

Hate speech and abusive behaviour on social media

A cross-cultural perspective

Luiz Valério P. Trindade

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Table of contents

List of figures and tables	v
Foreword	vii
Acknowledgements	xiii
Introduction	xv
Chapter 1 The internet and social media platforms: A brief history	1
Chapter 2 Social media users' antisocial behavioural aspects	9
Chapter 3 Sample of cross-cultural studies: Descriptive analysis	21
Chapter 4 Analysis of studies published in Portuguese	29
Chapter 5 Analysis of studies published in Spanish	45
Chapter 6 Analysis of studies published in Italian	59
Chapter 7 Cross-cultural analysis of hate speech	69
Concluding thoughts	81
References	85
Index	105

List of figures and tables

Figures

Figure 1.1: Timeline of events in the history of the internet and social media	2
Figure 3.1: Countries and number of studies in the sample	22
Figure 3.2: Evolution of publications over time according to the languages	23
Figure 3.3: Evolution of publications and the combined number of citations over time	25
Figure 3.4: Impact of publications according to the language	26
Figure 4.1: Proportion of studies according to the social media platform	43
Figure 7.1: Explanatory model of the societal impacts of social media platforms	73

Tables

Table 4.1: Summary of social media data in Brazil and Portugal	30
Table 5.1: Summary of social media data in Spanish-speaking countries	46
Table 6.1: Summary of social media data in Italy	60

Foreword

Receiving an invitation to write a foreword comprises one of the highest honours a professor can receive. More than that, being invited to develop it for Luiz Valério Trindade's book is unique and remarkable. I greatly admire him, with undisputed academic respect and legitimate affection. So, I would like first to express my gratitude for being invited to write these few pages and reiterate that it is a distinction to which I have tried to respond satisfactorily and contribute to introducing a work that undoubtedly will bring invaluable insights and innovative perspectives to readers. Thank you very much, Luiz Valerio!

I consider the author of this book to be one of the most distinctive voices in the study of the social representation of ethnic minorities in mass media, critical analysis of derogatory humour, critical race and ethnic studies, and analysis of hate speech on social media. Indeed, regarding the phenomenon of hateful discourses disseminated on the internet, two of Trindade's previous publications (*No Laughing Matter: Race Joking and Resistance in Brazilian Social Media* and *Discurso de Ódio nas Redes Sociais*), alongside several other publications, offered invaluable contributions to the debate around this phenomenon. In these studies, Trindade conceptualises hate speech as discriminatory ideologies that undermine a person or a social group's value, disrespect, and humiliate them based on attributes such as gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ethnicity, geographical origin or socioeconomic position. He points out that, given the exponential growth rate achieved by social media platforms in the recent past and their ubiquitousness in people's lives, hate speech has shifted from the offline to the digital realm. Within it, racist hate speech has become commonplace and Black women comprise one of the prominent victims of this pernicious practice.

The strength of his analysis, coupled with solid scientific rigour, also reveals how freedom of expression has been exploited as a sort of protective shield by countless haters (i.e., digital criminals), most of whom are not being held accountable for their actions due, first, to the inertia of the state's repressive structure. Secondly, the difficulty of juridically classifying this criminal activity and, finally, due to enduring and ingrained structural racism under which Brazil's national identity was built and still remains a relevant supporting pillar in its social fabric. In addition to these aspects, the instrumentalisation of hate speech and the spread of disinformation online at the service of autocratic political projects cannot be disregarded. Thus, Trindade's critical analysis

contributes to illuminating the public debate and fostering constructive change in such a toxic ecosystem.

In the current work, the author analyses, from an innovative cross-cultural perspective, the phenomenon of dissemination of hate speech and bigotry on social media, their adverse societal impacts on individuals, vulnerable social groups, society, and the potential erosion of democratic systems. This way, the work demonstrates the author's academic maturity and the core nature of his research.

Here, Trindade expands his previous studies considerably, analysing not only racist hate speech but also aggressive misogynistic discourses, cyberbullying, revenge porn, fake news, and politically motivated hate speech. In so doing, the book dialogues with the most relevant concerns raised by the academic community, several international organisations and society at large, seeking to understand how the supposedly free territory of the internet has become an echo chamber of the most harmful human feelings.

