



MEMES AS HATE SPEECH

Violence, Humour and Criticism Surrounding the image of Irene Montero

RAQUEL MARTÍNEZ-SANZ¹, PATRICIA DURÁNTEZ-STOLLE¹, IRIS SIMÓN-ASTUDILLO¹

¹ Universidad de Valladolid, España

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ABSTRACT

This research proposes a content and cross-modal discourse analysis of memes (n=191) alluding to the Spanish Minister for Equality, Irene Montero, with a focus on the representation of violence. Hatred appears as a constant (90.8%) in the social network X, ridiculing her personal life and criticising her political management through insults and comparisons. It is confirmed that misogynist hatred has permeated the meme, demonstrating its capacity to interfere in the public image of women, resorting to classic strategies such as dehumanisation, the exposure of private aspects and questioning of physical appearance.

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1. Introduction

In January 2020, Irene Montero, MP for the left-wing party Unidas Podemos (United we Can), took over the Ministry of Equality in the PSOE-Podemos (Partido Socialista Obrero Español/Spanish Socialist Workers Party. PSOE-We Can/Podemos) coalition government until her dismissal in November 2023. Since the beginning of her mandate, Montero has been the target of much criticism, both for her political management and for aspects of her personal life and has repeatedly ranked at the bottom of the public's assessment of Spain's main political figures (CIS, 2021; CIS, 2022). One place where this criticism has become particularly relevant is in social networks, whose characteristics favour a polarised discourse that reaches its maximum expression in the use of messages and images that are quickly constructed and emotionally based, especially in the discourse against women (Dickel and Evolvi, 2023). In this type of communication, the meme is an essential element as it conveys an easily viralised visual critique, characterised by intertextuality and humour (Benassini Félix, 2020).

This research aims to analyse how the memes accompanying the discourse against Minister Irene Montero are constructed and what characteristics contribute to their success. The results will also show the importance of memes as part of the hate speech directed against the feminist group that Montero represents as the person responsible for equality policies, thus contributing to the advancement of studies on misogyny in the digital environment.

2. Social Media Polarisation as a Basis for Political Use of Memes

Social networks are not the space of freedom promised at their inception. On the contrary, as a socio-technical product (Wajcman, 2006), they reproduce relationships and bring with them the same ills as the real world, amplified by algorithms. We have never been so connected, even though several experts (Lacasamas et al., 2014) have been predicting the risk of polarisation for democracies for several years. In particular, hate speech has found a loudspeaker in the lack of regulation (Nikolaev et al., 2023), and the promotion of virality in social networks has provided a suitable channel for its spread, with Twitter - now registered under the X brand - being a particularly sensitive platform due to its links with politics (Zamora-Martínez et al., 2020).

Despite providing a means for marginalised voices to be heard (Candón-Mena and Montero Sánchez, 2021; Rovira, 2019), one of the main characteristics of social networks for the spread of hate speech is the possibility of interacting with anyone, even under the cover of anonymity (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2021; Bustos-Martínez et al., 2019). This, combined with the emergence of echo chambers (Franch and Micó, 2021), makes social networks the perfect place to radicalise political criticism. Indeed, social media algorithms are often blamed for directing users to related content, thus contributing to the formation of toxic communities such as the manosphere (Dafaure, 2022).

Memes and humour in echo chambers can be particularly effective in naturalising these extreme ideologies, circulating conspiratorial visions and entrenching hate speech (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). This can have a significant impact on the way people think and act online, as well as political consequences, because memes are not limited to a playful aspect (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2016; Yoon, 2016). Moreover, humour is an effective way of communicating political messages, which has been used as a strategy in electoral campaigns because it creates and consolidates shared meanings (Medina et al., 2021) and reflects the political trends of the moment (Mancera Rueda, 2020). In this sense, Márquez (2017) identified two types of memes: those that seek to represent an idea without ideological overtones, and those that use photographic montage to make a political critique.

Memes are simple units of communication and cultural transmission on the Internet, in whose creation, transformation and dissemination users actively participate, generating a shared social phenomenon that usually includes a humorous tone and references to popular culture with the intention of achieving high virality (Benassini Félix, 2020; González-Hernández et al., 2019; Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2016).

In the political context, the success of memes has been explained by authors such as González-Hernández et al. (2019) after analysing their formats, content, authors and impact, identifying the simplicity of the structure, emotional content, the presence of sophisticated humour and the social capital of the creator as essential characteristics for achieving a high reach. Successful memes are part of today's popular culture, reflecting reality and its social perception, but also influencing its construction.

