


Being and Creating a Safe Space on the Internet. Digital Communication Practices of Mexican LGBT+ Youth in Response to Hate Speech

Ser y hacer un lugar seguro en Internet. Prácticas comunicativas digitales de jóvenes LGBT+ mexicanos ante discursos de odio



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Abstract:

This research analyses the digital communication practices that LGBT+ youth develop to confront hate speech on the Internet. To achieve this, a theoretical framework based on the communication perspective, which problematises the subject-technology relationship, is constructed. The qualitative methodology with a descriptive scope is synthesised through the method of systematising experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 young Mexicans who dissent from the cisheteronorm to analyse the strategies they employ in response to hate speech on the Internet. The results indicate that LGBT+ youth recalibrate the symbolic impact of hate speech on the Internet due to the subjective technological distance between themselves and the

Resumen:

Esta investigación analiza las prácticas comunicativas digitales que los jóvenes LGBT+ desarrollan para enfrentar los discursos de odio en Internet. Para ello se construye un marco teórico sustentado en la perspectiva comunicacional que problematiza la relación sujeto-tecnología. La metodología cualitativa y con alcance descriptivo se sintetiza en el método de la sistematización de la experiencia; mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas a 15 jóvenes mexicanos disidentes a la cisheteronorma se analizan las estrategias que emplean ante un discurso de odio en Internet. Los resultados apuntan que los jóvenes LGBT+ recalibran el impacto simbólico de los discursos de odio en Internet por la distancia subjetiva-tecnológica entre ellos y los usuarios anónimos que los pro-

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anonymous users who promote it. Consequently, LGBT+ youth leverage the interaction logic of socio-digital platforms to enhance their control over their digital environment and the groups in which they participate in order to render and maintain these spaces as safe spaces.

Keywords:

LGBT; youth experience; hate speech social media; communication perspective.

mueven. Así, los jóvenes LGBT+ aprovechan las lógicas de interacción de las plataformas sociodigitales para incrementar su control sobre su entorno digital y los grupos en los que participan con el fin de volverlos y mantenerlos como espacios seguros.

Palabras clave:

LGBT; experiencia juvenil; discurso de odio; redes sociales; perspectiva comunicacional.

1. Introduction

The visibility, reach, and form that hate speech acquires *on* and *through* the Internet have complexified and intensified its political and sociocultural effects on societies (Risso, 2022). Despite its heterogeneity, hate speech shares a core underpinned by othering, which seeks to create and legitimise asymmetrical power relations by accentuating individual and/or collective differences (Martínez & Sánchez Ceci, 2023; Rea Campos, 2017; Pérez Salazar, 2021; Ramírez-García, González-Molina, Gutiérrez-Arenas & Moyano-Pacheco, 2022). In this way, hate speech intertwines with systemic inequalities present in everyday life, thereby legitimising its impact on vulnerable populations.

Internationally, research on hate speech against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans (LGBT+) individuals on the Internet is limited. Sex-gender dissidents experience a specific type of dominion¹, which simultaneously engenders various forms of oppression² throughout their lives as their presence in everyday life systematically challenges the mandates and structures of cisheteronormative society (Martínez & Sánchez Ceci, 2023; De-Casa-Moreno, Parejo-Cuéllar & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2023). The unfavourable position of non-hegemonic sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions within this context renders them subaltern to the dominant ideology, which legitimises systematic mechanisms of violence against them. Therefore, it is crucial to develop analytical tools to understand hate speech targeting LGBT+ populations while considering their ontological and contextual characteristics (Olmedo Neri, 2022).

This research arises from an investigation into how LGBT+ youth utilise socio-digital platforms when they are subjected to hate speech, both directly and indirectly, and the strategies they have developed to counteract such speech in digital environments. The focus on LGBT+ youth is driven by two strategic considerations: first, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the Internet are integral to contemporary youth experiences; second, this demographic represents one of the most

1 Dominion refers to an asymmetric power relationship with a structural order, manifesting uniformly across different societies. This allows individuals benefiting from this order to gain symbolic and ideological power that enables them to subjugate marginalised groups. For example, the dominance of adults over young people or cis heterosexual men over cis heterosexual women and sex-gender dissidents. Transforming this relationship of dominance requires restructuring the system to which it adheres. Therefore, changing the dominion relationship necessitates dismantling and reconfiguring the social order under a new paradigm.

2 Oppression is a form of violence rooted in a relationship of dominion. Its specificity lies in its dependence on the context, time, and place of its expression, making its manifestation heterogeneous and contingent. Therefore, the visibility, intensity, and coerciveness of oppression are influenced by the legitimacy of the discourse emanating from the power inciting such actions, as well as the power dynamics among marginalised groups. For instance, the situation for LGBT+ individuals in Europe contrasts sharply with that in the Middle East; while, in the former, these groups have gained increasing legitimacy, the latter face such adverse conditions that forms of oppression can legally end their lives. These particularities condition how oppression manifests and persists in each society.

vulnerable groups among sex-gender dissidents. The intersection of their sex-gender identities with their youth exacerbates their already disadvantaged position.

These factors are further complicated in the Mexican context, characterised by systemic inequalities and the ideological hegemony of cisheteronormativity. Specifically, Mexico is one of the Latin American countries with the highest rates of violence against LGBT+ individuals, particularly within the Trans population (Brito, 2023; National Observatory of Hate Crimes Against LGBT+, 2020). Additionally, the adult-centric nature of contemporary societies exacerbates the vulnerability of youth who deviate from cisheteronormativity, making them the subgroup most frequently targeted for aggression in everyday life. According to AMICUS (2024), of the 3,277 recorded acts of violence against individuals dissenting from cisheteronormativity in Mexico between 2017 and 2024, 66% were perpetrated against individuals aged 12 to 30. Therefore, despite enduring high levels of violence, young LGBT+ individuals paradoxically represent one of the least researched groups (CONAPRED, 2018; INEGI, 2022; Yaaj México, 2016).

