

Digital battlefields: how racist and anti-racist discourse spread and interact on social media.

Case study of the 2024 European Union elections

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1) Introduction: Presentation and Objectives

In my Master's thesis I investigated the pervasive and evolving phenomenon of online racism in Europe, specifically using the 2024 EU elections as a critical case study. The primary objective was to identify the main trends of online racism by situating this discourse within its political and digital contexts (Verguts, 2025). I explored how - despite decades of legal and social efforts to combat discrimination - racism remains deeply rooted (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024) and has found new reach through social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and X/Twitter (Pei, 2022). These digital spaces are not neutral; they are active environments that both reflect and shape public sentiment (Velasco, 2025; Shaghasemi, 2025). I analyzed how platform algorithms interact with and amplify psychological mechanisms such as confirmation and negativity bias, and end up favoring sensationalist and emotionally charged content (Antypas, 2023), increasing emotional and political polarization (Del Vicario, 2016; Zhang, 2025) and creating fertile ground for hate speech. The findings of this thesis highlighted a lack of empirical data on the actual dynamics of racism on social media.

Aiming to fill this empirical gap, I started a PhD project titled "*Digital battlegrounds: how racist and anti-racist discourse spread and interact on social media. Case study of the 2024 EU elections*". The general objective of this research is to examine how these conflicting discourses were expressed and contested during the 2024 elections across the six largest immigration-receiving countries in the EU: Germany, France, Spain, Italy, The Netherlands, and Belgium.

Specific objectives include:

- Assessing the extent, circulation, and spread of racist and antiracist discourses.
- Analyzing the interaction between racist and anti-racist content.
- Identifying the key actors involved in producing and amplifying these messages.
- Identifying the dominant narratives involved in producing and amplifying these messages.

- Determining which forms of discourse are most influential in terms of visibility and engagement.
- Comparing these dynamics across different countries and platforms.

2) Theoretical-Methodological Approach

Social media does not just reflect societal attitudes; its algorithmic structure actively amplifies and normalizes hate (Keum & Miller, 2018; Ekman, 2019). The results of my previous research suggest that online racism intensifies during moments of crisis, has intensified during the 2024 EU electoral period (especially targeting immigrants, refugees and Muslims) (European Observatory of Online Hate, n.d.), is increasingly fueled by disinformation and AI-generated narratives, and is further normalized through the anonymity and algorithmic amplification of social media platforms.

For this project, I employed a systematic literature review as the core methodology. This approach allowed me to synthesize fragmented knowledge and map the theoretical foundations of modern racism, especially on social media platforms. I also reviewed existing Social Media Analytics (SMA) applications, such as sentiment analysis and Social Network Analysis, to understand how researchers currently track digital hate.

Now I propose to move beyond a literature review to an empirical, mixed-methods approach. The proposed methodology is structured into several phases:

- Preparation Phase: Conceptualizing racist and anti-racist content within specific country and language contexts through digital ethnography and interviews with experts.
- Quantitative Phase:
 - Sentiment Analysis: Classifying content as racist, neutral, or anti-racist to measure emotional intensity.
 - Trend Analysis: Examining the volume and spread of discourse over time.
 - Social Network Analysis: Mapping interactions and identifying influential actors and "nodes" of hate or counter-hate.
 - Engagement Metrics: Evaluating which messages gain the most traction.
- Qualitative Phase: Deepening the understanding of narratives and communicative strategies through thematic and discourse analysis.
- Comparative Analysis: Final integration of results to understand how political, social, and historical differences between the six countries influence digital discourse.

3) Results: Main Contributions, Results, and Conclusions

My previous thesis concluded that while overt racism has been legally challenged, it has merely transformed into more subtle forms, and has found a new reach through social media platforms to become re-normalized again (Keum & Miller, 2018). However, a major limitation noted was the lack of systematic, country-specific statistical evidence.

Consequently, this PhD project is designed to fill this gap, aiming to analyze how and which kind of racist and antiracist discourse was spread during the 2024 EU electoral period. The expected contributions include (1) filling the previously mentioned gap of empirical data of online racism and antiracism dynamics, (2) advancing academic

innovation by testing and refining SMA methodologies in social sciences (creating a framework that can be applied to other socio-political issues) and (3) providing actionable tools for policymakers and civil society to countering hate speech in digital spaces. By comparing results across six countries, the research will also conclude with a deeper understanding of how political and historical contexts influence the 'digital battlefield', ultimately working towards transforming social media into a space that fosters social cohesion rather than division.

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