

# The boomerang effect and hate speech comments in the press: Lionel Messi and the Catalan pro-independence movement (2019-2021)

El efecto búmeran y los discursos de odio en los comentarios en prensa: Lionel Messi y el independentismo catalán (2019-2021)

Efeito boomerang e ódio na imprensa: Messi e a independência da Catalunha (2019-2021)

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## **Abstract**

*This article seeks to identify traces of hate speech referred to the process for the independence of Catalonia (known as the procés) and the Catalan pro-independence movement published in the comments sections of news articles about Lionel Messi in Madrid and Barcelona in several newspapers (ABC, El País, La Vanguardia, Mundo Deportivo, Marca, El Mundo and AS) during the period 2019-2021. Based on 2,639 news items containing the word 'Messi' in the headline, quantitative methods were used to identify and study the threads with the highest number of political comments in some of the newspapers analysed. The results show that in Madrid, news and comments about Messi were used to discuss the procés and the pro-independence movement, while the player was not linked to politics in Barcelona-based newspapers. Two Barcelona newspapers (La Vanguardia, Mundo Deportivo) and two Madrid newspapers (Marca and El Mundo) contained the 12 threads with the highest number of political comments in both cities: 487 in total. Their analysis revealed that the sports press was more diverse in its opinions than the general press and, therefore, contained more conflict-related and more hate speech based on political ideology. The first posts (1-25) in comment threads were the most followed (in 77% of the times), which meant that the users who posted first had the most influence. This research concludes that hate speech was detected more in structures and arguments than in specific words; however, its existence was not necessarily negative and could result in a boomerang effect against the hate message itself if it was defeated in the ensuing comment dynamics.*

### **Keywords**

*Hate speech - Messi - digital media - comments in news articles – procés - Catalan independence*

## **Resumen**

*Este artículo busca señales de discursos de odio aparecidas en comentarios sobre el procés y el independentismo catalán publicados en las noticias en prensa sobre Lionel Messi en Madrid y en Barcelona (ABC, El País, La Vanguardia, Mundo*

Deportivo, Marca, El Mundo y AS) en el periodo 2019-2021. Partiendo de 2.639 noticias con Messi en el titular, se usaron métodos cuantitativos para identificar los hilos con más comentarios políticos de algunos de los periódicos analizados y estudiarlos después. Los resultados reflejan que en Madrid se usan noticias y comentarios sobre Messi para hablar del procés y del independentismo, mientras que en Barcelona no se relaciona al jugador con la política. Dos periódicos de Barcelona (La Vanguardia, Mundo Deportivo) y dos de Madrid (Marca y El Mundo) reúnen los 12 hilos con más comentarios políticos en ambas ciudades: 487, en total. Su análisis revela que la prensa deportiva concita opiniones más diversas que la generalista y, por tanto, recoge más conflicto y más presencia de discursos de odio por ideología política. Los primeros mensajes (1-25) en los hilos de comentarios aparecen un 77% de las veces como los más seguidos y, por lo tanto, los usuarios que escriben primero influyen más. Esta investigación concluye que los discursos de odio se detectan más en estructuras y argumentaciones que en palabras concretas, pero su existencia no tiene por qué ser negativa y puede derivar en un efecto búmeran contra el propio mensaje de odio si aparece derrotado en la dinámica de intervenciones.

### **Palabras clave**

*Discursos de odio - Messi - medios digitales - comentarios en prensa - procés - independentismo catalán*

## **Resumo**

*Este artigo busca sinais de discursos de ódio que aparecem em comentários sobre o processo e o independentismo catalão publicados em notícias sobre Lionel Messi em Madrid e em Barcelona (ABC, La Vanguardia, Mundo Deportivo, Marca, El Mundo e AS) no período de 2019 a 2021. Partindo de 2.639 notícias com Messi no título, métodos quantitativos foram usados para identificar os fios com mais comentários políticos de alguns dos jornais analisados para estudá-los depois através de análise qualitativa do discurso. Os resultados refletem que em Madrid são usadas notícias e comentários sobre Messi para falar do processo e do independentismo, enquanto que em Barcelona (tanto meios quanto comentaristas) não relacionam o jogador com a política. Dois jornais de Barcelona (La Vanguardia, Mundo Deportivo) e dois*

*de Madrid (Marca e El Mundo) reúnem os 12 fios com mais comentários políticos em ambas as cidades: 487, no total. Sua análise revela que a imprensa esportiva reúne opiniões mais diversas que a geral e, portanto, registra mais conflito e mais presença de discursos de ódio por ideologia política. As primeiras mensagens (1-25) nos fios de comentários aparecem 77% das vezes como as mais seguidas e, portanto, os usuários que escrevem primeiro influenciam mais. Esta pesquisa conclui que os discursos de ódio são detectados mais em estruturas e argumentações do que em palavras concretas, mas sua existência não precisa ser negativa e pode resultar em um efeito bumerangue contra a própria mensagem de ódio se ela aparecer derrotada na dinâmica das intervenções.*

