Politicians and Racism on Twitter: Citizen Reactions and New Forms of Social Participation

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Abstract

This paper is a study case that analyses the various functioning logics of racism and anti-racism in Twitter, specifically following the publication of a polemic tweet against immigration by Pablo Casado, president of PP, which aligns itself on the conservative "right" of Spanish politics. The aim is to provide knowledge –still scarce in research on the subject– on the characteristics of racist discourse –and its confrontation– in digital spaces. It is a case study analysing how the selected political discourse, as elite discourse, elicits reactions and provokes social participation in digital spaces. Methodologically, it is based on Twitter content analysis, utilizing both quantitative (frequency of topics) and qualitative (articulation of arguments) approaches. We worked through the NVivo analysis software and selected a sample of tweets, that were then coded and analysed in depth, responding to the politician's overall message. The results point to the existence of a strong rejection to the politician's words. However, there was an absence of a visibly explicit and significant anti-racism in the ensuing retorts. The support received for his racist comment was in the minority, although some were very aggressive.

Keywords: racism, anti-racism, social networks, political discourse, Twitter

Políticos y Racismo en Twitter: Contestación Ciudadana y Nuevas Formas de Participación Social

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Resumen

En el presente trabajo se realiza un estudio de caso sobre las lógicas de funcionamiento del racismo y el anti-racismo en Twitter, en concreto a partir de la publicación de un mensaje polémico de P. Casado, presidente del PP y exponente de la derecha conservadora española. Con ello se pretende aportar conocimiento –aún escaso en la investigación sobre la materia– sobre características del discurso racista –y su confrontación– en espacios digitales. Se trata de un estudio de caso que analiza cómo el discurso del político considerado, en tanto que discurso de élite, provoca un determinado tipo de participación en espacios digitales. El diseño metodológico se ha basado en análisis de contenido cuantitativo (frecuencia de tópicos) y cualitativo (articulación de argumentaciones). Para ello se ha trabajado con NVivo, codificando y analizando en profundidad una muestra de tweets que respondieron al mensaje del político. Los resultados apuntan a la existencia de un fuerte rechazo hacia las palabras del político, pero la ausencia de un anti-racismo explícito visible de manera importante. Los apoyos recibidos fueron minoritarios, aunque algunos de ellos de gran agresividad.

Palabras clave: racismo, antirracismo, redes sociales, discurso político, Twitter

The purpose of this study case has been to analyzes the functioning logics of racism and anti-racism through the posting of a controversial message on Twitter[1]. It is a case study that analyzes how political discourse, in this case a racist tweet by the People's Party's (PP) president Pablo Casado Blanco, elicited reactions and provoked a certain type of social participation through Twitter. Consequently, our work is anchored in two lines of research: first, the studies on racism in social media, particularly, in social networks; and second, research on socio-political participation in social networks, specifically Twitter.

On July 29, 2018, Casado gave statements to the media in Avila, Spain. After which, the newly elected president of the PP tweeted a controversial tweet about the migratory phenomenon in the country. It quickly went viral and was echoed by traditional and social media alike. In it, he positioned himself, along with his party, in the strongest stance against the migration phenomenon. In just 224 characters (in Spanish), and with language that he himself describes as "politically incorrect", he managed to summarize the most common and hackneyed racist and anti-immigration themes:

> It is not possible to have [residency] papers for everyone, nor is a welfare state sustainable that can absorb the millions of Africans who want to come to Europe, and we have to say it, even if it is politically incorrect. Let us be sincere and responsible with this issue. (Casado, 2018)

This stance, and approach to the problematization of the migratory phenomenon, presumes a qualitative leap in the political discourse given how political correctness has mostly been utilized in outlining the migration issues; with the exception of the far-right political parties and some individual right-wing politicians (Olmos Alcaraz, 2009; Van Dijk, 2009). Previously, when similar controversial statements were made public, there was usually a response in the form of an apology and not a vindication or defense of the assertion. With regards to immigration, it placed the PP in a political position very close to the extreme right-wing parties in Europe, where immigration is perceived as a threat to its security, cultural identity and economy. Furthermore, it defends restrictive immigration policies because it sees migrants as being too costly to the welfare state while creating unfair competition in the labor market (Wodak, 2020).

