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The "Plandemic" Emojis, Conspiracy Theories and Online Hate Micro-narratives on Twitter

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Abstract
Although social science research on COVID-19 is diverse, few studies have focused specifically on emojis. Similarly, research that has paid attention to emojis from a social network analysis perspective is almost non-existent. The study is based on mixed methods and a computational approach. 5,509,549 tweets were collected from the NON-CONSPIRA-HATE Project. A subsample of 221,044 original tweets containing the strings 'plandemia' or '#plandemia' was extracted from these. Of these, 46,318 tweets (21%) contained emojis. From here, emojis were analyzed to understand their connection with conspiracy theories and online hate micro-narratives. The analysis of the co-occurrence network of hate emojis and communities within the global network suggests that emojis are crucial for understanding the micro-narratives about the 'plandemia'. The findings reveal the interconnections between various hate micro-narratives of emojis and conspiracy theories. Several communities of emojis were identified, generating micro-narratives about 'The circus of the plandemic', 'the vaccine as a threat', the "global anti-plandemic resistance", and the "global anti-green-pass demonstrations", all infused with rhetorical and sociolinguistic elements. The continuous use of rhetorical and sociolinguistic resources, such as repeating emojis within the same tweet, serves to convey conspiratorial messages about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines (denialist, anti-vaccine, anti-quarantine).

Keywords: Hate micro-narratives, Emojis Co-Ocurrence Networks, Conspiracy Theories.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic as a context for the emergence and development of conspiracy and hate micro-narratives

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a global challenge since it was initially identified in Wuhan (China). The high mortality, high spread of infections, and the strict health recommendations established internationally to combat the pandemic were accompanied by the large-scale dissemination of conspiracy theories and misinformation. Attitudes and behaviours reluctant to adhere to social distance, hygiene, vaccination and other established recommendations also took place in this context (Johns Hopkins University, 2024; Lawson, Cameron & Vaganay-Miller, 2021; Brouard, Vasilopoulos & Becher, 2020; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; National Centre for Epidemiology, 2024; European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2024a, 2024b; Nicaise, Van Lancker, Verhaeghe et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2022; Hornsey, Harris & Fielding, 2018; Leibovitz et al., 2021; Fernández-Torres, Almansa-Martínez & Chamizo-Sánchez, 2021; Bertin, Nera & Delouvée, 2020; Van Bavel, Cichocka, Capraro et al., 2022).

A multiplicity of experts likewise refer to the fact that times of crisis, where higher levels of stress, anxiety and uncertainty are encountered, help conspiracy theories to flourish and expand. These theories, which have found social networks a favourable scenario for their dissemination, contribute significantly to the search for

vital meaning, to provide a sense of control to people who feel insecure, or to the fight against fears, anxiety and stress (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

The intense spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation during COVID-19 was found to imply greater potential risks to public health, mainly because of the harmful effects that belief in conspiracy theories or misinformation has on public behaviour during a pandemic. There were reported effects such as reduced adherence to health recommendations, preventive measures or guidelines such as social distancing, masks, hygiene, vaccination, or even undergoing diagnostic or antibody testing (Biddlestone, Green & Douglas, 2020; Bierwiaczonek, Kunst & Pich, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2022; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Allington & Dhavan, 2020; Allington, Duffy, Wessely et al., 2020; van Mulukom et al., 2022; Gualda et al., 2021).

Other societal effects are the increased distrust of science, authorities or institutions in general, the tendency to engage in risk-taking behaviour, the support for violent acts, risks derived from increased social and political polarisation, and harmful effects on social cohesion and cooperation (Pummerer et al., 2022; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Jolley & Paterson, 2020). While we cite examples of research describing some of the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories, investigations suggesting relevant consequences or adverse effects in different domains are not unusual (i.e. Pummerer et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2019).

It has not been uncommon, moreover, for a variety of conspiracy theories, and hateful, alarmist micro-narratives (Gualda, 2024) have been propagated in this setting, be they those concerning population control, vaccine-related sudden deaths, 5G, QAnon and many others (Pavela, Banai & Miklošić, 2022; Xu & Sasahara, 2022). Although much recent literature has studied conspiracy theories in COVID-19 (and in other contexts), much of the studies on conspiracy theory beliefs 'have relied on self-report survey measures' (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 22). Very little research has looked specifically at those micro-narratives propagated on social networks that incorporate emojis as visual elements that are interspersed with text, and that may have high semantic, symbolic or rhetorical content, both at the time of production and the impact of the discourses that are deployed during the pandemic on the Internet.

In this article, we focus on what we have called 'The Plandemic Emojis', with the idea of knowing and understanding thehows are used in conversations using the term' #plandemia'. with the idea of getting to know and understand the use of emojis in conversations that use the term' #plandemia'. In this way, although many of them could be considered neutral, we test the sociological use of emojis in micro-narratives on Twitter, while exploring the role of empowerment or reinforcement of hate speech and denialism in the pandemic. Early automatic detection of misinformation, conspiracy theories, hate, or attacks on health authorities or vulnerable groups on social networks is critical to minimising their impact. This exploratory work on how emojis were used on Twitter alluded to the' #plandemic' attempts to contribute to that end.

Today, when the WHO Emergency Committee declared that the COVID-19 emergency that began on 30 January 2020 has ceased to exist but that COVID-19 continues, and one cannot 'let one's guard down' (United Nations, 2023, 5 May), and with the birth of other emergencies as has recently occurred with the outbreak of monkeypox (Mpox), in which the WHO declares a Public Health Emergency of International Importance (PHEIC) (WHO, 2024, 14 August), deepen the understanding of the communicative processes that misinform or generate mistrust and fear in populations, or that hinder the prevention or the follow-up of recommendations emanating

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from health authorities or scientific research in general, is an important learning process that is highly applicable to crisis or emergency situations where the production of micro-narratives with a high social and political impact produced on social media platforms behaves similarly.

2. Micro-narratives of emojis on the internet

2.1. Emojis and emoticons: A Brief Note

Emojis and emoticons are small images or icons that have been incorporated into electronic communication processes for several decades adding new possibilities of expression in communication (Such, 2015; MoMA, 2016; Totenart, 2021). In recent years, emojis have become one of the characteristic elements of current communication on the Internet. Many people and social groups use them in different contexts. Compared to the previous emoticons, which were very limited in number, emojis now number in the thousands and are growing all the time.

Their establishment and international fame in communication and widespread use in social networks are accompanied by the regular standardisation and updating of emojis through the Unicode Consortium (2024). Emojis are available to the public on different websites (Emojipedia, 2024; Unicode, 2024; Emojigraph, 2024), which makes it easier for users to search for emojis. They are also designed and disseminated in open source (OpenMoji, 2024), which facilitates their wider use. Also, emojis are available on various platforms. As time has passed, a diversity of emoji collections (objects, animals, food, for example) has been developed, facilitating more versatile communication. Even more recent developments incorporate nuances to communication, such as skin-tone modifiers, making it possible to cater to the world’s populations (Robertson, Magdy & Goldwater, 2020; Sweeney & Whaley, 2019; Emojipedia, 2024). They are used, however, most especially to convey the sender’s mood and guide the message according to the tone they bring. As stated by Illendula & Yedulla (2018, p. 2): ‘Emojis serve many purposes during online communication, among which conveying emotion is one of the primary uses’.