As López-Paredes and Carrillo-Andrade (2022, based on Shifman, 2013, and Chagas et al., 2019) explain, political memes can be produced in a humorous or serious tone and have three purposes: to persuade support for a candidate, to promote collective action - grassroots - or to be part of the public debate, in the latter case often generating a humorous criticism of a politician. For example, in the context of the US elections, the far-right popularised memes of Donald Trump, praising his racist and sexist character and using a negative frame against his opponent Hillary Clinton, based on insults and mockery (Lamerichs et al., 2018).

In relation to misogynist hate speech, authors such as Lawrence and Ringrose (2018) highlight memes as an essential resource of the manosphere in the rise of anti-feminist expressions facilitated by participatory media, while also highlighting their use by the feminist movement to mock the former. In Spain, several studies warn of the affective polarising effects of memes (Calvo and Aruguete, 2020; Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2016), a type of discourse that also reaches women in the political sphere. For example, research by Lamerichs et al. (2018) found that memes against Hillary Clinton showed a high level of hatred, with a narrative in which the candidate suffered attacks related to her health, gender and age, and whose criticism extended to her supporters, liberals and feminists.

2.1. Hate Speech and Misogyny in the Digital Context

Research by Losada-Díaz et al. (2022) points out that social networks not only represent a new distribution channel for existing discourses, but also provide the basis for the creation of new mutations, including flaming (opinions supported by offensive language) and trolling (Khosravinik and Esposito, 2018).

Hate speech has become an emerging problem in recent years, especially for female politicians (Durántez-Stolle et al., 2023; Sánchez-Meza et al., 2023). Misogyny is a complex issue, involving cultural and traditional practices that are difficult to change. Indeed, patriarchal behaviour is part of most cultures and, despite all the feminist revolutions, equal rights are far from being achieved (Frenda et al., 2019). In the political sphere, this situation is even more noticeable, as women are confronted with hate speech more frequently than their male counterparts due to gender discrimination (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022), which targets them both in their private and public lives, even in the media and online.

The construction of hate speech is articulated through five basic elements: (1) non-compliance with norms; (2) inducing shame in victims; (3) inducing fear in victims through threats and intimidation; (4) attempting to dehumanise victims by comparing them to insects, vermin and primates; and (5) misinforming individuals or groups of belonging (Williams, 2021). Hate speech also refers to expressions that promote prejudice or intolerance and indirectly contribute to creating a climate of hostility that can lead to discriminatory acts or violent attacks (Gagliardone et al., 2015). For some authors, such as Shearer et al. (2016), these practices are limited to online harassment; for others (Ramírez-García et al., 2022), they exist in the offline world, but their effects are magnified in the online world.

According to the Council of Europe (1997), hate speech is defined as those forms of expression that propagate, incite, promote or justify rational hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and all other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including aggressive nationalism, ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility towards immigrant minorities (Ramírez-García et al., 2022; Igareda González, 2022). Thus, we can see that this discourse aims to arouse, incite or promote feelings of hatred and hostility towards groups of people identified with certain ascribed characteristics (Benassini Félix, 2022).

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) reiterates in one of its judgments that incitement to hatred does not necessarily imply an incitement to violence or other criminal acts, but that attacks by insults intended to ridicule or defame certain groups of the population "may be sufficient for the authorities to prefer the fight against speech (...) to freedom of expression exercised in an irresponsible manner" (Díez Bueso, 2020, p.55).

In Spain, the 2015 reform of the Penal Code included discrimination based on gender in the catalogue of discriminations in Art. 510, understanding "gender" as the roles and behaviours that are socially attributed to people depending on whether they consider themselves women or men, and understanding that it can constitute a basis for discriminatory acts other than those that include the reference to sex (Igareda González, 2022). Therefore, we can understand hate speech against women as the promotion of humiliation or contempt, as well as the harassment and dissemination of negative

stereotypes and threats justified by their gender (Sánchez-Meza et al., 2023). In its digital aspect, Bonet-Martí (2021) identifies two characteristics of cyberantifeminism: extreme misogyny and a tendency to personal attacks.

In the present case, Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021) have highlighted the toxicity of the social network X for female users by analysing the manifestation of hate speech and misogyny in the conversation on X of around 50 Spanish women with online and offline public projection. Among their findings, they found that violence against women was particularly evident in areas of greater visibility and social influence, such as communication and politics, which accounted for 90% of the insults recorded. With an average of 15 negative calls per day, violence is part of the daily life of these public profiles.