Literature Review

Racism, Social Media and Digital Spaces

Recent reports by the Movement Against Intolerance (MCI), state that in Spain there are more than a thousand websites or digital spaces (fan pages, Facebook profiles, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels and blogs), that propagate hatred and incite racist violence (Movimiento contra la Intolerancia, 2018, 2019). Almost all of them are linked to ultra-right organizations (Sánchez & Rodríguez, 2013). Despite this data, research on racism and media outlets are quantitatively uneven with respect to traditional, social media and digital spaces (Granados & Granados, 2013; Martínez, 2014; Van Dijk, 1993, 2009). The behavioral logic of racism is yet to be measured in a systematic and profound way in the latter two mediums, "especially in relation to the peculiarities and characteristics of [digital social networks] which can influence traditional racist logic and function" (Olmos Alcaraz, 2018, p. 43). Noting the uneven development of this type of research with respect to traditional work on mass media, we can highlight a few, for example: Costello et al. (2016) have studied exposure to racist content in terms of the characteristics of the users; Rauch and Schanz (2013) have analyzed the impact of such content on subjects and the varied reactions to it; the works of Arriaga (2013), Cisneros and Nakayama (2015), Ferrándiz et al. (2011), García and Abrahão (2015) and Miró (2016) address specific episodes of racism; while, Alcántara and Ruíz (2017), Awan (2016), Dubrofsky and Wood (2014), Khosravinik and Zia (2014), Mason (2016) and Olmos Alcaraz (2018), have deepened the specific types of racism such as islamophobia, sexist racism, anti-Arab racism and anti-immigrant racism. All of them within social media, digital spaces or networks.

Citizen Participation in Digital Environments

In the last decade, research on new forms of socio-political participation, concurrent with the expansion and generalization of the use of social media and digital social networks, has been consolidated as a growing field of study (Candón & Benitez-Eyzaguirre, 2016; Leetoy et al., 2019; Rovira, 2017; Sierra, 2018; Tascón & Quintana, 2012). In this regards, the field has become

interested in how citizens participate in political debates in elections (Alonso & Casero, 2018; Blas et al., 2019; Fenoll & Cano, 2017); on how feminism or cyberfeminism functions, acts and expands through networks (Caro, 2015; Núñez, 2011; Sàdaba & Barranquero, 2019; Sánchez & Fernández, 2017); on the citizen movements and their link with digital social networks that have occurred around the world after the 2011 mobilizations of Occupy Wall Street, "15M", "20F", "YoSoy132" and so on (Anduiza et al., 2014; Candón, 2013; Castells, 2012; Toret et al., 2013). There is also more specific research on citizen participation in networks of and around particular collectives or political groupings (Gualda et al., 2015; López-Trigo et al., 2019; Moreno, 2017). And more recently research of citizens' interactions in social media about fake news and COVID (Pulido, Villarejo-Carballido, et al., 2020, Pulido, Ruiz-Eugenio, 2020).

All these works, and many emerging others, define "cyber activity-practices as a space for citizen recognition" (Sierra, 2018, p. 981). In this paper we assumed these processes to be new forms of contestation, including in them, those interactions that did not define themselves as "activists" (for they do not cease to be forms of citizen and social participation).

Thus, this paper poses two research questions: 1). How will net-citizens react before an explicit affirmation of racism by a high-ranking politician? and 2). Do citizens use this discourse to support their own racist discourse on the social networks considered?

The analysis work to answer these research questions will help us to contribute to the construction of knowledge about the characteristics of racist discourse –and its confrontation– in digital spaces, an issue that is still scarcely addressed in research on the subject, as indicated in the previous lines.

Material and Methods

Through a methodological design based on content analysis, we have identified the discursive strategies used to confront and denounce racist speech, as well as those used to justify and support it[2]. This mixed method analysis combines a quantitative approach (frequency of topic occurrence) and a qualitative approach (articulation of arguments).

Table 1.
Thematic categories

Type of tweet	Discourse strategy	Thematic/content
Condemnation/ rejection	Non-racist	Tweets that insult/disqualify the sender of the message or their party for being racist
		Tweets that insult/disqualify generically the sender of the message or his/her party
		Deviations from the subject matter to show disagreement
	Non-racist_ anti-racist	Tweets with arguments that dismantle "lies" about immigration
		Tweets that allude to the causes that provoke migrations to defend them
		Tweets that appeal to a needed solidarity
		Tweets highlighting the contributions migrants provide to today's society
		Tweets demanding respect for human rights and other legal instruments guaranteeing fair treatment of migrants
Agreement/ held	Racist	Tweets that replicate the original tweet with very little nuances
		Tweets referring to an "immigrant invasion"
		Tweets claiming that migrants threaten "our welfare system"
		Tweets justifying discrimination based on the argument that "Spaniards migrated in a different way"
		Tweets calling for differential treatment between Spaniards and foreigners
		Tweets justifying racism because of immigrants
		Tweets expressing rejection of migrants for being poor