The author explains that the internet and social media have not created hate speech. However, it is flagrant that content recommended by powerful algorithms, users' constant search for attention and approval through 'likes', and the exploitation of personal data have turned the online environment into an antisocial virtual environment. The shift from a horizontal ecosystem of free speech to a network of reproduction of hierarchical class structures is among the most noticeable side effects of the commercial exploitation of digital platforms.

The work unequivocally points out that hate speech can go beyond mere rhetoric and cause real harm to individuals' lives, stigmatisation of minority groups, ethnic persecution, discrimination, and symbolic and actual physical violence. Amidst it, social cohesion is also affected because, as seen in the global resurgence of authoritarian governments, the internet has been captured as a powerful political tool. Thus, social media platforms have been weaponised at the service of autocrats, many of whom have been elected based on collective fear and hate, and through the systemic dissemination of fake news and disinformation. The combination of these aspects comprises inappropriate 'advisers' for citizens when deciding their vote and who act firmly in the erosion of belief in liberal values and the corrosion of democratic regimes.

Another invaluable contribution of this book is the ample literature review beyond the Anglophone social contexts. Despite recognising the robust and influential relevance of research conducted in these social contexts, Trindade advocates that most of the time, "only studies that explore English-speaking social contexts tend to receive great attention both in academia and beyond. Furthermore, it is a fact that studies addressing the issues of racism and hate

speech, for instance, tend to gain greater visibility when exploring events taking place in the US and the UK. Consequently, the research developed in the present book explored literature published in three 'non-hegemonic' languages (Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) in 11 countries to mitigate or reduce this excessive Anglophone concentration. Then, adopting this ample perspective, the present study contributes substantially to the public debate regarding the societal impacts of social media platforms.

In conclusion, I kindly invite you to explore this work fully. I am confident that it is of great interest to established scholars, researchers and students in the discipline of critical social media studies, digital humanities, and sociology, as well as social activists, policymakers, and everyone else who refuses to remain silent before the harm of hate speech and intolerance on social media. Ultimately, I hope we manage to witness the end of all forms of discrimination, hate, intolerance, and racism, both online and offline, well before they turn into something so common that we become unable to remember what life in society was like without them.

Prof. Dr. Irineu Barreto

Programa de Mestrado em Direito da Sociedade da Informação
Faculdades Metropolitanas Unidas - FMU

*To Giulia, who was already an essential part
of my journey even before she came on board.*

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A well-known adage says that 'no man/woman is an island', and I believe the same concept applies to any literary work (fiction or no fiction), meaning that, although writing up is quite a solitary work, it does not mean we accomplish the goal alone. The present study is the outcome of more than two years and a half of hard work, intense reading of dozens and dozens of references in four languages (English, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish), critical appraisal of all these written materials, and the manuscript's writing up and countless revisions. However, this would not be possible without the invaluable support of many people.

Thus, I would like to thank *Vernon Press* for believing in the project when I submitted my proposal and trusting that I would deliver it within the agreed deadline. It is my second project with them, and I am very grateful for this successful partnership.

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A special thanks goes also to my dear friend Prof Irineu Barreto, who kindly accepted my invitation to write the foreword. He did not even think twice when I made the invitation, which has brought me great joy and satisfaction.

Finally, I thank all my friends, colleagues, and family members for their trust in my work and the ability to produce insightful studies.

Introduction

"I have never had to face anything that could overwhelm the native optimism and stubborn perseverance I was blessed with".

(Sonia Sotomayor)

Research reveals that, within the past two decades, social media platforms¹ have become a breeding ground for a wide variety of manifestations of online harassment and abuse. Amongst them include the construction and dissemination of racist discourses against Black² people (Chaudhry and Gruzd, 2019; Trindade, 2019), varied forms of hate speech (Shepherd *et al.*, 2015; Jakubowicz *et al.*, 2017), the dissemination of aggressive misogynist discourses (Mantilla, 2013; Jane, 2017), the manifestation of religious intolerance, especially against people professing non-Christian faiths (Awan, 2016; Nogueira, 2020), revenge porn (Bates, 2016; Paulin and Boon, 2021), cyberbullying (Smith *et al.*, 2008; Slonje *et al.*, 2013) and the dissemination of fake news (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Apuke and Omar, 2021; Barreto Junior, 2022).

Speaking of which, it is also relevant to explain that online harassment is regarded as the abusive exploration of modern digital communication technologies with the aim to cause harm to other individuals or vulnerable social groups and the conscious spread of disinformation (Vepsä, 2021). As for hate speech, Tontodimamma *et al.* (2021, p. 157) define it as “any communication that disparages a person or a group on the basis of some characteristics such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion”.