2.2. Violence and Sexism in Criticism of Women in the Political Sphere

Female politicians are often the target of hate speech (Arencón Beltrán et al., 2023), but these attacks can be divided into two categories: (i) criticism of their policies and (ii) attacks on their personal lives. With regard to the former, female politicians are often criticised for their laws or reform proposals, which should not be unusual for a public figure. The problem is that these criticisms are often couched in derogatory or denigrating terms, emphasising their gender rather than their political opinions (Igareda González, 2022). This type of discourse aims to brand them as inferior or less competent than male politicians. As a result, female politicians often face greater scrutiny than their male counterparts and their policies receive more negative attention. They also suffer attacks on their personal lives. As above, these attacks are often based on their gender and aimed at intimidating them. However, they do not hide behind the pretext of political criticism, but are direct misogynistic remarks. This type of discourse can take many forms, from sexist comments about their appearance to threats of violence (Kaiser and Pakis, 2022; Sugiura, 2021).

As a result, hate speech fuels the culture of misogyny by discouraging women from entering or remaining in politics (Igareda González, 2022; Benassini Felix, 2022), in addition to reputational damage, resulting in a loss or inability to gain voter support. In addition, misogynistic discourse can undermine the ability of women politicians to perform their duties and lead to underperformance due to lack of productivity. Fear of being unfairly attacked limits their freedom of expression and movement, prevents them from attending certain public events and increases their self-censorship. This reduced public presence affects their visibility and ability to make a significant impact on their careers, and is a breeding ground for increased anxiety, stress and depression.

According to Blanco-Alfonso et al (2022), hate speech directed at women can lead to a toxic political environment with negative consequences for democracy. When female politicians are the target of sexist attacks, it sends a message that women are not welcome in the political sphere, leading young women to avoid political careers, thereby perpetuating gender inequalities in society. Indeed, in the 2021 German presidential election, Annalena Baerbock, the only female candidate, was the victim of 70% of the disinformation analysed from the campaign (Delcker, 2021). In Spain, gender-related fake news is so common that fact-checkers such as Maldita.es have created their own sections (Maldito Feminismo). In this context, Herrero-Diz et al. (2020) found that damaging feminism in order to undermine its political proposal is one of the main objectives of this disinformation.

Regarding the specific case of Irene Montero, the studies by Sánchez-Meza et al. (2023) and Durántez-Stolle et al. (2023) have analysed the hate speech against the minister Irene Montero on social networks, although with a perspective that focuses more on textual than visual discourse. In their findings, the first study notes that the attacks take the form of media violence based on sarcasm or humour to reinforce gender stereotypes, while the second study observes how hate speech against Montero is constructed from emotional messages and with the desire to insult, in a strategy of polarisation linked to astroturfing (a movement of support or criticism on the networks that appears natural but is sponsored by interested groups).

For their part, Arencón Beltrán et al. (2023, p. 9) conclude that "feminism is a clear target of the troll subculture", in addition to the fact that violence on social networks is commonplace against specific individuals who "express their demands", as in the case of Irene Montero, who was the target of attacks by right-wing groups on the Internet "even before being appointed Minister of Equality" (p. 7). In Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022), after analysing the X-accounts of twenty Spanish politicians, it was found

that Irene Montero's profile was one of the four cases whose tweets contained more messages with negative (unfavourable) emotional charge than positive (favourable) emotional charge.

Finally, it is worth noting that other studies on Montero have reflected how X has served as a platform for criticism of his private life, with polarising messages, with false and/or sarcastic information, promoted by micro- and nano-influencers as well as bots (Arce-García and Said-Hung, 2022).

3. Objectives

This research aims to address the phenomenon of misogynistic hate speech propagated through memes by observing the role played by the social network X in the construction of the public image of a female politician, specifically that of Minister Irene Montero. This profile was chosen as the object of study because it is one of the most attacked in both the digital and offline scenario (Arce-García and Said-Hung, 2022; Arencón Beltrán et al., 2023) and because it embodies the government's gender equality policy, thus representing the feminist collective.

The following secondary objectives are derived from this main objective:

- O1. Describe the composition, framing and impact of the memes disseminated on X under the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision.
- O2. To analyse the argumentative strategies, the symbols of delegitimisation and the level of hatred present in the memes featuring the minister.
- O3. Identify the attributes most often attributed to Montero.

