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# 'Seals', 'bitches', 'vixens', and other zoomorphic insults: the animalisation of women as an expression of misogyny in the Spanish Manosphere

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## ABSTRACT

The animalisation of women is a recurrent strategy of dehumanisation in Manosphere discourses. Its normalisation as a social phenomenon and its popularity are rooted in short and sententious genres (proverbs, sayings, etc.), which have significantly contributed to reaffirming the status quo of domination largely assigned to men in myths and philosophical theories. This article analyses the use of misogynistic zoomorphism in Burbuja.info, a Spanish economic forum whose extreme neoliberal perspective provides a suitable breeding ground for sexism. The corpus was constructed by identifying the most frequent examples of zoomorphism detected in an initial search of the approximately six million comments posted in the forum between 1 January 2022 and 31 May 2023. The research combines different digital techniques for the construction and quantitative analysis of the corpus with a qualitative analysis of examples of misogynistic zoomorphism. The analysis reveals that, while hostile sexist comments do a systematic comparison of women with the most undesirable traits culturally associated with animals, the positive aspects are never transferred to figurative use. The research also highlights the role played by some rhetorical strategies in the discursive construction of misogyny, such as metaphorical use of humour.

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## Introduction

Animalisation through language is a discursive practice often used to both praise and vilify people. Along with reification, it is the most effective strategy of dehumanisation and is based on denying the individual their agency (Ordioni, 2012; Salmen & Dhont, 2021). But, while the comparison with animals is often used in ways favourable to men, it is often used to denigrate women (López-Rodríguez, 2009; Pappas & Karras, 2021; Rudman & Mescher, 2012). As sexualisation is an enabler of dehumanisation, representations of sexualised women are even more exposed to animalisation than other representations (Salmen & Dhont, 2022).

Despite its popularity and its normalisation as a social phenomenon, the comparison of human beings with animals is a cultural fact based 'on a perceived perception, not on an objective perception' (Sanz-Martin, 2015, p. 380). This discursive practice is rooted in some foundational myths, such as the birth of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, which turned women into 'subaltern variants of the male-human model, from which, according to the biblical account, they originate, like animals do' (Martínez-Garrido, 2001, p. 94). Even the great Aristotle, whose work is part of feminist readings because he postulated the equality of all humans as reasoning beings (Sharkey, 2016), considered that men express their animal capabilities better than women (Basnett, 2021, p. 206).

Between the 13th and 15th centuries, the Christian protection of God's order prompted the dissemination of numerous codes and moral norms aimed at regulating women's conduct (Martínez-Garrido,

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2001, p. 94). The proverbs and other popular sayings from that period, which date back to the paremiological remnants of Ancient Greece, reflect the subordination of women in a patriarchal society developed in the cradle of Western thought (Echevarría-Isusquiza, 2011). Its transmission was decisive in the expansion and popular rooting of the clichés on which the animalisation of women is based, and to give just a few examples of Spanish proverbs: falsehood ('Woman, wind and horse, all false goods'); sentimentality ('Whenever they want to, women cry and dogs piss'); domesticity ('Women and cats, for the kitchen'); dependence ('A woman is only as a man makes her') or even the justification of violence ('both donkeys and women want to be beaten') (Corbacho-Sánchez, 2009; Fernández-Martín, 2011; Ugarte-Ballester, 1999).

The timid advances in the social status of women during the Renaissance and the later downturn in women's advancements in the Counter-Reformation came to merge in an 18th century binary system that associated men with mind and civilisation and women the body and nature (Tomàs-White, 2015). In the revolutionary 19th century, even forward-thinking anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon sought to demonstrate the physical, intellectual and moral superiority of men, while advances in medicine reaffirmed the existence of a weaker character in women related to the female cycle of fertility within the hygienist movement (Tomàs-White, 2015). These ideas not only fitted perfectly with Darwin's theory of the common origin of species, but also with Freud's emphasis on instinct, the unconscious and impulse (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The cultural association of women with the body and nature is one of the reasons historically given for justifying their subjugation and has been instrumental in dehumanising them through processes of animalisation (Salmen & Dhont, 2021). This association has become so deeply ingrained in society that it has been impossible to dispel; not even with the increasing participation of women in the social and public spheres have these comparisons been dissociated from representations of femininity (Ordioni, 2012). Advertising provides numerous examples of such dehumanising practices (Ordioni, 2012), even when the aim of campaigns is to protect animals (Villanueva-Romero, 2013). However, the discourses in the Manosphere<sup>1</sup> are the optimal breeding ground for the sexist and misogynist legacy<sup>2</sup> of traditional sayings finds the most fertile ground to be cultivated and disseminated, protected by the anonymity of social media (Ging, 2019; Kendrel, 2022; Siapera, 2019) and framed by emotions and ideology (Bachaud & Johns, 2023).