¹ Currently, the terminologies ‘social media platforms’ or merely ‘social media’ are practically consolidated in the literature (including an influential journal in this discipline is called *Social Media + Society*), but previously, there has been a variety of denominations, including Digital Social Networks, OSN (Online Social Network), SNS (Social Network Site or Social Networking Sites), RSD (Redes Sociales Digitales), and SRS (Sites de Redes Sociais).

² Should Black be capitalized or not? What about white, should it also be capitalized? This topic has been a subject of debates for many years already. There are voices pro and against its capitalization and both sides have solid arguments to defend their positions. In the present study though, the choice has been made to capitalize Black and not white, in alignment with arguments advocated by authors such as AP (2020), Coleman (2020) and Laws (2020).

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Index

A

abuse, xvi, 73, 77, 81, 85
African, 35, 53, 63, 64, 75
aggressive, viii, xv, 20, 32, 38, 50,
51, 53, 54, 57, 66, 74, 75, 81
algorithmic racism, 12
AltaVista, 3, 4, 86, 102
Anglophone, viii, xvi, xvii, xxi, 81
anonymity, xx, 9, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20,
64, 78, 82, 96
anonymous, 12, 13, 14
antiracist, 33, 34
antisocial, viii, xx, 9, 10, 17, 18, 21,
78, 82
Apple iTunes, 4
Argentina, 35, 36, 46, 47, 50, 52, 93,
95, 104
authoritarian, viii

B

backstage, 10, 19, 20, 78, 82, 98
Bard, xxi, 7, 83, 94, 101, 104
behaviour, xx, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18,
19, 20, 30, 34, 37, 54, 57, 63, 64,
71, 72, 73, 74, 76, 78, 82, 83
belief, viii, 5, 9, 11, 14, 20, 52, 78
bigotry, viii, xix, 18, 20, 24, 40, 43,
77
Black, vii, xv, 11, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38,
40, 42, 45, 52, 54, 71, 75, 79, 85,
89, 94
blackness, 11, 33, 38, 53, 70
Brazil, vii, xix, 5, 6, 22, 29, 30, 31,
32, 34, 35, 36, 38, 41, 42, 46, 47,
50, 52, 56, 59, 70, 71, 73, 75, 76,
86, 87, 88, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96,
97, 102
Brazilian, vii, 22, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38,
50, 69, 70, 71, 87, 98, 102
breeding ground, xv, 11, 12, 33, 43,
81
bullying, xix, 40, 64

C

Canada, 23, 93, 98, 102
catalyst, xxi, 54, 74, 78, 82, 83
ChatGPT, xxi, 7, 83, 92, 94, 101
China, 61, 104
civil rights, 11, 17, 41
class, viii, 29, 32, 35, 40, 48, 54, 55,
69, 82
Colombia, 36, 47, 50, 52, 53, 54, 75,
93
colonial legacy, 53, 54
coloniality of knowledge, 81
colonial-like, 54, 77
colour blindness, xx, 5, 9, 10, 11,
12, 78, 82
control, 16, 18, 45, 62, 65
conviviality, 18, 76
Costa Rica, 49, 70, 75, 93
COVID-19, 24, 49, 53, 59, 61, 62,
71, 75, 76, 82, 85, 88, 98, 99, 102,
103
cross-cultural, viii, xvii, xviii, 1, 21,
22, 35, 72, 73, 81
cyberbullying, viii, xv, 40, 59, 61,
63, 64, 71, 72, 76, 81, 82, 98, 101

D

democracy, xxi, 17, 40, 75, 82, 93,
97
digital technology, xvi, xxi, 1, 5, 12,
19, 21, 34, 74, 78, 81
discourse, xix, 18, 19, 37, 49, 63, 64,
78, 85, 86, 88, 92, 95, 103
discrimination, viii, ix, xvi, xix, 4,
11, 12, 39, 48, 55, 61, 69, 73, 90,
91, 95, 97
disinformation, vii, viii, xv, 40, 62,
63, 71, 72, 76, 78
dominance, 4, 31, 56, 65, 81
domination, 53

