and gender identity are axes that generate more vulnerability.

Anti-racist tweets or tweets condemning racist behaviour, in turn, triggered 26% of the attacks (120,019). In relation to this topic, it is very relevant to mention that the number of attacks increased when the users identified as racialized people. For example, in the sub-category of 'anonymous feminists', which includes two racialized women, one of them received 49 attacks on racist grounds (18.9% of the total), while the second received three for the same reason (100%). On the contrary, White women in the same category received between 0% and 3.5% for the same issue.

In fact, the increase in hate messages towards racialized women is not exclusive to the subject of racism but occurs across the entire corpus of the analysis sample. Similar to Amnesty International (2018) and Hackworth (2018), we can see that racialized women are more likely to experience online violence and generally receive more attacks than White women, regardless of the topic about which they express themselves. As an example, in the category of 'anonymous', after posting about a political issue, the maximum number of attacks received by one of the White women was 18 years old, while one of the racialized women received 148 when she posted about the same event and in an equivalent manner.

The third category that triggers most attacks is that which we have considered as 'others' (16 per cent or 70,332 attacks). The nature of this category could be a reason for this, since it accepts a larger number of tweets which can be collected under this label, but it can also simultaneously indicate an association with gender: when a user is identified as feminist, she receives more attacks regardless of what she tweets.

Table 3: Breakdown of total attacks per subject.

Topic	Number	Percentage
COVID	56,145	12%
Feminism	170,636	37%
Trans-feminism	21,653	5%
Sexual orientation	14,430	3%
Politics	7584	2%
Racism	120,019	26%
Aesthetic standards	105	0.023%
Others	71,709	16%
Total	**462,281**	

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In fourth place, we have the posts about COVID-19 as a topic about which attacks on Twitter can occur (12% of the attacks, or 55,235), while tweets about trans-feminism comprised 4% of the attacks (20,102). Lastly, the categories that trigger least attacks are, first, sexual orientation (3% or 12,832 attacks) and then, aesthetic standards (0.005% of the total, 22 attacks). This fact could be due to the nature of Twitter, which mainly favours textual communication and, therefore, visual parameters (where aesthetic standards would be reflected more) are relegated to a second plane and are not a target of attack.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Feminist users are an important target for gender attacks on Twitter. Our analysis sample explains this, being composed of a broad and varied typology of 50 Twitter profiles (in terms of public relevance, number of followers and characteristics of the feminists or group behind the account) and calculating a total of 462,281 attacks during the one-year period studied.

The research conducted reveals that we need to address the issue because of the frequency and fierceness with which it occurs. These attacks do not only seek to silence and cause harm to the internet users who are targeted, but through them messages are thrown out to society as a whole. They highlight ideological tensions that exist in relation to the conditions of use of the social debate and intervention space which social networks have become. These tensions include the struggle over who can participate in these debates, expressing what opinions, in what form and with what consequences (Civila et al. 2021). In this regard, this research confirms the significance of this issue and its consequences, in agreement with that highlighted by other research works in this context (Calala Fondo de Mujeres 2020; Bonet-Martí 2020, 2021) and in others (Amnesty International 2018).

As a first specific result of the research, we determined that there are six main typologies of aggressor accounts on Twitter: radical far-right anonymous accounts, bots, stalkers, transphobic feminists, anonymous accounts of trans-exclusionary women and general users who also join in on the attacks. Each of these profiles presents their own characteristics, their own mechanisms of attack and, usually, targets one main feminist.

As a second contribution, our research has defined a correlation between the political and social agenda and the increase in the number of attacks towards the women featured in them. In this regard, an association is observed between the waves of the pandemic and the fluctuations of attacks to which feminists are subjected; and more so when they are in the public eye, like politicians and journalists are. This, on the one hand, establishes a direct synergy between the time aggressors spend on the internet and the vulnerability of women in the digital space. On the other hand, the analysis indicates that when feminists are or are seen as part of or supporters of a left or centre-left political party that triggers attacks that take the form of gender attacks. Beyond the issue of the pandemic, the attacks, usually, occur in peaks of intensity in response to something the victim tweets which is often controversially associated with the social and political current affairs at the time (such as the passing of what is known as the Trans Law or the protest held on 8 March, International Women's Day).