This article studies the semantic transfer from the human domain to the animal domain in posts collected from one of the most popular forums in the Spanish Manosphere, Burbuja.info.<sup>3</sup> It is based on a two-fold premise. First, it considers that 'zoomorphic phrases are not arbitrary, totally incomprehensible signs, but they are used for a reason; they are semantically transparent, and they are based either on human experience and observation of the world or on cultural conventions' (Szyndler, 2014, p. 280). Second, it is assumed here that misogynistic internet discourses use traditional zoomorphic expressions with the intention of denigrating women and justifying not only their subordination, but even their subjugation through violence (Bock & Burkley, 2019; Rudman & Mescher, 2012).

The aim of this work is to analyse the conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1983), whereby animal traits are attributed to women in the digital environment. This is an almost unexplored area, despite the interest in the role that the Manosphere plays in the (re)configuration of toxic masculinities in the present decade (Lacalle et al., 2023). The study of the role of humour in zoomorphism is another of the objectives of this research, along with the negative emotions reflected in the discursive construction of animalisation.

### ***Animal metaphors and sexism***

Throughout history, the use of zoomorphic language has had a crucial role in the representation of the enemy and in the stigmatisation of entire groups considered undesirable, with the intention of dominating or even annihilating them (Salmen & Dhont, 2022; Wasniewska, 2018). Proverbs, sayings, and idioms hold a prominent place at the intersection between the normative and the marginal and thus in the processes of social construction of the *other*. The aim of denigration is always to stigmatise or undervalue the difference, which is seen a threat to the social group of reference.

Underpinned by basic analogical or metaphorical thinking, these brief and sententious genres 'have ancestrally established a reciprocal comparison between animals and human beings' (Martínez-Garrido,

2001, p. 81), a determining factor in the maintenance of the *status quo* of domination over women largely assigned to men in myths and philosophical theories. By presenting themselves as testimonies of authority and transmitters of eternal and absolute truths, animal metaphors 'redistribute the bestiary in a prototypical way on the basis of sexual difference' (Martínez-Garrido, 2001, p. 81).

Glick and Fiske (1996) explained the transmission of prejudices and attitudes against women through what both authors called *Ambivalent Sexism Theory* (AST). AST differentiates sexism from other types of discrimination, such as racism or xenophobia, on the basis that gender relations constitute a 'unique intergroup context', while differentiating between benevolent sexism and hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997, 2011). Benevolent sexism is rooted in the weakness traditionally attributed to women and is related to positive attitudes and stereotypes. Hostile sexism designates prejudice against women and is related to negative attitudes and stereotypes. AST also presupposes the existence of what Brudholm and Lang (2021) called 'dehumanisation without hatred' processes, which can be identified with the form of benevolent sexism that perceives women as complementary to men.

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) is a 22-item scale developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) to measure the degree of ambivalent sexism. Their research revalidated the assumptions of AST in the characterisation of women by means of zoomorphic language. Their findings revealed that when animalisation of women is continuously transmitted, and it may contribute to the perpetuation of harmful beliefs about women's roles in society (Tipler & Ruscher, 2019). They also showed that men who dehumanise women by associating them with animals or sex objects are more likely to victimise them (Rudman & Mescher, 2012); and even to accept rape myths (Bock & Burkley, 2019).

As an expression of sexism, the animalisation of women is ambivalent, since it is used to designate their aggressive behaviour as *predators*; but also their defencelessness as *prey* (Tipler, 2013). Salmen and Dhont (2021) confirmed the recurrent relationship between, on the one hand, benevolent sexism and tropes about associating women with animals that are easy prey and, on the other hand, between hostile sexism and metaphors that identify them with dangerous or harmful animals. Furthermore, paradoxical as it may seem, this two-sided nature of zoomorphic language use is perfectly compatible with the comparison of men with predators and of women with their prey in the myths about seduction and sexuality (Bock & Burkley, 2019). It also explains the negative assessment that hostile sexism makes of women who possess masculine characteristics, and even of those who do not in transform their bodies, as well as the preference expressed by both types of sexism for those who assume traditional roles (Glick et al., 2015). In short, animalisation is used to affirm and maintain patriarchal roles; but also to stigmatise those women who reverse them (López-Rodríguez, 2009, p. 92).

The negative moral attitude of zoomorphic language influences and is influenced, in turn, by the abuse to which animals are often subjected (Wasniewska, 2018). Hence, the interest in animalisation processes expressed by ecofeminism (Twine, 2010) and, in general, in perspectives close to what Wyckoff (2014, p. 721) has called the Linked Oppression Thesis, 'according to which oppression of women and the oppression of animals are linked causally, materially, normatively and/or conceptually'. In the same vein, the writer and activist Adams (2004, 2010) underlined the parallel between the animalisation of women and the feminisation of farm animals, in a society where virility and masculinity are often associated with meat consumption. This may even reach a point where vegan men tend to be accused of feminisation and socially devalued, particularly in sexist environments (Salmen & Dhont, 2022). This can be illustrated by an article published in the online newspaper *Slate* about the concern in Japan 'about the rise of 'grass-eating men' who shun sex, don't spend money and like taking walks'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Primary conceptual metaphors**