### **Palavras-chave**

*Discurso de ódio - Messi - meios digitais - comentários na imprensa - procés - independentismo catalão*

## **1. Introduction**

Football clubs are emotional institutions that span a long period of time and bring together different generations of supporters who feel a stable bond of recognition and shared sentiments when they are united behind their team. Societies engage in and understand football through an emotional choreography featuring liturgies of belonging, expressions of loyalty and betrayal, dramatised rivals and results (humiliation, shame, crushing, pride, depression, tragedy, euphoria), and the construction of identities and points of reference (Juventeny, 2017). Given the competitive and emotional components of football, it operates through a strong identification and exclusion mechanism, which makes it a fertile ground for nationalist narratives (Ervedosa, 2018; Gómez-García and Ballesteros, 2019; Rojas-Torrijos; Guerrero-Caballero, 2021).

The Catalan sovereignty process (2012-2021), popularly known as the *procés*, was a set of social and political events that sought to achieve self-determination and independence of Catalonia from Spain. No area of the public sphere has been free from political discussions on Catalan independence over the years, from the first demonstrations on the Catalonia's National Day to the illegal referendum

(2017), the Supreme Court ruling (2019), through to the Spanish Government's pardons for those convicted (2021). This has been especially true of spaces where all kinds of opinions can be expressed and articulated with total freedom, such as comments sections in news articles about football (Rojas-Torrijos and Guerrero-Caballero, 2021) and, specifically, about Lionel Messi. During the period where the *procés* became established, he became the player who had received the most individual awards in the history of football (*Sport*, 2022) and was also a strong symbolic element due to his global reach. This symbolic potential was used for and against Catalan nationalism in different news items and also in readers' comments on those news items. The space that newspapers provide for public participation can be a double-edged sword. It can complement journalism through its ability to monitor, verify and engage with information (Ksiazek, 2018; Naab et al., 2020), promoting deliberation and debate in the public sphere (Wang, 2020; Rowe, 2015) and generating value for information through a 'virtual conversation' (Santana, 2016, p. 145). However, it can also be an attack on the quality of information; corrupt the creation of meaning in the news through abuse, misinformation, disrespect and mockery (Barnes, 2015; Ksiazek, 2015; Rowe, 2015). 145), and the overt or covert appearance of hate speech or rhetoric (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2020).

Following Habermas's discourse theory, quality comments should raise debates in which participants make logical and coherent contributions in search of agreement (Beckert and Ziegele, 2020). Some studies have established traits to identify these quality comments (substantial argumentation, a high level of elaboration, valuable information and length) versus those that are unedifying and do not contribute to the debate (disrespectful language, polarisation, simplification and humour), although they have also recognised the difficulty in establishing a rigid classification of comments, given that they are 'multidimensional constructs' (Beckert and Ziegele, 2020, p. 3.931).

Two of the elements most often cited as deterrents to constructive public debate in comments sections are the anonymity of participants and contributions lacking in civility (Zamith and Lewis, 2014). Uncivil comments are understood as contributions that break the rules of politeness in exchanges of views, when those who comment on the news express themselves disrespectfully through insults, profanity or sarcasm (Wang, 2020) and seek to cause anger and annoyance (Ksiazek et al., 2015). Some studies have reported the presence of markers denoting this

kind of disrespect or intolerance in one in five comments (Coe et al., 2014). The large number of contributions that include features of hate speech (Gal, 2019) foster or encourage defensive reactions from other participants, who write from the perspective of their moral indignation and block the ability to listen to the other's point of view. Thus, the absence of a reflective climate leads to undesirable outcomes in online discussions (Hwang et al., 2018; Wang, 2020).

Logically, comments regarded as acceptable might be those that are free from any kind of hostility (Ksiazek et al., 2015), but sometimes the line between hostility and controversy can be blurred. In fact, when an issue causes conflict, as there is no clear or unambiguous streak of responses, the number of comments increases, and so does the level of hostility (Ksiazek, 2018). Non-aggressive comments are an essential part of moving forward in a constructive debate, but the need for confrontation and disagreement at some point in the deliberative process should not be overlooked (Santana, 2016).

Beyond the problems of building a productive dialogue, there are two situations that strongly influence online conversations. Firstly, the number of people who write a comment is a relatively small percentage of those whose participation is limited to only reading the discussions (Barnes, 2015). In the United States, only 25% acknowledged that they had ever added their thoughts or reflections to the flow of debate in 2010 (Purcell et al., 2010), whereas more recent studies in developed countries in Europe and Asia have shown that only 10-28% (Newman et al., 2017) or 8-14% (Lee et al., 2020, p. 5), respectively, participate in discussions and, therefore, in the construction of meaning of their reading. These percentages warn of the risk of a distorted perception of reality, because the opinion of a few may be interpreted as being that of the majority (Lee, 2016). Moreover, even when what is said does not directly challenge what is stated in the journalistic text, the comments can influence how readers perceive the information and, logically, the meaning that they may subsequently take from the texts (Lee et al., 2020).