Source: Author

Sample

Casado's tweet received 257 replies in the two days following its publication. After an initial filtering, 47 tweets were eliminated because they were out of scope for our research. They either did not refer to the original tweet, its subject matter nor because they were messages without text with irrelevant

images. Thus the sample consisted of 210 messages (N=210), that were registered manually into a database. Furthermore, secondary responses to the 210 tweets were not taken into account for inclusion in the sample. The aim of this was to have a very specialized corpus of data, focusing on the politician message while being sufficiently broad to perform the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the tweets.

Data Analysis

Data processing was carried out with NVivo, using a template of thematic categories (Table 1) created from an inductive procedure after an initial reading of the material collected[3].

For the analysis, we accounted for the same tweet to be classified into several categories. In such cases, we prioritized the dominant theme –in terms of length and number of units of meaning– in the message. However, these instances were very limited given the reduced length of the tweets, which did not leave room for multi angled elaborate arguments.

Results

The aforementioned tweet denies the possibility of regularizing the entire migrant population in the country, alluding to the impossibility of sustaining the welfare of the state. It targets a specific migrant population (African), and establishes a demarcation of "regularizable and non-regularizable" migrants, based on ethnic preferences and those deserving of social assistance and those who do not. By speaking of "millions" of migrants, it conveys the idea of an "invasion." He also places the problem as an issue affecting the whole of Europe, not only Spain, making his political position part of a broader entity that exceeds the national borders. I.e., we are Europe and it is Europe that is threatened. Lastly, he justifies his assertions by appealing to political responsibility and sincerity, which makes it easier for him to express himself without euphemisms while taking pride in his sincerity. In social networks, the citizens' response was immediate and generated discourses and counter-discourses, questioning Casado, his party and statement. It demonstrated how in digital spaces, one can speak out against "power" and even interact directly with elite discourse (Van Dijk, 1993, 2009).

Our analysis found that out of the 210 tweets (N=210), 83.3% –175– were of non-racist content and 16.6% –35– racist (Figure 1). Within the former, the bulk (63.4% –111–) were tweets that either disqualify the PP, its president or the sender of the tweet for being racist; or they deviated from Casado's message-theme, clearly opposed to it. However, they bore no explicit anti-racist discursive strategy. Only a small fraction (36.6% –64–), were explicitly anti-racist in content. In the latter pro-percentage, the bulk of the messages in support of Casado's tweet repeated the politician's ideas with hardly any nuances (62.9% –22–); with only 37.1% –13– contributing new input to the issue while maintaining the same racist argumentation.
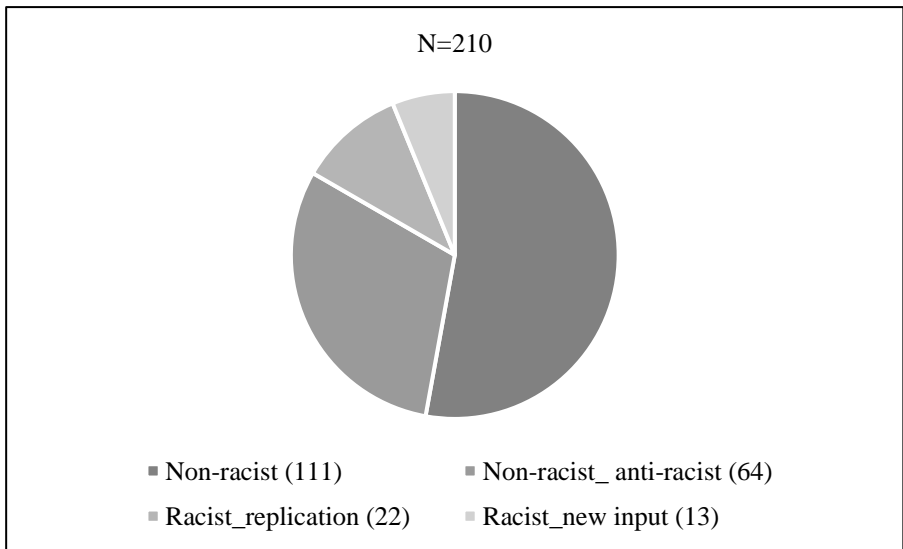
Source: Author
Figure 1. Number of tweet for type of content

Let us take a closer look at the data using paradigmatic examples of the most recurring discursive strategies. We shall follow the same expository order described in the previous paragraph.