Metaphors structure our ordinary conceptual system and permeate our everyday life; they shape the way we think about the world and conceptualise it. The aim of metaphors is to link two concepts in order to understand one of them (the more imprecise, elusive one) in terms of the other (the more specific one). The extraordinary eloquence of metaphors makes them optimal vehicles for defining abstract notions based on specific experiences, rather than invoking logical presuppositions such as necessity or sufficient conditions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Lakoff and Turner (1989) attribute the use of animal metaphors to the widespread belief in the *Great Chain of Being*, a folk theory of diffuse philosophical and religious underpinning used to explain the relationships between different entities. Human beings are at the top of the chain, followed by animals, a proximity that justifies the abundance, persistence and popularity of similes between them. These authors also noted the frequent combination of the *Great Chain of Being* with another commonsense theory (*The Nature of Things*), to develop a complex folk theory of how things work in the world. This theory is an essential ingredient in the understanding of animal metaphors, the corollary of which is the transmission of prejudices and attitudes such as sexism in the linguistic socialisation of individuals (López-Rodríguez, 2009).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identified three basic domains of conceptual metaphors: structural, orientational and physical. Zoomorphic expressions are inspired by a primary conceptual metaphor ('PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS') based on the *Great Chain of Being*, which this theory places at the basis of our cognitive system.<sup>5</sup> Rhetorical devices related to zoomorphism belong to a more general model, which postulates the construction of one concept in terms of another. They often shape conceptual metaphors from the structural domain ('He managed to get rid of a real slut [*lagarta*]' [*De menuda lagarta se libró*]; 'You must admit the bunny is a good shag' [*Hay que reconocer que la coneja tiene un polvo*], Burbuja.info). The structural aspect of such conceptual metaphors was defined by Lakoff (1987) as a set of correspondences between a *source domain* and a *target domain* which, in the example referred to by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) correspond to ANIMALS and PEOPLE, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

### **The role of humour in radicalisation**

The use of zoomorphic language involves building a wide range of representations, from infra-humanisation (attribution of a few human traits to a person/group) to their full association with animals (Haslam, 2021). These dehumanisation strategies are extremely effective in immunising their users from any potential attempt at counterpropaganda, and they have long-term effects (Quiamzade & Lalot, 2023). Hence, the individual journey to misogyny on the internet does not seem to differ much from the 'individual journey to extremism online' described by Munn (2019) to explain the process of adherence to extreme right-wing ideologies.

Following popular sayings, metaphors of dehumanisation often resort to humour in order to increase their effectiveness. The repetition of jokes, humorous expressions, and, in general, mocking clichés about the construction of the *other* in social media is particularly important in the first of the three overlapping cognitive phases of the journey to extremism online described by Luke Munn: *normalisation*, *acclimatisation* and *dehumanisation*. The aim of the initial stage of *normalisation* is to create familiar environment where group members feel comfortable and safe sharing their imaginary. In this sense, the value of irony lies in its ability to make denial plausible and to help blur the boundaries between the serious and the satirical; the possible and the real; the true and the false. It is so effective that, in the opinion of Luke Munn himself and other authors such as Laskovstov (2020) and Prazmo (2020, 2022), it may have played a decisive role in the radicalisation of the misogynist subcultures of the Manosphere: *Men Rights Activists* (MRA), *Men Going their Own Way* (MGTOW), *Pick Up Artists* (PUA) and *Involuntary Celibates* (Incels) (Ging, 2019).

In the second phase, that of *acclimatisation*, a new cognitive base is established as to what is acceptable and unacceptable, which involves expanding and sealing the prejudices cultivated and shared during the process of *normalisation* as much as possible to drive radicalisation.

The third phase, *dehumanisation*, is based on the moral superiority over the *other*, developed and strengthened in the two previous stages (Munn, 2019).

### **Materials and methods**

The study combines different digital techniques for the construction and quantitative analysis of the corpus with a qualitative analysis of misogynistic examples of zoomorphism found on Burbuja.info, inspired by the work of Lakoff and Turner (1989) on the use of animal metaphors. The analysis explains

the construction of meaning that takes place by associating certain animals with some characteristics attributed to women. The hybrid methodology used draws on the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in working with large samples, while trying to overcome some of the limitations of applying it to social media discourses such as 'problems concerning languages because the intention of the tweets sometimes varies on what real means' (Benrouba & Boudour, 2021, p. 6).

