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**ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

**A CORPUS ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 HATE SPEECH ON  
FACEBOOK**

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**Keywords:** Corpus Analysis, COVID-19 Hate Speech, Discourse, Collocations, Humour Language, Metaphors, Puns, Media, Facebook.

### **Abstract**

The present doctoral research aims to detect and analyse manifestations of hate speech that emerged during the global COVID-19 pandemic, specifically on the social networking platform Facebook. This platform was chosen due to its status as the most widely used social media service both in Romania and globally. In the context of this study, hate speech is defined as public language that expresses hatred or incites violence against individuals or groups based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or other characteristics, including medical status. The data used in this analysis were extracted from Facebook pages belonging to prominent British, American and international news organisations, consisting of user comments responding to COVID-19 news posts.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research, an extensive theoretical framework was imperative. The study begins by establishing the foundations of corpus linguistics, focusing on communication modes, types of corpora, data collection procedures, data access and analysis, analytical tools, concordancers, and the Neo-Firthian approach to collocation and discourse. Since the metaphorical language was anticipated to be a salient feature of the data, the study further investigates how metaphors may be identified and extracted from a corpus using various linguistic and computational techniques. This is followed by an exploration of discourse analysis (DA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), as both are central to understanding the communicative context and ideological implications of the hate speech identified.

As the self-made corpus comprises comments from a global audience, politeness theories and impoliteness were incorporated to provide a nuanced account of pragmatic interaction. Recent studies on humour and media discourse also informed the analysis. In this regard, the study categorises and exemplifies various forms of wordplay and humour—including puns—and introduces a gradable taxonomy comprising satire, parody, irony, and sarcasm. A key aim of the study is to distinguish between legitimate expressions of opinion—protected under freedom of speech—and harmful, discriminatory discourse. Analysing hate speech in the unprecedented context of a global medical crisis posed unique challenges. The study offers an overview of the spectrum of hate speech as it appears on social networks, offering an overview of all types of hate,

ranging from verbal to calls for violence or terrorism. The analytical framework also surveys national and international legal responses to hate speech, including the UK, the US, the EU and global legislation alongside Facebook's content moderation policies related to COVID-19. The research contributes novel insights by focusing on hate speech specifically triggered by a medical crisis, and by proposing an original analytical model. Drawing from the Council of Europe's advanced hate speech toolkit, an analysis scheme was developed that categorises examples, assesses their level of explicitness, and evaluates whether they include a call to action.

The methodological framework details the multi-stage evolution of the corpus, including the initial research proposal, consultations with the evaluation committee, a preliminary publication, a preliminary publication and the final version. Followed then by the experimental tools description, Facebook Comments Extractor and WordSmith concordancer. Screenshots illustrating their functionality are included, alongside a comprehensive schematic of the experimental process, described step by step.

The interpretation of the data comprises several steps. First, keywords from the COVID-19 lexicon were examined in combination with their collocations, which led to the identification of more categories of hate speech than initially anticipated. The quantitative analysis offers a broad set of authentic examples, which were categorised into distinct types of hate speech, metaphor usage, and humorous expressions. Frequency per thousand words (ptw) was calculated, and the percentage of hate speech was determined by comparing the total number of collocations to those containing hate speech elements. These findings are displayed in both tabular and diagrammatic formats. The qualitative analysis complements this with a detailed categorisation model and a critical discussion addressing the research hypotheses and research questions.

## **Context and motivation**

The global environment in which we live consists of many culturally and ethnically heterogeneous nations, which constitute the world's wealth. However, these diversities, whether based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, sex or other identity factors, are sometimes exploited to segregate groups, minorities or individuals. In today's internet society, online hate speech has become a pervasive impediment that threatens social peace and the well-being of diverse communities worldwide. In the digital landscape, socialisation is continuously remodelled via interactions between people and technology. Social media companies play a fundamental role, as some of the corporations in the US and China have become almost ubiquitous giants. While companies such as Facebook present themselves as democratising powers, more attention has been paid to their role in mediating and amplifying old and new forms of persecution, hatred and discrimination in recent years.

There is a contemporary saying: if you do not have a Facebook profile, you do not exist. This was the motivation for choosing a thesis title that contained the word 'Facebook' instead of 'social media'. Nevertheless, Facebook is not only the most significant social network in Romania; a ranking based on the number of monthly active users (MAUs) revealed that Facebook occupied

first place worldwide. With nearly three billion people and precisely 2.96 billion MAUs, Facebook is the largest social networking site in the world. This means that approximately 37% of the world's population uses Facebook.