It is difficult to determine exactly which elements or aspects of online discourses are most influential in eroding or establishing an article's credibility (Kümpel and Springer, 2016; Dohle, 2018; Lee et al., 2020). But there is no doubt that a comment is a persuasive instrument that has an impact on the text and on the reader to create 'signals' that that can be used to assess the quality of information (Naab et al., 2020, p. 13). Some studies have argued that shorter and easier-to-remember

comments may have a greater influence on readers' perceptions when reading the comment stream (Weber et al., 2017), while others have highlighted the importance of authenticity: the more genuine and sharp negative comments are, the more they affect the credibility of the news (Waddell, 2020). It has also been noted that negative comments are remembered more than positive ones (Waddell, 2020), although there have been analyses that downplay the importance of comments as isolated elements and study them in context, stressing the importance of conversation dynamics. Negative or critical comments do not necessarily negate the credibility or authority of the information if a comment thread is in favour, if a comment has many *likes* or if there is a counterargument that negates the eroding effect of a negative remark (Naab et al., 2020). Attempts have been made by the media to control hate speech by using moderators and software that detects insults, as well as forcing users to subscribe by providing personal data (Wang, 2021). These measures have put an end to the more explicit messages, but some users have adapted by becoming 'real experts in rhetoric' and making the debate just as uncivil, but in a more subtle way (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2021, p. 10).

## 2. Material and methods

This article seeks to detect the comments on the *procés* and the Catalan pro-independence movement that appeared in news articles published in Madrid and Barcelona (*ABC*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *Marca*, *El Mundo* and *AS*) about Lionel Messi in the period 2019-2021, immediately after the player left F.C. Barcelona to sign for PSG. The six threads with the highest number of political comments on the subject were analysed, published in newspapers from Madrid (in *Marca* and *El Mundo*) and Barcelona (in *Mundo Deportivo* and *La Vanguardia*), respectively. No comment threads were found in the *AS* and *El País* newspapers that were sufficiently continuous in their political content to form part of the final analysis. Finally, readers' contributions to these 12 larger threads, including those from Madrid and Barcelona, were studied to see whether the different political positions on Catalan independence were also used to promote intolerance and hate speech.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> User comments are reproduced during the article in response to their original wording, including typos, onomatopoeias, or misspellings

This study addresses the following research questions:

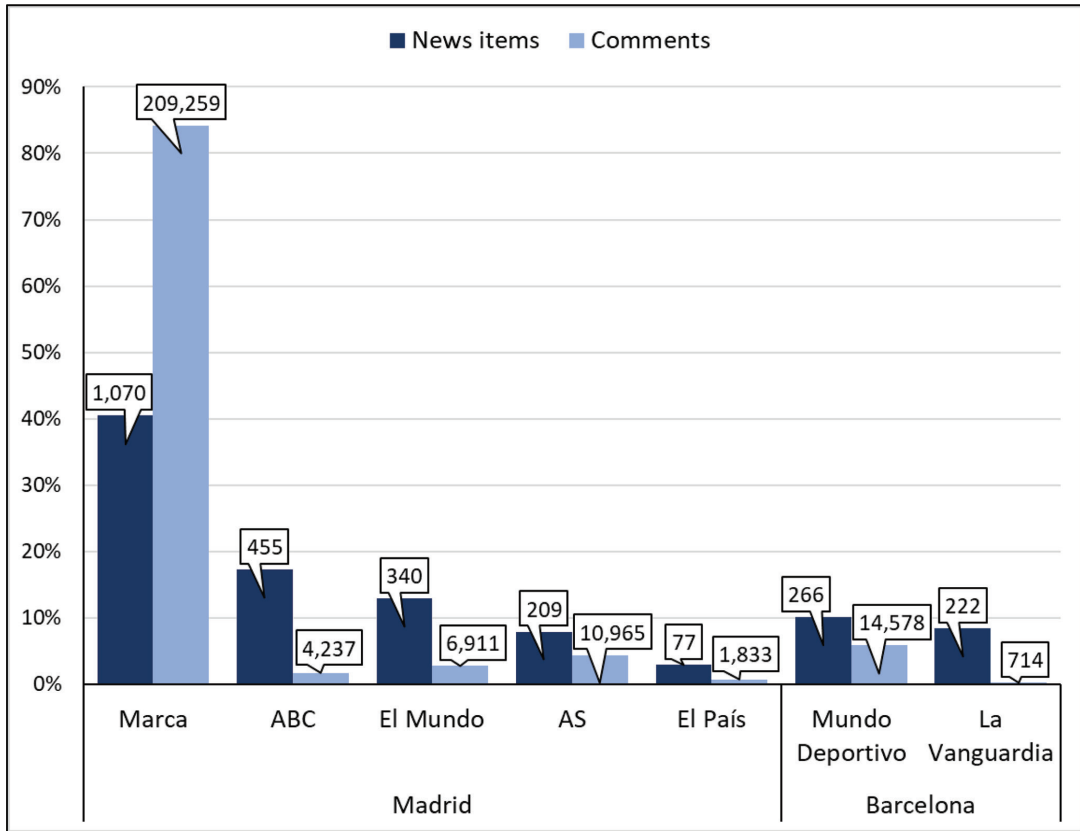
- RQ1. Were there any differences between the press in Madrid and Barcelona, or between general circulation and sports newspapers, in their comments on the *procés* or the pro-independence movement in their news reports about Lionel Messi?
- RQ2. Were online comments about Lionel Messi used to construct or promote hate speech in connection with or motivated by political ideology?
- RQ3. What were the common features or dynamics in news comment threads and how did they affect the development of hate speech?