Attacks tend to be collective, performed 'in packs', as Jordi Bonet Martí called them in the interview conducted for this research. This pattern does not only happen when the feminists are well-known, but when they use their

voice to condemn discrimination or to give their opinion on a specific fact no
matter if they have fewer social projection. At times, the person who initiates
the attack is an account or person of reference for these groups, and others
follow them. This indicates the existence of campaigns that are coordinated
between reactionary groups as well as the development of what we could
call 'digital hatred'. In relation to this, it is also important to point out that
often the attacks occur in the form of retweets/mentions on the aggressor's
own profile, which encourages the followers who retweet or mention them to
interact with the post and in this way join the pack. In this way, it seems that
the aggressors seek to control a digital space, which hinders the possibilities
of this being a cosmos of feminist empowerment and resistance. The virtual
space thus stops being a safe place, as users are faced with the possibility of
being attacked at any time. Therefore, the collective attacks that take place in
the digital sphere can be considered to be aimed at weakening, limiting or
conditioning participation.

The frequency and aggressivity of these collective attacks, as the research
concludes, does not mean that this type of attack does not coexist with that
of individual aggressors, but that 'lone wolves' tend to perform less intense
attacks when not protected by the group. In these individual attacks we
detected a tendency to try to humiliate and ridicule the feminists in an appar-
ently innocent manner and using a paternalistic tone, present in strategies
such as mansplaining, or in an insidiously insistent manner, as occurs in seal-
ioning. It is also equally striking to note that, on the contrary, more serious
attacks –both part of a group action and individual– occur as responses to
a tweet and are hidden in a particular section of the profile of the aggressor
account and are not as publicly visible.

The research also enables us to conclude that most attacks take the form
of personal attacks. In other words, they directly target the feminist on the
grounds of their personal characteristics, rather than setting out an ideologi-
cal argument referring to the group to which they belong, but without directly
attacking the specific person.

This dynamic is especially vicious in the case of racialized women and
trans people. Regarding this question, it is important to note that the anti-
racist topic, after feminism (to which 37 per cent of the attacks refer), triggers
the second highest percentage of attacks (26 per cent), especially if, as has
been indicated, the feminists receiving them are migrants or racialized, but
also if they are known beyond the context of social media as public figures.
Therefore, one of the most relevant results of this work is that an intersection
of hatred occurs: those who attack tend to do it not only because the victims
are feminists, but because these feminists also represent other social values
that they look down on. This highlights the importance of an intersectional
approach to analyse gender-based online violence. Depending on different
axes of inequality (such as race, gender identity and sexual orientation), some
groups are more vulnerable to gender-based violence online than others.

It is relevant to observe how the anonymous accounts of trans-exclusion-
ary women, such as transphobic feminists, produce a discourse that leads to
synergies with the radical and racist far right: the former tend to attack femi-
nist trans-inclusive women and, on the other hand, they also develop racist
discourses against racialized women.

This research has explored a field which is significant on account of its
vast social repercussions, and its results present diverse strands that need to
be collected to continue to further the analysis of the problem. For example,

the broader developments could extend from feminist activists to cis men and, since it is a broad and changing phenomenon, a greater conceptualization that collects the contributions of the various fields of study from which the issue is analysed is needed. In short, much work remains to be done to continue exploring this problem, and it is relevant to do so.

The research highlights the significance of the issue, its scope and the multiple dimensions it presents by placing the focus on the analysis of attacks. These attacks are not only likely to deeply affect the people subjected to them, but they spread as a threat to the entire social body that witnesses them. Moreover, it questions the options of the digital space being a place for debate, exchange and safe expression, free of gender discrimination.

FUNDING

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