In this context, the relationship that LGBT+ youth establish with ICTs and the Internet acquires a qualitative uniqueness that is not empirically observed in the experiences of young people who conform to the dominant ideology. Consequently, the ways in which youth who dissent from the cisheteronormative framework integrate technological devices and digital platforms into their lives enable them to imbue these technologies with counter-hegemonic meanings to create autonomous and counter-power spaces from which they can evade cisheteronormative surveillance, and dismantle the coercive mechanisms imposed by the dominant ideology in everyday life. Specifically, LGBT+ youth creatively employ these techno-communicative informational innovations to 1) access counter-hegemonic content that reaffirms their gender and sexual dissent, 2) overcome spatial limitations, and connect with LGBT+ individuals in other locations/contexts. 3) assert their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in digital spaces, and 4) mitigate the effects of the domination and oppression resulting from their subaltern status in an adult-centric and cisheteronormative society (Martel, 2013; Olmedo Neri, 2022).

The ways in which young LGBT+ Mexicans use and attribute meaning to ICTs and the internet are framed within a context where the social, political, and cultural recognition of sex-gender dissidence remains incomplete. Official data from Mexico indicates that individuals explore and define their sex-gender identity during childhood (under 12 years old) and youth (aged 12 to 29) (INEGI, 2022). However, LGBT+ youth are often forced to develop strategies of camouflage and representation to avoid the (in)direct violence that is prevalent and legitimised in their daily environments. The need to conceal their sex-gender dissidence and to build resilience against hate speech in public and/or family spaces highlights the hostile context in which young people who dissent from cisheteronormativity in Mexico must navigate (INEGI, 2022; Yaaj México, 2016).

Under these conditions, this research aims to identify the strategies devised by LGBT+ youth when confronted with hate speech propagated on the Internet and to analyse their techno-social implications. This study operates under the assumption that socio-digital platforms provide LGBT+ youth with techno-operational tools to evade hate speech, report its perpetrators, and symbolically dismantle the exclusionary and segregative core of such content.

To achieve this goal, a theoretical framework is developed from a communicational perspective to highlight the specific characteristics of hate speech directed at LGBT+ individuals and the opportunities that socio-digital platforms provide them to confront it. Subsequently, the methodological design is detailed, and the results are discussed from this perspective.

1.1. Hate Speech and LGBT+ populations

Hate speech contingently articulates nonverbal, physical, and/or symbolic actions to incite and legitimise acts of violence rooted in intolerance and (in)difference (Martínez & Sánchez Ceci, 2023; Ramírez Salado, 2022). Hate speech dehumanises its targets by symbolically and factually suppressing the human rights of victims, relegating them to a position of inferiority/subalternity (Gomes Dantas & Pereira Neto, 2015; García González, 2022).

Hate speech is characterised by two inherent elements: the process of othering on which it is based and the ideological core that provides its explanatory coherence. Othering is a process through which a “we” is constructed in opposition to an otherness, often perceived as a threat or as the source of socio-cultural and/or economic issue(s). The negative symbolic charge of hate speech justifies the need to distance from this otherness and legitimises the implementation of violent mechanisms to impede its progress and minimise its impact (Pérez Salazar, 2021; Rea Campos, 2017). For othering to be effective, a distance must be constructed between an “us” and “them”. The emphasis on differences and the articulation of systemic inequalities based on race, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, and social class, among others, underpin this separation and, consequently, obscure the dehumanisation it promotes.

On the other hand, if hate speech possesses an ideological core, its construction is grounded in a framework of reference that provides it with meaning and ‘coherence’ (Martínez & Sánchez Ceci, 2023). As a result, whether hate speech is accepted or challenged depends on the ideological affinity or discord it generates among those it targets (Abuín-Vences, Cuesta-Cambra, Niño-González & Bengochea-González, 2022).

Therefore, othering and ideology function in tandem within hate speech, such that they can be classified according to the referential framework of beliefs from which they derive and by how they select and articulate differences to construct otherness.

LGBT+ individuals have historically and systematically been targets of exclusion, repression, and oppression in cisheteronormative societies due to the transgression they represent to the dominant ideology and structure (Brito, 2023; Martel, 2013; Mendoza-Pérez, Trejo-Hernández, Olmedo-Neri, Vega-Cauich, Lozano-Verduzco & Craig, 2023). In this context, the Internet serves as a space and tool where this unfavorable power dynamic can either be replicated or recalibrated. As sex-gender dissidents gain access to innovative defense strategies and symbolic disarticulation, they are able to level the playing field with their adversaries (Bolz, 2006; Olmedo Neri, 2022; Martel, 2013).

The contingent capacity to reproduce or dismantle hate speech on the Internet lies in the information circuits that, despite their opposition, find their own causes to guarantee their (re)production. On one hand, the proliferation of sources and narratives, and on the other, the boundlessness of the digital space, enable antagonistic discourses to establish ongoing loops of monological reaffirmation (Bolz, 2006). Hate speech against LGBT+ individuals on the Internet is stimulated, among other factors, by the disembodied nature of online communication, the anonymity afforded to perpetrators, the legitimisation of violence seeking digital expansion, and the distortion of the right to digital freedom of expression to justify intolerance (Díaz Hernández, 2020; Martínez Valerio, 2021; Rivera-Martín, Martínez Bartolomé Rincón & López López, 2022). Furthermore, hate speech against LGBT+ individuals is articulated with misinformation; because only through it can its promoters challenge their agenda and rights and foster their growing legitimacy in everyday life.

Since the mid-20th century, there has been a growing trend in the West towards legitimising LGBT+ populations in everyday life. However, conservative activism has simultaneously gained momentum in attempting to halt this cultural, social, and political progress (Inglehart et al., 2021). In Latin America, the legitimacy of LGBT+ populations has been achieved through their political influence at the (sub)national level and through soft activism in culture and communication fields, which seek to recalibrate the negative symbolic burden imposed on them (Corrales, 2021; Olmedo Neri, 2021, 2022). Paradoxically, the anti-LGBT+ rights movement has also gained momentum in recent years in this region, often aligning with religious symbolic frameworks to legitimise its influence over the social imaginaries of each country (Blanco-Echeverry, 2022). Consequently, the presence of the anti-rights movement encourages individuals who resonate with its frameworks to produce and disseminate hate speech in their everyday and digital spaces.

Hate speech against LGBT+ populations can overlap online and offline, intensifying the sense of oppression and exacerbating its effects on the mental health and social well-being of these individuals (Ștefăniță & Buf, 2021). While such speech depends on the socio-cultural and political context to ensure its framing and effectiveness, it maintains the same ideological core. It pursues the same objective regardless of whether it occurs in digital or non-digital spaces.