The data collection process was structured into two phases. The first identified the most frequent feminine animal nouns included in the more than six million comments posted in the forum between 1 January 2022 and 31 May 2023, drawing on a list included in the results of the research on Spanish proverbs referenced in the introduction to this article. The number of comments containing other animals was so low and unrepresentative that it was decided to limit the sample to the first six animals on the list. The posts containing the nouns selected in the first stage ('seal' [*foca*], 'whale' [*ballena*], 'bunny' [*coneja*], 'bitch' [*perra*], 'vixen' [*zorra*], 'lizard' [*lagarta*], and 'viper' [*vibora*])<sup>7</sup> were then downloaded through a web scraping process utilising BeautifulSoup, a Python library designed for pulling data out of HTML and XML files and characterised for its readability. A total of 119,721 posts were collected, which represented 0.28% of the comments posted during the reference period, distributed as follows: 'bitch' ( $N=92,862$  and 77.56%), 'vixen' ( $N=12,627$  and 10.55%), 'bunny' ( $N=7057$  and 5.89%), 'lizard' ( $N=2651$  and 2.21%), 'whale' ( $N=1910$  and 1.60%), 'seal' ( $N=1803$  and 1.51%) and 'viper' ( $N=811$  and 0.68%).

The zoomorphic language used for misogynistic purposes was identified through a corpus-based approach, aimed at selecting the animal nouns associated with the most recurrent Spanish terms found in animal metaphors related to women on Burbuja.info: 'a' [*una*, feminine article], 'that' [*esa*, feminine demonstrative], 'puta' [*slut*] and 'de mierda' [*piece of shit/shitty*]. In parallel, all posts containing the pejorative phrase 'hijo de perra' [*son of a bitch*] referring exclusively to men were removed. Finally, the resulting 5239 messages were subjected to a manual coding procedure aimed at selecting the 3134 comments that make up the sample for qualitative analysis of misogynistic animalisation processes: 'vixen' ( $N=1,844$  and 58.84%), 'bitch' ( $N=612$  and 19.53%), 'bunny' ( $N=315$  and 10.05%), 'seal' ( $N=141$  and 4.50%), 'whale' ( $N=111$  and 3.54%), 'lizard' ( $N=64$  and 2.04%) and 'viper' ( $N=47$  and 1.50%).

While misogyny is the hatred of women, it is a specific and complex kind of feeling that should be understood as a profoundly complicated and emotional (Wrisley, 2023). For this reason, the analysis of the feelings induced by hostile sexism was conducted by identifying the two other-condemning emotions most commonly expressed in hate speech: anger and contempt (Haidt, 2003; Scarantino & Griffiths, 2011). These emotions are recurrently employed in the construction of identities by the different subcultures of the Spanish Manosphere (Lacalle, 2023a, 2023b). Mood was another variable used in the labels describing the emotions elicited by the posts.

## Findings and analyses

The analysis of the different animal metaphors related to women is structured into three main groups: (1) physical appearance; (2) sexual and reproductive behaviour; and (3) mental faculties and interpersonal relations. The metaphors 'seal' and 'whale' refer exclusively to the first of these groups, while 'lizard' and 'viper' refer only to the third. In contrast, 'vixen', 'bitch' and 'bunny' are associated with all three groups. Some common features in the use of the different animal metaphors are identified and summarised at the end of this section.

### *Animal metaphors referring to the physical appearance of women*

Metaphors about physical appearance were constructed by associating the source domains 'seal' (141 comments) and 'whale' (111 comments) with the integrated target of plus-size women. The size of both marine species is therefore emphasised, ignoring any other distinguishing features.

The 252 posts in this first group mostly expressed feelings of contempt (83.6% in the first case and 89.1% in the second), mainly referring to the sexual sphere. The discursive construction of this other-condemning emotion is figuratively reflected in the refusal to have sexual relations with the

women identified with both animals: 'What a bitch, she's a *seal* and still thinks she's in a position to make demands. I wouldn't fuck her even if she paid me'. There was even advice given to resort to prostitution rather than having sex with plus-size women: 'Son of a bitch, spend 50 euros and fuck a whore that's not a *beached whale*. That's what I do, anyway'.

Many of the insults justified their rejection on health grounds and downplayed the difficulties that weight loss often entails. Some users also expressed concern about the increase in obesity cases, attributed to the inclusion of plus-size women in media content, which they accused of normalising overweight: 'It's not healthy, and these bodies are not pretty. Aren't they [the media] always going on about the health issue? So what's that *beached whale* doing working as a model, do they want girls to think that's healthy?' Indignation was the main emotion expressed in 13.8% of posts that described women as seals or beached whales, sometimes accompanied by the victim mentality characteristic of misogynists:

In American series they tend to use fat women, where they go on about stuff to do with acceptance, diversity of bodies, subjectivity of beauty and all that bullshit. Fuck fat people in the ass. [...] they still surprise us in the new season with Merche's son eating the greasy, moldy ass of an oily, gypsy whale whore.