Although the Facebook platform closed or banned millions of accounts, most of which were fake, this occurred because misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic situation was identified. Hence, the present research aims to highlight the fact that the right to have an opinion related to this subject in the virtual environment has become a means of expressing hatred towards certain entities that believe or do not believe in the pandemic, in the measures taken by the World Health Organization (WHO) and governments, in vaccines and even in the virus itself. All of these aspects can be observed in the comments that people from across the world posted in response to various articles on the Facebook pages of dailies and newspapers.

Hate speech is increasing in the online environment, and there has been an increase in radical nationalist political ideology in global mass politics in the recent years. For example, former and current US President Donald Trump repeatedly mobilised a political constituency denigrating Mexican immigrants and building the well-known border wall separating America from Mexico. Another example is the UK, in which the 2016 Brexit referendum visibly provoked expressions of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments, which occurred simultaneously with the most significant increase in religiously and racially driven hate crimes ever witnessed in British history. Such significant events in everyday life received waves of comments on Facebook and other social media platforms, on which numerous individuals have had the opportunity to express so-called hate speech. A relatively new event, such as the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was not an exception to the trend. Therefore, a new opportunity for haters arose and generated expressions of pros and cons, thus further dividing the world.

## **Research hypothesis**

This study aims to conduct a corpus analysis of hate speech on the topic of COVID-19 expressed by Facebook users. The research hypothesis points to analyse hate speech manifested in the online environment during the pandemic, investigating in particular aspects of language, keywords belonging to the COVID-19 lexicon, collocations and their incidence rate in the self-made corpus, metaphors and the integration of humorous language in this context. Although the context is a medical one, the study refers to several areas such as economics, politics, war, entertainment, media, tourism, sports and conspiracy theory.

The experiences I had when the pandemic began, when I was a master's student and I switched from face-to-face to online study, laid the foundation for this research and determined the formulation of the following guiding research questions: What strategies to combat hate speech regarding COVID-19 are used on Facebook?; How are these speech strategies linguistically realized on Facebook?; Why are such strategies used in the context of Facebook discussions related to COVID-19?

To answer this scheme of research questions what? how? and why? I started from a straightforward premise: Facebook users employ metaphorical language to hide their hate speech towards both society and individuals, while also escaping censorship. They hope that through this method, they will be heard and their opinions will be taken into account. Consequently, two working hypotheses were launched. The first hypothesis underlying the research is as follows: if the speech of Facebook users contains metaphors, puns, slang, and different symbols and emoticons, then they use hate speech. Facebook users widely use any available discursive strategy to exercise power over the other side. The exchange of remarks is conducted with the assistance of computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, pros and cons often contain irony, insulting words as well as figures of speech, particularly metaphors. A further working hypothesis underpinning this study proposes that if the comments posted by Facebook users in response to COVID-19 news content provoke or incite hate speech, they may influence public perception and even affect decision-making processes. Consequently, some government responses—such as the relaxation of mask mandates, partial lifting of restrictions during the summer months, or the organisation of cultural events for vaccinated individuals—could reflect shifts in public sentiment influenced by online discourse.

### **The structure of the thesis, limitation and innovations**

The thesis consists of five chapters, apart from the abstract, conclusions and recommendations, references, and annexes.

Chapter 1, the introduction, includes the context and motivation, research questions, research objectives and hypotheses, expected results and limitations. One of the limitations is the comments that did not respect the COVID-19 policies of the Facebook platform. As well as articles or videos whose contents were considered inappropriate were banned or deleted. Another limitation lies in the temporal boundaries of the dataset. The articles and news items chosen for data collection were published and posted between 2020 and 2022. Thus, the comments that appeared after that period, were not included in the analysed database.

Chapter 2, the theoretical framework, emphasises the multidisciplinary nature of this doctoral thesis. This chapter explores various theories and reviews key reference works from diverse fields, including corpus linguistics highlighting the contributions of McEnery and Hardie (2012) and Sinclair (2004), metaphor studies evoking landmarks such as the works by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Fairclough (1995), Deignan (2005), Kövecses (2000), Grady (1997), Ritchie (2003) and Goatly (1997), DA refers to theories such as those proposed by Brown and Yule (1983), Grice (1975), Lyons (1977), Givón (1979) Stalnaker (1978), Sadock (1978), Fillmore (1977), Firth (1957), Hymes (1964), Halliday and Hasan (1976), Malinowski (1935) and Labov (1971); humorous language and media includes the study of humorous language (Ermiida & Chovanec, 2012) and theories such as those proposed by Blake (2007) and Raskin (1985); intercultural politeness referring to Spencer-Oatey (2008), Goffman (1956), Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (2014) and Watts (2003).