At its ideological core, this speech is constructed and defined from a cisheteronormative perspective, which imposes the cisgender-heterosexual alignment as the only valid framework for sex-gender identity through which individuals can construct, perceive, and participate in the world. Consequently, anyone who challenges this ideological framework is viewed as a potential threat to the *status quo* (Moreno López & Morales Calvo, 2022; Paulo da Silva & Souza da Silva, 2021).

The aim of hate speech against LGBT+ individuals is to invalidate their increasing legitimacy in everyday life and undermine their position of enunciation. To achieve this, othering (re)produces stereotypes rooted in cisheteronormative and religious frameworks morally discrediting LGBT+ individuals to justify the repertoires of violence used against them (Paulo da Silva & Souza da Silva, 2021). In this way, these discourses acquire the following dimensions on the Internet:

1. Individuals become user-operators, with their technological skills enabling them to act as producers, consumers, and managers of hate speech (Gomes Dantas & Pereira Neto, 2015; Paulo da Silva & Souza da Silva, 2021).
2. The networked structure of the Internet facilitates connections among individuals with shared ideological affinities, allowing them to create autonomous spaces where they can reaffirm their referential frameworks and reinforce the distance established by othering (De-Casas-Moreno, Pareja-Cuéllar & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2023).
3. Proponents of hate speech against LGBT+ individuals exploit digital anonymity to perpetuate this symbolic violence, distancing themselves from the repercussions of their actions and evading criticism from those advocating for sociocultural transformations in support of sex-gender dissidents on a local-global level (Ștefăniță & Buf, 2021).
4. The impact of hate speech becomes deterritorialised as the Internet removes geographical distances, allowing these discourses to extend their reach to individuals far removed from the contexts that other them.
5. Hate speech moves beyond textual/oral manifestations to utilise audiovisual/narrative formats circulating on the Internet, strategically positioning itself within content circuits.

Although the essence of hate speech remains unchanged regardless of the medium, its effects are nuanced depending on whether it exists in isolation *from* or is convergent *with* the digital space. If hate speech appears in a single context, its impact may be mitigated or dismantled by the actions available to individuals within that specific setting. Therefore, it is crucial to problematise the manifestation of hate speech on the Internet and explore how LGBT+ individuals confront it.

1.2. *Digital Communicative Practices*

Although research on hate speech on the Internet emphasises its modes of production and dissemination models, there has been limited exploration of the mechanisms that the digital space offers to marginalised individuals for re-signifying and dismantling such speech.

Analysing the use of the Internet and socio-digital platforms in a counter-hegemonic manner implies articulating the operational skills and intangible abilities that individuals employ to intervene in information circuits, challenge hate speech and offer (self)representations that destabilise the consensus of the dominant ideology within the social imaginary (Parra, 2021). These aspects are recognised by the communicational perspective, making their use both enriching and strategic in any study related to the subject-technology relationship on the Internet (Gómez Cruz, 2022; Olmedo Neri, 2023).

The communicational perspective is transdisciplinary and does not prioritise either the subject or technology within a social phenomenon. Instead, it emphasises their dialogic-dialectical relationship to analyse their dynamics, assemblages, and implications within specific material and socio-historical conditions (Craig, 1999; Giménez, 2011; Miège, 2015). The subject-technology relationship is a pact that manifests in various ways, influenced by the possibilities, negotiations, and resistances encountered as technology is integrated into an individual's daily life. Consequently, this relationship is heterogeneous and historically anchored to the contextual conditions of its framing and development (Gómez Cruz, 2022).

From the communicational perspective, systemic inequalities can either be reproduced or disrupted on the Internet due to the general conditions provided to users by its architectures and interfaces. In the context of online hate speech, its producers not only amplify its impact by exploiting the underlying logics of socio-digital platforms, but those marginalised by such speech also find opportunities within these same logics to confront it.

From a communicational perspective, it is acknowledged that individuals do not simply do whatever they want on the Internet; rather, their actions are constrained by the technological structure in place. The individual's creativity introduces a subaltern dimension to the uses predetermined by the network designers (Bucher & Heldmont, 2018; Olmedo Neri, 2022). Therefore, the communicational perspective does not assume that individuals merely *use* technology in a vacuum. Instead, it recognises that their actions are enabled by the functionalities provided by interfaces and their recognition of these functions as viable resources for achieving specific goals. This convergent negotiation and techno-social appropriation process is defined as digital communicative practice.

Digital communicative practice refers to a strategy employed by individuals to achieve specific goals through the frequent, simultaneous, or asynchronous use of one or more ICT(s) and the Internet. This digital communicative practice is rooted in the experience of the subject-technology relationship and the knowledge gained through new uses over time. As individuals refine their digital communicative practice, they reduce execution time, improve resource management, and enhance the expected/

achieved outcomes. Consequently, digital communicative practices are shaped by the individual's needs and realities and are influenced by the cultural forms they acquire and manifest (Gómez Cruz, 2022; Olmedo Neri, 2023).

Digital communicative practices developed by LGBT+ individuals represent a specific field that has garnered attention in recent years due to their counter-hegemonic nature. A primary objective of these practices is to dismantle/challenge the ideological core of cisheteronormativity, which legitimises their systemic oppression in everyday life (Martel, 2013; Wuest, 2014).

Through the Internet, LGBT+ individuals can dismantle the cisheteronormative oppression they face in non-digital contexts by collaboratively constructing safe and counter-hegemonic spaces, expanding or reinforcing their social support networks and producing and disseminating counter-hegemonic narratives that reclaim their sex-gender identity (Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards & Churchill, 2019; Olmedo Neri, 2023; Parra, 2021). Additionally, LGBT+ individuals can filter content and set criteria for socialisation online to minimise the likelihood of encountering hate speech or interacting with those who promote it.

In addition to the possibilities of (inter)action, LGBT+ individuals leverage the operational logics of socio-digital platforms to create safe spaces and navigate networks to keep cishteteronormative perspectives at bay from their hybrid lives (Martel, 2013; Olmedo Neri, 2021). This is crucial because LGBT+ individuals perceive the Internet not only as a tool for connecting with others but also as a space to occupy and re-signify, analogous to a public square or space, due to the symbolic contestation that unfolds there (Olmedo Neri, 2023 Wuest, 2014).

Therefore, it is essential to identify and analyse the digital communicative practices developed by LGBT+ youth to understand their objectives and the resulting implications.

