



‘The filthy people’:¹ Racism in digital spaces during Covid-19 in the context of South–South migration

Macarena Bonhomme 

Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Chile

Amaranta Alfaro

Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile

Abstract

Notions of ‘race’ and disease are deeply imbricated across the globe. This article explores the historical, complex entanglements between ‘race’, disease, and dirtiness in the multicultural Chilean context of Covid-19. We conducted a quantitative content analysis and a discourse analysis of online readers’ comments ($n = 1233$) in a digital news platform surrounding a controversial news event to examine Chileans’ cultural representations of Haitian migrants and explore online racism and anti-immigrant discourse. Drawing on a decolonial approach, we argue that Covid-19 as a crisis has been fabricated at the expense of a constructed ‘other’. We show how colonial racist logics not only endure in digital spaces, but are made viral in new ways by representing Haitian migrants as ‘filthy’ and ‘disease carriers’. We identified two contemporary forms of racism – *online cultural racism* and *online aggressive racism* – through which people construct imaginaries of racial superiority in digital spaces.

Keywords

anti-black racism, Chile, Covid-19, cultural representations, digital spaces, Haitian migration, hate-speech, migration, race and ethnicity, racism

Corresponding author:

Macarena Bonhomme, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Chile, Av. Pedro de Valdivia 425, Santiago, Chile.
Email: macarena.bonhomme@uaautonoma.cl

On 10 April 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 health crisis in Chile, right-wing President Sebastián Piñera made a public statement regarding Chile's police force: 'They have also collaborated in better protecting our land, sea and air borders to prevent illegal immigration from bringing to our country the contamination or infection of the virus that's attacking us' (CNN Chile, 2020).² Chile's president not only explicitly linked migration and contagious disease by alluding to migrants as foreign elements that 'bring' contamination to 'our' country; he also situated immigration as a crime with his use of the term 'illegal'. The government's construction of the 'other' as a threat demonstrates how the ideology of racism is embedded in political discourse³ (van Dijk, 2000). By associating the coronavirus pandemic with immigration flows, President Piñera converted migrants into scapegoats, thereby reinforcing his political discourse about the need to control borders and 'put the house in order'⁴ (Prensa Presidencia, 2018). This discourse has extended into the everyday lives of many Chilean residents (Bonhomme and Alfaro, 2022).

A few days after the president's speech, the TV news confirmed a Covid-19 outbreak⁵ among Haitian residents living in a low-income borough which has the capital city's greatest concentration of Haitians. A conflict emerged as Chilean residents claimed Haitians were not complying with the quarantine regulations. Television reporters filmed the residents' collective housing violating their privacy and reinforcing the stigmatization of the Haitian community. This controversial news story garnered substantial national attention. Alleging that the Haitian community possessed 'deviant' attitudes that threatened the local population, local media mimicked global media practices of reducing migrant-related issues to matters of integration, conflict and stereotypes about the flawed character of migrants (van Dijk, 2000).

Drawing on this news event, the most controversial of its type during the pandemic in Chile, this article aims to unpack dominant discourses around, and cultural representations of, the Haitian community. Over the past 20 years, the number of migrants in Chile rose by 792% (INE and DEM, 2021), predominantly as a result of South–South migration from Latin America and the Caribbean. Although the vast majority of Chile's migrants originate from Venezuela, the population that has attracted most attention in recent years is Haitians.⁶ They have been widely stigmatized, becoming the most racially discriminated migrant group in Chile (Bonhomme, 2020). Administrative orders implemented as part of the 2018 Migratory Reform imposed additional entry restrictions on Haitians. Both the introduction of consular visas⁷ and the implementation of the Plan of Orderly Humanitarian Return⁸ were key to the growing exclusion of Haitian migrants in Chile.

By examining the readers' comments on the EMOL (*El Mercurio* online) digital platform, this article offers insights into the deep imbrications among 'race', migration, and disease. It further explores how online racism is articulated and how it echoes colonial racial hierarchies amid a South–South migratory context in which people who share an ethnic background and colonial past converge in a single territory. Our aim is to understand how 'race' and migration are articulated in the readers' comments about Covid-related issues. Drawing on a decolonial approach, we contribute to research on

the inextricable relationship between contagious diseases and processes of racialization (Ahmad and Bradby, 2007; Briggs, 2005; Cecchi, 2019; Chan and Montt, 2020; Kraut, 2010; von Unger et al., 2019). Understanding the complexities of racialized processes of ‘othering’ in Latin America and the Caribbean within a migratory context⁹ and amid a sanitary crisis is overdue. Our aim is to fill this gap and contribute to the growing research that analyzes racism on social media (Chou and Gaysynsky, 2021) during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dionne and Turkmen, 2020). We advance what is known about processes of racialization in digital spaces by moving beyond the usual focus on anti-Asian racism, and by incorporating a cultural studies and ‘race’ perspective. Studying racial issues in the context of the Global South is key for understanding how other negatively racialized groups, such as Afro-descendants, are likely to experience racism (Ruiz et al., 2020) amid crises. A decolonial approach is crucial to rethink how colonialism has permeated social life in colonized nations like Chile,¹⁰ and to examine contemporary forms of racism given the growing impact of digital media in people’s lives.

Much of human communication takes place through online platforms.¹¹ Digital platforms have become spaces where racism is enacted in different ways (Daniels, 2013). Digital online platforms are always reflective of place, embedded in larger social and cultural structures and power dynamics (Sassen, 2002). Therefore, they become valuable spaces in which to explore racism and anti-immigrant discourses in multicultural societies. In today’s digitalized world, mediated reality matters even more than objective reality in terms of perpetuating representations (Strömbäck, 2008) since it occurs in front of a much larger audience (Brown, 2017). The internet is not only a site for identity- and community-formation but also ‘of political struggle over racial meaning, knowledge and values’ (Daniels, 2013: 704). Digital spaces are today’s most pervasive communication and interaction channel, shaping public opinion on migrants (Ekman, 2019: 606) by highlighting attitudes of rejection towards negatively-racialized outgroups (Farkas et al., 2018).

Due to the anonymity and lack of regulation¹² that characterizes online news sites, people are more likely to express disagreement than on other social media platforms. In online news sites, disagreement often takes the form of ‘unedited reactions’ and allows readers to amplify their private sentiments and racist attitudes (Loke, 2012: 243; Rossini and Maia, 2021) among like-minded people (Faulkner and Bliuc, 2016). Open use of racist language no longer deemed acceptable in public settings and traditional media channels is common (Chaudhry, 2015; Florini, 2017; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). The interactivity, anonymity, and ubiquity of digital media makes it a powerful tool for spreading hate-speech.¹³ The most common type of cyberhate is racial hatred (Douglas et al., 2005), which has been on the rise on digital platforms (Müller and Schwarz, 2021). While previous research has examined the prevalence of cyber-racism and hate-speech in digital spaces¹⁴ such as Facebook, Twitter and other online public spaces (Bartlett et al., 2014; Cammaerts, 2009; Chaudhry, 2015; Ekman, 2019; Farkas et al., 2018; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), this article seeks to explore the differences that emerge in the way racist expressions are constructed online. This study contributes to the growing body of research on how racism is expressed in readers’ comments on news websites (Cogo, 2019; Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012; Ferré-Pavia and Simelio-Solá, 2016; Loke, 2012). Specifically, we examine how different forms of racism are enacted in the evolving digital public sphere. The aim of this study is

to delineate the distinctive ways in which contemporary racism is expressed online in South–South migratory contexts, considering historical processes of racialization as well as more locally specific aspects of racism.¹⁵ Drawing upon the systematic review of racism in online platforms conducted by Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021), we contribute to the small amount of research that has deeply engaged with racial studies in Global South digital contexts. Although emerging research has focused on racism in digital spaces in Latin America (Calvo-Buezas, 2014; Olmos-Alcaraz, 2018; Torre-Cantalapiedra, 2019), this field remains under-explored.