3. Emojis' Micro-narratives on the Internet, Conspiracy Theories & Hateful Micro-narratives

Online emojis’ micro-narratives, or micro-narratives containing emojis, are short stories told using emojis or, more commonly, mixed narratives in combination with other elements such as text. It is a form of communication that has become popular on social media and instant messaging applications. Emojis’ micro-narratives can be very creative and expressive. They can be used to tell stories of love, friendship, humour, tragedy, or any other subject. Likewise, micro-narratives are often configured in which a set of emojis are more likely to be located in the same discursive space, finding co-occurrence relationships between emojis (Illendula & Yedulla, 2018), or configurations in which some emojis or hashtags or words tend to share the same space (i.e. a tweet), as a characteristic of the discourse that is emitted.

Online emojis’ micro-narratives are expressed in a very brief format and multiply in a technological context where social media platforms, websites or messaging services limit the number of words or characters. In addition, the communicative prac-

tices that users are progressively acquiring by consuming and producing short messages, whether due to the time savings that this form of communication entails, or other factors, help this type of micro-narratives to have become one of the principal forms of expression today, with great impact in different areas, such as political, social, scientific and others (Gualda, 2024). Emojis, a common form of communication on the Internet today, where brevity is a requirement, have become a fundamental element due to their power to condense many meanings briefly. In this way, they have become a key piece for transmitting emotions or reinforcing some messages and making them more visible, attractive, shocking or expressive. It applies to Twitter, X, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and others. According to the research, this coercive pattern significantly impacts the content created and shared.

The ease and brevity with which messages are conveyed through emojis and their great popularity among the young population, as well as in a diversity of populations, makes them a very useful tool to solve the problem of the limited number of characters in the most common platforms where text is transmitted. Emojis make it possible to express very briefly complex ideas or messages by being able, for example, to synthesise, condense or symbolise meanings or even reinforce and emphasise them. Online micro-narratives have become constructors of stories and arguments in diverse scenarios (society, education, politics, marketing and advertising, and others). In many of these stories, emojis are present as a formal communicative feature of these micro-narratives, which in parallel provide content and reinforce or complement the messages. Apart from emojis, a typical pattern is messages that include other elements such as text, video, or images in coherence with contemporary communicative praxis on the Internet.

In this context, that of a society in which an important part of communication is found on social media platforms, the prosumer population (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), especially the younger ones, has become accustomed to communication conveyed through short formats where communication is effectively condensed into fewer elements and it is here particularly where emojis play a key role as they can contribute, by being incorporated into messages, to the design of attractive micro-narratives that respond to the strategy of keeping users' attention or maintaining their motivation and engagement (Venditti, Piredda & Mattana, 2017).

In the case of conspiracy and hate micro-narratives, it is not uncommon to try to seduce or convince social media users through very attractive or shocking messages in an attempt to gain followers. This would be the case, for example, of the incorporation of an emoji of a coffin (⚰️) next to a syringe (💉) to represent the idea of 'the vaccine kills you', associated with expressions typical of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories.

In current communication processes on the Internet, the micro-narratives of emojis (pure or mixed) and, specifically, conspiracy theories and emojis' hate micro-narratives are commonly developed on an international level. An emoji can allude to a meaning, but the systematic pattern of using them in certain contexts and combinations can generate and enhance hate speech (or another type of speech), which is explored in this paper. In this article we particularly study the hate and conspiracy narratives in which the token 'plandemia' is used, observing how in the communicative process it is common to combine different types of emojis in the same tweet (usually belonging to different groups), constituting a particular micro-narrative that can help to reinforce, complement or magnify the messages that are published.

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4. Objectives, hypotheses and research questions

In this article, we focus our attention precisely on what we have called ‘the plandemic emojis’ with the idea of exploring (1) which emojis are mainly incorporated in messages posted on Twitter that contain the string or token ‘plandemia’ (word or hashtag in Spanish); (2) which emojis are prevalent in those tweets about the plandemia that are classified as tweets expressing hateful emotions and how these emojis connect with conspiracy theories related to plandemic, or with the denial of the pandemic. In this way, we can get closer to the role emojis play in hate speech and to the narratives supporting conspiracy theories: Are they reinforcing hate messages, help messages carrying emojis have a hate bias, or help messages carrying emojis have a hate bias? 3) Based on the identification of what we have called 'hate emojis' in the narrative context of plandemia, our purpose is to investigate the connections that occur between some emojis and others, in relational terms, in order to find out whether they tend to be used systematically. We are therefore interested in (3.1) finding out about the global network of hate emojis in the context of plandemia, (3.2) investigating the communities in which, by proximity, these emojis are grouped, (3.3) finding out what type of narratives prevail in these communities, illustrating some significant examples.

Although many emojis could be considered neutral, depending on the context in which they are used, they may enhance, reinforce, or encourage hatred. If the insults and language used in tweets are offensive, showing intolerance and incivility on the Internet, emojis used in the context of the pandemic, in a specific framework of denialism, can help to discredit, mistrust and even mock people or institutions, including health authorities, in the particular case of the pandemic.

5. Methods, techniques and sources of information

5.1. Methodological design, data collection and data sources

This article aims to understand and describe the online emojis’ micro-narratives of hate related to ‘plandemia’ and the connections between emojis. Given the technical complexity of achieving our objectives and hypotheses (section 4), this work is accomplished using a computational approach, and the methodological design chosen is based on mixed methods. Our data source for this article was Twitter. The data we analysed was extracted by connecting directly to the Twitter API v2, with Academic Access, through *twarc2*, under Python [https://github.com/DocNow/twarc]. This article draws data from a broader project interested in studying the conspiracy theories that have circulated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gualda, 2024b). The NON-CONSPIRA-HATE project generated a global dataset [Conspiracy Theories Dataset, 2020-2023], composed of 5,509,549 organic tweets (only original tweets, no RTs), from which a subsample of tweets containing the strings ‘plandemia’ or ‘#plandemia’ (first step) was first filtered. In this first phase of filtering the global dataset, an initial subsample of 221,044 original tweets was obtained. The process is summarised in Figure 1. The subsample is then limited to those tweets containing at least one emoji (21%). These tweets are the primary basis of our analysis. We named this subsample as *Plandemia Dataset with Emojis, 2020-2023*.

A third step, in order to identify the hate emojis used in the ‘plandemia’ narrative context, was to conduct a sentiment analysis of the set of tweets resulting from step

2 (46,318 tweets with emojis). The result was the identification of the tweets containing hateful sentiments, extracting from there the pairs of hate emojis of each tweet to elaborate the emoji co-occurrence network, as explained in the following section.

Figure 1. Selection of sample of tweets

- *Conspiracy Theories Dataset, 2020-2023*: 5.509.549 organic tweets (without retweets) - Subsample including the token 'plandemia' (word, hashtag): 221.044 tweets - Subsample filtering the emojis (with *tidyEmoji* package): 46.318 tweets (21%). The rest of tweets (174.726 tweets, 79%) do not contain emojis - Determination of tweets containing hate speech & extraction of all the pairs of emojis sharing the same tweet.

Source: Author.

5.2. Pre-processing and data cleaning

Before starting more specific analyses, such as an emotion and sentiment analysis, a first exploratory data analysis (EDA) was carried out to explore the dataset, followed by a pre-processing and cleaning stage common in textual analyses employing computational strategies. The data were pre-processed and cleaned with the help of several R packages included in tidyverse such as dplyr or stringr [https://www.tidyverse.org/], as well as tm (Feinerer & Hornik, 2024), aimed at preparing the corpus for analysis). This routine task improves computational analysis (Wickham, Averick, Bryan, et al., 2019). A new corpus was created with pre-processed data before applying sentiment analysis. As specific to the processing we employed, to improve sentiment identification in Spanish, it was decided to keep the 'ñ' for better identification of Spanish words, convert emojis to their Spanish textual strings, and hashtags were kept (removing the '#' sign and preserving their text). These steps were prior to the tokenisation process.