This study used a hybrid approach. Quantitative techniques were first used to make a relevant selection in order to limit the scope of the qualitative analysis to the comment threads which had the greatest potential for political discourse associated with Messi. The comments were then assessed in depth in order to identify the use of hate speech and also predictably complex content patterns within a potentially valuable but also manageable volume of text.

The *Cartodio* database was used to apply web scraping techniques to download more than one million news items, with their corresponding comments sections, from the newspapers *20minutos*, *ABC*, *AS*, *El Mundo*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *Marca* and *Mundo Deportivo* for the period 2019-2020. The database did not include all the news items from 2019: it excluded the whole year of *Mundo Deportivo* and the first eight months of *El País*, because these newspapers moved the comments to an external server that web scraping could not access. Nevertheless, it was possible to expand the data collection from *ABC* and *El Mundo* to 2021, which extended the study with these two newspapers to include the end of Messi's time at F.C. Barcelona. A broad shortlist was made from this database of all available news items in which the word 'Messi' appeared in the headline. This search resulted in 2,639 news items and almost 250,000 comments to work on (Figure 1).

Subsequently, six comment threads were selected from the Madrid newspapers and another six from the press published in Barcelona that had the highest prevalence of terms that would be potentially useful for our analysis. The terms sought were *\*catalanuf\**, *\*cataluf\**, *\*democracia\**, *\*democratic\**, *\*democràtic\**, *\*independ\**, *\*preso\**, *\*procés\**, *\*prosés\**, *\*prucés\**, *\*prprusés\**, *\*polític\**, *\*politic\** (Tables 1 and 2). The search (and therefore, this list), which only included news

**Figure 1.** News items and comments that included 'Messi' in the headline



*Source:* Developed by the authors.

items from *Marca*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia* and *Mundo Deportivo*, may have returned false positives (any use of the adverb 'independently' [*independientemente*] would be selected by the filter, for example) and/or false negatives (any comment of a political nature that did not use any of these terms would have been excluded). However, this was not a relevant limitation, as the quantitative phase simply identified comment threads where the volume of discussion on the topic of the *procés* and the pro-independence movement were significant. Once the threads with the most political discussion were located, the qualitative analysis of the comments automatically eliminated the impact of Type I and Type II errors inherent in the quantitative phase.

**Table 1.** Six news items with the highest prevalence of political terms in the press from Madrid

Date	Newspaper	Headline	Comments
17/05/2019	<i>Marca</i>	Leo Messi's gesture as everyone chanted 'Freedom, political prisoners!'	198
11/09/2019	<i>Marca</i>	Cardoner: Messi can come and go from the club as he sees fit	106
16/05/2019	<i>El Mundo</i>	Messi receives the <i>Creu de Sant Jordi</i> award for services rendered to Catalonia	43
31/01/2021	<i>El Mundo</i>	Messi and Barça announce legal action against EL MUNDO after revelations of the biggest contract in sports history	32
05/08/2021	<i>El Mundo</i>	Leo Messi ends his time at Barcelona	39
07/08/2021	<i>El Mundo</i>	Messi, a matter of life and death at Barça: Survival depended on his departure	28

**Source:** Developed by the authors.

**Table 2.** Six news items with the highest prevalence of political terms in the Barcelona press

Date	Newspaper	Headline	Comments
30/03/2020	<i>Mundo Deportivo</i>	Messi announces 70% pay cut in State of Emergency	14
25/09/2020	<i>Mundo Deportivo</i>	Messi says goodbye to Luis Suárez with another swipe at Barça board of directors	9
29/08/2020	<i>Mundo Deportivo</i>	Barça's reasons for not selling Messi	7
04/09/2020	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Messi is unhappy staying at Barça but will honour his contract	6
26/12/2020	<i>Mundo Deportivo</i>	Messi: 'Guardiola and Luis Enrique were the best'.	3
27/08/2020	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	FIFA protects Leo Messi	2