4. Methodology

To achieve these objectives, the research adopts a mixed (quantitative-qualitative) approach, combining the use of two methodological tools: content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2010), as already applied by Hakokongas et al. (2020) to study memes with a pronounced hate component, and Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2016) to explore the use of this format for feminist mobilisation. Memes, due to their intertextual nature and widespread presence, represent a distinguishable mode of communication capable of constituting independent virtual discourses (Huntington, 2016).

The design of the analysis sheet (Table 1) is inspired by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) model, which includes four analytical layers: discourse (theme, context and characters), design (conceptualisation and relationship of ideas), production (materialisation) and distribution (dissemination), broadly defined by Rodríguez-Camargo and Velásquez-Orjuela (2011, pp. 43-44). The adaptation of this model to the object of study, the political meme, and to the context of hate speech, results in a file composed of 12 categories, with single (9) and multiple (3) responses, validated in the studies by Durántez-Stolle et al. (2023), González-Hernández et al. (2019) and Sola-Morales et al. (2022). The final definition and arrangement of the categories and their variables will be consolidated after a preliminary random test on 10% of the sample, which will allow us to identify discrepancies between coders and to correct and recalibrate the more subjective aspects.

Table 1. Analysis sheet

Composition		
1.1. Structure	Photography Photo + text Photomontage Cartoon-illustration	Collage Edited photo + text Visual text Another
1.2. Protagonist	Irene Montero Left parties and/or leaders Another	Feminist movement Government

Design		
2.1. Framing	Private life Personality Feminism Transsexuality Another	Physical appearance Political management Violence gender Political ideology
Production		
3.1. Intertextuality	Celebrities Popular culture Deconstruction of symbol	Icons or logos Digital culture Other
3.2. Values carried over	Nepotism Stupidity, uselessness, incapacity Frivolity	Enrichment Betrayal to feminism Aggressiveness
3.3. Argumentation	Cognitive (<i>logos</i>) Authority (<i>ethos</i>)	Emotional (<i>pathos</i>)
3.4. Narrative	Support Critique Sexualisation	Humour Sarcasm
3.5. Hate pyramid	Not detected Mockery Ridiculing Threat	Stereotype Blame Insult
Impact		
4.1. Number of <i>Likes</i>		
Number of comments		
4.3. Number of <i>retweets</i>		
Number of citations		
4.5. Total interaction		

Source: Own elaboration.

The sample was configured after automating the collection of all publications from November 2021 under the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision and filtering those that had an associated image (887 cases). The timeframe of the collection followed a criterion of relevance, as there were a number of important events in that month that led to it being prioritised over the rest: the pardon of Juana Rivas, the opening of Irene Montero's profile on TikTok, the rape of a minor in Igualada and the celebration of the Day Against Gender Violence. On the other hand, a hashtag with a certain trajectory was selected, trending several times (Trendinalia, n.d.) and used since January 2020, when Montero was appointed Minister of Equality.

All images were manually monitored, discarding those that were not memes, such as screenshots, posters and photographs without a clear offensive and/or humorous orientation, or that did not have a thematic relationship with the protagonist. In total, 191 units were recovered and analysed in their entirety.

The analysis of the data and the cross-referencing of the different variables were carried out using the SPSS statistical package (v.26), while the inter-coder concordance, after closing the analysis sheet, was demonstrated by means of a second pre-test applied to a sample of 10%, reaching 0.714 with the Fleiss Kappa formula, which guarantees the reliability of the results obtained.

5. Results

5.1. Composition and Design: Montero's Prominence Sparks More Conversation

In the period analysed, a total of 175 publications were obtained whose associated images were classified as memes in one of the formats considered in the file. It should be noted that some of these publications contained more than one meme, bringing the total sample of study units to 191, which were analysed in their entirety, despite the fact that in a small number of cases the memes were repeated because they had been reappropriated by other users with a different accompanying text. In this way, the most shared memes can be properly evaluated and their dominant styles identified.

Before breaking down the analysis, it is worth noting that of the total of 191 memes, 73.8% came from users who posted more than one, either in the same message or in different messages. However, only 87 of these images featured Irene Montero, while the remaining 57 criticised her party or the feminist movement in general. The most common thing for repeat authors in the sample is to publish two (13 users) or three (6) memes, although there are extreme cases, such as one user who published 39 memes under the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision.