Chile – one of the destination countries with largest flows from within Latin America – is a quintessential case study for unpacking racism in Global South digital spaces. Chile has a high level of internet use and social media penetration (Valenzuela et al., 2012), and research has documented that incivility in Chilean news site comments sections is significantly higher than in its Global North counterparts (Saldaña and Rosenberg, 2020). Chile’s media environment is concentrated in a handful of news conglomerates widely recognized as conservative / right-wing. As a voice for the values of Chile’s political right, EMOL represents a key venue for the communication of far-right discourses that tend to negatively represent, and/or criminalize, indigenous communities (Hudson and Dussailant, 2018) and Latin American and Caribbean migrants (Poo, 2009; Valenzuela-Vergara, 2019).

People’s comments on news sites are key for unveiling the way Chileans make meaning from the news regarding particular migratory groups. Representations are the products of meaning through language and are key to our existence as cultural subjects (Hall, 2013: 3). Since social conventions produce fixed codes through which people generate meaning, it is possible to uncover discursive themes in Chilean readers’ comments that articulate a unified position of national and racial superiority and that work to establish power differences between themselves and migrant ‘others’. Using an explorative content analysis of discourse, we reviewed online comments to understand in depth how the reproduction of racism unfolds due to its ideological nature (van Dijk, 2000). We argue that Chilean news sites have allowed anti-immigrant and racist discourse to go viral by offering both anonymity, whereby ‘politically incorrect’ expressions can be voiced without fear of consequence, and allegiance with other co-nationals. Racist discourse varies, however, and we found that two forms of online racism predominated. We discuss these two forms (*online cultural racism* and *online aggressive racism*) in detail in the next section.

This article is structured as follows. First, racism in digital spaces is conceptualized, defining key concepts and exploring the deep entanglements among ‘race’, migration, disease, and hygienic practices. Second, we describe our methodology, and third, we present research findings. Fourth, we discuss the findings. Finally, we draw some conclusions from our study.

Conceptualizing racism in digital spaces

This theoretical framework builds inductively from both the analysis and from racial, migration, and communication studies to develop two concepts: *online cultural racism* and *online aggressive racism*. These notions advance our understanding of how racism is performed in digital spaces in South–South migratory contexts and amid the

Covid-19 pandemic, examining 'race' and its historically contingent characteristics (Hall, 1980).

Racism and 'race'

Racism is an ideology that is constituted by difference and power (Fredrickson, 2003). Its central mechanism is the assertion of a biological basis to human difference (Hall, 1980). To produce relations of domination, external differences are explained as a bodily manifestation of internal characteristics. These internal characteristics are viewed as immutable and determinative of human superiority and inferiority (Alexander and Knowles, 2005). The concepts we advance (i.e. *online cultural racism* and *online aggressive racism*) offer a means to better understanding of how these ideas of superiority/inferiority are materialized in digital spaces. The discursive nature of racism as an ideology is key to the proliferation of its online forms (van Dijk, 2000); that is, various forms of racisms are expressed and enacted not only through local practices but also through text and comments in digital spaces. Discourse analysis, therefore, becomes a natural way to unpack online viral racism. Since we mostly 'learn' racism through text and talk,¹⁶ 'discourse as a social practice of racism is at the same time the main source for people's racist beliefs' (van Dijk, 2000: 36). This discursive approach is vital for understanding how relations of domination are produced in digital spaces grounded in a national context, such as news sites.¹⁷ By enabling a focus on historical, structural, and ideological dimensions of racism (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021), discursive approaches bring to light the novel ways in which ideology flows within society and niche groups (Farkas et al., 2018).

The social construction of 'race' persists by adapting to new social and cultural contexts; accordingly, novel forms of racism, characterized by their symbolic nature, have emerged. These 'subtler' forms of racism render racist ideology less visible. The distinction between new and previous forms of racism is important to acknowledge. Balibar (1991) refers to the former as 'neo-racism', describing a type of racism in which allusions to cultural difference function as a guise for racial differentiation. The latter, 'old racisms', are based on notions of biological heredity and essentialized notions of 'race'. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a particular social context in which emerging racisms should be considered, as contagious diseases have historically been entwined with notions of 'race', as we show below.

'Race', disease, and hygienic practices

Notions of 'race' and disease have a deep-seated relationship across the globe (Briggs, 2005). Every society that has faced crises tends to construct an 'other' upon which to place the blame (i.e. 'scapegoat') for unexpected circumstances as a way to control diversity (Ahmad and Bradby, 2007; Cecchi, 2019). The historical record shows that numerous pandemics and infectious diseases have been blamed on underprivileged groups (Sennett, 1997), such as migrants and ethnic minorities, who are either perceived or presented as the 'other' and associated with being vectors of contagious diseases.¹⁸ For instance, Mason (2015) shows how different imaginaries surrounding SARS racially constructed the epidemic as a Chinese disease.¹⁹ Historically, discourses have been focused

on Chinese living practices and bodies, which are represented as ‘unhygienic’ and vectors for infectious diseases (Craddock, 1995). According to Eicher et al. (2015: 386), infectious disease outbreaks constitute threatening events that require ‘collective symbolic coping’. The outgroup’s unhygienic practices, which are considered ‘immoral’, emerge as one symbol that allows the collective to cope. Despite evidence to the contrary, migrants have historically been seen as a potential threat and stigmatized as ‘disease carriers’ (Kraut, 2010). Because of their often-crowded dwelling places, they are accused of facilitating of contagion. However, their higher risk of illness is largely attributable to poverty, as congested living conditions, long working hours, and malnourishment all leave migrants more vulnerable to disease (Kraut, 2010).

These historical entanglements between notions of ‘race’ and disease have strongly impacted contemporary racism. So, too, has the pandemic context, which has helped to make online racism viral. The concepts *online cultural racism* and *online aggressive racism* emerge from this juxtaposition, illustrating that the Covid-19 pandemic is highly racialized in increasingly multicultural contexts like Chile. The concepts illustrate the two forms of racial discrimination we encounter in digital spaces amid the pandemic. Although previous studies have offered concepts aimed at understanding online racism (e.g. ‘platformed racism’; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), the concepts we propose here address vital distinctions and allow us to examine the particularized notions of ‘race’ that (re)emerge in Global South digital contexts triggered by the sanitary crisis.

The concept *online cultural racism* is inspired by the notion of cultural racism put forward by Solomos and Back (1994) and what Balibar (1991) called ‘neo-racism’. It describes how cultural attributes that arise from historical stigma and racial stereotypes are attached to certain migratory groups, and how ‘race’ is re-inscribed into a cultural code. This discursive strategy conceals racist sentiments, similar to van Dijk’s (2000) ‘apparent denial’. This strategic form of disavowing racism through ‘stylistic resources’ (Ferré-Pavia and Simelio-Solá, 2016) is evident in commenters who intentionally use specific language or who ‘lie’ to hide their racist discourse and avoid creating a ‘bad impression’. The term *online aggressive racism* captures overt aggressive forms of racism that dehumanize the constructed ‘other’. It also alludes to incivility²⁰ or hate-speech against social groups (Papacharissi, 2004), yet allows the production of racial superiority by denigrating a negatively racialized ‘other’. These concepts will be further described in the research findings. We caution readers that the findings may be upsetting.

Methodology

We conducted²¹ an exploratory quantitative content analysis followed by a discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2001). The story of interest was an outbreak of Covid in a collective housing and the indiscriminate exposure of Haitian residents to public scrutiny at the beginning of the pandemic. We analyzed readers’ comments (n = 1233) posted on five separate news articles²² (Table 1: EMOL_1–5). These articles were published in the online news platform EMOL, one of Chile’s most prestigious newspapers.²³ As Saldaña and Rosenberg (2020: 2) assert, comment sections are places for ‘unfiltered expression’ among Chileans.²⁴ While the EMOL website claims to host moderators,

who prevent offensive or inappropriate material from being posted,²⁵ this rarely seems to be the case. Although it is difficult to know the exact reasons, it is possible that moderators are present but purposefully preserve such comments to increase public exposure to the conservative perspectives held by media elites (van Dijk, 2000).