**Source:** Developed by the authors.

## 3. Results

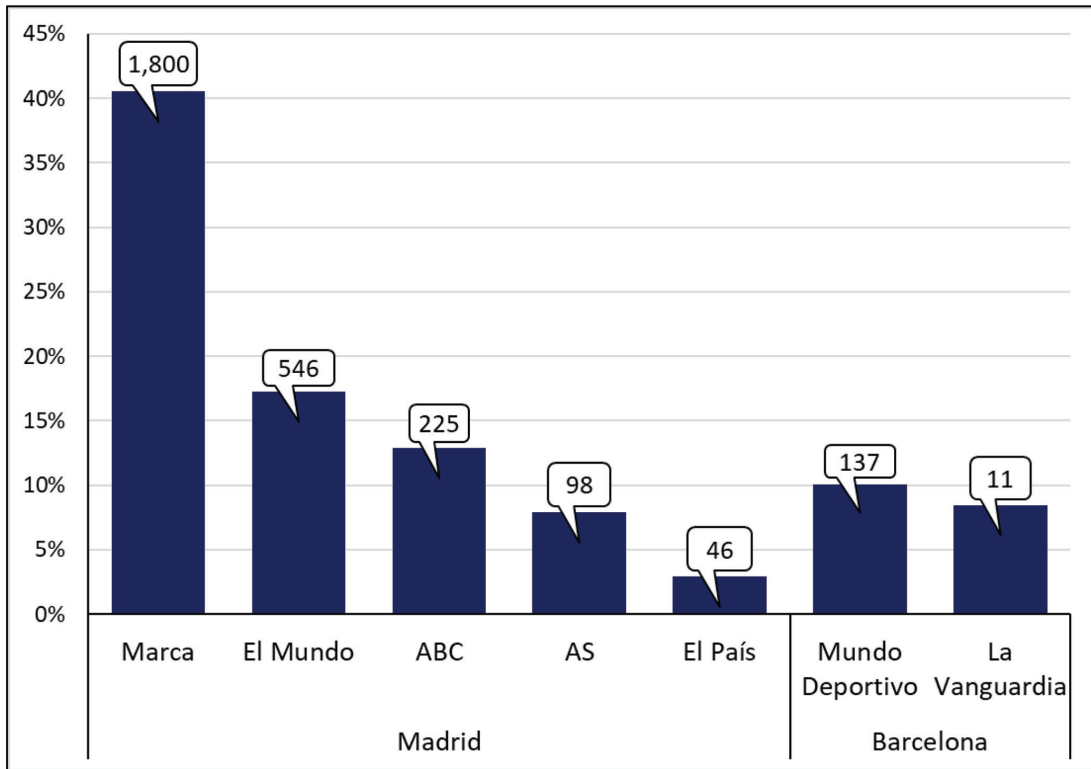
### 3.1. Political comments by type of newspaper and location

The quantitative selection of the 12 most important threads in Madrid and Barcelona, respectively, showed considerable differences between the comments sections in news articles published in each of the two cities. The incidence of political discussions about the *procés* and the Catalan pro-independence movement was overwhelmingly higher among newspaper users in Madrid compared to Barcelona: 95% compared to 5% (Figure 2). The Madrid-based newspapers published a greater volume of news about Messi in the period analysed: more than four times as much. While this was partly due to the greater number of news publications in Madrid, if this effect is eliminated by basing the ratio on averages per newspaper (Table 3), the imbalance is still remarkable: almost double. In Madrid, there was also a higher volume of comments on news items about Messi, regardless of whether politics was discussed or not. This higher average volume was found when analysed by news item, by newspaper and also overall. Proportions ranged between 6.1 and 1 for general comments and from 7.1 and 1 for specifically political comments (Table 3).

Of the total number of comments in news articles on Lionel Messi that were related to the *procés* and the pro-independence movement, 71% were found in the sports press, compared to 29% in the general circulation press (Figure 2).

The news item about Messi with the highest number of political comments was the one related to the Sant Jordi Cross award that the player received. This was for a specific reason: as the audience applauded when slogans were shouted in support of the pro-independence prisoners, Messi did not do so. *El Mundo* did not highlight Messi's attitude to the applause in the headline and simply published a reflection on what happened in a few descriptive lines within the information: 'he was also the protagonist during the applause and chants for the release of the prisoners of the *procés* when, unlike those present, he crossed his hands and did not join in other people's gesture' (Cabezas, 2019). In the 157 comments, the presence of pro-independence opinion makers was almost non-existent. This absence of a counterbalance marked the comment thread. There was speculation in the comments as to why Messi did not applaud and what it meant. The vast majority of

**Figure 2.** Frequency of political terms related to the *procés* and the Catalan pro-independence movement found in comments



**Source:** Developed by the authors.

comments conveyed the belief that Messi's gesture was against pro-independence interests. Most users felt that Messi was 'neutral on the issue of independence' (#130) or that he was 'neither in favour nor against' (#123). However, Messi's neutral position did not mean that the commentators took the same view: 'he strongly dislikes these displays that destroy coexistence' (#116; Cabezas, 2019).