5.3. Strategy used for sentiment and emotion analysis with the syuzhet package and limitations in measuring hate speech

In order not to lose the context of each tweet, the text that had previously been processed into a vector of sentences was analysed with the function get_sentences() of the multilingual package *syuzhet* in R (Mohammad et al., 2015), which implements the openNLP sentence tokeniser (Jockers, 2023). This routine allowed the text to be split into units (in this case, sentences). Then, sentiment analysis was applied with the NRC Emotion lexicon from the same package (Mohammad & Turney, 2010). This lexicon consists of words and their associations with eight emotions (anger, fear, anticipation, confidence, surprise, sadness, joy and disgust) and two sentiments (negative and positive).

The function get_nrc_sentiment was used to obtain the sentiment of each tweet by specifying the Spanish language. As explained by the authors of the NRC Emotion lexicon (Mohammad et al., 2015), this function assigns a value to each word based on whether there is an association with these emotions or feelings and their valence. For the construction of the dataset of tweets with hate emotions, all emotions were first detected in the dataset containing all tweets with emojis (46,318 tweets). This task was done with *syuzhet* and the *openNLP* phrase tokeniser (Mo-

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hammad et al., 2015; Jockers, 2023). Subsequently, a subsample of tweets was prepared containing emotions of anger, fear, disgust or sadness on the basis that these emotions often coexist and reinforce each other in hateful contexts, with the idea of capturing a more nuanced and complete picture of hate in the narratives.

Although the determination of what is hate and what is not hate is tremendously complex, and it can even be affirmed that there is no universal definition of what hate speech is (United Nations, 2021; The Council of Europe, 2023), we could understand that, in the specific environment of social networks, hate speech refers to communications of an offensive or discriminatory nature. Communications directed for different reasons against individuals, groups and even institutions can provoke harmful micro, meso or macro-social effects. We understand that considering these four emotions is only an approach to detecting hate speech.

This highly complex task is not unrelated to the overall study of emotions and feelings, so measurement has limitations. From a theoretical perspective relating to the sociology of emotions, as Bericat (2006, pp. 3-5) has already suggested, emotional processes are characterised by their great complexity due to the different elements involved in the experience of emotions and the existence of a diversity of emotional states. In this field, this work focuses primarily on 'emotional expression (the external manifestation of emotions)' (Bericat, 2006, p. 4), although in this article, ascribed to the Twitter scenario and attempting to approach the emojis of hate in the context of plandemia, an aspect on which there is still much to be known about this aspect, especially in its more relational dimensions.

5.4. Emojis co-occurrence network and determination of hate emojis communities related to 'plandemic'

Diverse Python libraries were employed to build the emojis co-occurrence network (Figure 4). Before representing the network, the pairs of emojis in each tweet classified as hate tweets were extracted. To construct the emojis co-occurrence network, the relationship between two emojis was considered as the fact of sharing the same tweet. Once the network of co-emojis of hate in the context of plandemia had been elaborated, different measures of social network analysis were calculated, and the communities of belonging of each emoji were obtained with the help of the Louvain algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008). This algorithm takes the idea of a 'community' to be one in which groups with a high density of connections within them can be found. The Louvain community detection method, developed by Blondel et al. (2008), is a simple algorithm that can quickly find clusters with high modularity in large networks. Modularity here means the density of connections within clusters compared to the density of connections between clusters (Blondel, 2008). The communities of hate emojis were calculated, and from here, the membership of each emoji to a community was extracted. This procedure was first done in R (with *igraph* -Csárdi et al., 2024-) and later – as validation – in Python. As Junker (2020) points out, community detection algorithms make it possible to identify groups in the network with common characteristics. The visual representation of the network shown in the article was made with the help of a set of Python libraries, such as *emoji, matplotlib.pyplot, network, pandas, Image, numpy, python-louvain, louvain*, and other more generic ones, which can be found in PyPI (Python Package Index): https://pypi.org/].

6. Main emojis in the 'plandemic' dataset

We now synthetically describe the main emojis that we have identified in our dataset (Figure 1). These emojis belong to different categories, according to the Unicode classification (2024). The main emoji, very much in line with the conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, and particularly with the denialist and anti-vaccine sides, is the syringe emoji (💉), which prevails over the others in this dataset. It is an emoji classified within the 'objects' category or group and the 'medical' subcategory. As seen in Figure 2, other emojis do not have as much comparative importance. Although they are equally relevant in connection with the global discourses framed in the context of 'plandemic'. Some of the main emojis found are widely used in various social contexts. For example, the 'face with tears of joy' (😂) is the most popular emoji on Twitter according to different sources and platforms[1]. There are different variants of this emoji, among which the third one appears the most in our data, in a similar semantic line: 'rolling on the floor laughing' (🤣). Both are in the 'Smileys & Emotions' group. Another in this group is 'thinking face' (🤔), also commonly used on Twitter and other networks.

Secondly, in our dataset, we find an emoji also very used internationally in different contexts as the so-called 'backhand index pointing down- (👇), which is also the most popular internationally according to the sources cited above. This emoji is usually used to indicate something specific and point it out in the context of the message or to emphasise or mark some idea. However, as with all emojis, the meaning depends largely on the context in which it is used or even the tone of the conversation, which are key to its understanding. This emoji is sometimes used to express something negative as well. The emoji' backhand index pointing right' (👉) is also often used to draw attention to something, emphasise or indicate some direction. Other trendy symbols that we found in this first descriptive approach were those of 'female sign' (♀) and 'male sign' (♂). Likewise, a series of them frequently appear in the 'People & Body' group, such as 'woman cartwheeling' (🤸‍♀), 'woman walking' (🚶‍♀), 'man running' (🏃‍♂) and 'man dancing' (🕺), which are emojis usually associated with positive activities or emotions, although their use and meaning may vary, as we will see below, depending on the context in which they are used (section 8.2.4). These types of symbols that appear in our dataset are also widely used in different fields, hence the importance of observing them in context.

On the other hand, some of the emojis we have found have been widely used in the context of conspiracy theories and hate speech related to the pandemic. These emojis are common in toxic discourses during the pandemic. The 'skull and crossbones' (☠), the 'clown face' (🤡), the 'ewe' (🐑). Or other facial expressions belonging to the wide group of 'Smileys & Emotions', such as the 'pouting face' (😡), the 'face with symbols on the mouth' (🤬) or the 'face vomiting' (🤮). The following pages explore the meaning they acquire in connection with other emojis frequently used in the context of pandemic denialism or associated conspiracy theories, such as anti-vaccine ones.