2. Method and Materials

The method of experience systematisation was employed because it analyses not only the subject but also their perspective and worldview within which they operate (Mera, 2019). Therefore, this method allows for the integration of the subject's place of enunciation with their experiences and the meanings they acquire/construct *with* and *through* ICTs and the Internet (Orozco Gómez & González Reyes, 2011).

An online survey was designed and distributed through socio-digital platforms between January and March 2023. The criteria for participation were as follows: 1) self-identifying publicly or personally as part of an LGBT+ community, 2) recognising a hostile context in their place of residence, 3) holding a university education degree or higher, or 4) being between the ages of 18 and 29³.

3 Each criterion is crucial, identifying as part of the LGBT+ community implies an acknowledgment of one's subaltern position, assessing the hostility within their common contexts allows for an exploration of how the Internet is redefined as a space of counterpower; the educational level not only expands young people's social networks by providing connections with individuals from different contexts but also offers access to theoretical discussions where gender non-conformities are both visible and politicised; and the age dimension reflects how, over time, young people gain increasing autonomy within their family units, allowing them to undertake various activities without parental supervision.

Thirty LGBT+ youth were registered, all of whom reported having strategies to prevent and confront potential hate speech targeting their sex-gender dissent. However, 15 of the participants indicated that they had encountered or been the recipients of or had encountered hate speech on the Internet. Consequently, the research focused on these individuals due to their direct experiences with symbolic violence. A semi-structured interview was developed to specifically address these experiences, investigate the effectiveness of their strategies in real situations and identify the digital communicative practices developed to counteract hate speech.

Semi-structured interviews enhance the epistemological coherence of this qualitative research by allowing the researcher and the interviewee to establish a flexible interaction process, enabling a deeper exploration of the empirical manifestations related to the study's objectives (Fontana & Frey, 2015).

It should be noted that these young people do not hold prominent roles in the public sphere or within LGBT+ activism in Mexico. This factor conceals significant analytical depth: lacking such recognition, these LGBT+ youths reveal how oppression is contingent on their experiences and how the threat of being subjected to violence (un)consciously contributes to shaping their digital communicative practices against hate speech.

Finally, the LGBT+ youths who participated in the interview possess the following characteristics: 1) eight identify as gay, one as lesbian, two as bisexual, two as trans, and two as queer ⁴ 2) their ages range from 18 to 28 years old, 3) they describe their place of residence as rural (three), semi-rural (three), semi-urban (four) and urban (five) and 4) most are either pursuing a bachelor's degree or are recent graduates.

3. Results

Based on the information gathered from the interviews, it was observed that the LGBT+ youth experiences are shaped and lived through dynamics that oscillate between acceptance and violence, and integration and exclusion. Regardless of geographical and territorial distances, these young people confront the same hate speech, which tends to dissipate in urban areas due to their cosmopolitan nature or intensify in rural areas where sociocultural frameworks are more insular and cisheteronormativity has a stronger structural hold. As a result, these young people experience a relationship of domination sustained by the adult-centric nature of contemporary society. This dynamic subjects them and their cis-heterosexual peers to a systemic invalidation of their place of enunciation under the adult gaze. In terms of oppression, LGBT+ youth experience at least two types: the first, termed selective oppression, targets or identifies those young people who do not conform to the hegemonic sex-gender identity (cis heterosexual), so that they can be subsequently subjected to violence. The second form of oppression is differentiated because although all LGBT+ youth challenge the mandates of the dominant ideologies, the violence they endure varies based on the degree of disobedience to the cisheteronorm. Thus, the more transgressive their

4 While gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer youth identified as cisgender, trans youth simultaneously identified as heterosexual. Emphasising the intersection of sex and identity is essential because it is the only way to expose the inequalities embodied in the sex-gender articulation that society expects and imposes; cisheterosexuality.

sex-gender identity is, the greater the violence they endure (Mendoza-Pérez, Trejo-Hernández, Olmedo-Neri, Vega-Cauich, Lozano-Verduzco & Craig, 2023).

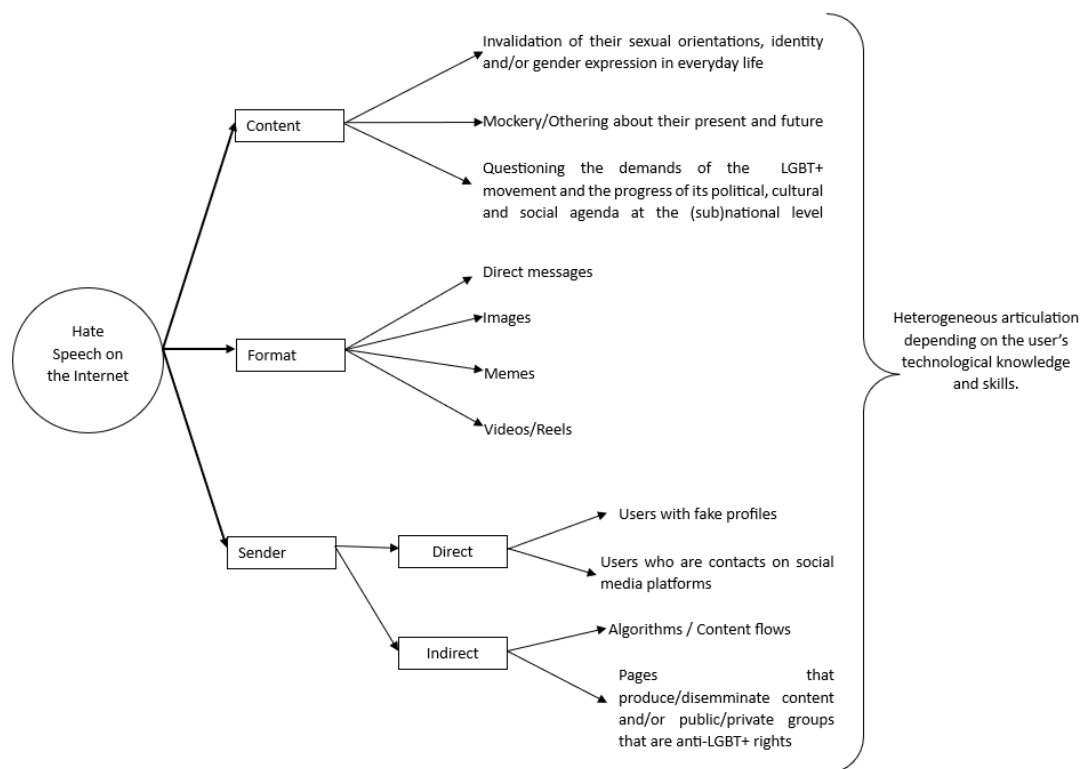
The interviewed youths indicated that hate speech has been present at various stages in their lives. However, upon identifying themselves as dissenters from cisheteronormativity, they become marked by the dominant ideology, triggering processes that alter both their worldview and the way society views them. The following experience illustrates this shift:

Until I was 20, I didn't fully feel like myself, as I didn't publicly identify as homosexual. I knew it would have profound implications for my life, so that was the initial impact. And when I finally decided to come out, I faced repercussions, friends and even family members stopped talking to me. It was very shocking for me [...]; I also didn't know the extent of the stigma associated with identifying as a member of the LGBT+ community because I see it as an act in which society exposes you... I stopped being seen as an exemplary young person which I was before because I did athletics and won medals, all of that was a source of pride. Besides, I entered UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico]. So, they were things that made me stand out as a person. So, the moment, I came out as non-heterosexual, everything changed (Young Queer individual, personal communication).

These constraints result from selected and differentiated oppression, as they stun the individual by destabilising their ontological safety and reframe their achievements in the context of the violence now directed at them. Consequently, the interviewed LGBT+ youth often reject digital friendship with family or neighbours; adjust the privacy settings of their profiles and the visibility of their content or even maintain multiple accounts on the same platform. All of these measures are taken to exclude those who perpetuate oppression and to safeguard their autonomy on the Internet.

However, these elements are significant because the experiences reveal that hate speech is expressed in heterogeneous ways as a result of the various formats the content adopts and the sender's adaptive methods. Figure 1 summarises the elements of hate speech identified and confronted by LGBT+ youth.

Figure 1. Elements of Hate Speech on the Internet



Source: created by the author

As observed, the essence of hate speech on the Internet is hybridised with various (audio)visual formats, techno-operational logics and how individuals present themselves in the digital space. Specifically, online hate speech encountered (in)directly arises from 1) individuals with weak social ties to the LGBT+ youth (such as extended family members, exclusive online contacts or individuals whose interactions have diminished over time for various reasons), 2) a few cases of LGBT+ individuals replicate hate speech they have been internalised in a (un)conscious way and 3) as reported by most participants, anonymous users.

A significant finding is the internalised hate speech expressed by individuals within sex-gender dissident groups. Some of these cases are evident, for instance, in LGBT+ groups on the Internet. The following experience illustrates this nuanced form of hate, which is nonetheless rooted in the invalidation of others.

I used to be in a [fandom] group for Camila Cabello, and sometimes, discussions about her sexuality would come up. Even within the LGBT+ community, people can be biphobic [by commenting or writing]: No! How can she like both men and women! In this group, there are many people, and there can be transphobic comments... generally, there are hate speech issues. What I do [when I see this] is report it because Facebook specifically provides tools [to flag] that it is hate speech. But, they often don't consider it hate speech, though sometimes they do, and delete it (young Queer individual, 21 years old, personal communication).

The distancing caused by hate speech within the LGBT+ community results from the alienation imposed by the dominant ideology, which leads those who internalise violence to justify it against other subaltern communities with similar marginal statuses. Reporting such incidents demonstrates the empowered agency that young people acquire through the Internet when confronted with such acts, which, under different circumstances, might otherwise remain unpunished or even be justified.

In this context, the effort to deploy mechanisms to prevent hate speech from taking root and/or being replicated in their digital spaces is understandable⁵. Participants specifically reported that most of the hate speech they encountered (in)directly is constructed from a cisheteronormative perspective and is often framed within religious contexts, predominately Catholic, owing to its sociocultural relevance in Mexico.

Their digital communication practices aim to collaboratively construct safe spaces while simultaneously being a safe space for other subaltern users marginalised due to their sex-gender dissent. The following explanation reflects this shared emancipatory nature:

[I] see the Internet as an indispensable tool because through the Internet I know what I know, I have met very interesting people, [I've learned about] extraordinary cases that make me reflect on the fact that we constantly live under the threat of people who are not right in the head, who judge us, without having any idea of what we are, that we are equal and that it is entirely normal. The Internet has helped me access more than one opinion and know more (young Bisexual individual, 19 years old, personal communication).

The counter-hegemonic distribution of narratives from the LGBT+ perspective erodes and challenges the ideological framework of cisheteronormativity to the extent of reversing power dynamics: LGBT+ youth cease to view themselves as the culprits of the violence they experience and begin to recognise the collaboration of the dominant structure and ideology that perpetuate their oppression. Therefore, the need to be and create safe spaces lies not only in the possibility of convergence but also in the ability to reclaim their sex-gender identity on the Internet. Consequently, the digital space emerges as a strategic place; as one interviewee put it, "I believe that [the Internet is important] at least for those who are just starting out, so they don't feel alone and so that part of [LGBT+ communities] becomes normalised, making them increasingly visible" (young Bisexual individual, 22 years old, personal communication).

As observed, there is a collaborative spirit among these youth aimed at preventing other LGBT+ users from experiencing similar hardships. Making their stories of resistance and (re) existence visible acts as an implicit mechanism to reveal their

⁵ The device most frequently used by participants are mobile phones as they represent a higher degree of technological personalisation. They received their first mobile phone between the ages of 10 and 16 from their parents to maintain contact despite physical distance. For these young people, mobile phones become a symbol of their autonomy from parental authority and marks the beginning of their adolescence; it solidifies its role as the central hub from which they manage and experience their youth.

subaltern position within an adult-centric and cisheteronormative society. One particular way of being or creating a safe space is by constructing and/or strengthening their social support networks on the Internet. These networks consist of contacts who provide ongoing emotional and social support to LGBT+. Individuals. Social support networks foster the collective trust that mitigates the impact of cisheteronormative oppression, delegitimises hate speech and even contributes to dismantling it by allowing users to participate in actions such as calling out/cancelling⁶ those who perpetuate othering and/or the dominant ideology. In summary, social support networks offer ontological safety and alleviate the existential crisis brought about by cisheteronormativity at various stages of LGBT+ individuals' lives (Olmedo Neri, 2022).