First, we carried out a quantitative content analysis²⁶ (Riffe et al., 2014) of a descriptive nature. Inter-coder reliability²⁷ was high for the codebook (Tables 2 and 3). Our discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2001) derives from this content analysis. We considered those categories that emerged inductively from the frequency analysis of keywords found in the comments. We also considered concepts that emerged deductively from the literature. Once we identified the main discursive themes, we categorized the comments across multiple readings (Loke, 2012). We analyzed the discourses about migration and disease and their imbrication with processes of racialization and racism. We focused on the semantic construction of oppositions, exemplified by outgroup/ingroup language regarding 'them' and 'us'. Such negative presentations of the 'other' and positive presentations of self help to establish relations of social domination (van Dijk, 2000). Our primary research question was: how are 'race' and migration articulated in readers' discourse on Covid-related issues?²⁸ The next sections illustrate the predominant discursive themes found in the comments, which we categorize as either *online cultural racism* or *online aggressive racism*.

Table I. Sample and comment distribution

| Article code | Article date | Number of comments | Headline |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------|---|
| EMOL_1 | 22 April | 341 | SJM ²⁹ accuses discrimination against foreigners living in the cité where Covid-19 outbreak occurred: 'The problem is not them; it's about racism' |
| EMOL_2 | 22 April | 349 | Governor announces inspections after the eviction of 250 people from the cité: 'These conditions are not adequate for a human being' |
| EMOL_3 | 22 April | 251 | The immigrant community where the Covid-19 outbreak occurred is transferred to sanitary residence: about 250 people |
| EMOL_4 | 23 April | 231 | Guevara ³⁰ asserts that the Quilicura case shows that 'it is not prudent' to give the identities of people who have Covid-19 |
| EMOL_5 | 23 April | 61 | Protect them from harassment or offer information to help them: The debate about access to patient data |
| Total number of comments | | 1233 | |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2. News-comment codebook and inter-coder reliability

| Variable | Agreement (%) | Krippendorff's alpha | Cohen's kappa |
|--|---------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Case study identification | 100 | 1 | 1 |
| Deportation | 75.5 | 0.432 | 0.426 |
| Migrants take jobs away from Chileans | 77.7 | 0.47 | 0.464 |
| System abuse | 73.3 | 0.459 | 0.452 |
| Migrants as violent and criminal offenders | 80.0 | 0.502 | 0.496 |
| Demography and poverty issues | 73.3 | 0.369 | 0.362 |
| Overcrowded housing conditions | 86.6 | 0.563 | 0.558 |
| Dirtiness | 80.0 | 0.2 | 0.191 |
| Illegality | 80.0 | 0.2 | 0.191 |
| Dehumanization | 80.0 | 0.2 | 0.191 |
| Risk of contagion | 78.8 | 0.185 | 0.176 |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 3. Quantitative content analysis results

| Variable | Frequency ⁱ | Percentage |
|--|------------------------|------------|
| Deportation | 91 | 35% |
| Migrants take jobs away from Chileans | 26 | 10% |
| System abuse | 70 | 27% |
| Migrants as violent and criminal offenders | 32 | 13% |
| Demography and poverty issues | 58 | 23% |
| Overcrowded housing conditions | 23 | 9% |
| Dirtiness | 23 | 25% |
| Illegality | 28 | 28% |
| Dehumanization | 11 | 13% |
| Risk of contagion | 45 | 54% |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

[i] Since all these variables are dichotomous, the table only includes the frequency and percentage of the category 'yes', in order to display the presence of each variable among the comments in the sample.

Online cultural racism: unravelling the anti-immigrant discourse

The event described sparked several news stories. Referencing the quotes of local authorities, some news articles (see Table 1: EMOL_1, EMOL_3) highlighted how the event was fraught with racism, as both local residents and the media transgressed against Haitians' privacy and put them at risk of discrimination (Table 1: EMOL_5). The readers' comments primarily took issue with the news framing. Comments usually began by arguing against the claim that the event was a 'racism issue', alluding to Haitians' racial inferiority to structure their arguments:

This has nothing to do with racism. They don't adapt. They live amid garbage... and they're lazy and loudmouths. (Table 1: EMOL_1)

This strategic way of structuring the discourse by denying any racist sentiments on their own part crystallizes what van Dijk (2000: 41) refers to as an 'apparent denial': employing language to refute negative impressions while still broadcasting the opinions that might generate them.

The way Haitians are constructed in negative terms reveals different dimensions of 'othering' (Crang, 1998) that are repeated in a systematic fashion throughout the comments. We can see at least three dimensions of 'othering' that sustain anti-immigrant sentiment: their 'culture' and customs, their abuse of the (welfare) system, and demographic and poverty issues. All are intrinsically related to one another. The allusion to cultural behaviour, assuming Haitian cultural difference from Chileans explains their problems and the associated discrimination, is expressed in different ways. Other dimensions are added as discursive devices to exacerbate difference.

In the comment above, the use of the words 'lazy' (repeated 13 times) and 'loudmouths' emphasizes cultural difference by suggesting the need to 'adapt' and thus acculturate to 'superior' Chilean culture. These statements establish the alleged inferiority of Haitians compared to Chileans on the basis of cultural practices.

One of the news follow-ups reported that 250 migrants were transported to a sanitary residence (Table 1: EMOL_3). Here, too, interviewed authorities mentioned discrimination against Haitians. Many readers referred to racialized perceptions of migrants, reproducing political discourse associating Haitian migrants' arrival with diseases. Some even pointed to Haitians' 'cultural' difference from other Latin American and Caribbean migrants:

It's not a racial issue. The Haitians arrived with high rates of HIV, tuberculosis, and other diseases that were considered eradicated from Chile (and thanks to them are not anymore). With very low education and carrying poverty and disease. It's not about race; I've met many black Venezuelans who are educated and contribute to the country. (Table 1: EMOL_3)

This comment holds Haitian migrants directly responsible for bringing diseases other than Covid-19. The racialized process of 'othering' is achieved by alluding to a lack of education and the sole contribution of 'poverty' and 'diseases'. Yet this reader also refutes the notion that the comment might be racist, mentioning 'black' educated Venezuelans who 'contribute'. Thus, the reader contends, their concern is about culture ('low culture') rather than 'race' – a strategic way to hide racist logics and obscure the racial essentialism implied by associating migrants with diseases (von Unger et al., 2019) that could threaten the national status quo. Culture is naturalized by presenting it as immutable in origin, and racism is expressed through a language of 'culture' that explicitly disavows the existence of racism. This form of racist discourse, called cultural racism (Solomos and Back, 1994), thus facilitates the persistence of racism in everyday interactions by shielding perpetrators from being labelled 'racists'.

Readers repeated the terms 'illegal' or migrant 'illegality' (van Dijk, 2000) throughout the comments (30%). Related notions of 'delinquency' were also present, yet these were

mostly associated with migrants' abuse of the health and social system amid the pandemic; almost 30% of the comments referred to migrants' abuse of the system (Table 3). The Covid-19 outbreak ignited anti-immigrant sentiment that often had less to do with the pandemic and more to do with migrants in general. Criminalization has long contributed to the process of othering (Crang, 1998); Covid-19 allowed readers an opportunity to justify their calls for the control and even deportation of Haitian migration:

This isn't about Covid but rather Chileans' frustration with illegal immigrants and their crime and disregard for laws, as a CONSEQUENCE of them there's a Covid outbreak, endangering the health of citizens and LEGAL immigrants. There's also frustration with politicians who carry out an immigration policy that's basically illegal, without citizen consent, basically they... bring the illegal immigrants to the front of the line at the expense of citizens' suffering and health. That's why in USA they elected Trump, and I hope the same happens in Chile. (Table 1: EMOL_4)

The use of capital letters emphasizes the 'consequences' that 'illegal' and 'disrespectful' behaviour can have for local residents. The term 'legal' is also in capital letters. This is an example of what van Dijk (2000) calls an 'apparent concession', when the reader extends their concern to 'legal' migrants not just Chilean citizens. Yet, in the end, the reader concludes that these 'illegal migrants' have acted at the expense of 'citizens' suffering'. The reader differentiates 'citizens', who can only be local nationals, from migrants, who are defined by the legality/illegality of their migratory condition outside of citizenship. Describing migrants as 'illegals' is a form of rhetorical repetition that emphasizes the act of breaking the law (van Dijk, 2000)³¹ and equates migrants with criminals. In fact, the terms 'illegal' and 'illegality' appeared most often (38 times), with related terms such as 'delinquent' (25), 'violent' (9), and 'dangerous' (9) also mentioned frequently.³²