[1] https://emojitracker.com/; https://www.statista.com/topics/11194/emoji-usage/; https://worldemojiday.com/statistics; https://emojipedia.org/face-with-tears-of-joy

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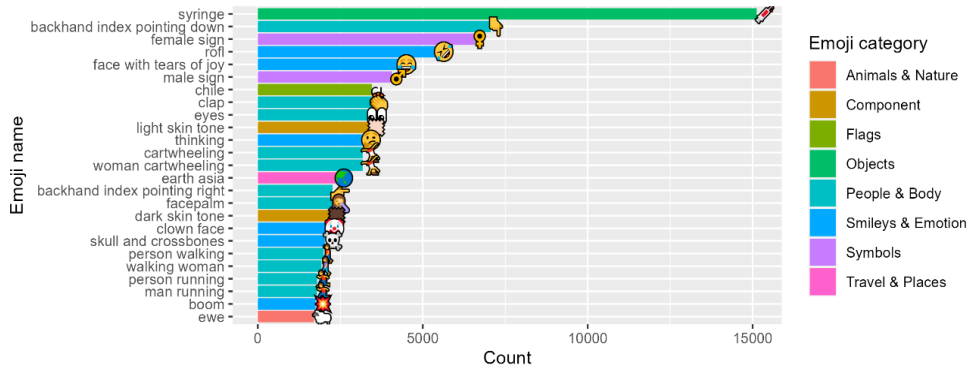
Figure 2. The 25 most popular Emojis



Source: Author from the *Plandemia Dataset with Emojis, 2020-2023*. Based on Spanish language tweets.

7. Hate emojis in the context of 'plandemia'

A second aim of our work was to identify hate in the subsample of tweets on 'plandemia' containing emojis (section 5.3). In this way, we could extract a dataset with tweets classified as hate (first) to study the role played by emojis in conspiracy theories and hate micro-narratives (second). Figure 3 shows the top 50 emojis in tweets using the token 'plandemic' (in Spanish). The size of the emojis in the figure means that the presence of these emojis is most relevant. As can be seen, the syringe emoji, which usually represents in this context the vaccines against COVID-19 (💉), prevails well ahead of the rest. It is an emoji of central importance due to its recurrence in conversations about the plandemic. It is often associated with anti-vaccination messages or messages warning of the risks of vaccines. Other emojis related to the pandemic, health, safety, disease, or its symptoms, and which are frequently found in these conversations, are, for example, the face with a medical mask used to prevent the spread of the virus and which in the context of 'plandemic' also connects with anti-mask discourses (😷), or others such as the emoji of the face vomiting (🤮) or with symptoms of illness (🤢), nausea, discomfort or sneezing (🤧), among others to which we will refer in more detail later on (sections 8.1.1 to 8.1.4).

Figure 3. The 'plandemic' hate emojis. Top 50.

Source: Author from the *Plandemia Dataset with Emojis, 2020-2023*. Based on Spanish language tweets.

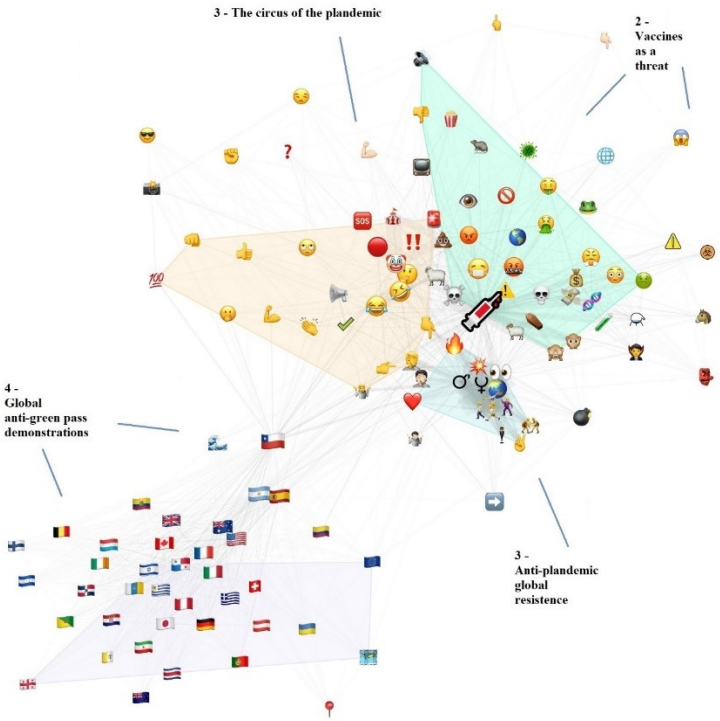
8. Network of co-emojis and hate emoji communities that co-occur on Twitter in the context of 'plandemia'.

8.1. Network of hate co-emojis

For this section, we have constructed an undirected and weighted network based on the co-occurrence of hate emojis in tweets (Figure 4). Each node of this network is an emoji. Edges are the relationships or links between two nodes and indicate that the two emojis are related to each other, that is, they appear together in at least the narrative space of a tweet. The weight of each edge is proportional to the frequency with which two emojis co-occur in the considered dataset.

To detect communities of closely related emojis, we used Louvain's algorithm (section 5.6). This algorithm by Blondel et al. (2018) is a technique used to detect communities in large networks, such as a co-occurrence network of emojis. What the algorithm does is initially assign each emoji to its own community and then optimises modularity, which measures the density of connections within communities compared to connections between communities. Through iterations, the algorithm clusters emojis into larger communities, maximising modularity at each step. This allows it to identify groups of emojis that tend to appear together in messages, revealing meaningful patterns and relationships in emoji usage. Figure 4 depicts the network of hate emojis in the plandemic and also visualises the areas where the different communities are located.

Figure 4. Network of co-occurrence of hate emojis, and communities of belonging.



Source: Author from the *Plandemia Dataset with Emojis, 2020-2023*. Based on Spanish language tweets. Network made in Python representing the most relevant emojis by degree centrality and the strength of connections. Communities were calculated with the algorithm of Louvain. Emojis are sized proportionally to their centrality in the network. Colored polygons have been drawn to more easily identify communities. More details on sections 5.23 - 5.2.4.

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To improve the visualisation of the graph, nodes and edges were previously filtered according to their relevance (degree centrality). The degree is a measure that calculates the number of emojis in a network to which a particular emoji is directly connected. In our data, when two emojis are connected, they co-occur (match) in a tweet. If they co-occur a lot, their degree is higher. The communities detected by Louvain’s algorithm (sections 8.2.1 to 8.2.4) can be interpreted as emojis that tend to share a narrative.

We now focus on looking at the communities of hate co-emojis in the tweets that have used the string ‘plandemic’ (word or hashtag) in the dataset we are analysing. To facilitate the understanding of some of the key elements of each community, we have assigned a name to each community based on the dominant narrative in the community (Figure 4). We explore in each community which emojis are prevalent and their links to the ‘plandemic’ conspiracy narrative. It is essential to note that the hate co-emoji network does not include all emojis, just the most significant ones.

Although different encyclopaedias or inventories of emojis show the standardised individual meaning of each emoji, emojis can acquire new meanings or nuances in their relationship with others. In this way, emojis can construct a micro-narrative (Gualda, 2024a) that, although brief, can have extraordinary communicative power if used in specific social and cultural contexts where these signs are widely used and well understood. The impact is the greatest when systematic combinations of emojis are found in the same context. Emojis' micro-narratives exemplify how a simple visual language can generate complex meanings, which can be instrumentalised for ideological, commercial or other purposes to make messages more impactful and viral.

We describe below, with an approach based on social network analysis, the co-occurrence network of hate emojis and the emojis’ communities that differentiate themselves in this network after modularity calculations. Denser communities (with more modularity) have more connections within them. The particular way in which emojis are articulated and combined helps us to understand their communicative role or function in the particular context of discourses on ‘plandemia’.