On the other hand, given that they have most frequently encountered or been the recipients of hate speech in non-digital contexts, LGBT+ youth strive to reframe their profiles as safe spaces for themselves and for other dissenters against heteronormativity. Among these efforts is the creation of groups on various platforms such as Facebook; although important, these types of actions have not been immune to such violence:

One of the [groups] where I was most active and still am, though I no longer post as much and comment less often - is Foro Trans World on Facebook; it is not only intended for trans individuals but also, for example, partners or family members seeking support. Often, they accept new members into the group, only for those members to intimidate the other members. Fortunately, the administrators and moderators do a good job of banning those who join groups to provoke, mock or infiltrate information (young Trans individuals, 28 years old, personal communication).

This experience in collective spaces can also be mirrored in individual interactions. The Trans youth mentioned that, on one occasion, after challenging hate speech on socio-media platforms, "a user who had posted one of these hateful comments later sent me a direct message and even threatened to kill me". These dimensions highlight the extent to which such speech can manifest itself when anonymity and digital distance mediate the interaction, concealing the sender and heightening the vulnerability of the recipient.

As previously noted, the most common type of perpetrator encountered by LGBT+ youth is one who uses fake profiles to spread hate speech or send direct messages to LGBT+ young people. The following experience illustrates this latter form of behaviour:

I had forgotten about the first [message] until a few months ago when I checked my profile and messages. It said that I was a faggot, queer, and so on... and well, now it doesn't affect me as much because it's minimal [the impact]. It seems that after seeing my profile, the person sent a message and then deleted [their account] or blocked me (young gay person, 23 years old, personal communication).

The textual or audiovisual forms of hate speech constructed on the Internet undermine LGBT+ youth's self-esteem, invalidate their sex-gender identity in everyday life, and adversely affect their mental health by attributing the violence they experience to their perceived failure to conform to cisheteronormative mandates (Mendoza-Pérez, Trejo-Hernández, Olmedo-Neri, Vega-Cauich, Lozano-Verduzco & Craig, 2023; Rivera-Martin, Martínez de Bartolomé Rincón & López López, 2022).

6 Public denunciation made by individuals through social media platforms involve exposing individuals, groups, pages whose indirect or direct actions are grounded in hate speech or othering, or who, through inaction, promote unethical or morally reprehensible practices such as harassment, corruption, negligence, among others. The aim of calling out/cancelling someone is to collectively and publicly highlight the negative symbolic impact of their behaviour, thereby confronting socially unacceptable behaviour.

In response to hate speech sent anonymously in the digital environment, young people have developed a repertoire of digital communication practices to mitigate the negative impacts on themselves and restrict their visibility in their respective digital spaces. They often block users and delete such messages immediately, though the interface can sometimes play an ambivalent role in this process. The following experience illustrates this complexity:

...But in Clash [Royale], which is a gaming group, people of all ages join from all over the world, and it is entirely anonymous, and that's where hate speech really comes through. Like, people would join and post things like "Fucking gays blah blah blah..." horrible stuff and then they'd leave, you'd start to think, surely they're just kids, right? Because sometimes they couldn't even spell correctly and would just leave (young Lesbian individual, 25 years old, personal communication).

Therefore, anonymity, the fleeting nature of the content, the operational logic of each interface, and the lack of traceability of actions are factors that complicate the dynamics of hate speech on the Internet (Rivera Martín, Martínez de Bartolomé Rincón & López López, 2022).

Regardless of the individual or the communicative practice employed, hate speech and othering are symbolically deconstructed by the anonymity of their sender, the strength/weakness of the connection with the LGBT+ youth, and the operational logics they exploit on the Internet. The following testimony illustrates this loss of legitimacy stemming from the anonymity of the source:

I generally feel that this is anonymous. If it is anonymous, I would just block them; I feel like you have to choose your battles, and there's no point. You don't even know who it is, how old they are, why they are doing it... I would just block them; I wouldn't try anything else. But if it were someone I know, it would depend a lot on what they say and how open they are to listening or having a discussion or talking. I try to raise awareness a little. But if it's just blind hatred and you definitely can't start a conversation, then I think if it's someone I know, I would publicly burn them and block them" (young Lesbian individual, 25 years old, personal communication).

LGBT+ youth report that the anonymity of online users indirectly reinforces the notion that these actions are socially discredited, prompting them to conceal their identity. As a result, when these young people are directly targeted by anonymous attacks or encounter hate speech within their information networks, they tend to downplay its importance by recalibrating its negative symbolic weight and blocking the sender. In this way, the sense of security provided by their support networks and digital spaces enables them to reduce the harmful impact of hate speech, challenge its ideological core, and discredit its source.

Finally, one of the most transgressive digital practices involves creating an anonymous account to join groups where hate speech is produced and confront those spreading it. The following experience is particularly insightful:

I have two profiles on Facebook (...). I use the other profile anonymously, and sometimes I go on because I feel like arguing; I've seen [open] Catholic groups to observe their perspective. And if I can comment or discuss [LGBT+] issues, I do. (young Gay individual, 21 years old, personal communication).

Figure 2 shows the profile used by this young person to challenge the ideological core of hate speech produced and legitimised within a conservative and public group⁷.