The 'cultural' difference many readers referred to when talking about Haitians mainly related to practices of hygiene. Readers referred to migrant 'others' as 'dirty' and 'filthy', and their cultural practices were held up as proof of their racial inferiority. On the other hand, readers endorsed Chileans' cleanliness as a sign of their development and superiority (see Bonhomme, 2021). The terms 'dirty/filthy' or 'dirtiness' were among the most mentioned (18 times), as well as related terms such as 'garbage' (7), and comprised 25% of the comments. One reader, for instance, stated that Haitians were 'people used to living in filth'. Other comments added 'race' as a biological factor that explained these practices and that served to differentiate 'them' from 'us' (self-identifying Chileans from the 'white race'). For example, 'the Haitians are an extremely discriminatory people, when someone like us from the white race is in Haiti...' (Table 1: EMOL_5). Other comments cited the need to deport Haitians because of their unhygienic practices. Still others described Haitian as originating from a '*shithole*' (sic) country, drawing the comparison between Haiti as a 'Fourth world country' and Chile as 'Third World'.

We have about two million poor foreigners who live in crowded, unhealthy conditions or who don't know the most basic thing about hygiene, and moreover come from countries with little or

no social discipline. They are a real health and social time bomb. And they compete unfairly... against Chileans for the few jobs that are left after the crises we endured... (Table 1: EMOL_3)

Now 33 Chileans may die because the respirators are occupied with Haitian immigrants. Why did 33 of them get infected in one *ci  *? Because they live in overcrowded conditions like in their native country, they have no consciousness of hygiene.... With this kind of immigrants, we'll never flatten our contagion curve. *Chileans first*. Now 250 will go to sanitary residences paid by all Chileans. (Table 1: EMOL_1)

Here, the use of hyperbole ('million poor foreigners', 'time bomb') is key to legitimating the need to control Haitian migration. This commentary also includes the common anti-immigrant discourse surrounding 'unfair' job competition. Moreover, overcrowded housing is said to arise from 'little or no social discipline'. In the second comment the establishment of an ingroup – 'we'll never flatten *our* contagion curve' – is clearly reinforced by 'Chileans first' (sic) in English. As in many other comments, Haitian migrants are presented as second-class citizens who compete (given Chile's alleged lack of resources) with Chileans for the health services to which they believe they are entitled.

These comments illustrate what we call *online cultural racism*, an analytical concept that helps to describe this kind of covert racism. Online cultural racism emphasizes the need for immigration control through the construction of an inferior 'other' without using dehumanizing racist speech against migrants. The hidden nature of the anti-immigrant and anti-black sentiment allows the ideology to persist, with effects that rival more direct forms of racism. In contrast to what Solomos and Back (1994) suggest about cultural racism in offline multicultural contexts, in digital spaces this kind of racism is often less subtle and more hateful as a product of the anonymity the internet allows. In the next section, we focus on *online aggressive racism*, which describes a more radical and aggressive form of racist hate-speech against Haitians.

Online aggressive racism: dehumanizing the 'other'

The second discursive strategy we encountered for expressing racist views relies on the use of aggressive, dehumanizing metaphors. As shown earlier, readers' comments present dirtiness as a cultural practice intrinsically related to contagion and disease. The dirtiness/cleanliness binary is a strategic discursive approach that constructs Haitian migrants as a threat to Chilean society beyond the health crisis. While more covert forms of racism were also present in the comments, many comments still exhibited overt racism in the discussion of this particular subject:

These black shithheads are all infected and instead of obeying the government's quarantine, they go out 'to work', spreading the virus wherever they go, it's not racism, it's that we can't tolerate the immigrant shits who came to Chile thinking they could bypass the laws. (Table 1: EMOL_1)

This hateful comment also neglects racism and emphasizes that Haitians are a real threat in this pandemic because of the way they behave. Almost 55% of the comments alluded to the risk of contagion that migrants present. References to unhygienic conditions were used to justify readers' fear of contagion. For example, comments referred to houses as 'dirty

ghettos' or generalized the whole migrant community as 'people with virus', 'chronically ill', and even 'pigs'. These representations were fuelled by other offensive racist expressions, such as 'black shitheads' and 'immigrant shits', that aimed to diminish Haitian migrants and imply that they are 'filthy' people. This echoes findings from studies suggesting most Chileans believed migrants were 'dirtier' than them (INDH, 2017; Bonhomme, 2021). Dirt's symbolic meaning is pertinent here. According to Douglas (1966: 2), dirt 'offends against order', which implies that the production of 'dirt' is associated with morality and respect for social conventions. Exaggerating differences in dirtiness becomes a way to reinforce hierarchy (Douglas, 1966). Thus, issues of 'dirt' are often related to other issues in reader discourse, such as criminality. In contrast to the dirtiness, contagion, and diseases attributed to the Haitian 'other', cleanliness, health, and purity are attributed to the Chilean 'us'. According to Berthold (2010), ideas of cleanliness are rooted in notions of whiteness; thus, being clean means being 'white' – and racially superior, as whiteness has historically meant more privilege in Latin American and Caribbean countries (De Ramón, 2009; Rebolledo, 1994).

Other 'cultural' behaviours attributed to Haitians represented them as 'uncontrollable', and thus unable to acculturate to Chilean customs, a requisite for being a 'good migrant'. Metaphors like 'stubborn as mules' crystallized this idea. The use of other dehumanizing metaphors functioned to deny racial discrimination, in line with the online cultural racism.

They pretend to be victims alleging that their bad luck is due to the skin colour and that they're foreigners.... That 'reasoning' makes them special people who deserve to be protected, maintained, and are above the local law. When you point it out to them, they immediately shoot out 'discrimination'. Their modus operandi is always the same.... They're professional beggars, they behave like parasites, they use money that belongs to others without putting a cent on the table... (Table 1: EMOL_5)³³

Here, Haitians are represented as dishonest: they 'play' the victim using their skin colour and migratory condition to explain being discriminated against and take advantage of the social (welfare) system. The use of the 'professional beggars' and the 'parasite' metaphor characterizes their 'bad' habit of benefiting at others' expense. It also dehumanizes Haitians, portraying them as abusers rather than contributors, victims rather than agents.

Taking the form of aggression, these comments emphasize the negative aspects of, and dehumanize, this constructed 'other' by alluding to non-human' attributes.³⁴ The following statements show this discursive strategy of constructing Haitian migrants as racially inferior, fuelled by the use of capital letters:

...THE MATTER ISN'T THE SKIN COLOUR. IT'S THE OFFICIALS' STUPIDITY OF LETTING IN GARBAGE, AND, AS IF THAT WEREN'T ENOUGH, THEY LIVE CROWDED TOGETHER. AND, WATCH OUT:THEY'RE LIKE ANIMALS, WHO DO NOTHING BUT HAVE CHILDREN, AND LIVE AT THE GOVERNMENT'S EXPENSE. YOU ONLY NEED TO LOOK AT HAITI. DESPITE ALL THE AID IT RECEIVES, THEY NEVER EVOLVE, BECAUSE THEY'RE LAZY.

...they're infected but pretend to be tough. They act like they're IMMUNE, and don't have the same immune system as whites.... And they're as filthy as the Chinese haha... (Table 1: EMOL_3)

The racist logics apparent in these comments underscore one of the purposes of 'othering': to construct an emotional defence mechanism against what is perceived as a threat (de Rosa and Mannarini, 2020). Not only is cultural racism present in their discourse, but so is racism based on biological heredity. Readers refer to biological traits when asserting the ways that Haitians represent a different, inferior 'race', using terms as 'black' (the most used word overall, 38 times) and statements like 'filthy as the Chinese' and 'they never evolve'. This reinforces the ideology of racism by alluding to Darwin's theory of evolution³⁵ and using racial traits to portray Haitians as animals. As the decolonial scholar Maldonado-Torres (2010: 111) states, 'Invisibility and dehumanization are the primary expressions of the coloniality of Being.' By calling Haitian migrants animals as well as '*negros*' (blacks)—which represents the legacy of colonialism and implies 'race' is biological – Chilean readers deprive them of humanity.