**"You Should Be Ashamed to Say Such Xenophobic Things":
Tweets Condemning or Rejecting Casado's Message**

Non-racist discursive strategies

With respect to tweets containing discursive strategies of non-racist nature (63.4% –111–), they can be classified further in order of frequency. First (46.8% of this subcategory, 52), tweets that "insult or disqualify the sender of the message, or his party, for being racist":

> Example 1[4].
> July 30: 'You should be embarrassed to say such racist and clearly senseless things being the president of a political party. You only confirm what we suspect you are. Those "Africans" do not want to leave their families voluntarily and live with people like you'
> 0 Replies. 0 Retweets. 7 Likes[5].

> Example 2.
> July 29: 'Finally the most reactionary right wing in Spain is photographed and uncovered as what it really is. Thank you for showing yourself! We are already like all Europeans and we have our own extreme right wing and racist party'
> 0 Replies. 1 Retweet. 2 Likes.

Second (31.5% of this subcategory, 35), tweets that "insult or disqualify generically the sender of the message, or his party", without addressing or condemning racism:

> Example 3.
> July 29: 'It's easier to find papers for every migrant than to locate someone who remembers seeing Casado attending University'
> 0 Replies. 8 Retweets. 28 Likes.

> Example 4.
> July 29: 'And is there any welfare state that can support the rottenness of all the pending fraud cases of your party with the justice system? And a lying swindler politician with a false master's degree?

> 0 Replies. 1 Retweet. 2 Likes.

Finally (21.6% of this subcategory, 24), "deviations from the subject matter to show disagreement":

> Example 5.
> July 30: 'Hypocrites villains, you are only interested in the votes of the people, thieves of Spain and robbers of the Spaniards, those that you say you love so much…'
> 0 Replies. 2 Retweets. 1 Like.
>
> Example 6.
> July 29: 'A welfare state that can sustain the millions stolen by my party is not possible and we have to say it, nor is it possible to have corruption for all, even if it is politically incorrect. Let's be sincere and formal with this question'
> 0 Replies. 1 Retweet. 1 Like.

The discursive strategies that predominate in the first category reproach the politician for having broken with "political correctness", admonish him for his explicit racism; or, on the contrary, ironically thank him for being clear in his statements and not hiding his racist disposition, in order to also openly reject it.

The discursive strategies of the second and third categories are *ad hominem* discursive strategies, which discredit the politician (or his party) not because of the racist content of the tweet, but for various reasons related to his credibility or diverting the central issue addressed.

Explicitly anti-racist discursive strategies.

The tweets in which we found non-racist discursive strategies are also those that hold a clearly anti-racist position and try to undo the arguments of the original (36.6% –64–). In this case, the variants found were as follows. First (42.2% of this subcategory, 27), tweets with "arguments that dismantle 'lies' about immigration":

> Example 7.
> Jul 29: 'Arrivals of migrants on EU soil: in 2014 more than 200,000, in 2015 more than 1 million, in 2016 almost 400,000, in 2017 almost 200,000, in 2018 (only until June)just over 50,000. In 2018 it is not true that there is a migration crisis on European soil, there is no massive arrival of migrants (Source: European Commission)'
> 2 Replies. 44 Retweets. 93 Likes.

Second (18.7% of this subcategory, 12), tweets that allude to "the causes that provoke migrations" to justify the legitimacy of the current international displacements:

> Example 8.
> July 30: 'Europe has to assume all that it took from Africans during colonialism. Moreover, Europeans also migrated in the past and do so today all over the world'
> 0 Replies. 3 Retweets. 4 Likes.

Third (18.7% of this subcategory, 12), tweets that appeal to "a needed solidarity" between human groups:

> Example 9.
> Jul 30: 'But your party can steal, lie, cheat and the migrants who have no other choice because they have to support their families cannot? why? who are you to decide that? We all must help each other, we must avoid more deaths in the sea of migrants. People like you are too many in this country'
> 0 Replies. 0 Retweets. 3 Likes.