When the same news item was published in *Marca*, the dynamics in the comments changed: they involved conflict. Firstly, there was mass participation, with a total of 1,299 comments. Secondly, there was a general tone that saw Messi's gesture in a positive light, as reflected in the 51 times the word 'great' was used to describe the player. Thirdly, as *Marca* is a sports newspaper, it has no ideological

**Table 3.** *Quantitative differences between newspapers in Madrid and Barcelona*

	Madrid Newspapers	Barcelona Newspapers	Madrid/Barcelona ratio	Ratio adjusted by no. of newspapers
Total number of news items available in Cartodio	514,194	80,816	6.4 / 1	2.5 / 1
Total number of news items in Cartodio (period 2019-2020)	376,515	80,786	4.7 / 1	1.9 / 1
Total number of news items that contained Messi in the headline	2,151	488	4.4 / 1	1.8 / 1
Total comments found in all news items about Messi	233,205	15,292	15.3 / 1	6.1 / 1
Political comments found in all news items about Messi	2,257	127	17.8 / 1	7.1 / 1
Average number of comments per news item about Messi	108	31	3.5 / 1	1.4 / 1
Average number of political comments per news item about Messi	1.0	0.3	4.0 / 1	1.6 / 1

*Source:* Developed by the authors.

affiliation as such, although it is more identified with the city of Madrid and specifically with Real Madrid, which means that there were some pro-independence comments. Regarding the type of political comments, *Marca* users could be clearly divided into two groups: those who were in favour of independence and those who were against independence. The former were considerably fewer were distributed over the entire duration of the thread (almost two days). All these comments were posted by eight users. Some were more active, whereas others participated only very occasionally and their presence in the discussions was fleeting. Two of them even overlapped with each other and participated simultaneously, although they tended to take turns, which allowed for a sustained tension between positions throughout the thread. Those who were against independence believed that Messi did not clap because he was surfeited: ‘Messi, like many Catalans and non-Catalans living in Catalonia, is totally fed up with this issue. They’re riff-raff!’ (#59; Navarro, 2019) or ‘Good for him for sending them to hell with that gesture’

(#813). Another user saw it more as a test of his personality, but closely associated with their reading of what was happening in Catalonia: ‘they won’t brainwash you’ (#193). Others did not dare to go too far: ‘many Catalans who see the awkward attitude of their idol will identify with it’ (#525). And there were those who took the opportunity to criticise him: ‘what happened to him is that he got scared, like he did at Anfield’ (#193; Navarro, 2019).

The views of pro-independence supporters were remarkably different. Some assessed his gesture as neutral (‘he wants to stay out of it’ (#986) or ‘they seem to suggest that Messi, instead of applauding, was giving the finger’ (#986). Take a good look at the video, he didn’t clap but he showed respect’ (#922)); whereas there were some who chose to justify his decision by arguing that it was based on fear of what television channels could do to him if he had applauded: ‘[they would have been] throwing bombs and fake news against Messi for more than 10 years and demanding that he went to prison for sedition... On the side of the baddies, Messi knows that nothing happens’ (#907; Navarro, 2019).

### 3.2. Hateful insults and rhetoric

The presence of moderators who deleted messages was detected in *Mundo Deportivo*, *La Vanguardia* and *Marca*. In *El Mundo* there was no trace of this activity: all messages were numbered consecutively. This absence of a moderator translated into a higher number of disparaging comments, especially in news item number 4 (Table 1), where expressions such as ‘sufre separata rata’ (suffer, you separatist rat) and ‘AmiMeMola, muérete!’ (ILikeIt, just drop dead!) were published. Even so, the analysis as a whole revealed relatively few direct insults or derogatory words considering the volume of material reviewed. This type of language was found in comments referring to Messi, who was described as ‘an autistic dwarf’, ‘semi-literate’, ‘illiterate’ and ‘borderline’ (Cabezas, 2021a), and was accused of being ‘traitor and collaborator of the year’ (#1059; Navarro, 2019). Similarly derogatory language was directed at other users who posted in the threads, including ‘Sois paletos (...)’ (you are all rednecks), #117; Cabezas, 2019)), and also referring to all those in favour of independence: ‘clowns’ (Ruipérez, 2020); ‘(...) he has not let himself be manipulated by that “bunch” of “dimwits, bumpkins and troglodytes” (Cabezas,

2019); '(...) this way we will prevent spawns like Junqueras and Torra from coming out (#246; Navarro, 2019), or 'there is no field without a cricket and no idiot without a yellow ribbon' (#934; Navarro, 2019). Being fed up with this political issue also led to comments that criticised both sides: 'I say that it's equally stupid when independence supporters bring politics into football as when someone like you (who is not pro-independence) does the same (*Mundo Deportivo*, 2020).