This first part of the results evaluates the categories of composition and design, applied to all the units collected, whether or not they featured Irene Montero herself (120 cases), as the hashtag was used to give visibility to other criticisms of people or issues related to the minister. These include attacks on other politicians from her party (19 cases, with special attention to Pablo Iglesias, also because of her personal relationship with him) and from the coalition government (6 cases, with special attention to Pedro Sánchez as president), or feminism in one form or another (46 units, with priority mentions of cases linked to gender violence, such as Rocío Carrasco and Juana Rivas). The protagonist variable is related to the number of replies received by the publication containing the meme (p -value=0.023 with the Kruskal-Wallis test): specifically, the images featuring Montero received an average of 7.47 replies, compared to less than 1.5 for each of the other protagonists. In terms of overall interaction, memes about Irene Montero received an average of 101.58 hits, compared to 45 for the government, 14.7 for those about the feminist movement and 11 for those about Podemos.

In terms of structure, there is a clear predominance of the sum of image plus text in any of its variants, both globally and specifically in memes featuring Montero. More than half of the cases (51.8% of the total and 52.5% for Montero) are unedited images with text, followed by edited photographs with text (20.4% and 16.7% respectively) and photomontages without text (11.5% and 11.7%). As can be seen in Figure 1, it is noteworthy that the photo format without text or editing (memetic photo) is only used in cases with the minister (16), as is the photo collage (3). These images show a frivolous image of her (through her personal use of TikTok, selfies, make-up, etc.), but above all they reflect emotional features of her political performance, with photos in which she appears shouting, in tears or demonstrating with her fist raised in the air.

In the case of the memes featuring Montero, a correlation was found between the type of structure and their success in terms of reactions (Kruskal-Wallis, p -value=0.030) and quotes (Kruskal-Wallis, p -value=0.002). In particular, the memes created from the image collage achieved a higher average number of citations and responses than the other compositions.

Figure 1. Collage and unedited photographs that convey negative values about Montero.



Source: X.

In terms of the framing of the meme, a multiple response option, the theme of "feminism" stands out in the first place, present in 41.4% of the sample, often linked to the "political management" of the minister (22.5% of the total), with criticisms such as the increase in crimes against women, the loss of rights, the waste of public money or the indiscriminate persecution and blaming of men, the latter being particularly visible in the memes supporting Antonio David Flores against the accusations made by Rocío Carrasco. In addition, and as can be seen in Figure 2, the "political ideology" represented by Montero appears in 22.5% of cases, with attacks on inclusive language and the trans movement, as well as the use of political symbols - socialist, Nazi and fascist - and denigrating terms such as "podemita," "squatter," "caste," and "handout." ("podemita, derogatory referring to a member of Podemos", "okupa", "casta" and "paguita, derogatory subsidy, grant, help").

In terms of the importance of these variables, the correlation between "ideology" and success in terms of message interaction (Mann-Whitney U test with a p-value of less than 0.01 for likes and less than 0.05 for retweets, replies, quotes and total interaction) stands out, with higher values in those memes that do not deal with ideology, due to the fact that the construction of these cases is usually more subtle than the rest and requires a higher level of effort to understand compared to allusions to more banal or direct aspects such as personality or private life.

Other common meme frames focus on the minister's private life (30.4% of the total; 35% of those with her), contain allusions to her personality (35.8%) or her physical appearance (10%). With regard to the private sphere, the most frequent reference is to her marriage to Pablo Iglesias, the promotion linked to this relationship and the economic benefits of her status, usually highlighting the contradiction between her initial approaches and her current situation. In terms of personality, we identified the most repeated negative qualities attributed to Irene Montero: aggressive, incompetent, elitist and hypocritical, while only two units were collected with explicit support for the Minister, in which she is portrayed as brave and a fighter. When the spotlight fell on emblematic feminist media figures such as Rocío Carrasco and Carlota Corredera for the latter's award-winning documentary on the abuse she suffered at the hands of her ex-partner, Carrasco's greedy, lying and exploitative personality was conveyed, as was Corredera's desire for prominence and manipulation.

Figure 2. Example of frames in memes linked to their personal sphere.