E

echo chamber, viii, xx, 9, 10, 16, 39, 82
 Ecuador, 46, 49, 56, 70, 97
 El Salvador, 46, 55, 85, 93
 empowerment, 17, 33
 enemy, 35, 48, 77, 100
 English, viii, xiii, xvii, xix, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 47, 81, 89, 93
 Europe, xvi, 36, 61, 63, 90, 102
 European Commission, xvi, xviii, 39, 90
 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, xvi, 39, 90
 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, xvi, 91
 explanatory model, xxi, 74, 75, 82

F

Facebook, xvi, xix, 5, 6, 14, 15, 16, 23, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 48, 49, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 60, 62, 64, 66, 76, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 103, 104
 fake news, viii, xv, 13, 62, 63, 71, 72, 76, 85, 94
 fallacy, 9, 12, 19, 82, 83
 fanbullying, 57, 103
 far-right, 32, 35, 50, 52, 62, 69, 71, 76, 77, 102
 FB Messenger, 32, 47, 60
 feminism, 33
 feminist. *See* feminism
 France, 53, 90, 91
 freedom of expression, vii, xx, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 78, 82
 frontstage, 18, 19, 20, 98

G

gender, vii, xv, 12, 29, 32, 33, 38, 41, 55, 56, 66, 69, 72, 82, 91, 95, 97, 101
 gendered hate speech, 59, 82

Google, xix, xxi, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 24, 25, 83, 88, 92, 94, 98, 101, 102, 104

H

harmless, 14, 20
 hate, vii, viii, ix, xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, xix, xx, xxi, 1, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 50, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104
 hate speech, vii, viii, ix, xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, xix, xx, xxi, 1, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 50, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 85, 87, 90, 91, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104
 hateful discourses, vii, 10, 16, 19, 32, 41, 42, 63, 72, 74, 75
 hater, 10
 heteronormative, 32, 33, 37, 69
 homophobia, xix, 31, 35, 36, 55, 77, 85, 95

I

immigrant, 38, 39, 42, 48, 49, 50, 52, 63, 64, 70, 72, 75, 89, 102
 immigration, 39, 48, 49, 62, 63, 70, 104
 impact, xvii, xviii, xix, xxi, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, 36, 63, 64, 66, 75, 76, 85, 89, 101, 102
 inappropriate, viii, 12, 19, 31, 65, 66, 72, 77, 78
 indigenous, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 71, 75, 78, 86, 91
 infodemics, 59, 61, 62, 71, 76, 82
 Instagram, xix, xxi, 6, 15, 16, 31, 32, 42, 43, 47, 57, 60, 67, 83, 88, 99

International Sociological

Association, 18

Internet Society, 16, 101

intolerance, ix, xv, xvi, 10, 11, 12,
18, 20, 35, 39, 40, 41, 48, 53, 57,
60, 61, 64, 66, 74, 75, 76, 78, 81,
90, 98, 100

invader, 96

Italian, ix, xiii, xvii, xix, xxi, 22, 23,
24, 25, 27, 59, 61, 62, 63, 66, 67,
71, 72, 79, 81, 82, 83, 89, 94, 95

Italy, 22, 50, 59, 60, 62, 63, 66, 67,
71, 73, 75, 79, 93, 95, 96

L

Latin America, 53, 56, 91, 99, 101,
103

leadership, 3, 32, 57, 60

LGBTQ+, 35, 36, 78

like-minded, 10, 16, 39, 41, 57, 74,
77

M

masculinity, 31, 33, 37, 65, 69, 70,
72, 73, 77

megaphone, 79

methodological approach, xix, xx,
xxi, 21, 29

Mexico, 22, 36, 47, 48, 53, 55, 56,
60, 70, 93, 95, 97, 99

Microsoft, 3, 4

milestone, xx, 1, 2, 6, 88

misogyny, xvi, xix, 4, 11, 18, 20, 31,
65, 77, 101

moral, 33, 37, 49, 55, 64, 70, 71, 77

N

Napster, 4, 6

native peoples, 56

Netherlands, 53

Netscape, 3, 6, 93

Nicaragua, 49, 56

non-hegemonic, ix, xvii, xviii, xxi,
81

normative values, 33, 35, 55, 70

O

offender, 9, 10, 12, 14, 20, 32, 33,
74, 75, 77, 78, 82, 83

offline, vii, ix, 9, 12, 13, 17, 19, 36,
64, 75, 83

online, vii, viii, ix, xv, xvi, xviii, xx,
5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17,
18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 29, 33, 38, 41,
42, 51, 57, 62, 72, 77, 78, 81, 82,
83, 85, 87, 88, 92, 95, 97, 104