Figure 4 shows a visualisation of the network of co-emojis of hate in which the main emojis identified in the tweets about pandemics are represented. It is a network with several subgraphs, clearly showing how one of them (section 8.2.4), although connected to the main subgraph (the one with the most emojis), is at a greater distance. One aspect that stands out in the main subgraph is that it comprises several subcommunities, each with a greater or lesser degree of internal cohesion. It is important to note that there is some overlap between the various communities in the central subgraph. This overlapping is because some emojis are used to support the discourse of several communities, and there are, therefore, ties that link them to other emojis, although, at the same time, the Louvain algorithm classifies them in a single community. This fact gives us a clear clue about the existence of a micro-narrative on plandemic with several connecting arguments explained in the following sections (mainly in sections 8.2.1 to 8.2.3). In the elaboration of the graph, the size of the emojis was represented as a function of the value of each emoji, taking into account the degree centrality. This shows that the emoji with the largest size and centrality is precisely the syringe (💉), which has a central value in the articulation of the different emoji communities, according to the calculated measures of degree centrality and betweenness.

8.2. Communities of hate emojis and associated micro-narratives

Each community of hate emojis detected and appearing in the co-emoji network (Figure 4) is constituted by a set of emojis that produce a micro-narrative that refers to different argumentative dimensions of plandemic. We describe them below.

8.2.1. The circus of the plandemic.

One of the most common co-occurring communities of emojis in the narrative about plandemic is the one that argues that we are dealing with a 'circus', a 'spectacle' or a 'pantomime'. Emojis are very expressive in this community and reinforce, in coherence with the texts of the tweets that accompany them, the conspiracy theory that argues that the COVID-19 pandemic responds to a plan and is a farce invented for the benefit of some. Figure 4 clearly shows the relevance of several highly connected emojis (💩, 🤡 and 🎪). The high connection of these emojis, one of the predominant triads of emojis in this network, forms a micro-narrative that allows for the strengthening of arguments of mockery and ridicule towards official health measures. These emojis represent metaphors that concisely express ideas and emotions associated with the conspiracy theory of plandemic.

World leaders or experts (seen as unreliable and symbolized as clowns) are also mocked using these symbols. Such narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic reflect and foster scepticism and mistrust, contributing to the delegitimization of institutions, which significantly affects public health, whether by discouraging vaccination or reducing adherence to social distance, hygiene norms, and other factors.

The 💩 emoji expresses the view that the pandemic is 'rubbish', a lie, and also symbolises institutional corruption, while the 🤡 and the 🎪 highlight the idea that the pandemic is a spectacle or a farce. The popcorn emoji (🍿) similarly reinforces the idea of the spectacle of the pandemic, which helps to develop the pandemic denialist narrative. Viewed together (🤣, 😂, 🤡, 🎪, 🙄, 🤪, 💩), these emojis suggest attitudes of contempt, dislike and mockery, both towards people with public responsibility and towards institutions and prevention measures or other official statements developed to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Messages accompanied by these emojis often suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax. In a disparaging way, the sheep (🐑) frequently appears in Twitter micro-narratives representing people who follow the rules without question.

> "The 1% Control the World 😈 The 4% Are Sold Puppets 🤑 The 90% Are Asleep 😴 There is a 5% Who Know This and are Trying to Wake Up the 90% 😳 The 1% Don't Want the 5% To Wake Up the 90% 😈 Yet They Are Succeeding! 👏 You and I Are that 5% 💪 #Plandemia #Coronacirco #NoAlNOM https://t.co/suPS7mHr3R" [Translated from Spanish]

The population that adheres to the health recommendations is described as 'sheep'. It is a 'herd' that is humiliated and belittled and needs to be 'woken up', recalling recurring terms in the tweets that often accompany this community of co-emojis. This type of offensive and hateful discourse, due to its effects, is a major handicap for the proper development of public health policies and is often loaded with large doses of misinformation. The population in general and authorities or leaders in particular are scorned or insulted with the help of semantically loaded discursive markers (emojis) that act as visual metaphors that condense and amplify signifiers that are associated with farce and manipulation (🤡, 🐑).

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The endowment of these meanings to emojis in the context of the pandemic reveals a sociolinguistic practice that seeks to stigmatise, delegitimise and silence, on the one hand, the citizens (‘the sheep’) who follow official recommendations and, on the other, the authorities, leaders and institutions (‘the clowns’) who dictate them.

On the other hand, a set of emojis that also characterise this community focuses on showing resistance and rebellion (💪 , 👊 , 🖕), representing the active struggle against restrictions and imposed rules, showing a defiant stance and rejection, but also solidarity among people who resist (✊). These are common emojis or emojis that link to other co-occurring emoji communities. Connected with the narrative of the plandemic’s circus, another series of emojis (🤔 , 🤷 , 🤷‍♂️ , 🤦 , ⁉️ , ❓) also reinforce the ideas of doubt, questioning, surprise, confusion, lack of veracity and scepticism towards the official narrative of the pandemic, and the constant search for alternative answers. Complementarily, the eye emoji (👁), used in this community in the context of the pandemic, symbolises the idea of vigilance, that is, that users are observing and paying attention to certain events, narratives or actions of the authorities and are attentive to any sign of manipulation or deception, alluding to the symbolism of the eye of providence (Wilson, 2020).

On other occasions, in the face of the circus of the plandemia, emojis are found that reveal a carefree tone and attitude (😎 , 🤷 , 🤷‍♂️). These emojis represent a relaxed, indifferent and defiant stance towards restrictions, suggesting the message that official measures are not taken seriously. Similarly, in this discursive context, other emojis express anger, frustration, discontent and detachment from the pandemic (😒 , 😳 , 🤦 , 😈 , 💢 , 👻 , 👹 , 👺), expressing intense emotions.

Some of these emojis even suggest that there are evil forces at play and perceived deception in the actions of authorities and other pandemic-related figures. It is not uncommon to find emojis such as the devil’s face (😈) representing the existence of perverse forces or defiant and malicious attitudes towards authorities or official actions. We have found other emojis such as the ghost (👻), the Japanese demon ‘Oni’ (👹), or ‘Tengu’ (👺), a mythical creature from Japanese folklore that have connections with emojis from this community. These emojis allude to the terrifying fact that some truths are ‘missing’ or ‘invisible’, or that there is something evil, manipulative or lying in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

> “More topical than ever ❗ 🤡 👻 👹 👺 #Covid19 #CCPVirus #WEF #Mutation #DavosAgenda #Agenda2030 #GreenDeal #CO2 #NWO #NOM #FakePandemic #Plandemia #Eugenic #Vaccine #Impfung #Vaccine #AnaBotin #communism #nazis https://t.co/aUwQaWcx0G” [Translated from Spanish]

Finally, another set of recurring emojis in this community show support and validation for the conspiratorial arguments being developed (✔️, 👏, 💯), reinforcing the idea that these beliefs are shared by others, empowering and encouraging other users. Other times, they are used in contexts of celebration and satisfaction (🥳 , 😁 , 😊), representing the joy of those who believe they have discovered the ‘truth’ behind the pandemic, a truth they hope and pray will come to light (🙏).

8.2.2. The vaccine as a threat.

As seen in the emoji co-occurrence network (Figure 4), the emoji corresponding to the syringe (💉) is the most important in this community and globally in the whole

network, having equally high connections with other communities. The syringe represents the vaccine as a direct threat to health and individual freedom. The syringe emoji becomes the central symbol of the threat, representing an invasion of the body and a loss of autonomy. This emoji is representative of the anti-vaccine movement. However, in the context of COVID-19, due to its symbolic power and its internationalisation, it has a strong capacity to articulate other messages connected to it. Unsurprisingly, the syringe occupies a central position in the network. It is the emoji with the highest degree of centrality and betweenness in the network as a whole (to use the terminology of social network analysis).