Figure. 2. Hate Speech on the Internet and Forms of Containment



Source: provided by a young interviewee

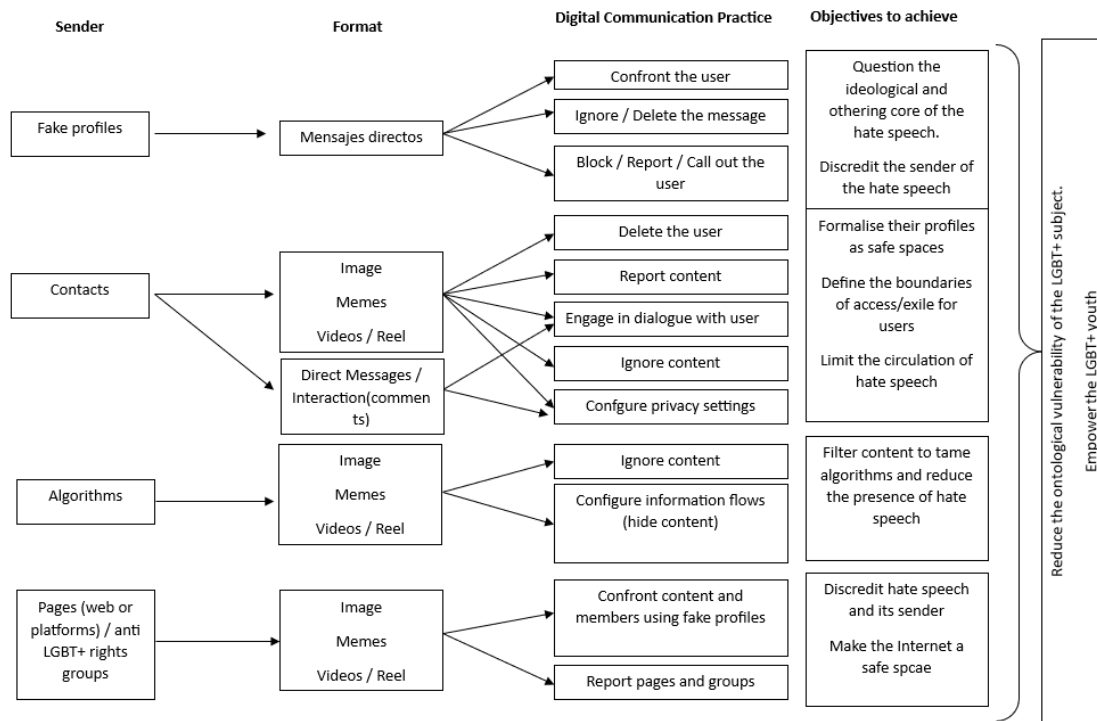
Hate speech is expressed textually through online posts; in Figure 2, the name of the group is shown, alongside the articulation of conservative, legal, and religious frameworks that shape the ideological core and othering elements of the hate speech. The young person uses a fake profile to challenge the validity of this othering, and their message is met with resistance from users aligned with this ideological framework. The significance of this digital communicative practice lies in the young person's ability to create a profile that mimics the logic of users who support this hate speech, allowing them to remain anonymous and ensure their safety online. A profile picture featuring a meme and the use of socio-scientific arguments to dismantle hate speech are key components of this digital communicative practice, which involves: 1) an advanced understanding

7 According to the interviewees, Facebook and Twitter are the platforms where hate speech circulates the most. This may be due to the increased participation of adults on these platforms. As a result, young users have migrated to Instagram in search of more autonomous socialisation spaces, LGBT+ youth report that Instagram is where they encounter more positive content about sex-gender dissidences.

and mastery of the platform’s techno-operational tools, 2) a sense of empowerment gained through technological devices, interfaces, and the Internet, and 3) an effort to recalibrate the power asymmetries that sustain their daily oppression. The diversity of strategies implicitly shows the extent to which the logics of the Internet can be leveraged to expand their means of confronting hate speech.

Figure 3 synthesises the articulations of hate speech and the containment strategies used by LGBT+. Youth.

Figure. 3. Hate Speech and Digital Communicative Practices



Source: created by the author

The use of digital communicative practices are guided by their prior effectiveness and the way in which hate speech manifests. Consequently, the definition and selection of strategies are influenced by the creativity and experience each LGBT+ individual contributes to addressing these forms of symbolic violence on the Internet.

4. Discussion

On the Internet, the balance of power is not defined by an individual's inherent position of power or subalternity, but by their skill in using techno-operational dynamics to their advantage. As a result, power asymmetries are recalibrated by the equal techno-operational conditions accessible to users. Therefore, a greater and more nuanced understanding of technology allows LGBT+ youth to leverage these tools effectively, thereby empowering them to confront those who propagate hate speech online.

Both LGBT+ youth and anti-rights groups coexist within the Internet's communicative chaos, and it is only when their boundaries intersect or their members interact that dynamics of tension and conflict arise. Therefore, communicative practices take on a particular meaning (Bolz, 2006).

In summary, the impact of hate speech on the Internet is influenced by 1) the social connection between the LGBT+ youth and the sender, 2) the format in which the hate speech is delivered, and 3) the utilisation of the techno-operational logics of mobile devices and the Internet for the propagation or containment of hate speech. Therefore, these practices hinge not only on the individual's capacity for agency but also on their ability to exploit the techno-operational capabilities provided by technological devices and digital spaces. The communicational perspective shows how the subject-technology relationship manifests uniquely, addressing the needs and contexts of specific social groups (Gómez Cruz, 2022).

Therefore, if the connection between the individual endorsing hate speech and the LGBT+ youth is weak, the oppressive effect of the speech will be lessened and may even lose its effectiveness. This is the case with digital hate speech, as its symbolic violence is undermined because most perpetrators promote it from digital anonymity. These findings are consistent with Ștefăniță's and Buf's (2021), which suggest a correlation between online hate speech and anonymity.

This quantitative dimension has a qualitative explanation: the anonymity of hate speech online underscores its lack of social legitimacy, causing its oppressive function to fragment and dissipate on the Internet. Consequently, the absence of public acknowledgement for those who propagate hate speech in the digital space unintentionally lessens its negative symbolic impact and deconstructs its cisheteronormative ideological core. The digital anonymity of hate speech perpetrators coupled with the visible advocacy of LGBT+ individuals offline and online reflects a reconfiguration of social imaginaries and a shift in power dynamics globally in favour of subaltern groups (Corrales, 2021; Inglehart et al., 2021; Martel, 2013).

When faced with hate speech through their digital contacts, LGBT+ youth take direct actions to highlight the negative symbolic impact of such messages, aiming to prompt the individual to reconsider and abandon their cisheteronormative ideology. If these efforts do not lead to a positive change, these LGBT+ youth may choose to sever their social connection with those who pose a latent threat to their sense of security and autonomy, which they seek to establish within their profiles. In extreme cases, instead of deleting these contacts, they may adjust their privacy and content visibility settings to create an illusion of control and surveillance for these individuals. In reality, these users are excluded from the safe space created by the LGBT+ youth and their information circuit.