The 'semantic frame' (Charles J. Fillmore [1983] 2006) of the insults referring to women's size is often inspired by the speeches of Incels, frustrated at not even getting the attention of these women: 'even though they're *beached whales*, they'd rather go with *moors* and muscle-bound blacks instead of with Spaniards'<sup>8</sup>

### ***Animal metaphors referring to sexual behaviour and female reproduction***

Unlike the monosemic metaphors constructed through the source domains 'seal' and 'whale', the zoomorphic terms 'vixen' (1844 comments), 'bitch' (612) and 'bunny' (315) have different meanings, one of which qualifies the physical aspect of women also associated with sexuality: 'I'd fuck those *vixens*, they're all so hot'. However, in contrast to the similes built on the references to 'seal' and 'whale', the similarity between the animal and the woman in this case is not measurable, but is related to the behaviour of the three land mammals mentioned above. The source domain 'vixen' refers to a wild animal, which is both a predator of other animals and a prey to men who chase and hunt women. Moreover, since hunting is primarily a symbol of leisure and status (foxes are not part of the ordinary human diet), female zoomorphism turns the vixen-woman into a sexual object to be displayed as a trophy.

The small size of rabbits compared to other farm animals such as cows or pigs, and their greater sexual activity, have turned female zoomorphism into a metaphor for a desirable female and, consequently, a sexual object: 'I look sideways at her in the rear-view mirror and see that she is a *bunny*. I let my foot off the gas and let her come alongside me. We look at each other with a provocative and playful gesture, I put my foot down and I get out of there at full throttle, revving up like a fucking Lambo. It was a real show. All in all, you could say it was something quasi-sexual. I got a hard-on'. In contrast, the association of 'bitch' with the physical appearance of women has the opposite meaning, expressed around a negative transfer from the target domain of the adjective 'old' which usually accompanied it in the posts analysed: 'It's disgraceful to fall for an old *bitch*'.

The frequent association of 'bunny', 'vixen' and 'bitch' with sexual and reproductive activity in colloquial speech accounts for their high frequency in the sample. The source domain 'bunny' was used to insult a woman by both animalising and objectifying her (considering women as reproductive machines), alluding to the number of offspring she can give birth to in a year. This explains why 87.8% of the comments referring to motherhood in the sample were turned into zoomorphic phrases through references to rabbits/bunnies, with the aim of discursively converting women into creatures strictly useful for procreation, who often use their children as a pretext to live at the expense of men: 'But come on, I don't know what I'm doing explaining myself to a bloke from a South American country where it's normal for girls to give birth like *rabbits* to live off men. No matter how liberal you claim to be, you have the *bunny* DNA'. For example, female political leaders who have more than two children are often referred to as 'bunnies' in an attempt to discredit them, including Ursula von der Leyen (President of the European

Commission); lone Belarra (Spanish Minister for Social Rights and 2030 Agenda); Irene Montero (Spanish Minister of Equality), among others.

As for the emotions represented, 81.5% of the comments that included this type of zoomorphic language expressed contempt and 18.5% indignation. But, unlike the rest of the animal metaphors, reproductive capacity and sexual attractiveness converge in the metaphorical use of 'bunny' as a generic noun to epitomise the desirable woman, probably induced by the misogynistic use of the masculine form 'rabbit' to refer to a woman's vagina: 'If you have something with a *bunny*, the other *bunnies* will always take her side'. Be that as it may, this trope thus overcomes the potential meanings of the noun itself, which also has hypergamous connotations: 'Given the current hypergamy, the competition is getting bigger and bigger, you have to buy a better bike that attracts *bunnies*, you have to take steroids to bulk up more at the gym, post better photos on Instagram'.

The terms 'vixen' and 'bitch' describe women in two different ways. On the one hand, the vixen's dual meaning, namely, as both a prey and a predator, inspires two different uses of zoomorphic language: as a desirable sexual trophy (prey), and as a promiscuous woman or even as a prostitute (predator). Additionally, the inference underlying the metaphor of women as predators is that they cause a man to lose control over his freedom, associated with the vixen's wild nature. In this context, she becomes a threat and a usurper of (patriarchal) power, punished by the negative association with the source domain: 'They're such self-aggrandising retards. What's the difference between her and a street *vixen* with the same characteristics? None.'

The dog is the other canine featured in the sample, the pet *par excellence*, commonly referred to as 'man's best friend' and characterised by its fidelity, loses its positive attributes when used in its feminine form to become a wild, uncontrollable animal associated with promiscuity in the misogynist cultural imaginary of the Spanish language. In fact, 'bitch' is one of the most common slurs against women, often used to condemn their behaviour (43.6% of posts include this term): 'Send him a picture of you in a thong and tell him that you've been touching yourself thinking about him, that you don't know why but lately you've been having fantasies about him fucking you wildly like a *bitch*'.

The posts that used the source domains 'vixen' and 'bitch' to denigrate women for their sexual behaviour fall into the semantic frames of the PUA (Pick-up Artists) and Incel (Involuntary Celibates) subcultures within the Manosphere. PUAs are obsessed with seduction and reinforce their contempt for women on the dishonesty attributed to them: 'No, her husband didn't know. It was her who is a *vixen* [...] It didn't take me long to fuck her in the bar, while her husband was two floors above'. The prevailing emotion among Incels, who are self-conscious about their physical appearance and have mental health problems, is indignation at their difficulty in having sexual relations with women, which they use as a pretext even to incite violence: 'This afternoon I wanked watching Eva and Tete from *Los Serrano* and Africa at *pajilleros.com*. Tonight I don't know which one to go with, but I'm getting tired of the handjobs and the prudish girls in the village, it makes you want to rape those shitty fucking *bitches*, its tiring TT'.