The emojis of this community are connected to those who claim the 'plandemic' conspiracy theory. This connection allows for the reinforcement of various narratives and emotions that support this theory. Emojis associated with death, destruction and chaos (i.e. 💣, ☠️, 🍗, 💀, 🤹‍♀️). Emojis related to health and medicine, such as test tubes, masks, and others (💊, 😷, 💉, 🧪, 🧬, 😷) complement the syringe and reflect the distrust of drugs, vaccines, and science, suggesting that the virus was intentionally created. Emojis related to information, control and surveillance (👁️, 📺, 📢) suggest, among other meanings, that the authorities are using the pandemic to exert excessive control and surveillance over the population.

> "The young lady from the international monetary fund tells us that we are already old and she is the first one to warn us how chiquilla she is an expert in the elixir of life, the "pendeja" [insult] thinks she is immortal ☠️ #Plandemia #Repentinitis [SuddenDeaths] get the 6th dose 💉💉💉💉💉💉 https://t.co/RBVEzYzYn2 en #Repentinitis 🧪💉🧪💉💉💉 #PLANdemia 👁️💥🙈🙉🙈 https://t.co/sDfyeh7UDk" [Translated from Spanish].

This community comprises a diversity of emojis that usually connect to the syringe and allude to other dimensions. For example, the emojis of rejection and protest (🤌, ❌, 🚫, 🆘) symbolise opposition and resistance to official measures, while those of distrust, scepticism and anger (🙉, 🙈, 🙈, 😳, 🤢, 🤬, 😤, 😡, 😱, 😨, 😳, 😵, 🥸, 🤡, 🤑, 💸, 💸, 🐀, 🐁, 🐸, 🐂, 🐴, 👺, 👾, ☣️, ⚗️, 🔴, ⚠️, ‼️, ➖, 👇, 👋🏻, ✅, 🌐, 🦠, 💪🏻, ✊, 🧪, 💰, 🧬, 🤢, 💀) reflect disbelief and rejection of the official narrative, suggesting that there are hidden and malicious interests behind the pandemic. When used together, these emojis reinforce the conspiratorial narrative by expressing and amplifying emotions of fear, distrust, rejection and resistance towards official measures and authorities. The discourse is saturated in the negative side.

In this way, vaccination is linked to conspiracy theories about population control, death and the new world order. At the same time, scientists, doctors and those who promote vaccination are stigmatised, insulted or rejected, fostering polarisation and social division (as other analyses based on different methodologies, especially surveys, have highlighted). Overall, this community of co-emojis creates a climate of alertness, fear, anger and distrust towards vaccines. By linking vaccination with concepts such as social control and loss of freedom, conspiracy theories are reinforced, and polarisation around COVID-19 is encouraged. As Dyrendal (2023, p. 275) argues, in Nordic countries, discourse on issues such as vaccines is combined with tropes of 'tyranny' that infringe on 'freedom' as an 'empty signifier' in the conspiracy discourses of movements such as the World Freedom Alliance.

The emojis' co-occurrences network exhibits a narrative that presents vaccines as an imminent danger to health and individual freedom. Members of this community

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see vaccines as part of a global conspiracy to control the population. The emojis reinforce this narrative by creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust.

A very relevant aspect of this co-emoji community is that the discourse suggests serious or very serious threats. It reflects a visual language that conveys a series of alarming messages. Extreme risk is represented in the emojis of the coffin, skulls, syringe with blood, biological risk derived from viruses or diseases (biohazard symbol) and the virus emoji, as a direct threat derived from vaccination or genetic mutations, infectious diseases or side effects caused by vaccines (⚰️, 💀, ☠️, 💉, ☣️, 🦠, ⚠). These are visual representations of death, fatal diseases, or lack of control over the organism, including warning signs (⚠) of dangerous situations or, in the case of contagion, for example, the need for protection against contagious diseases (😷).

A more moderate risk is represented by emojis such as the devil, fire, sick, genetics and mouse or rats (😈, 🔥, 🤒, 🧬, 🐁, 🐀), which encourage fear by visually representing problems and long-term side effects. Alongside the above, other emojis represent other negative emotional reactions to vaccination. Other threats, no longer associated with the seriousness of death, are symbolised by the emojis of fear, anxiety and surprise (😱, 😰, 😳, 🤢), which suggest that vaccination is perceived as a threat to health and individual freedom, as well as an imposition or restrictions on daily life (🚫).

> “👿👿👿👿 Another case! 🆘🆘🆘🆘 How many minors must die for parents to resist experimental inoculations? 🛑🛑🛑🛑🛑 Stop it now! #StopVaccination #NotoChildhoodVaccination #StopChildhoodVaccination #COVID19 #Plandemia @DocentesPVerdad https://t.co/B7XJRPU7NH” [Translated from Spanish].

Emojis related to money and economic profit (💸, 🤑, 💰) denote the belief that there are economic interests behind vaccination, whether by pharmaceutical companies, governments or other actors. Alongside emojis such as the above, a recurring element in Twitter messages is the incorporation of alert emojis, another characteristic pattern. It reflects now a highly specialised visual language that helps to convey a sense of imminent danger and global conspiracy (📢, 🚨, ❗, ⚠, 🚫, 🛑, 🆘), along with other expressions of rage, anger and rejection (🤬, 😡, 👎), questioning or interrogation that seems to sow doubt or question official information (❓). Other emojis indicate strength and endurance (💪) or direct attention (👇). The globe (🌎, 🌐), together with narratives of danger and urgency, suggests a call for global action and resistance, possibly against pandemic and vaccine restrictions.

8.2.3. Anti-Plandemic Global Resistance.

This co-emojis community, which we have synthetically named ‘Anti-Plandemic Global Resistance’, is dominated by tweets written by a single author on Twitter [@desakordes]. In our dataset on hate emojis, this user alone has 2436 tweets with similar texts and systematic use of a comparable combination of emojis. We have found tweets from 2020 to 2023, but many were published in 2020. The systematic repetition of the same emojis in tweets explains this dense and cohesive emojis’ co-occurrence subcommunity in the global network, as shown in Figure 4.

The continuous repetition of similar chains of emojis constitutes a micro-narrative that reinforces the discourse shown in the texts. Through visual language, these

emojis strengthen the discourse on Twitter about 'plandemia' in various ways. They are emojis that, in this case, convey emotions of global resistance to the COVID-19 pandemic and of struggle and vigilance, reinforcing the idea of the plandemic conspiracy theory that a hidden power is manipulating the population. By using these symbols, which are shared internationally, supporters of the existence of a 'plandemic' or COVID-19 denialism create a sense of community and solidarity, thus strengthening their beliefs.

Thus, the conspiratorial narrative resisting '#plandemia' seems to express here resistance, struggle and protest (✌️ , 🤺 , 🧍 , ⛹️ , 🚶 , 🕺), and symbolises active (through movement and action emojis) and passive resistance against restrictions, promoting the idea of fighting against imposed measures. The movement emojis represent users being active and fighting against supposed injustices. The emoji ✌️ (victory sign) symbolises triumph, while other emojis refer to the ability to overcome obstacles (🤺 , 🧍). Danger and urgency, with emojis such as explosion (💥) and fire (🔥), are suggested, as well as the seriousness of the situation and the need for immediate action.