Readers also frequently referred to Haitian birthrates and poverty (23%), using hyperbole and saying 'they multiply their misery exponentially' to show the radical difference between 'them' and 'us' by implying that birth control represents a symbol of development. This animalization also echoes the colonial dualism of uncivilized/civilized and inferior/superior in which the black/white binary is ingrained. The comments below represent such attempts at dehumanization:

Stubborn infrahuman and overbearing monkeys, who do they think they are?? Send them back to their island to eat shit.

They should go back. To the caves where these stubborn monkeys came from.

And these cockroaches have grown legs. These assholes are cashing in on employment insurance. (Table 1: EMOL_1)

Thus, Haitian migrants are constructed as 'racially inferior', consistently linked to 'inferior' behaviours and customs and referred to as animals, insects, and 'infrahumans' who should be deported. Of reader comments, 35% mentioned this. These kinds of comments represent what we call *online aggressive racism*. This concept refers to the way processes of 'othering' involve dehumanization, hatefulness, and the overt use of racist logics and anti-black racism to assert racial superiority. This study shows that what Balibar (1991) refers to as 'old racism' – directly alluding to biological heredity – is not so old, as evidenced by its endurance in the contemporary digital context.

Discussion

Covid-19 reveals that colonialism is still present, both covertly and overtly voiced in digital spaces that allow people to express hateful opinions around culturally sensitive and controversial issues. While some of these alleged cultural differences between

Chileans and Haitians are established through covert forms (i.e. *online cultural racism*), more blatant forms that involve aggressive, dehumanizing rhetoric against migrants (i.e. *online aggressive racism*) also played a role. Compared to the kind of racism that conceals racist conduct, *online aggressive racism* embraces it. In other words, *online cultural racism* is subtle, resembles cultural racism, and references a cultural code – what Balibar (1991) calls ‘neo-racism’. *Online aggressive racism*, on the other hand, resembles historical, more aggressive forms of racism, and alludes to biologically grounded assumptions of racial inferiority and dehumanization – what Balibar (1991) refers to as ‘old racism’.

Drawing on a decolonial perspective, these discourses reflect othering process and rhetoric that have historically reproduced relations of domination between the ruling elites and indigenous and African communities in Latin American and the Caribbean countries during colonial times and the new republic (van Dijk, 2007; Wade, 2010). These crude racist comments reinforce racial and cultural representations that historically associated ‘blacks’ and indigenous people with ‘backwardness’ and ‘whites’ with development and civilization (Wade, 2010). By asserting their belonging to the ‘white race’ – as many comments revealed – some Chileans drew a line separating Chilean ‘us’ from Haitian ‘them’. Rhetorical oppositions abounded. ‘We’ (Chileans) are clean, healthy, hard-working, peaceful, civilized, developed, humans and thus superior; ‘they’ (Haitians) are filthy, contagious, lazy, violent, illegal, uncivilized, and ultimately ‘infrumans’. Since colonialism, Europeans have been conceived of as having a correct ‘moral behaviour’ and ‘culture’ – which Chileans believe they represent; African ‘others’ have been conceived of as foreigners who lacked ‘proper manners’, were ‘ignorant’, ‘lazy’, ‘savage’, ‘brute’ and ‘delinquent’, and deprived of culture (De Ramón, 2009). These colonial representations have re-emerged in digital spaces. Haitians represent the new ‘other’, reproducing racial hierarchies that place Afro-descendants at the bottom of society.

The cleanliness/dirtiness dualism that prevails in readers’ discourse remains intrinsically imbricated with health issues. Haitians are portrayed as ‘disease carriers’ and a ‘threat’, and ‘cultural’ factors emphasize (an alleged) racial inferiority. The *online cultural racism* we identified in reader comments masks racist beliefs by alluding to supposed ‘cultural difference’ between Chileans and Haitians. That is precisely how racism works: it generates power imbalances based on naturalizing ‘culture’ and attaches culture to already racialized bodies (Back, 2010). We argue that dirtiness and illness are deeply entangled with notions of ‘race’ in online discourse. This entanglement constitutes a strategic discursive mechanism by which anti-immigrant sentiment, historical anti-black racism and, ultimately, racial superiority are sustained and reinforced.

In defending how the media and residents handled the Covid-19 outbreak on grounds of ‘cultural’ customs, readers imply that Haitians’ behaviour is a choice – while ‘race’, seen as biological, is not. At the same time, readers imply that cultural behaviour and practices are determined by the country of origin, and as such, cannot be escaped. When cultural difference is established as radical and generalized to the entire Haitian population, it becomes unbridgeable; acculturation, which many regard as compulsory for anyone migrating into Chile, is not a real option. Because dirt is relative and symbolizes immorality (Douglas, 1966), representing migrants as ‘filthy people’ (and ‘disease carriers’) implies the impossibility of them belonging. They are outside the dominant

moral order, outside of citizenship. Thus, this discourse justifies the need to deport them, a demand that is strongly present in reader comments. As von Unger et al. (2019: 13) claim, by representing migrants as ‘vectors of infection’, their entry is made to evoke the ‘entry of pathogens’ and asserts a biomedical reality that inevitably leads to exclusion. In sum, the Covid-19 crisis in migratory contexts and within local digital spaces has been explained at the expense of a negatively represented ‘other’. Readers attributed to this ‘other’ both practices contrived as ‘cultural’ and dehumanized biologically based characteristics, each of which sustains a nationalist anti-immigrant discourse. This has made both covert and overt racism pervasive throughout local online news sites.

The tendency to racialize and medicalize the risk of infection in low-income populations obscures the relevance of other complex factors at play, such as how restrictive immigration policies force migrants into overcrowded collective housing, elevating the risk of both coronavirus and racial discrimination. This discrimination is extended and becomes viral in digital spaces.³⁶ Readers’ comments show how the news story was interpreted through a ‘racial lens’ (Bonhomme, 2021) rather than through the complex macro factors related to infection susceptibility in low-income contexts such as Quilicura (the neighbourhood in which the event took place). Both the racial factor and the struggle for resources become key variables in understanding how pandemics become deeply racialized³⁷ (Roberts, 2009).

Conclusion

As crystallized in this controversial news story, Covid-19 has played a key role in the process of ‘othering’ Haitian communities in Chile. Our study shows how this racialized pandemic has not only reinforced anti-Asian racism but also anti-black racism (Ruiz et al., 2020), as Covid-19 allowed Chileans an opportunity to further construct the Haitian ‘other’ and reinvigorate their anti-black and anti-immigrant discourse. The stigmatization of Afro-descendants persists to this day, reproducing colonial hierarchies that rendered them marginalized. Echoing the state’s discourse, readers position Haitians at the bottom of Chilean society. The discursive strategy of focusing on cultural differences rather than on racism masks this ideology, which is a ‘domination hierarchy of superiority/inferiority over the line of humanity’ that is, at its core, still racism (Grosfoguel, 2012: 93). As we show, these discourses, especially those categorized as *online aggressive racism*, clearly echo colonial racist representations and unveil how multicultural, post-colonial Chile remains far from being a post-racial society, despite its disavowal of racism (Bonhomme, forthcoming; van Dijk, 2007).

Both kinds of online racism exhibit anti-black sentiment, echoing colonial hierarchies in the Americas and indicating that processes of racialization have permeated the discourse. Difference in the way racism is enacted in these digital spaces is important to acknowledge, however. The two kinds of online racism have different purposes and levels of aggression towards migrants. *Online aggressive racism* aims to actively degrade and deny the ‘other’s’ humanity, reinvigorating old biological forms of racism. *Online cultural racism* emphasizes cultural differences, mostly addressing the need for immigration control while avoiding more radical hateful assertions. This difference shows that, in digital spaces, ‘old racisms’ persist alongside contemporary racisms, of which cultural racism is but one.