Chapter 3, the analytical framework refers to hate speech. Article 10 of the ECHR states that hate speech laws are compatible with freedom of expression, but also allows states to set limits to protect public safety when necessary. Each state has the freedom to set limits to differentiate between freedom of expression and hate speech; thus, several laws and regulations are reviewed. The Public Order Act 1986, the Communications Act 2003, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 and the Equality Act 2010 are mentioned in relation to the UK; the First Amendment, including laws that refer to incitement to violence, true threats, hate crimes, workplace regulations and state laws in the USA are discussed, while European and international legislation, including Article 20 of the ICCPR, the Framework Decision on combating racism and xenophobia, has provisions requiring member states to criminalise public instigation of violence or hatred against a group or individual based on race, religion, ethnic origin, or nationality, the Budapest Convention (also known as the Convention on Cybercrime) and the OSCE's ODIHR, which provides guidance and training on combating hate speech, monitors hate crimes and supports efforts to counter hate speech online. As the experiment was conducted exclusively on the social network Meta, known to most people as Facebook, the COVID-19 protections included in the platform's policies are presented. During the pandemic, Facebook removed or banned content that was considered to be fake and referred to the existence and spread of the virus, vitamin C cures, social distancing measures, as a way of installing 5G infrastructure or the obligation to wear face masks being connected to 5G technology, and vaccinations that involved the inoculation of toxic substances that allowed for the planting of microchips or the modification of DNA. All of this misinformation increased the degree of hate speech perpetuated on Facebook. This chapter brings an element of novelty as the most important aspect of analysing hate speech was the experience of the evaluator. Consequently, in line with the Council of Europe, I propose the following parameters: the degree to which the word/expression was provocative or the aggressiveness of the message with the answer options 'LDV', 'MDV' and 'HDV'; how direct the message was with the answer options 'D' and 'I'; the degree to which the message could be regarded as a call to action with the answer options 'NCA', 'CMTA' and 'STA'. Some countries have clear provisions regarding the types of hate speech that are punishable under criminal law. A collection of national legislative provisions on this subject can be found by accessing the link provided by the members of INACH.

Chapter 4, methodological framework describes how the corpus was built, detailing the data collection procedure, and describing the experimental tools and the method that was used in the research. The data collection section describes the entire process of expanding the self-made corpus, which entailed several stages: the scientific research proposal, the disciplines studied within the doctoral school of the '1 Decembrie' University of Alba Iulia, publications in scientific journals, and its final form. There are also descriptions of the portfolio of Facebook pages in British, American and international publications from which the comments that were used to build the corpus were extracted. In addition, details about the statistical data pertaining to the corpus regarding the number of words, as well as the percentages for each category in the corpus, are provided. The keywords that were used to search for articles about COVID-19, the time intervals at which they were posted and the periods during which I extracted the comments are also

described. The two experimental tools are then presented: Comments Exporter for Facebook, which was used to improve and complete the manual data collection process, and WordSmith concordancer, with the three basic functions of Concord concordancer, KeyWords and the WordList. Each module provides several other features of the text corpus or the text that is being analysed. For example, the collocations and dispersion plots were computed using a concordance search. Some other modules were helpful in the preparation, cleaning and layout of the text corpus. WordSmith Tools can be used in 80 different languages and, together with several other similar software products, is an internationally popular programme for work that is based on corpus linguistic methodology.

Chapter 5, data analysis and interpretation, presents the results and interpretation of the experiment. Before beginning the identification and analysis of examples of hate speech, I searched for and extracted collocations of words belonging to the semantic field of COVID-19 from the self-made corpus: ‘coronavirus’, ‘virus,’ ‘social distance’, ‘mask’, ‘lockdown’, ‘quarantine’, ‘test’, ‘vaccine’ and ‘green pass’. The quantitative analysis produced tables that display the frequency of KWICs, the total number of occurrences in the corpus, the ptw, the number of collocations, and diagrams that show statistics in percentages regarding COVID-19 hate speech related to the keyword collocations. The quantitative analysis followed three main directions: various forms of hate speech (offensive words and expressions, racial and ethnic slurs targeting groups, WW II lexis, leetspeak), COVID-19 puns and metaphors. COVID-19 puns were organised according to the categories of conspiracy theories, entertainment, ideology, marginalised groups, media, medical, political, racial and ethnic, science and sports. I proceeded in the same way with the COVID-19 metaphors, which were organised according to the following domains: business, conspiracy theory, crime, death, entertainment, laboratory experiments, media, politics, sports and war. The qualitative analysis produced tables and diagrams that present the statistical data of all the forms of hate speech that were detected in the corpus, which were analysed according to the model proposed in Chapter 3. This analysis was followed by an RQ - answer (A) exchange, which clarified the hate speech strategies regarding COVID-19 that were being used on Facebook, how hate speech strategies were realised on Facebook and why hate speech strategies were being used on Facebook.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Although this work offers an innovative and original contribution to the study of COVID-19-related hate speech on Facebook, it does not claim to have fully exhausted the complexities of this topic. Several limitations affected the research, particularly those stemming from Facebook’s content moderation policies and the temporal boundaries of data collection. The analytical data were derived from user comments on news articles about COVID-19 posted on Facebook pages of multiple UK, US, and international media outlets. These comments were collected between September 2021 and December 2022, and the original posts appeared from March 2020 to November 2022. The resulting corpus comprises over one million words, drawn from 78 articles.