online harassment, xv, xvi, 10, 19,
22, 24, 29, 41, 42, 81

online harassment and abuse, xv,
xvi, 10, 19, 22, 24, 29, 41, 42, 81

Orkut, 5, 6, 87, 91, 92

P

patriarchal, 31, 33, 69

Peru, 46, 49, 51, 54, 55, 56, 70, 73,
93, 97

political discourses, 32, 50, 62, 63
politically motivated hate, viii, 76,
82

Portuguese, ix, xiii, xvii, xix, xxi,
22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 39, 41,
42, 44, 54, 56, 57, 61, 63, 69, 70,
71, 81, 82, 83, 102

power, xvii, 11, 14, 17, 20, 55, 56,
64, 65, 72, 78, 92, 95, 102

problematic, xx, 14, 35, 36, 37, 39,
40, 51, 71

public scrutiny, 10, 19, 78, 82

R

race, vii, xv, 11, 12, 29, 32, 33, 69,
82, 90, 104

racism, vii, viii, ix, xvi, xix, 4, 11,
12, 18, 19, 20, 31, 35, 45, 48, 52,
53, 54, 61, 69, 70, 71, 73, 77, 79,
82, 87, 89, 90, 95, 96, 98, 100,
102

racist ideologies, 34, 38, 54, 70, 77

resistance, 33, 34, 36, 59, 63, 71,
72, 82, 90, 99

revenge porn, viii, xv, 59, 61, 65,
66, 71, 72, 73, 76, 81, 82, 91

S

sample, xvii, xix, xxi, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 37, 38, 39, 40, 43, 44, 45, 47, 49, 53, 54, 57, 59, 61, 63, 66, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 77, 78, 82

shame, 65

Sinophobia, 61, 98

social conventions, 14, 17, 18

social media, vii, viii, ix, xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, xix, xx, xxi, 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 81, 82, 83, 85, 87, 88, 92, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103

social representation, 37, 38, 47, 54, 78, 103

societal impacts, viii, ix, xvi, xxi, 7, 73, 74, 76, 77, 81, 82, 83

society, viii, ix, xxi, 1, 4, 7, 18, 19, 20, 37, 38, 39, 42, 55, 59, 66, 73, 74, 75, 77, 82, 83

Spanish, ix, xiii, xvii, xix, xxi, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 45, 46, 47, 51, 53, 54, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 70, 71, 72, 81, 82, 83, 85

Spotify, 4

stigma, 97, 104

T

Telegram, xxi, 6, 31, 43, 47, 83

Threads, 7, 32, 83, 88, 92, 96

TikTok, 6, 31, 43, 47, 88

Twitter, xix, 6, 7, 15, 31, 32, 39, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 48, 49, 51, 53, 54, 56, 57, 61, 66, 83, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103

U

UK, ix, 53, 81, 86, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 101, 103, 104

UNESCO, xvi, 91

United Kingdom. *See* UK

United Nations, xvi

United States. *See* US

US, ix, 3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 23, 36, 48, 49, 50, 70, 81, 93

V

vehicle, xxi, 34, 62, 63, 74, 78, 79, 82, 83

Venezuela, 38, 49, 70, 85, 96, 103

violence, viii, xvi, 36, 40, 41, 64, 75, 77, 85, 87, 91, 98, 99, 102

virtual environment, viii, xx, 4, 10, 11, 12, 21, 54, 82

vulnerable social groups, viii, xv, xxi, 75, 77, 78, 82

W

weapon. *See* weaponise

weaponise, 78

weaponising. *See* weponise

Web 1.0, 4

Web 2.0, 2, 5, 6, 89

WhatsApp, xxi, 6, 16, 31, 32, 42, 43, 47, 57, 60, 67, 83, 95, 99

white superiority, 32, 69

whiteness, 11, 38, 52, 53, 64, 70, 100

Windows, 3

X

X, 7

xenophobia, xvi, xix, 4, 20, 31, 35, 47, 48, 53, 59, 61, 71, 77, 82, 87, 90, 99, 101, 104

xenophobic discourses, 29, 37, 38, 39, 42, 45, 48, 49, 50, 69, 70, 72, 73, 82

Y

Yahoo, 3, 4, 6, 86, 89, 92, 101
YouTube, xxi, 6, 15, 34, 41, 42, 43,
57, 67, 83, 91, 100, 101