Fourth (14.1% of this subcategory, 9), tweets highlighting "the contributions migrants provide to today's society":

> Example 10:
> July 29: 'Migrant people are helping to support the publics services in our State. Migrants pay more than they receive. A lot of researches have demonstrate it'
> 0 Replies. 1 Retweet. 6 Likes.

Finally (6.3% of this subcategory, 4), tweets demanding "respect for human rights and other legal instruments guaranteeing fair treatment of migrants":

> Example 11.
> July 29: 'But shouldn't we as Spaniards respect our Constitution? Aren't we proud to be part of the European Union or is it just for show?'
> 11 Replies. 57 Retweets. 171 Likes.

All the arguments deployed in the tweets included in this category are explicitly anti-racist because they go beyond the simple "non-racist" rejection. They are different discursive strategies that openly confront, denounce or actively discursively combat the racist message or racism in general, not only at the moral but also at the political-institutional level.

"Evidently You Are Unequivocally Right": Tweets Agreeing or Adhering to Casado's Message

All messages showing support and accord with Casado's statements harbor discursive strategies that are racist in nature. Most of them (62.9% –22–) "replicate the message of the original tweet with very little nuances":

> Example 12.
> July 29: 'Evidently you are unequivocally right my President, let's put everyone in its correct home'
> 0 Replies. 0 Retweets. 1 Like.

Other tweets expanded the arguments of the original (37.1% –13–), and alluded to further series of issues. In order of frequency, the firth point refers to the "immigrant invasion" (the 38.5% of this subcategory, 5), In this case, there were two tweets from the same person arguing against the right of immigrants getting nationality or work permits due to being too numerous:

> Example 13.1.
> July 29: 'I have no problem, but they should never be given a work permit, nor nationality'

20 Responses. 3 Retweets. 27 Likes.

Example 13.2.
July 29: 'And soccer players should not be given nationality either. But there is a difference in number, because the soccer players are very few and the immigrants are very many. In addition, immigrants compete directly with the most disadvantaged workers and with people who are unemployed'
28 Replies. 4 Retweets. 81 Likes.

Second (the 23.1% of this subcategory, 3), tweets "claiming that migrants threaten our welfare system":

Example 14.
July 29: 'If we do not restrict the entry of migrants, we will no longer be able to maintain the public services of the State. Migrants do not come to create wealth in our country, but to take advantage of state aid'
0 Replies. 12 Retweets. 13 Likes.

Third (the 15.4% of this subcategory, 2), tweets justifying discrimination and racism towards migrants on the basis that "Spaniards migrated in a different way":

Example 15.
July 29: 'My grandfather was a migrant in Uruguay, but he went there to work legally, did not attack the police and was not armed like those who come here. This is something totally different'
12 Replies. 3 Retweets. 49 Likes.

Fourth (the 7.7% of this subcategory, 1), there is a tweet demanding a "differential treatment between Spaniards and foreigners" in relation to social benefits:

Example 16.
July 29: 'That is true, but it is also true that we cannot give a retirement money or other help to all immigrants coming from

> Africa. First they should help the Spaniards, and then the African immigrants'
> 46 Responses. 10 Retweets. 165 Likes.

Fifth (the 7.7% of this subcategory, 1), a tweet that justify the racism of politicians simply because "there are immigrants" in Spain; as can be seen as following where the person responds to a previous thread that grouped Casado with other ultra-right-wing politicians in France, Italy and the United Kingdom:

> Example 17.
> July 29: 'But that is so, like in Spain, because they happen to be countries that have a lot of immigrants, or not? don't you think so?'
> 1 Reply. 0 Retweets. 1 Like.

Finally (the 7.7% of this subcategory, 1), a tweet expressing "rejection of migrants for being poor":

> Example 18.
> July 29: 'How do you say soccer players are treated? the problem is not that they are immigrants, the problem is that they are poor! not like soccer players'
> 25 Replies. 71 Retweets. 815 Likes.

In this case we find a double discursive strategy. On the one hand the argument of "authority", in those tweets that agree with the racist message of the politician because they recognize in P. Casado (or in his party) a referent, a moral authority we could say; and on the other hand a whole series of discursive strategies that expand the racist message by making a more or less wide deployment with hackneyed "clichés about migrations".