> "@USER Strength, Honour and FREEDOM Until Final Victory ✌️ ... "Go get 'em! Go get 'em! And let them know who's boss!" That they are few and Cowards. 👀 👇 #COVIDisOver #Planet3110 #Plandemia #ToxicBozal #residenciasdeancianosgate... #Sevilla #Oviedo #Barcelona #ToqueDeQueda #EstadoDeSitio 🤺 ⛹️ 🚶 🤺 👀 💥 🌎" [Translated from Spanish]

Emojis of distrust, scepticism, tiredness, discontent, sadness, or pain (🤦 , 🖤) express frustration and suspicion towards the authorities and official measures, suggesting something hidden or malicious behind the pandemic.

The current situation is rejected. This narrative also alludes to being attentive and vigilant to what is happening (👀) or to what the managers of the pandemic are doing, going as far as actions of denunciation and accusation, as shown in some of the tweets cited. Other emojis highlight the dimensions of mockery and ridicule (🐔) of official measures and authorities, showing an attitude of contempt and scepticism. The chain or emoji of connections (🔗 , 🤼) seems to symbolise the union between people who support this discourse. Dimensions of health, medicine and love are also incorporated into the narrative of this community (🍎 , ➕ , ❤️‍🩹), or the global impact (🌎) of the pandemic is highlighted, showing how these ideas spread around the world and to a diversity of people (♀️ , ♂️).

When used together, these emojis reinforce the conspiratorial narrative of the 'plandemic' by expressing and amplifying emotions of fear, distrust, rejection and resistance towards official measures and authorities, as observed in studies on the spread of disinformation on social networks. The combination of these emojis forms a cohesive discourse. By symbolising struggle, vigilance and danger, these emojis feed the idea of a global plot against the population and create a sense of community among those who share these beliefs.

Despite the above, it must be taken into account that in this case we are dealing with a community dominated by only an author who produces a negationist, anti-vaccine, anti-mask, anti-quarantine and even racist discourse, which rejects institutions, authorities and politicians (press, political leaders) and saturates the discourse with words such as strength, honour and freedom (other 'empty signifiers' – Dyrendal, 2023 –, in this case distorted, as they are incorporated into violent and

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hateful discourses, together with insults. Emojis reinforce the message, making this narrative more visually appealing.

> "@user The truth is that sometimes you feel like going back to the times of the Guillotine.... And look that we are against the death penalty... But it is that these #ExtremePsychopathicSociopaths s deserve it.. 👀 #WeAreTheResistence #Plandemia #ToxicMuzzle #ThesePoliticiansJoinedInPrison 🤺" [Translated from Spanish].

It is necessary to explain, to understand more about the tweets that give rise to this community of co-emojis, that they are mainly generated from an account of an anonymous Twitter/X user, @Desakordes, whose description mentions, among other things, a website [https://www.urbanres.eu/], which directs to the popular video 'Plandemic 3: The Great Awakening'. This is the third video in the 'Plandemic' collection produced and directed by Mikki Willis, whose contents are aligned with the anti-vaccine movement, whose dissemination of misinformation was timed to gain viewership (Kattumana, 2023; Nazar & Pieters, 2021) and which has had a high impact in terms of views and shares on different networks (Neil, 2020), or which has been widely shared (Kearney et al. 2020).

8.2.4. Global anti-green-pass demonstrations.

This community of co-emojis appears on the network away from the rest. However, it remains connected with other communities through emojis such as those representing Chile, Spain and Argentina, especially the syringe, which, as we have already indicated, is the emoji with the bigger betweenness centrality in the network. The flags of a diversity of countries or regions stand out in this community, alluding to the globality of the plandemic, and the location markers (the location marker emoji, 📍 and the map emoji, 🗺️).

This subgraph of co-emojis in the network is more comprehensible when we delve deeper into the tweets where the emojis that originate them are found. Specifically, these are very similar tweets that usually incorporate the same set of flags in the context of statements against the official narrative of the pandemic. They typically repeat the following string (or similar) that gives rise to the pairs of links at the base of the subgraph: 🗺️ EUCLCHGRFRAUUAUSESITAR💉 👉 👉 ⛓'.

The tweets where these emojis are found commonly manifest a reaction in different countries regarding mobility passes, vaccination passports, greenpasses, etc., or they often refer to demonstrations in cities against vaccination or against vaccination passports or equivalents.

A closer look at the tweets containing these country emojis, or even the chain emoji (⛓), reveals that they are accompanied by words or hashtags clearly ascribed to anti-vaccination conspiracy theories: '#Cities against #Pandemic', '#Map n36' as explicit statements of opposition to the official narrative of the pandemic and some of the most controversial public health measures implemented, such as the aforementioned #GreenPass or #MandatoryVaccine. The emojis of this community reinforce the anti-vaccine and denialist narratives by expressing the global involvement of a diversity of regions and countries that are cited and symbolically represented in the tweets. Emojis relating to locations, maps, and flags reinforce the idea that this is a globalised movement, as reported in the press (La Vanguardia, 2022; Gutiérrez, 2021).

Other narratives found in this network refer to resistance and struggle (✊🏽, 👋🏽), as well as the spread or contagion of the pandemic and global vigilance (📍, 🗺️,

🌊) in the face of the 'plandemic' as mentioned in other communities through other emojis. Animal emojis (🐼, 🐻) can symbolise specific countries, such as China and Russia, referents in the conspiracy narrative. Globally, these visual symbols help create a community of users who share and reinforce their beliefs through visual communication, generating a sense of urgency and alertness, while ridiculing, mocking, challenging or distrusting official narratives (😏). The combination of these emojis in a vector such as (🇪🇺, ✊🏽, 📍, 😌) shows how they intertwine to form a cohesive, international discourse that supports the conspiracy theory of plandemic, and promote solidarity among users who share these beliefs (🤗).

9. Discussion and Conclusions

Although social science research on COVID-19 is diverse, few studies have explicitly focused on emojis. Similarly, research that has paid attention to emojis from a social network analysis perspective is almost non-existent. This article, based on a dataset containing the token 'plandemic' (word or hashtag in Spanish) and the study of hate emojis co-occurrence networks, has been able to detect patterns of communication on Twitter regarding how emojis are combined and articulated in the message as a whole to produce and reinforce predominantly anti-vaccine and anti-vaccine conspiracy narratives.

The co-occurrence of emojis in the same narrative space allows us to observe how emojis' connections shape a discourse of support for the conspiracy theory on the 'plandemic', feeding, with the help of emojis, the idea of a global plot against the population. Emojis contribute to a narrative of victimisation, mistrust and resistance that goes hand in hand with other aspects such as the symbolisation of danger, surveillance, manipulation and control. These emojis help to create a sense of community among those who share these beliefs by expressing anger, fear, mockery, and disdain. As these visual symbols are shared across networks and become known to users, they contribute to the existence of a community of users who share and reinforce their beliefs through visual communication, generating a sense of urgency and alertness while at the same time ridiculing and challenging official narratives.

While each of the co-emojis hate communities we have described articulates and accentuates an overriding conspiratorial narrative that can contribute to polarisation and hatred, it is a typical pattern around the axis of 'plandemic' to find tweets incorporating emojis that, although they are classified in a single community, due to the connections they maintain with other emojis at sharing the same tweet, help to construct the global pandemic denialist narrative, while adding a more specific meaning in the community in which they have been automatically classified.