This article not only contributes to a better understanding of the ubiquity of racism in online news comments, but also demonstrates the relevance of moving beyond text-based analyses of overt racist discourses alone. Instead, we must also examine everyday forms of racism in digital spaces (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021), ideally through a critical discursive approach. According to Bouvier (2015), as digital spaces are fused into everyday life, examining discourse in social media allows us to explore the ways that cultural identities are maintained and created and the ways local ideas and values are combined. As this study painfully shows, however, the ways these digital spaces are actually used might be harmful as they become tools for voicing privately held anti-immigrant sentiments. While the internet is, by default, a multicultural space that could facilitate intercultural encounter, news digital platforms appear to inhibit it. Their open and unmoderated nature can enable the construction of nationalist identities and offer the potential to invigorate local hateful racism through anti-immigration protests or acts of aggression against migrants, making it viral, as seen recently in northern Chile.³⁸ This underscores the significance of examining people's discourses and sentiments in digital platforms in order to unpack the novel ways in which the imbrication of 'race' and disease in representations of Afro-descendant migrants is often hidden in subtle forms of expressions. News media should pay greater attention to racist hate-speech and reactivate the force of ethical norms of communication. Following Loke (2012), journalists need to harness digital spaces' potential to foster civic participation and tolerance, and conduct effective myth-busting and fact-checking, all of which are grounded in a human rights approach. Putting these self-established guidelines into practice is key for cultivating democratic dialogue and mitigating online racism.

Our study also demonstrates how hegemonic political discourse, like that described at the beginning of the article, is reproduced through nationalist and racist logics that permeate the anti-immigrant discourse in digital spaces. Furthermore, news websites have become spaces where people openly voice their 'politically incorrect' opinions and construct meaning through interactions; as such, these sites may influence public opinion and even policy directions (Glenn et al., 2012). Although our findings may be alarming, they also point to avenues for redemption, if digital platforms were better regulated and anti-discrimination laws better enforced. Accordingly, we recommend further research to unravel the discursive elements of contemporary viral racisms and racial struggles on the internet. For these efforts, we suggest the use of nuanced qualitative analysis, especially in Global South contexts where, as we have shown, contemporary digital spaces have not only revived but also reinvigorated varieties of 'old racism'.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the National Agency for Research and

Development (ANID), Chile, FONDECYT Project No. 1200082 and No. 322193, and the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES), Chile, Anid/Fondap/15130009.

ORCID iD

Macarena Bonhomme  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1779-2062>

Notes

1. The title evokes Marilyn Manson's song 'The Beautiful People'.
2. Translated by the authors.
3. The reality, however, tells another story. In Chile, only 7.4% (44,980 people) of the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases in 2021 (610,783 people) are international migrants.
4. As Cecchi (2019) asserts, countries have historically used migrant communities as tools to enable their own political agenda in the face of health or economic crises.
5. On the morning of 21 April 2020, most Chilean media outlets, surprisingly not EMOL, covered and confirmed a Covid-19 outbreak in Quilicura, after 33 inhabitants tested positive. A total evacuation of the site was ordered that afternoon, transferring more than 250 people, Chilean and Haitian, to a sanitary quarantine residence. This situation sparked debate over patient data privacy during the coronavirus emergency, particularly around the media coverage (T13, 2020), and resulted in a sanction by the CNTV (National Television Council) to Canal13 (T13) for failing to protect Haitian interviewees' identities. Following the news story, neighbours of Quilicura insulted and threw stones at a group of Haitian migrants. This was also covered in the news.
6. Haiti's political and economic crisis intensified after the 2010 earthquake (Feldmann, 2013). The increase in Haitians migrating to Chile has been vast, making them one of the most prominent migratory groups (12.5%), after Venezuelans (30.7%) and Peruvians (16.3%) (INE and DEM, 2021). The policy environment since 2018 in Chile has curtailed Haitians' rights by restricting access to visas. Furthermore, studies have shown that racial discrimination and (sometimes perceived) lack of language proficiency limit Haitians' access to labour market opportunities, decent housing, and social services (Bonhomme, 2021; Rojas-Pedemonte et al., 2015). Accordingly, the mainstream media and videos that went viral on social media portrayed Haitians as arriving 'massively' and 'illegally' (although there was nothing illegal in their arrival) (La Tercera, 2018a), as 'violent' (La Tercera, 2018b) and as a threat to the 'Chilean race' (La Nación, 2018).
7. This consular visa stopped Haitians from entering as tourists and then applying for jobs – a common practice among Latin American and Caribbean migrants.
8. The government implemented the Plan of Orderly Humanitarian Return, a voluntary return programme for documented and undocumented migrants. Officially presented as a program for all migrants, it was widely described in the media as a 'solution to help' Haitians. In fact, the then Minister Andrés Chadwick emphasized that it was intended to help Haitians who had been misled by persons with deceitful promises of a better life in Chile- to return to Haiti 'voluntarily' (TVN, 2018). By 2019, the plan had returned 1262 Haitians to Port-au-Prince in eight Air Force (FACH) planes. This 'humanitarian plan' was intended to facilitate the expulsion of migrants who apparently made the house 'messy', perpetuating the state's historical use of migration policies against non-white Latin American and Caribbean migrants (Bonhomme, forthcoming). Some of the returned migrants were not proficient in Spanish and signed the related documents without translation assistance.

9. The context of South–South migration that characterizes Chile is relevant to studying racism since migrants coming from Latin America and the Caribbean share an ethnic background and colonial past (see Wade, 2010). Migrants in Chile today are mainly from Venezuela (30.7%), followed by Peru (16.3%), and then Haiti (12.5%), and other countries (INE and DEM, 2021).
10. The decolonial approach is key for understanding the ways the colonial past of South America and the Caribbean engendered current notions of ‘race’. This historical approach allows us to understand how Latin America is situated as a global coloniality (Quijano, 2010). In Latin America, indigenous communities and African descendants have historically been exploited and oppressed based on an ideology of racism that assumed their inferiority and primitive character. These beliefs and practices have reproduced inequality and poverty, reinforcing notions of ‘inferiority’ in these societies (van Dijk, 2007).
11. Rather than occupying different realms, the online and offline contexts are deeply imbricated, as are the digital and the material worlds (Sassen, 2002). Thus, what some call the ‘virtual/mediated/online reality’ is not separate from, but part of, our everyday realities.
12. Racist and hate-speech comments may be allowed to remain on the site rather than being deleted because stories with comments attract more page views (Loke, 2012: 241) and the number of views and time spent looking at comments, have a direct impact on advertising revenues (Erjavec and Kovačić, 2012). Therefore, editors may be disinclined to censor the online news discussion section.
13. Hate-speech is defined as any form of expression or offensive material (i.e. verbal, non-verbal, symbolic) used to denigrate members of a collective. Some scholars prefer the term ‘incivility’, which refers to messages that have the potential to cause harm through insulting language, name calling, profanity, or other stereotypes (Chen, 2017; Saldaña and Rosenberg, 2020).
14. Bartlett et al. (2014), for instance, studied the epistemology and linguistics of racial hate-speech in digital spaces.
15. This is because ‘race’ must be studied considering its historically active and contingent character (Hall, 1980).
16. This ideology is acquired and learned mostly through discourse (from everyday conversations, textbooks, the media, movies, news, etc.) rather than innately (van Dijk, 2007).
17. While media framing of all news content shapes the way it is consumed by the audience (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017; Hartmann and Husband, 1971), we focus on the readers’ comments and analyze the different strategies of text, structure, and rhetorical devices.
18. Clear examples of historical exclusion based on ideas of purity can be seen among Jewish and Chinese communities, where migrants were presented as outsiders and targeted as causes of economic and epidemic crises (Craddock, 1995; Lehnstaedt, 2016; Sennett, 1997).
19. Furthermore, epidemiologists associated the spread of the SARS virus with cultural practices of southern Chinese people, reinforcing racialized distinctions between southern and northern Chinese (Mason, 2015).
20. Incivility is defined as a set of aggressive behaviours involving hate-speech and inflammatory language against social groups in online settings. This threatens democracy because aggressors ‘deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups’ (Papacharissi, 2004: 267). The term ‘incivility’ proved to be inadequate in analyzing the forms of aggressive online racism we found, since this kind of hate-speech is used specifically to racially denigrate a perceived ‘non-white other’ and alludes to colonial racist logics. Furthermore, as both kinds of online racism are uncivil, this term did not help to highlight the distinction between these contemporary forms of online racism.
21. It is relevant to acknowledge our positionality as researchers, especially when focusing on issues of ‘race’ and racism in the context of a racialized Chile and a ‘colour-blind’ Internet (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). By acknowledging our position,

we seek to be mindful of the racialized structure of the society in which we live, as well as the online spaces we observed and analyzed. We believe such reflexivity allows us to better understand the processes of 'race'-making in social media. To that end, we must disclose that the authors are Chilean women from a well-off social background with what is usually considered 'light-skin'. Thus, we have benefited from white privilege in the racialized and classed Chilean society. However, we would like to acknowledge that 'race' is a social construction and we do not self-identify as 'white' like other Chileans, and we have indigenous and African ancestries.