Discussion and Conclusions

Twitter is the social network that is currently being most addressed by social research, given its public nature, it allows us to easily access the communicative interactions of users (Alonso & Casero, 2018; Blas et al., 2019; Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015; Gualda et al., 2015; Sánchez &

Fernández, 2017). This digital space is of distinctive relevance for research in our scope of work, especially for its ease of provoking social alarms (Miró, 2016). For this reason, we chose to analyze the various operational logics of racism and the citizen response to it through an specific study case.

The work had a twofold objective, articulated from two research questions: First, to investigate how net citizens reacted, as a form of social demonstration and participation, to an explicit affirmation of racism by a high-ranking politician as an exponent of the elite discourse; and secondly, to analytically reflect on the possibility that citizens used such statements to openly express racist discourses in digital spaces. And all of this in a backdrop where, till recently, the use of political correctness was the general trend when dealing with issues related to racism beyond far right-wing groups (Olmos Alcaraz, 2009; Van Dijk, 2009); until these entered state institutions.

With respect to the first question, the results show that the bulk of the retorts to Casado's tweet were of rejection. Although most were not articulated through discursive strategies explicitly dismantling the politician's racist words, we could categorize them as "non-racist" even though were not explicitly "anti-racist". On the other hand, tweets supporting his statement, though notably disqualifier and racist, were not the majority. In other words, the net-citizenry's response to the racist statement by an important national politician was fundamentally one of rejection, even though it was not one characterized by a strong and clear anti-racist activism.

With respect to the second question, related of whether Casado's words (free of "political correctness" as he himself tweeted), could be used by the public to express themselves openly in a racist manner, we can say the tweets based on the words of the politician to support and spread racism were minor compared to the tweets rejecting his message. However, despite being a small number, some were abnormally aggressive and crude. The very characteristics of digital networks "seem to be contributing to the fact that issues who were socially considered taboo and hardly talked about [in relation to racist discourse], are emerging with force and are becoming increasingly visible" (Olmos Alcaraz et al., 2020, p. 26). On the other hand, the racism that emerged in this case study does not work mainly with a logic of a biological discrimination but rather corresponds to what is known as cultural racism. Additional monitoring is needed of similar cases to further analyze this phenomenon to greater depths.

In this case study, citizen protest is presented as a novel form of social participation, a democratization of protest (Tascón & Quintana, 2012). It allows individuals to interact directly with politicians and elite discourses that dictate public opinion. It makes it possible for anyone to stand up against the powers that be that these discourses embody (Van Dijk, 1993, 2009). This issue is especially important with respect to the problem area of racism, which is surrounded by a significant social stigma. This makes it difficult to know its operating logic, dimensions, roots and processes (Olmos Alcaraz & Martín, 2020). Nonetheless, it is necessary to continue this line of investigation to know if "digital networks allow us to articulate socially open, innovative and autonomous spaces (and contribute to establishing rules and procedures, checks and spaces for dialogue and empowerment), or, on the contrary, replicate traditional logic of oppression" (Sierra, 2018, p. 987). This, with respect to the theoretical object that concerns us, forces us to reflect on the possibilities of these spaces confronting racist elite discourse; as well as the new risks that may arise from the dissemination and propagation of racist messages and the reproduction of social inequalities (Van Dijk, 1993, 2009).

Notas

[1] In previous works we have reflected on the concept of racism (Olmos Alcaraz 2009, 2020; Olmos Alcaraz & Martín, 2020). Suffice to note that we started from a notion of racism as a network of racialized processes that operate in an intersectional manner –and in skewed spheres of reality– through a contextually diverse and changing logic of de-humanization. To dwell deeper in these postulates, see Grosfoguel (2012), Santos (2010) and Fanon (1953). Likewise, we understand that anti-racism has to do with positions that openly confront, denounce and actively combat situations of discrimination and racism, not only at the moral level but also at the political-institutional level.

[2] A "discursive strategy" is understood to be a way of arguing in support and to legitimize discourses with the aim of convincing or inciting the receiver of the message (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2005); in the case at hand, we are specifically dealing with ways of arguing with the intention of condemning-rejecting or supporting racist statements made by a high-ranking politician.

[3] The validation process of the categories has been carried out by the project work team in which the article is inserted. The constant comparison method was used to validate the categories.

[4] To preserve anonymity, the usernames of any of the tweets quoted are not included. All tweets quoted had been paraphrased and are translations from Spanish.

[5] To provide context to the tweets cited, all of them include information on replies, retweets and likes received.

Acknowledgments

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