Despite this extensive dataset, some comments were unavailable due to deletion or banning by Facebook, which inevitably constrains the comprehensiveness of the corpus. Furthermore, as public interest in COVID-19 diminished starting in 2022, other related topics—such as vaccine inquiries involving high-profile figures like Ursula von der Leyen or China’s zero-COVID policy—attracted more attention. More recent developments, including the former US President Joe Biden’s July 2024 announcement of a COVID-19 infection shortly before withdrawing from the presidential race, suggest that ongoing research could fruitfully explore hate speech dynamics post-pandemic, once COVID-19 is no longer regarded as an immediate global threat.

Facebook’s approach to managing COVID-19 content has largely focused on censoring misinformation and disinformation, but this has not translated effectively into curbing hate speech. Employing a targeted collocation analysis of the COVID-19 lexicon allowed for the identification of diverse manifestations of hate speech within the corpus. These include explicit insults and offensive language, derogatory references to racial and ethnic groups, allusions to historical events such as the Second World War, the use of leetspeak, as well as metaphorical and pun-based expressions related to COVID-19. It is important to acknowledge that the classification of hate speech into low, moderate, and high degrees of violence is inherently subjective and shaped by intercultural considerations, as different countries maintain varying thresholds for freedom of expression.

Ultimately, combating hate speech requires a collective effort. Individuals can contribute by modelling responsible and respectful communication, particularly for younger generations. It remains essential to report and raise awareness of such phenomena and their consequences. At the institutional level, social media platforms bear the responsibility of improving their filtering and moderation mechanisms to mitigate violent behaviours online. Concurrently, policymakers must collaborate across jurisdictions to formulate and implement more effective legal frameworks that address the complexities of hate speech in the digital age.

In light of the above, several directions are proposed for future research and institutional response. First, subsequent studies should extend beyond the pandemic period to track the evolution of hate speech in a post-COVID context. The rhetoric surrounding vaccinations, political accountability, and public health remains highly charged and is likely to continue generating hostile discourse across platforms. Second, future research should adopt a multimodal perspective, incorporating visual and symbolic elements—such as emojis, memes, and GIFs—that frequently encode hate speech in non-verbal ways. These elements often elude traditional text-based moderation systems, yet play a central role in online communication. Third, attention should be given to intercultural pragmatics. Since interpretations of offensiveness, sarcasm, and metaphor vary considerably across linguistic and cultural boundaries, future studies should engage with multilingual corpora and apply culturally adaptive analytical models. Such approaches will ensure more nuanced and contextually grounded interpretations.

At the platform level, Facebook and similar companies should develop more sophisticated moderation strategies that move beyond keyword detection and engage with the discursive and contextual dimensions of hate speech. These systems should be co-designed with discourse

analysts, computational linguists, and cultural experts to better account for subtle, coded, or metaphorical expressions of hate.

Transparency in moderation decisions must also be improved. Users deserve clear, consistent explanations when content is removed or flagged, along with accessible and timely appeal mechanisms. Educational interventions—such as prompts or nudges that encourage civil discourse—could complement punitive measures and help foster a more respectful online environment.

At the policy level, the persistent tension between protecting free speech and curbing harmful discourse must be addressed through international collaboration. Harmonising definitions and enforcement of hate speech laws while respecting national legal traditions remains a complex but necessary goal, particularly in global crises where misinformation and hate speech converge.

Finally, education remains a foundational tool. Integrating digital literacy, critical thinking, and intercultural communication into curricula and public outreach programs can help individuals recognize, challenge, and counteract hate speech. Empowering users to engage ethically online is essential to fostering healthier digital spaces.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to a growing body of research that seeks to understand the dynamics of online hate speech in crisis contexts. By combining linguistic analysis with digital media studies and social critique, it offers both empirical insights and practical implications. As the digital public sphere continues to evolve, addressing hate speech demands not only reactive measures but proactive, collaborative, and context-sensitive strategies.

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