22. The comments were posted between 22 and 24 April 2020. We analyzed the entire comment thread posted to each of the five online articles on EMOL. We retrieved articles using the internal search tool available on EMOL website using the following terms: Haitians, cité, Covid-19 outbreak, and migrants. We then filtered results according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: (a) must be text based and a news article; (b) must have at least one accompanying comment. Afterwards, we manually retrieved all comments posted to the five published articles. For ethical reasons, usernames were omitted from the analysis. One limitation of our method is that, since the information is not available in a clear and reliable manner, we lack data on users' gender, age, ethnicity, and other sociodemographic characteristics. Collecting the data from a single media source about a single news event may carry a risk of the comments being influenced by the media framing. We sought to overcome this issue by developing a codebook with negative, positive, and neutral expressions regarding the Haitian community, a registry of a wide range of comments. (The present analysis focuses on the negative expressions since those predominated.) This sample also does not allow us to analyze associations between the forms of online racism and different stories or topics related to the Haitian community.
23. EMOL is the acronym for *El Mercurio* online. EMOL is the most used online source and one of the 15 most-trusted news brands (Reuters, 2021). According to SimilarWeb Top Sites ranking for News and Media in Chile (<https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/chile/category/news-and-media/>, accessed 16 September 2021), EMOL ranks first and is positioned 17th among Top Sites in Chile, as reported by Alexa (<https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/CL>, accessed 16 September 2021).
24. The comments posted on EMOL are publicly available, and readers are aware of this. Comments do not have a character limit. Anonymity is not complete because, in order to leave comments, readers must register with EMOL or log in with a Facebook account. In both cases, however, anonymity could be achieved with an account that does not include a photo, name, or personal data.
25. These moderators, according to EMOL's rules, can limit a comment's visibility, as well as delete comments and ban commenters temporarily or indefinitely in order to safeguard respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among users. The website explicitly states that 'any racist, homophobic or hateful comments will be removed', as well as those that 'contain insults or slurs' (EMOL, n.d.). Our analysis suggests this rarely occurs in practice.
26. Three coders manually collected and coded 411 comments each to generate the descriptive statistics. The analysis focused on certain categories that emerged inductively from the overall readers' comments. The codebook comprised 23 variables based on inductive categories and themes related to anti-immigrant discourse and racial issues.
27. We calculated inter-coder reliability on a sample of 30 comments. Agreement between the three coders ranged from 73% (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .39$) to 100% (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$) for the 23 variables included in the codebook. As for the reliability of the measures, some of the variables analysed were on the low side. As some of them are less clear to appreciate and are close to the 0.6 (Neuendorf, 2002) required for exploratory research, or have a high agreement percentage, we retained them for this study.

28. We identified two main trends, intrinsically related, that we categorized as covert anti-immigrant racist discourse and overt racist discourse, the latter of which includes racial allusions that are more evident and aggressive. While a few comments acknowledged racism and/or counteracted highly racist discourses, we did not focus on them as they were not prevalent.
29. Jesuit Migrant Service Foundation.
30. Felipe Guevara is Intendant of the Metropolitan Region of Santiago
31. It is also interesting to note the political dimensions of this comment. The reference to the US election of President Trump, and the reader's wish that someone like him be elected in Chile, also reinforces the anti-immigrant sentiment expressed. It exemplifies many other comments blaming institutions (i.e. Jesuists) and politicians (i.e. ex-President Michelle Bachelet) for growing migration, associating it with illegal trafficking.
32. In the content analysis, almost 13% of comments included allusions to violence or criminality.
33. The authors translated all comments from Spanish to English.
34. In the content analysis, 13% of comments represented them as animals.
35. Since colonial times, thinkers and historians have supported a racialized social hierarchy in Chile that was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution who built the narratives of today's national identity (Rebolledo, 1994). The Chilean ethnic background has been conceived of as having only two ancestries, excluding any African background, and reproducing the colonizers' beliefs of the 'undesirability' of African populations (Bonhomme, forthcoming).
36. As Eckenwiler (2018) suggests, much of the stigmatization of vulnerable groups and their health conditions stems from racialized understandings of infection. The health-threatening conditions of collective migrant housing are not representative of the normal circumstances in which disease takes shape; yet these circumstances are regularly cited in social representations of migrants (Eckenwiler, 2018).
37. The complex economic, political, and social processes that cause precarious living conditions among many migrant communities must be considered (Avaria, 2020; Bonhomme, 2021).
38. In late 2021, some Chileans in Iquique organized an anti-immigrant protest. This happened after the police evicted an informal settlement of migrants from a public square. Protesters chanted 'Long live Chile' and 'Chileans first', and violently burned migrants' meagre belongings while police looked the other way. A similar protest occurred in 2022 in the same city, after a growing number of migrants entered the country through irregular paths. This is due to a recently approved immigration law that has further restricted migration from the region. As readers' comments illustrated, this devastating event reflected a local manifestation of online aggressive racism.

References

- Ahmad WIU and Bradby H (2007) Locating ethnicity and health: exploring concepts and contexts. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 29(6): 795–810.
- Alexander C and Knowles C (2005) Introduction. In: Alexander C and Knowles C (eds) *Making Race Matter: Bodies, Space and Identity*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–16.
- Avaria A (2020) Migrantes internacionales y pandemia: precariedades, desigualdades y oportunidades en salud. In: Brito S, Basualto L, Azócar R, et al. (eds) *Intervención social y educativa en tiempos de pandemia*. Santiago: Aún Creemos En Los Sueños, pp. 179–202.
- Back L (2010) Whiteness in the dramaturgy of racism. In: Solomos J and Hill-Collins P (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Race and Ethnic Studies*. London: Sage, pp. 444–469.
- Balibar E (1991) Is there a 'Neo-racism'? In: *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, pp. 17–28.