In addition to the above, socio-digital platforms and their operational logic mitigate power asymmetries by granting LGBT+ youth greater control over their digital environment. With this increased control, they can 1) set criteria for evaluating whom

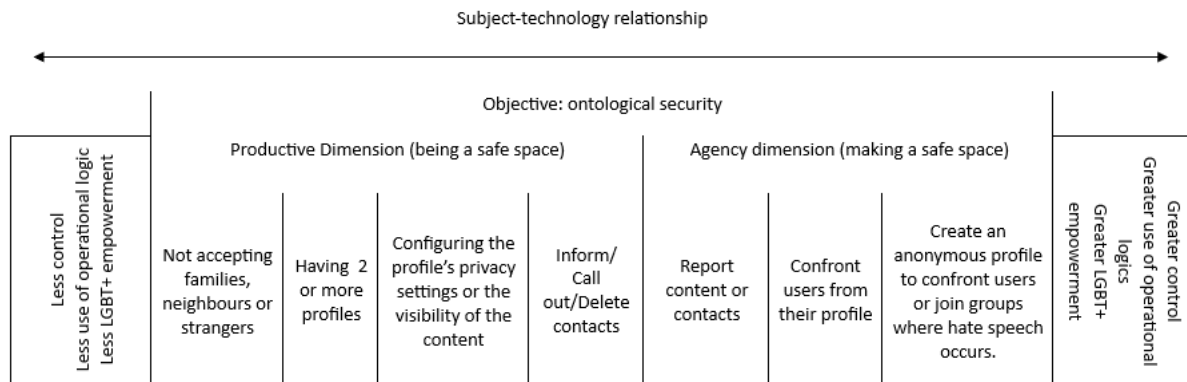
to engage with through their profiles, 2) apply filters to determine what content to view/consume and 3) design strategies for addressing hate speech.

Clearly, LGBT+ youth cannot confront the potentially violent context in which they navigate on their own. However, they can keep these factors at bay within their digital presence to prevent cisheteronormative perspectives from infiltrating their profiles and disrupting their online youth experience.

Thus, LGBT+ individuals develop digital communicative practices to establish themselves as safe spaces for others who dissent from cisheteronormativity while also creating a secure environment for themselves. Analytically, these digital communicative practices share a common goal: to provide existential security to LGBT+ individuals by being and creating safe spaces for both themselves and others who partially or fully share their experience and/or sex-gender dissent. This objective is consistent with findings from other studies on LGBT+ youth and the Internet (Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards & Churchill, 2019; Olmedo Neri, 2022; Parra, 2021; Wuest, 2014). However, it is the specific contexts in which these practices are situated that imbue them with a distinct ontological significance.

These practices can be categorised into two domains: a productive field and an agency field. In the productive field, LGBT+ leverage interface tools to create a safe space. In the field of agency, LGBT+ youth use techno-operational logics to minimise the impact of hate speech and its perpetrators on their digital experience. Figure 4 presents a categorisation of the identified practices.

Figure 4. Digital Communicative Practices



Source: created by the author

Each digital communicative practice is shaped by the individual's material, cultural, and historical particularities. Therefore, this framework does not suggest a sequential logic but rather illustrates the complexity of the subject-technology relationship from which these practices emerge. Consequently, these practices may manifest either in isolation or in convergence, depending on the needs, objectives, and skills of the individual employing them.

These digital communicative practices are counter-hegemonic from an ideological standpoint because they expose the symbolic struggle occurring within digital spaces (Olmedo Neri, 2022). On the Internet, individuals encounter cisheteronormative surveillance, prompting them to take action against users who empirically challenge this ideology. However, given the techno-operational capabilities, these users are also subject to surveillance themselves, leading them to resort to anonymity to distance themselves from their actions, which are increasingly socially discredited (De-Casas-Moreno, Parejo-Cuéllar & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2023).

Finally, through digital communicative practices, LGBT+ youth (and adults) hack cisheteronormativity on the Internet and in everyday life. The initial objective of this research has been demonstrated through the reconfiguration of power asymmetries when they are digitalised.

5. Conclusions

This study was conducted to explore how Mexican youth who dissent from cisheteronormativity use ICTs and the Internet when they are victims of digital hate speech. Thus, the objective was to identify and analyse the strategies employed to confront those who propagate hate speech on the Internet and to assess the implications of such actions on the power asymmetries experienced within an adult-centric and cisheteronormative society.

From a communicational perspective, the concept of digital communicative practice was developed to describe how individuals use ICTs and the Internet to achieve specific goals. Subsequently, a methodological strategy was employed to capture the experiences of Mexican LGBT+ youth in this domain, findings that pave the way for exploring a relatively under-researched thematic area.

The results show that hate speech takes on characteristics unique to the digital context and technological infrastructure where it is expressed, sometimes diminishing its effectiveness. Those who promote such speech often hide behind anonymity to avoid facing challenges to a worldview that increasingly lacks social legitimacy. In addition, within this context, LGBT+ youth demonstrated a range of digital communicative practices that demonstrate the counter-hegemonic uses they make of ICTs and the Internet within their youth experience.

By analysing how hate speech is presented and the heterogeneous ways used to confront it, the following findings emerged: 1) most hate speech is propagated from anonymous profiles, 2) the process of othering and the ideological core of hate speech dissipates due to the distance created by technological devices between the sender and the receiver, 3) the digital communicative practices employed aim to be and create safe spaces for the individual and other LGBT+ individuals on the Internet.

Creating safe spaces involves not only knowledge of the digital environment but also the development of skills to confront hate speech. In this regard, the most significant contribution of this study lies not only in the diverse communication practices that LGBT+ youth have developed through their youth experience to limit the frequency and visibility of hate speech but also in the reconfiguration of the power dynamics that underpin hate speech against sex-gender dissidents on the Internet.

In this way, the Internet and socio-digital platforms serve as tools for combating hate speech- As spaces for socialisation, the digital environment helps dismantle the core elements of such discourse. It mitigates its negative impact on LGBT+ youth navigating this space. In other words, the spatial and social distance afforded by the Internet reduces the symbolic violence inherent in hate speech.

On the other hand, the techno-operative logics of platforms reveal the duality of technology in contemporary society. Technological innovations can legitimise violence or recalibrate power asymmetries depending on the individual and their objectives.

Finally, both the theoretical approaches and the findings of this study provide elements that can be further explored in future research. These include analysing specific communities, enhancing the identified digital communicative practices, and using a communication perspective to problematise how the Internet becomes a battleground for the struggle over recognising LGBT+ individuals in contemporary societies. It is evident that the prominence of sex-gender dissent in social sciences offers opportunities to expand and renew understandings of current phenomena such as hate speech.

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