### ***Animal metaphors referring to mental faculties and relationships***

In addition to being despised for their physical appearance and sexual behaviour, women are vilified for their intellectual capacity, which misogynists consider inferior to that of men. Along with the meanings referred to above, the animal metaphors 'bunny', 'bitch' and 'vixen' were also used in this sense in the posts: 'The other day a *bunny* told me that her 'generation' invented baggy jeans, they are all so thick that they can't even look at pictures from the 80s'; 'That asshole called on you for support, but the one who is going to get hurt is you; but as you are quite thick, you just do what he asks you to, like the *bitch* that you are [...]. Close your legs and open a book, stupid'; 'a chick who records herself shaking her ass like a *vixen*, pretending she doesn't realise how erotically charged she is, why would she bother to improve herself intellectually?'. All three comments are clear examples of the third phase phases of the journey to extremism online, *dehumanization*, to the extent that they demonstrate the feeling of moral superiority over women that their authors feel.

The insults 'bitch' and 'vixen' also take on the meaning of a nasty, despicable, spiteful and/or bossy woman. In these cases, the prevailing contempt (76.9%, 471 posts for 'bitch' and 62.5%, 1153 posts for 'vixen') gave way to outrage: posts portraying women as manipulative represented 60.9% (86 posts) in

messages that included the source domain 'bitch' and 72.2% (499) in messages that included the source domain 'vixen'. References to the target domain of evil were systematically used to describe female politicians, both Spanish (Irene Montero, Margarita Robles, Yolanda Díaz) and European (Sanna Marin, Ursula von der Leyen, Christine Lagarde). In other cases, the alleged female evil was linked to hypergamy: '80% of Spanish women aged 26-35 would not date an unemployed person [...] 20% lied. They are all shallow *bitches*'; 'all prostitutes. love does not exist, only interest. spread their legs in exchange for money and/ or a roof over their heads and food. FUCKING VIXENS'.

The zoomorphic noun 'vixen' also included another defining feature in folk culture: cunning, although in the misogynist metaphor it is always used to denigrate women. The semantic frame of the posts built around this type of animalisation is within the discourse of Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), obsessed with the idea of being falsely denounced for gender violence: 'The difference is that if a *vixen* files a criminal complaint against you (it doesn't matter if you've hit her or not) she gets money, they give her a flat if she doesn't have one, she gets preferential treatment for getting a job, etc. In other words, it's a bargain and you get sent to the joint for life'.

The capacity for manipulation attributed to women also included the zoomorphic nouns 'viper' and 'lizard', which are predominantly used metaphorically in Spanish to mean an 'evil, manipulative woman' (96.8% in the case of 'lizard' and 93.6% in that of 'viper'). As these two reptiles are mainly associated with survival instincts and with the most basic and primitive functions of the animal species, these cultural references enrich the semantic content and expand the figurative meaning of both terms. Thus, in all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), snakes are identified with Satan, who tempted Adam and Eve in Paradise and thus became a symbol of sin, evil, greed, cunning and deceit. Although snakes also symbolise wisdom in some Eastern cultures, vipers have always been lethal enemies of human beings because of their capacity to inoculate venom. This makes this term an insult of choice to disqualify powerful women capable of influencing public opinion, such as the singer Madonna or the aforementioned Lagarde. However, the generalised meaning in the sample was of an eminently material nature: 'Stay away from that *viper*. I have no doubt that she will bounce from you to someone else who's got more money and a bigger cock than you'.

The misogynistic meaning of the term 'lizard' is similar to that of 'viper', as it relates the mental and intellectual capacities of women (intelligence, wisdom, cunning, etc.) to deceit, trickery and the ability to take advantage of men. However, unlike the use of 'viper', taking advantage was not strictly linked to cruelty (poison), but to the inability of women to achieve their goals (economic resources, position of power, fame, etc.). This is why it also designates women whose power, fame and/or influence is attributed to their romantic partners (Letizia Ortiz, Melania Trump, Sara Carbonero) or to other male figures, such as their father (Ana Botín): 'His [the King of Spain's] marriage to the former reporter [Letizia Ortiz] has not helped him much; but on top of that, that *lizard* has been like a spectacular Trojan horse to implement a lot of shit in the royal house'.