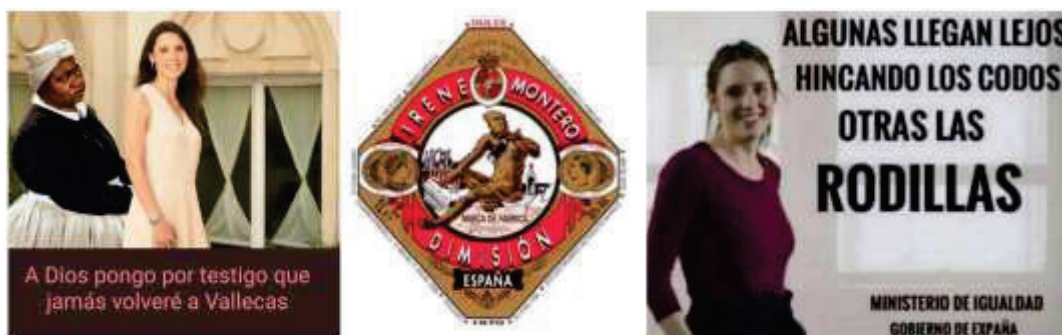


Source: X.

5.2. The Triumph of Sarcasm and Criticism as Visual Vehicles in Hate Speech

One of the characteristic features in the construction of the meme is intertextuality, that is, the referential function of this discursive unit towards other previous cultural elements. In the analysis of the memes featuring Irene Montero, the use of symbols to deconstruct their meaning stands out (45.8% of cases), usually symbols of the Ministry of Equality itself, political slogans and institutional scenarios. In second place are other more common elements in memes that are not related to political criticism, such as the use of popular culture (12.5%), celebrities (15%) and icons (10.8%), as can be seen in Figure 3. In the first group, we find references to film classics such as *Gone with the Wind* and *You to Boston and I to California*; in the case of celebrities, Rocío Carrasco stands out for the support she received from the minister in response to her documentary denunciation of the abuse she suffered in her relationship, and Matías Prats, whose use as a meme has also become a reference in popular and digital culture; while in the case of icons, money and the Spanish flag stand out.

Figure 3. Intertextuality: examples of popular culture and deconstruction of symbols

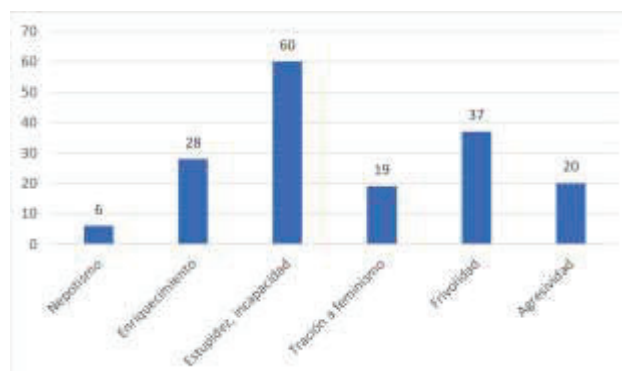


Source: X.

In terms of argumentation, there is an absolute predominance of pathos in the memes about Montero (82.5% of cases), where the aim is to provoke an emotional response in the recipient, as opposed to logos based on data (7.5%) and ethos based on statements of authority (10%). In cognitive or logical argumentation, data relating to Montero's salary, property, privileges, professional experience and previous romantic partners are cited to criticise her, but without indicating the source of the data, while authority-based argumentation uses figures such as judges and celebrities. Emotional argumentation, on the other hand, is based exclusively on the personal perception of the author of the meme, validated by the feelings aroused by the character of Montero, which he or she tries to transmit to the rest of the virtual community through negative and denigrating montages or through real images accompanied by disqualifications, as will be seen in the development of the following categories of results.

In terms of the values conveyed by the meme about Montero, Figure 4 shows that the most common criticism focuses on her incompetence, uselessness and stupidity (present in 50% of cases), attributed to her childish dialogues and performances of dubious value: "spending on bullshit" or "making tistos" - in reference to their presence on TikTok.

Figure 4. Representation of the values conveyed by the memes



Source: Own elaboration.

Frivolity (30.8%), with fabricated statements that portray a person alien to the social reality of the moment, and her personal enrichment (23.3%), with the attribution of privileges and a change in the way she dresses, are also among the most repeated options. In last place are allusions to her aggressive discourse (16.7%), her betrayal of the feminist movement (15.8%) and, to a lesser extent, her nepotism as the cause of her access to power (5%).

In terms of the primary narrative resource used, only one unit stands out, which, instead of criticising the minister, supports her image with the definition of 'warrior'. As seen in the previous example images, the majority construction in this exclusionary response category is mainly based on sarcasm (56.7%) and criticism (35%). To a much lesser extent, humour (3.3%) and sexualisation (1.7%) are used, although, as can be seen in Figure 5, with very striking examples.