Sometimes, the response to these hateful terms and rhetoric was a degree of self-restraint by the commentators themselves by appealing to equanimity, as in 'don't feed the Troll' (Martinez, 2020), by helping to neutralise a participant, which occasionally also resorted to verbal violence. This was done by creating a kind of boomerang effect, as the original post was used to disparage its originator. A user (*Cento*) who had a history of aggressive comments in the same thread, wrote a hateful message: 'I will continue until there is not even the smell of anything Catalan left in Spain. Everything Catalan out of Spain' (#440; Cabezas, 2021a). This message resulted in four aggressive comments of rejection. One user reminded him that 'anything Catalan, or all raving lunatics like you' (#444). Another participant elaborated the argument further in the post, but also disapproved of the comment: 'It must be very sad to live with such moral decay; believe me, I am sorry for you and for those who have to endure being near you, best regards' (#484). *Cento* complained about the treatment he received and the 'insults': 'Curious, is it moral decay to want the best for my country? I think Catalans are ruining coexistence in my country. You are the one displaying moral decay as you try to prevent me from expressing my opinion through insults' (#497). In all this discursive process, which lasted more than six hours, one user supported *Cento* and suggested a boycott of Catalan products and 'a fair divorce settlement for them to get the hell out [of Spain] straight away' (#451). However, the last messages about the conversation, those that held a certain higher ground in the creation of final meaning because they were not answered or questioned by anyone, reinforced the rejection of his hateful message: 'not all Catalans are like Puigdemont and his gang, but it seems that you are too short-sighted to understand that' (#501) and 'Crackpot!' (#504).

The same user (*Cento*) had written a similar message months before, also in *El Mundo*: 'What the Catalans have to do is to leave Spanish competitions, or better still, all Catalans should leave Spain; it's very hard to put up with these people

on a daily basis. For a Spain free of Catalans' (#9; Cabezas, 2021b). Again, three users attacked this message in less than an hour and reminded *Cento* that not all Catalans were in favour of independence: 'I very much regret your statements and, even more, your lack of solidarity with the Catalans who have views like mine, there are a few millions of us' (#72).

### 3.3. Ways of reading a thread: consequences

In order to understand the influence that hate speech messages can have on threads, it is important to discuss the two reading patterns identified among users. On the one hand, there were some who replied to commentators who issued their views close to the time when they decided to participate. This way of interacting with the thread means that they were not influenced by virtual conversations or comments that came long before: they did not read in a narrative way, from the beginning to the end. Therefore, users who chose to stay in the thread for a long time or leave and come back later to continue participating had a greater influence than others who posted and read on an ad hoc basis. A user participated in the same thread at three different points in time times with an interval of more than six hours to introduce the same idea:

'Puigdemont is roaming around freely in Europe. Why?' (#103. 10:57)

'Josu Ternera, a fugitive from justice, lived in hiding and didn't appear in court. Puchy [Puigdemont] appeared before Belgian and German courts; the civil guard is not watching him, as far as anyone knows, and everyone knows where he lives' (#231, 11:44).

'Why was Josu Ternera extradited and Puchy was not? What's going on?' (#823. 17:02; *Marca*, 2019)

Within this reading dynamic, the more an idea appears, the more influential it is, because it can reach more people without them reading other messages that refute or qualify theirs. In contrast, other users read the thread narratively, going back to comments that were posted a long time ago, even as far as the beginning. This gave them the perspective of several or many virtual conversations, not just one or two. Moreover, despite the fact that a comment was a long way into the

thread, and there was little or no chance of continuing the conversation, many users chose to leave a reply to support or counter someone else's opinion; and those messages were also read, despite the disconnection between those creating the debate. In all the threads there were some conversations that were hours or days apart: comment 190 of one thread replied to number 7 and did so almost a day later (Cabezas, 2021c); number 660 replied to number 28, which was made more than 5 hours earlier (Navarro, 2019); the user who wrote comment 436 to reply to number 2 did not notice the almost 12-hour interval between messages (Cabezas, 2021b), etc. Users continued to reply to messages more out of the need to express themselves or to have the upper hand in the ultimate meaning of the conversation than to communicate with the author of the original message.

Further evidence that the comment thread was often a narrative in itself, which users wanted to follow from the beginning, could be found in the top-rated comments. Systematically, the users whose post contents were the most widely accepted were the ones who participated first; thus, they gathered support not only from readers who read and wrote at the same time as they did, but also from those who came later and started reading from the beginning. Of the six comment threads analysed from the Madrid press, four of them were above or close to 500 messages (*Marca*, #1299 and #737; *El Mundo*, #534 and #488) and two were around 200 (*El Mundo*, #157 and #193). Only 3% of those who contributed beyond post 50 in these threads were among the most supported. If a user wrote one of the first 10 posts, they were more likely to be selected as one of the most strongly backed-up comments: 48% of the most widely supported posts were among the first ten who participated; and 77% were among the first 25 to take part.