The posts that included the animal metaphors 'viper' and 'lizard' often showed the prejudices of another of the Manosphere's subcultures, Men's Rights Activists (MRAs). These are men aggrieved by the economic consequences of divorce and the 'Machiavellian' character attributed to women, whom they accuse of manipulating children to obtain the best possible terms in settlements. These discourses expressed the indignation of men who consider themselves victims of feminist policies and laws: 'and don't make her angry, she'll bring her lover in the house and then throw you out and you'll have to support her anyway. These are the FUCKING laws we have in this shitty country [...] total nonsense typical of a *lizard* who lives in cloud cuckoo land'; 'Whatever you do, don't have children with her. You'll be a living dead because she'll use them to tear you apart emotionally before springing a surprise divorce. [...] Those of us who know a little human psychology sniff out psychopathic narcissistic predators from afar. It will be the biggest mistake of his life if he goes back to that *viper* and her family of *vipers*'. Both examples, in addition to attributing the problems related to separation to women, reinforce traditional stereotypes by contrasting the predatory nature of 'vipers' with the passivity of 'lizards'.

The concerns of MRAs were also reflected in numerous posts that included the word 'vixen', undoubtedly the most productive sememe in the sample: 'They always tell us how women suffer because men are bad, but nothing about uncovering fraud when it is those *vixens* who cheat and the cuckold has to feed other men's children'. Some messages mix the concerns of MRAs with those of MGTOWs: 'Every

time we keep quiet when a *vixen* puts a man in jail for jealousy, or for getting off scot-free in a divorce proceeding. Every time a woman gets into the police it's because she has a pussy and not because she is worth it. Every time there is positive discrimination against the equality enshrined in the Spanish constitution and we men remain silent, each and every time we are accomplices and accessories to that injustice'.

Along with its popularity in the language of the community analysed, the animal metaphor 'vixen' is particularly explicit when it comes to insulting women and exercising verbal violence. It was therefore constantly used in the most vexatious and aggressive messages in the posts, such as: 'Fucking empowered *vixen*. I want to stick my fat cock in her and cum on her tits and then thump her until she makes me a lentil stew'.

### **Common trends in the use of the different types of zoomorphism**

In order to intensify the insults, the zoomorphic language in the posts was sometimes combined with swear words in Spanish, including 'puta' and 'de mierda' (when used as modifiers or intensifiers, these may be freely translated into English as 'fucking' or 'piece of shit'). Animal metaphors were also linked to each other in order to reinforce the negative evaluations: 'Seal? That's a fucking *whale*, good luck to the Moorish-looking faggot she's with'; 'Fucking *vixen* piece of shit. How nice it would be if she was dead'.

As was to be expected, some of the messages sought to offend and ridicule women through humorous or supposedly humorous expressions (6.5%, 206 comments), the intention of which was evident in the discursive style. These comments were sometimes used to explain a joke ('Hello, sir: I'm Paraguayan and I've come to ask for your daughter's hand for fucking her like a *bitch*. - For what???? - Paraguayan [...]').<sup>9</sup> In other cases, the pragmatic function is enhanced by the use of onomatopoeias or laughing emoticons ('a feminazi *bitch* is what she is, the comment the vox<sup>10</sup> woman made was a real killer, she literally left her crying XD') or the context of the message ('In prehistoric times it was a good thing because turning a woman into a *seal* meant you were a hell of a hunter').

There was an additional feature of the animal metaphors used that was common in the posts: the intention to distort sisterhood among women by recounting the personal experiences of some users who exhibit a constructed female identity ('As a Polish female friend of mine said to me... 'Polish women are *bitches* but Ukrainian women are even worse *bitches*'). Men's scepticism about sisterhood was also often attributed to their own mothers, whom they blame for their own mistrust of women: 'My mother has the advantage of being a woman and therefore, as a woman, she knows there are lots of *vixens* out there [...] And she prefers that we stay as we are, rather than having some *lizard* come along and tricks us or bring us to ruin'.

## **Discussion**

User feedback on digital media has led the mechanisms of culture to be redefined and has resulted in an unparalleled development of mini-narratives; in other words, small stories that can be combined and spread across the internet in unpredictable ways. Their attractiveness and efficiency lie precisely in the characteristics attributed by Williams (2002) to mini-narratives: short scale, sequence, start and sense. These features were shared by a large number of the posts analysed. The mini-narratives from Burbuja.info analysed here epitomise how the misogynist discursive manifestations of folk rhetoric have been adapted to the digital environment, anchored in an extemporaneous vision of the role played by women in today's society that make men into victims, and shows the desire of forum's users to regain the lost control over them.

All the posts analysed are paradigmatic examples of the hostile sexism that permeates the Manosphere, aimed at dehumanising women through the hate speech that their animalisation exudes. The most undesirable traits culturally associated with the animals that make up the seven examples of zoomorphic language studied were systematically used; they were both about physical (overweight, ugliness, etc.) and behavioural characteristics (clumsiness, manipulation, deception, etc.), while the positive qualities (power, independence, loyalty, etc.) are not transferred in any post to figurative use. However, the lower

virulence of messages with humorous intent suggests the coexistence of different stages of hate intensity, compatible with the increasing process of radicalization observed by Munn (2019) in the individual journey towards the defense of alt-right ideologies.