Figure 5. Narrative Strategy and Hate: Examples of Sexualisation and Ridicule

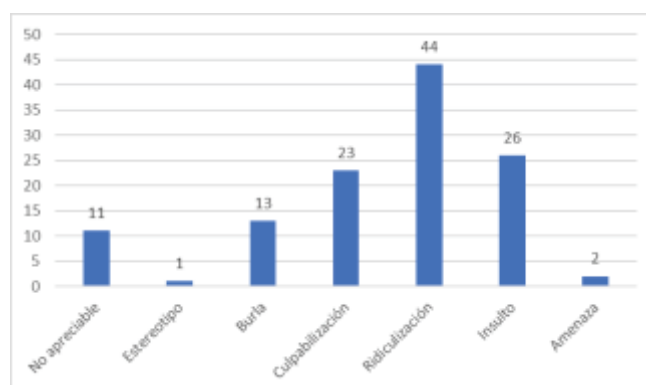
Source: X.

This argument is largely related to the other variables. For example, with regard to the format of the meme, sarcasm is often seen in the contradiction between the image (edited or not) and the superimposed text. In terms of framing, it is worth noting that criticism without humour is almost exclusively directed at his public sphere, while sarcasm is used in attacks on his political management and ideology as well as in attacks on his private life.

Another important correlation is between the categories of argument and narrative: memes based on data and opinion use sarcasm, while those based on sources of authority fall almost exclusively into the category of humourless criticism. As for the values associated with Montero, those related to enrichment and frivolity are almost exclusively based on sarcasm, while stupidity or incompetence is reflected in both criticism and sarcasm or even sexualisation. On the other hand, those users who express their dissatisfaction with the measures taken by the Minister, considering them contrary to feminism, do not usually resort to humour, preferring more sober or angry criticism.

Aggressiveness can also be found in the form of humourless criticism, as many of the memes that reflect this facet of Montero are unedited images that show her gesticulating or shouting during public interventions such as demonstrations and in the Congress of Deputies itself. They play with the image of Irene Montero, specifically with her gestures, in order to extrapolate the rejection of this expression (of violence, outburst, idleness) to her person, thus invoking an aggressive, unsociable and inquisitive personality.

Finally, each meme was catalogued within the hate pyramid on the basis of its predominant values and intentions, assigning each the highest rank. In the sample analysed, only 9.2% were found not to project hate, usually in the case of photographs without text or editing. As can be seen in Figure 6, the memes are mainly attributed to ridiculing (36.7%), insulting (21.7%) and blaming (19.2%), levels of hate surpassed only by threats, which are not very present in the analysed messages (1.7%). On the other hand, lower levels such as stereotyping or mockery had a lower weight (0.8% and 10.8% respectively).

Figure 6. Representation of the hate pyramid in total terms

Source: X.

The memes framed as mockery and insult have a simple argumentative structure based on personal opinion, while those who seek to blame, for example, policies that harm men indiscriminately or are ineffective in the fight against gender-based violence, are the only ones who rely on external opinions from authority figures to reinforce the validity of their view.

Figure 7. Hate pyramid: examples of name-calling as the purpose of the meme



Source: X.

In the ridicule, references to her personal sphere stand out, either because of her physical appearance, where she is shown as unkempt or unfeminine, or because of her private life, especially with attacks on her wealth, which is linked to frivolity. Moreover, in both the private and public spheres, any of her actions and appearances are denigrated and used against her: when she acts and speaks, she is aggressive; when she smiles, she is laughing at citizens for wasting the ministry's money and for taking measures that betray feminism while enriching herself through her personal relationship. As shown in Figure 7, the most severe attacks are accompanied by insults such as 'traitor', 'sheeple', 'caste' or 'asshole', and comparisons are made between her and animals and objects, dehumanising her image.

6. Conclusions

Misogynistic hatred has permeated the meme (Lamerichs et al., 2018; Sola-Morales et al., 2022). Its popularisation, combined with its intertextual nature, makes memes a valuable object of study to understand reality and thus identify discourses, shared referents (Huntington, 2016) and, in the present case, their impact on the image of current political figures. Our work confirms that political polarisation is fundamentally expressed in terms of hate (Herrero-Izquierdo et al., 2022; Losada-Díaz et al., 2022), with feminism being one of the most attacked constructs online, with messages protected by the anonymity and sense of impunity of the senders (Barker and Jurasz, 2019; Dickel and Evolvi, 2023).

