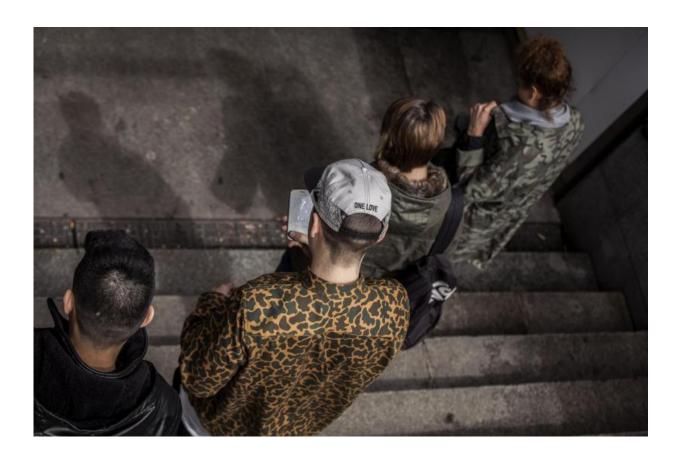# Discrimination on Facebook: A matter of gender

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Discriminatory content on Facebook varies depending on whether it is shared by males or females. Credit: Olmo Calvo / Sinc

While young, less educated males are those who share a greater amount of discriminatory content on Facebook, young university females share

the least. According to a study conducted by sociologists at the University of Rovira i Virgili (Spain), there is a feminine way as well as a masculine way to behave on the Internet: males tend to directly allude to ethnic and cultural issues whereas females are less obvious in doing so. The study is part of a European project that aims to fight these behaviours.

Facebook boasts over one billion daily users, a large percentage of which are young people, according to the company. The use of discriminatory and racist content concerns the European Union. The project called "Internet: Creatively Unveiling Discrimination" (I:CUD) was thus launched, and a guide was developed for educators and families in order to create tools and strategies to combat these behaviours on the Internet.

As part of this initiative, a team of sociologists from the University of Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona (Spain) have carried out an study on discriminatory expressions used by young people -ages ranging from 17 to 24 years old- on Facebook; they have reached the conclusion that this type of content can vary depending on whether it is shared by males or females. The research findings have been published in the journal *Comunicar*.

David Dueñas i Cid, a researcher at the Social and Business Research Laboratory (SBRlab) at the Catalan university and the main author of this study, explains to Sinc that the purpose of the study was to gather information regarding the types of discriminatory content created and spread by young people via social networks such as Facebook.

The study collected information regarding the types of discriminatory content created and spread by young people on Facebook. Credit: Olmo Calvo. / Sinc

Rather than using big data techniques, very on fashion these days, the team chose a sociological approach, "since simple data extraction could lead to incorrect results," said the researcher.

In order to conduct the study, the team designed a methodological strategy to detect discriminatory content on 493 Facebook profiles from the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, Romania and Spain -the participating countries in the I:CUD project- which allowed them to find 363 samples for their analysis.

"Taking into consideration the data protection and ethical principles that

must regulate social research, we found volunteers in these five countries, in collaboration with institutions that have experience in fighting discrimination and inequality", pointed out the sociologist.

These institutions include CEPS Projectes Socials (Barcelona), Fundatia PACT (Bucharest), Pour la Solidarité (Brussels), Collage-Arts (London), CIES (Rome) and SBRlab itself. "With these organisations -says Dueñas- we wanted to ensure that interest in and dedication to the project would go beyond the analysis and also include ethical and practical aspects".

After informing the volunteers about the purpose of the study, the researchers accessed their Facebook profiles and reviewed the content that had been published during the last year. The comments or activity considered to be discriminatory were evaluated, analysed and categorised.

Discrimination intensity

Dueñas indicates that the team thoroughly analysed the elements of the discriminatory content that was detected in addition to the type of associated activity: "Creating content is not the same as reacting to it. The intensity of discrimination in the content was also evaluated".

As a result, they observed patterns between young men and young women that reveal that there is a feminine and a masculine way of behaving on the Internet and that there are different ways of expressing discrimination on social networks sites.

The study emphasises that young males tend to be more direct by posting and sharing messages with content that is more clearly discriminatory and mainly aimed at ethnic groups and cultural minorities.

On the other hand, females utilise indirect forms of discrimination such

as agreeing with and spreading content posted by others by clicking the 'like' button; this strategy makes the element of discrimination less evident. The author notes that, for the most part, female attitudes are directed towards the sociocultural situation and physical appearances.

In the limit of political correctness

The study also highlights that young, less educated males share a greater amount of discriminatory content on Facebook whereas young university females share less.

The authors have additionally noticed that there are certain types of discrimination that can be more easily concealed, such as discrimination towards physical appearance, social class and homosexuality. Other types, such as discrimination towards ethnicity and religion, are classified as highly discriminatory content. Gender discrimination occupies a medium position.

All of this means that discriminatory content regarding physical appearance or social class is easily spread over the Internet as it does not carry such a strong social stigma and stays in the limits or 'political correctness'.

The unconscious differences between these different discriminatory attitudes may give us clues that can help us understand how certain content is easily disseminated. Facebook enables some content to be tagged as inappropriate and deleted; according to the study, but if users are only detect traditional forms of discrimination, the rest can easily survive.

Dueñas stresses that although they are aware of the limits of their research, the data obtained in the study indicate that there is a link between the internal differences between the young men and women and

their online behaviour; this research opens the way for other fields of study such as the differences between socialisation, language and use of power.

"The online world is a reflection of our offline world but with the difference that online activities can be recorded in a space that has become public or semi-public, a scenario that helps these activities to gain relevance, visibility and permanence. The way we are acting on the internet resembles how we act out in the real world, but on the internet our words are not blown with the wind," says the researcher.

  More information: David Dueñas i Cid, Paloma Pontón, Ángel Belzunegui, Inma Pastor. "Discriminatory Expressions, the Young and Social Networks: The Effect of Gender". *Comunicar* nº 46 v.XXIV (2016)

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