This article represents an original contribution to the study of one of the recurrent tropes of digital misogyny: the animalisation of women, unexplored in Spain despite the large volume of research on the sexist sayings and proverbs that inspire it. The research highlights the role played by some rhetorical strategies, such as men's victimisation as well as contempt for, derision towards and antagonism of women, in influencing the amount and type of engagement of comments. The relationship of animal metaphors with attitudes and expressions of hatred towards women, characteristic of the different sub-cultures of the Manosphere (MGTOWs, MRAs, PUAs and Incels), constitute the semantic frames of the comments analysed, while confirming how this is used to feed misogyny. The results suggest that these types of virtual spaces have become an ideal environment for guiding men on the journey to extremism described by Munn (2019); whereas some of the posts analysed exhibit the 'normalisation' of the misogynist imaginary, many others clearly show the complete dehumanisation of women.

The combination of digital techniques for the quantitative analysis of the corpus with a qualitative analysis inspired by Lakoff and Turner's (1989) work on the use of animal metaphors, as well as Fillmore's 'semantic frame' theory, provides an accurate and applicable method for other digital studies on misogyny. Nevertheless, further research should be conducted to connect the analysis with the real world, in order to empirically demonstrate that the dehumanisation is a key part of the radicalisation process and can predispose users towards violence, particularly in young men.

## Notes

1. The term Manosphere is used to describe an indeterminate set of online stakeholder groups composed almost entirely of men, which are openly hostile to women. The term became widespread after the publication in 2009 of porn entrepreneur Ian Ironwood's book *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*. For more detailed information, see Ging (2019).
2. The concept of 'misogyny' is intended here as including any form of gender-based harm against women, whether directly or indirectly, that does not necessarily involve violence (Debbie & Siapera, 2018).
3. Burbuja.info emerged in 2006 as an economic forum and became well known when it predicted the 2009 crisis. The dominant neoliberal perspective underlying the group is strongly appealing to conspiracy theorists, extreme right-wing sympathisers and misogynists.
4. Available at: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/06/japan-panics-about-the-rise-of-herbivores-young-men-who-shun-sex-don-t-spend-money-and-like-taking-walks.html>
5. *The Great Chain of Being* is a concept of Platonic inspiration that dominated the worldview and social organisation of Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This theory is based on the idea that all beings and objects in the universe are connected in an ordered hierarchy where each of them occupies a specific place in the *Chain*: from the lowest and simplest to the highest and most complex.
6. Kristina Fernandes (2021) provides a detailed summary of Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS in their study on the Spanish native speakers' associations with novel zoomorphic metaphors, conducted through two online questionnaires answered by 112 and 53 respondents, respectively.
7. Definitions taken from the Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Language (<https://www.rae.es/dhle>).
  - Foca  
[s. f. Mujer de cuerpo feo, sin cintura, de piernas cortas y andar grotesco].  
Feminine noun. Woman with an ugly body, no waist, short legs and a grotesque gait.
  - Ballena.  
[s. m. y f. desp. Persona obesa o muy corpulenta].  
Masculine and feminine noun, derogatory. An obese or a very corpulent person.
  - Coneja.  
[f. despect. coloq. Mujer que pare muy a menudo].  
Feminine noun, derogatory, colloquial. Woman who gives birth very often.
  - Perra  
[1. f. Prostituta].  
1. Feminine noun. Prostitute.  
[2. m. y f. coloq. Persona despreciable. U. t. c. insult.].  
2. Masculine and feminine noun. Colloquial. Despicable person (also used as an insult).
  - Zorra.  
[1. f. despect. malson. Prostituta].

1. Feminine noun, derogatory, rude. Prostitute.  
[2. m. y f. coloq. Persona muy taimada, astuta y solapada].
2. Masculine and feminine noun. Colloquial. A very sly, crafty and devious person.  
Lagarta.  
[1. f. despect. coloq. prostituta. U. t. c. adj].
1. Feminine noun, derogatory, colloquial. Prostitute. Also used as an adjective.  
[2. m. y f. coloq. Persona pícara, taimada. U. t. c. adj.].
2. Masculine and feminine noun. A sneaky, sly person. Also used as an adjective.  
The most accurate definition of the term as an adjective would be 'opportunistic', although it is not in the dictionary.
- Víbora.  
[f. Persona con malas intenciones].  
Feminine noun. A person with bad intentions.
8. Charles Fillmore ([1983] 2006) defines the "semantic framework" as a system of concepts related in such a way that understanding any one of them allows one to understand the whole structure in which it fits. Its usefulness for mapping and categorizing the Manosphere lies precisely in the encyclopedic character of its structure.
9. Translators' note: The pun in this sentence does not work in English. In the Spanish original there was a pun between the preposition "para" in the sentence "para follármela como a una perra" (to fuck her like a bitch) and the first part of the term used to refer to a (male) national of Paraguay, "Para-guayo".
10. Vox (used in the post analysed above as "vox"): Spanish far-right party.

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