The choice of Irene Montero is based on the premise noted by Benassini Félix (2022) that hate speech also uses people who are identified with certain movements or sectors as the subject of attack, and who can thus represent hatred or discrimination against a group. In this case, Montero suffers extensive online criticism that goes beyond her public administration, partly as a politician (highly visible female profiles), but especially as a representative of feminist policies and support for the LGTBI community.

If we look at the composition, framing and impact of the memes published under the hashtag #IreneMonteroDimision, which was the first objective, we can see that the memes that generated the most discussion were a frontal rejection of Montero. In other words, the explicit attack acts as a claim and manages to stand out, as can also be seen in the work of Berdón-Prieto et al. (2023) on TikTok for the Spanish context and Díez-Gutiérrez et al. (2022) on X in Latin America. Similarly, some of the key characteristics identified by González-Hernández et al. (2019) for the success of a meme are reproduced, especially simplicity, as basic structures such as a single image edited with text and a highly emotional character prevail.

On the contrary, and according to the author's conditions, the sample lacks sophisticated humour, as humiliation, simple mockery, insult and ridicule prevail, as already happened to Hillary Clinton during the US elections (Lamerichs et al., 2018), with anecdotal cases of complex intertextuality and intelligent humour.

Montero's body is the object of ridicule, the vehicle to represent her flaws and the proof that she has no principles, in reference to her 'new' way of dressing, for example. Sell-Trujillo et al. (2023) warn that

criticism of physical appearance is one of the most normalised ways of questioning popular female characters on the networks, using aesthetics and standardised canons of beauty as an element of value.

Another of the most common frames is the criticism of their political management and, in particular, of actions related to gender equality, revealing recurring themes of the misogynist imaginary: rejection of the law on gender violence, emphasis on the loss of guarantees and the increase in crimes, which Lacalle et al. (2023) also find in their analysis of the manosphere. Addressing these aspects leads to another of the "classics" of violence against women: victimhood. The aggressor is presented as the victim and the maximum and defenceless victim of the action, either of Irene Montero or of feminism, which constitutes a kind of informative disorder by trying to neutralise the influence of feminism.

With regard to the presence of hate in the memes collected in the second objective, the hostile environment and violence against Montero that Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021) show is exercised against women with public projection in X is confirmed. Specifically, not only is violence present in the construction of the meme - three quarters of which are on the upper rungs of the hate scale: blame, ridicule and insult - but Montero is also represented as an aggressive person in the development of her political activity, as can be seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Violence in the meme narrative and as a trait associated with Montero



Source: X.

And while it is true that humour reinforces the rhetoric of the meme (Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018), it is worth noting that in our sample it was associated with criticism in all cases, resulting in an absolute predominance of the category of sarcasm, which is common in political criticism of this discursive format (Mancera Rueda, 2020; Medina et al., 2021). However, the presence of memes that also tend to sexualise or denigrate her physical appearance represents a difference with respect to the attacks received by male politicians, which, together with the accusations of Montero's access to power due to her personal relationship with Pablo Iglesias, implies a clearly misogynist undercurrent of attack that, as Igareda González (2022) and Dickel and Evolvi (2023) point out, seeks to exclude women from the political front line.

The attributes suggested by the memes in response to the third objective present a woman as incapable, sometimes even stupid, frivolous and insensitive to the real problems of the country and her office. Through direct insults and insinuations, by reproducing fictitious situations, dialogues and poses taken out of context, they seek to denigrate her public image.

In relation to previous research on Montero, the results obtained show that memes promote a greater hate discourse than other discursive constructions in the networks, since only 10% of the sample did not fit into any of the steps of the hate pyramid, with ridicule taking precedence, while previous studies, such as that by Duránte-Stolle et al. (2023), showed that approximately 30% of the messages in the Twittersphere critical of Montero fell outside this classification. Moreover, this analysis reinforces the conclusions of studies such as that of Arce-García and Said-Hung (2022), by showing how the minister's private sphere is a priority object of criticism and by observing the weight of recurrent users in this narrative. All this, in turn, falls within the framework of studies on online anti-feminism, which identify misogyny and a tendency towards personal attacks as its core values (Bonet-Martí, 2021).

This research explores the construction mechanisms of hate speech against women in general and politicians in particular, by studying the power of memes as a vehicle for such hatred and its dominant elements, in this case thanks to the analysis of the figure of Irene Montero as a politician and as a representative of feminism and support for the LGTBI collective. For further research, it is proposed to compare these results with the analysis of critical memes with other women in national politics, in order to establish possible links, including with the political groups they represent.

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