The analysis has allowed us to confirm the contextual use of emojis and the importance of the context for understanding what these codes mean, as they are sometimes linked to sociohistoric moment phenomena. This aspect refers to polysemy, as the capacity of a linguistic sign (in this case, an emoji) to acquire multiple meanings or senses depending on the context in which it is used. Likewise, we can refer to intertextuality, which refers to text connections (i.e., tweets).

Based on the data analysis, it is evident that context plays a significant role in understanding specific emojis and the patterns of systematic co-occurrence in a similar context. In some cases, these patterns can help convey a more intricate or nuanced message than each emoji individually. For instance, consider the triad: ' 💩,

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🤡 and 🎪 ’, in section 8.2.1, or the strings characteristic of other communities (sections 8.2.3 and 8.2.4): ‘ 🗺️ EUCLCHGRFRAUUAUSESITAR💉 👉 ⛓️ ’ and “ ✌️ , 🤸 , 🕴️ , 🤾 , 🚶 , 🕺 ” which, without context, would be challenging to interpret.

For instance, in the tweet below, the strategic use of emojis and text in the same space constructs a narrative that aligns with the various communities described. The technique of repeating emojis within the same tweet, a widespread pattern, is a strategic use of rhetorical resources to convey the conspiratorial message about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines (denialist, anti-vaccine, anti-mask or anti-quarantine).

> “in #covid1984 #plandemia #HealthDictatorship #IDon’tVaccinateMe #repentinitis 🙉🙉🐑🐑🐑💉💉💉🍗🍗🍗 https://t.co/aFyxtfwYSi’ @user Keep selling the 🤡🎪😷. Even you don’t believe your posts 💸💵 💲 #ChaoMascarillas #GlobalPlandemia. #thebigresetmovie 📽️🍿🩼” [Translated from Spanish].

The messages in our dataset continuously use rhetorical elements of language. This rhetorical strategies and narrative tropes were also found in other type of cultural products, as it is reported recently in the analysis of anti-corona Lyrics by Önnefors (2024). Returning to our data, for instance, the repeated use of different emojis reinforces the message. It emphasises central aspects of the message, such as the dangerousness of vaccination (💉 , 🍗), criticism of established health measures (😷), or compliance with them by an uncritical population (🐑), or the idea of the falsity and pantomime of a pandemic (🤡 , 🎪), which has been created for purely economic purposes (💸 , 💵 , 💲).

Emojis, from a rhetorical perspective, create an ‘atmosphere’ of distrust, fear and rejection of institutions, appealing to the emotions of the receiver of the message and contributing to emotional polarisation. Attacking people or institutions, whether through emojis or texts, is an additional resource in the development of a hate narrative that has the potential effect of polarising and destroying social cohesion, as well as discrediting.

On the other hand, the systematic use of emojis and co-emojis for ironic purposes or to ridicule the other, sarcasm, satire, or black humour are powerful strategies in conspiracy rhetoric. They allow discrediting those who promote and follow the established health measures, thereby delegitimising their arguments and detracting from their seriousness by presenting them as ridiculous or manipulative characters. This use of language is not just about simplifying complex messages, but it also plays a significant role in discrediting health measures, an issue that needs to be urgently addressed. In connection with the network of co-emojis that we have analysed in the article (Figure 4), we have found that the repetition of the same emoji in a tweet, similar to the use of capital letters in the case of texts, is a common rhetorical strategy that provides greater emphasis and underlines some essential aspect of the message, which also allows us to create a kind of visual rhythm that can help to memorise or retain some element of the message. In relation to appealing to emotions, the repetition of an emoji can intensify this emotional response, creating a deeper connection to the message.

Emojis, in addition to simplifying a message, play a crucial role in reinforcing group identity. Using the same emojis on Twitter to develop conspiracy theories strengthens a shared identity, creating a sense of belonging. For instance, using the

‘🙉🙈’ emojis in the example message symbolizes the idea that the truth is hidden and people are being deceived, reinforcing the group’s shared identity.

The emojis co-occurrence network was constructed based on the pairs of emojis that share the space of the same tweet in a dataset where all their tweets contained the token ‘plandemic’. Through it, we have observed that a systematic repetition of emojis in a specific context on Twitter (the plandemic narratives) is a powerful rhetorical tool that can manipulate people’s emotions and effectively reinforce simple messages. In the case of the tweet we are now referring to as an example in this concluding section, this strategy is used to spread conspiracy theories, hatred and misinformation to generate fear, mistrust and discredit towards vaccines and health institutions.

Incorporating visual elements in the messages, in this case, emojis, allows for better capturing of the receiver’s attention, contributing to a more significant impact and virality of the messages. Additionally, emojis combined with the hashtags with which they share the message facilitate the amplification of the conspiracy narrative because users use hashtags to connect with people who share the same beliefs.

As has already been pointed out in other research based on different methods and techniques (such as surveys or experimental studies), the dissemination of conspiracy theories and misinformation can have very harmful consequences for public health and society in general by fostering distrust in institutions, their representatives and science (Pummerer et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2019; Douglas & Sutton, 2023). One of the typical consequences during the COVID pandemic was dissuading people from getting vaccinated or not respecting other health guidelines. In addition, these conspiracy beliefs or thinking contribute to the polarisation of society and the fragmentation of social cohesion and hinder constructive dialogue on issues of public interest, the impact on mental health and the risks of increased social and political polarisation, and the harmful effects on social cohesion and cooperation (Douglas & Sutton, 2018; Pummerer et al., 2022; Jolley & Paterson, 2020). Globally, experts have reported the serious social effects of conspiracy theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pummerer et al., 2022; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Uscinski et al., 2023).

By stigmatising certain groups (governments, experts, vaccinated people) and fostering mistrust, an atmosphere of hostility is created that can lead to social divisions. Portraying opponents as sinister and manipulative figures facilitates dehumanisation and justifies violent or discriminatory actions. Identifying one group as responsible for all ills diverts attention from the real problems and facilitates the search for blame.

This often-Manichean binary thinking simplifies reality as an ‘us’ versus a ‘them’, facilitating misinformation and polarisation. As suggested by Imhoff et al. (2022), one of the aspects that may help to understand the quadratic (U-shaped) relationship between political orientation and conspiratorial thinking seems to have to do precisely with the vision of a black-and-white world where few powerful evil people for prioritising their own sinister goals over the welfare of all others’ (p.397) is often rhetorically blamed, something that, in the setting of this article is quite evident. Emojis evoke strong emotions such as fear, anger, and distrust, as well as manipulating individuals’ beliefs. Members seek information that confirms their beliefs, reinforcing their cognitive biases.

Referring to hate speech and the analysis of the meme ‘Finspång’, Önnerfors (2019, p. 384) reminds us that ‘there is a risk that so-called humour, systematically abused for political purposes and as a cloak for a rhetoric of hate, too often melts

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down the last moral barriers of the democratic discourse'. Precisely, this abuse of the rhetoric of hate that puts democracy at risk is one of the elements that we have systematically found in the micro-narratives on plandemia. Rhetoric that, amplified visually and emotionally through what we have called the 'emojis of plandemic', has potentially greater impact when additionally articulated through the co-occurrence of emojis. Insofar as emojis are crucial for an adequate understanding of communicative processes in the platform society and digital societies, this work underscores the importance of our research in understanding and countering conspiratorial narratives.

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