## 4. Discussion

The press in Madrid paid more attention to Lionel Messi in the period analysed than the press in Catalonia: a higher volume of comments in news items about Messi were found in Madrid, regardless of whether they linked to politics or not. Of the total number of comments related to the *procés* and the pro-independence movement, 71% of the contributions were found in the sports newspapers, compared to 29% in general newspapers (RQ1). The sports press featured a greater

number of political comments, as well as more conflicts and debates compared to the general press due to its audience's diverse ideologies and territorial sensitivities, contrasting with the more homogeneous ideological alignment of the general press audience. Once the differences due to the greater number of Madrid-based news publications studied had been discounted, the average number of political comments in the news was 7.1 to 1 in favour of Madrid users, as opposed to the abstention of those who posted messages in the Catalan press. Barcelona newspapers and users, whether out of self-censorship or sense of exhaustion with the issue, or out of a simple desire not to mix heterogeneous topics, refrained from making political references to Messi, or from using the news and comments to analyse or discuss political issues such as Catalan independence, and did not mention Messi in political discussions. On the other hand, the Madrid media did not shy away from political issues in some news reports, and users of these newspapers resorted to the comments section to engage in discussion on politics and the pro-independence movement in relation to Messi (RQ1). Beyond some occasional insults, the comments did not target Messi, but they did use some actions or events in his life to undermine the legitimacy or authority of pro-independence views and at the same time introduce words or arguments associated with hate speech.

In the Madrid press, newspapers had a decisive influence on the type of users who posted messages. The rhetorical dynamics and the tone of the comments did not change depending on whether a newspaper was a general or a sports one, but there were differences in the variety of the reflections displayed in the threads. In the reports in *El Mundo*, ideologically linked to the centre-right, pro-independence users were almost non-existent, which meant that virtual conversations were almost monologues, lacked major conflicts or substantial differences, while *Marca*, a sports newspaper with no ideological affiliation, had overwhelmingly more political discussions due to conflicts between users who were for and against the independence of Catalonia from Spain. Although the former were fewer in number, their presence was enough to generate discussion throughout the thread (RQ2).

In the sample analysed, online discussions were always incomplete; there was no closed narrative; there were no conclusions and the participants who posted the comments were not willing to understand or assimilate new arguments;

on the contrary, they remained anchored to their views, although they did look for rhetorical formulas to gain an advantage and refute the arguments of their opponents. In threads with a higher number of comments there was more conflict and also more hostility (Ksiazek, 2018). Readers who accessed the comments had two reading patterns: they engaged on a casual basis (reading only the comments that were close to the time when they decided to participate) or as a narrative (reading from the first comment). The number of arguments or rebuttals a user could read conditioned their construction of meaning about the information and tolerance of hate speech. Although the measures taken by the media reduce direct insults, it is really complicated to prevent uncivil discourse, because 'the richness of the language, the context of interpretation and even in some cases unintentional biases cause comments that would be part of hate speech to remain undetected' (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2021, p. 6). Still, the more a reader follows any given thread, the more likely they are to notice the real impact that hate speech has on successive debates and how most participants react to the tone and substance of those comments. There was a boomerang effect in the threads: while hateful messages might always have had some support, they were more often rejected by the majority. If such comments were properly neutralised, their presence could lead to a greater and deeper rejection of the ideas they conveyed than if they did not appear in the thread.

Threads contained several virtual conversations running simultaneously, sometimes more than 50 over the course of the entire thread if it was long enough. The presence of uncivil comments, clearly identifiable as hate content, caused anger (Ksiazek et al. 2015) but only in part because, despite the presence of hateful messages, some conversations continued long enough to show a majority rejection of such content by number of speakers and rhetorical quality (RQ3). It is true that certain responses also revealed hateful content in the way they were expressed; this seems inevitable: 'We cannot expect everyone to act rationally online' (Lee, 2016, p. 1). But a comment with clear signs of hate speech may not be negative (Naab et al., 2020, p. 13) if it appears as *defeated* by a counterargument or simply by the cancellation of its response through silence or the joint action of several users in the dynamics of the conversation (RQ3).

The analysis of virtual conversations and the fact that the most valued comments were systematically the first ones in the thread (77%) suggests that the

narrative reading of the thread is widespread, although more studies would be necessary to assess how many readers chose to read a thread as a narrative, and how many briefly stepped in and out. It would also be important to study to what extent the presence of comments with hate speech traits was disruptive or, on the contrary, users took a degree of aggressiveness in virtual conversations for granted and set boundaries when it became excessive and self-regulated, confirming the boomerang effect. It would be interesting to analyse under what circumstances and for what types of messages users were more likely to cancel hate speech comments themselves.

## Contribution by authors

**José Cabeza:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing - Original draft, and Writing - review & editing.

**Raúl Casado:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing - Original draft and Writing - Review & editing.

**Manuel Gómez:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Writing - Original draft and Writing - Review & editing.

All authors have read and agree with the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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