- Bartlett J, Reffin J, Rumball N and Williamson S (2014) Anti-social media. *Demos (Mexico City, Mexico)* : 1–51. Available at: https://www.demos.co.uk/files/DEMOS_Anti-social_Media.pdf.
- Berthold D (2010) Tidy Whiteness: A Genealogy of Race, Purity, and Hygiene. *Ethics and the Environment* 15(1): 1–26.
- Bonhomme M (2020) *Making 'Race' at the Urban Margins: Latin American and Caribbean Migration in Multicultural Chile*. PhD thesis. Goldsmiths, University of London.
- Bonhomme M (2021) Racismo en barrios multiculturales en Chile: Precariedad habitacional y convivencia en contexto migratorio. *Bitácora Urbano Territorial* 31(1): 167–181.
- Bonhomme M and Alfaro A (2022) How television news media reinforce racialized representations of Haitian and Colombian migration in multicultural urban Chile. In: Ngwainmbi EK (ed.) *Dismantling Cultural Borders through Social Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 147–184.
- Bonhomme, M (forthcoming) 'We're a bit browner but we still belong to the white race': Making whiteness in the context of South-South migration in Chile. *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*.
- Bouvier G (2015) What is a discourse approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media: connecting with other academic fields? *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 10(2): 149–162.
- Briggs CL (2005) Communicability, racial discourse, and disease. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34(1): 269–291.
- Brown A (2017) What is hate speech? Part 1: The Myth of Hate. *Law and Philosophy* 36(4): 419–468.
- Calvo-Buezas T (2014) Racismo y neonazis en internet: también en América Latina. *Derecho y Realidad* 12(24): 90–112.
- Cammaerts B (2009) Radical pluralism and free speech in online public spaces: The case of North Belgian extreme right discourses. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(6): 555–575.
- Cecchi S (2019) 'It's all their Fault'. Immigrants as Scapegoats and a Mirror Revealing Social Contradictions. *Italian Sociological Review* 9(1): 21–41.
- Chan C and Montt M (2020) Many-faced orientalism: racism and xenophobia in a time of the novel coronavirus in Chile. *Asian Ethnicity* 22(2): 374–394.
- Chaudhry I (2015) #Hashtagging hate: Using Twitter to track racism online. *First Monday* 20(2): 1–13.
- Chen GM (2017) *Online incivility and public debate: Nasty talk*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chou SW and Gaysynsky A (2021) Racism and xenophobia in a Pandemic: Interactions of Online and Offline Worlds. *American Journal of Public Health* 111(5): 773–775.
- CNN Chile (2020) President Piñera declarations about COVID-19 and migration. *CNN News*, 10 April.
- Cogo D (2019) Communication, migrant activism and counter-hegemonic narratives of Haitian diaspora in Brazil. *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* 4(3): 71–85.
- Craddock S (1995) Sewers and scapegoats: Spatial metaphors of smallpox in nineteenth century San Francisco. *Social Science & Medicine* 41(7): 957–968.
- Crang M (1998) *Cultural Geography*. London: Routledge.
- Daniels J (2013) Race and racism in internet studies: A review and critique. *New Media & Society* 15(5): 695–719.
- De Ramón E (2009) Demandas por igualdad en Chile colonial. In: Gaune R and Lara M (eds) *Historias de Racismo*. Santiago: UQBAR editores, pp. 193–223.
- de Rosa AS and Mannarini T (2020) The 'invisible other': Social representations of COVID-19 pandemic in media and institutional discourse. *Papers on Social Representations* 29(2): 5.1–5.35.

- Dionne KY and Turkmen FF (2020) The politics of pandemic othering: Putting COVID-19 in global and historical context. *International Organization* 74(S1): E213–E230.
- Douglas KM, Mcgarty C, Bliuc AM et al. (2005) Understanding cyberhate: Social competition and social creativity in online white supremacist groups. *Social Science Computer Review* 23(1): 68–76.
- Douglas M (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Eckenwiler L (2018) Displacement and solidarity: An ethic of place-making. *Bioethics* 32(9): 562–568.
- Eicher V, Bangerter A (2015) Social representations of infectious diseases. In: Sammut G, Andreouli E and Gaskell G (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 385–396.
- Ekman M (2019) Anti-immigration and racist discourse in social media. *European Journal of Communication* 34(6): 606–618.
- EMOL n.d. Términos y condiciones generales de uso. Available at: www.emol.com/Terminos/Terminosycondiciones.aspx (accessed 24 October 2019).
- Erjavec K and Kovačić MP (2012) ‘You don’t understand, this is a new war!’ Analysis of hate speech in news web sites’ comments. *Mass Communication and Society* 15(6): 899–920.
- Farkas J, Schou J and Neumayer C (2018) Platformed antagonism: Racist discourses on fake Muslim Facebook pages. *Critical Discourse Studies* 15(5): 463–480.
- Faulkner N and Bliuc A-M (2016) ‘It’s okay to be racist’: Moral disengagement in online discussions of racist incidents in Australia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39(14): 2545–2563.
- Feldmann AE (2013) El “Estado fantasma” de Haití. *Migraciones forzadas* (43): 32–34.
- Ferré-Pavía C and Simelio-Solá N (2016) Comentarios sobre inmigración en tres periódicos en línea españoles: Aproximación a un discurso racista enmascarado. *Revista Q* 10(20): 137–156.
- Florini S (2017) This week in blackness, the George Zimmerman acquittal, and the production of a networked collective identity. *New Media & Society* 19(3): 439–454.
- Fredrickson GM (2003) *Racism: A Short History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Georgiou M and Zaborowski R (2017) *Media Coverage of the “Refugee Crisis”: A Cross-European Perspective*. Council of Europe.
- Glenn NM, Champion CC and Spence JC (2012) Qualitative content analysis of online news media coverage of weight loss surgery and related reader comments. *Clinical Obesity* 2(5–6): 125–131.
- Grosfoguel R (2012) El concepto de ‘racismo’ en Michel Foucault y Frantz Fanon: ¿teorizar desde la zona del ser o desde la zona del no-ser? *Tabula Rasa* 16: 79–102.
- Hall S (1980) Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance. In: *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. Paris: UNESCO, pp. 305–345.
- Hall S (2013) The work of representation. In: Hall S, Evans J and Nixon S (eds) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 1–15.
- Hartmann P and Husband C (1971) The Mass Media and Racial Conflict. *Race* 12(3). SAGE: 267–282.
- Hudson E and Dussailant F (2018) The conflict between the state of Chile and the Mapuche people in the national and regional Chilean press (2014–2016). *Communication & Society* 31(4): 243–255.
- INDH (2017) *Manifestaciones de discriminación racial en Chile*. Santiago: Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos.
- INE and DEM (2021) *Estimación de personas extranjeras residentes habituales en Chile al 31 de diciembre de 2020. Informe metodológico*. Santiago: INE, DEM.
- Kraut AM (2010) Immigration, ethnicity, and the pandemic. *Public Health Reports* 125-(3_suppl.): 123–133.

- La Nación (2018) Checho Hirane ante el control de inmigración: “Puede cambiar la raza”. 28 February. Santiago. Available at: <http://lanacion.cl/2018/02/28/checho-hirane-ante-el-control-de-inmigracion-puede-cambiar-la-raza/> (accessed 24 October 2019).
- La Tercera (2018a) Firma que trajo a haitianos ha hecho cuatro vuelos a Chile en 2018. La Tercera, 28 February. Santiago. Available at: <https://www.latercera.com/nacional/noticia/firma-trajo-haitianos-ha-hecho-4-vuelos-chile-2018/83442/> (accessed 24 October 2019).
- La Tercera (2018b) Polémica detención de Carabineros a haitiano en Santiago Centro. La Tercera, 14 August. Available at: <https://www.latercera.com/la-tercera-tv/noticia/polemica-detencion-carabineros-haitiano-santiago-centro/282012/> (accessed 24 October 2019).
- Lehnstaedt S (2016) Jewish Spaces? Defining Nazi Ghettos Then and Now. *The Polish Review* (New York. 1956) 61(4). University of Illinois Press: 41–56
- Loke J (2012) Public expressions of private sentiments: Unveiling the pulse of racial tolerance through online news readers’ comments. *Howard Journal of Communications* 23(3): 235–252.
- Maldonado-Torres N (2010) On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. In: Mignolo WD and Escobar A (eds) *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*. London: Routledge, pp. 94–124.
- Mason KA (2015) H1N1 Is Not a Chinese virus: The racialization of people and viruses in Post-SARS China. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 50(4): 500–518.
- Matamoros-Fernández A (2017) Platformed racism: The mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. *Information, Communication and Society* 20(6): 930–946.
- Matamoros-Fernández A and Farkas J (2021) Racism, hate speech, and social media: A systematic review and critique. *Television & New Media* 22(2): 205–224.
- Müller K and Schwarz C (2021) Fanning the flames of hate: Social media and hate crime. *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19(4): 2131–2167.
- Neuendorf KA (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. California: Thousand Oaks.
- Olmos-Alcaraz A (2018) Alteridad, migraciones y racismo en redes sociales virtuales: un estudio de caso en Facebook. *REMHU* 26: 41–60.
- Papacharissi Z (2004) Democracy online: civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media & Society* 6(2): 259–283.
- Poo X (2009) Imaginarios sobre inmigración peruana en la prensa escrita chilena. *Revista F@ro* 5 (9): 1–9.
- Prensa Presidencia (2018) Presidente Piñera anuncia Reforma Migratoria. 9 April. Available at: <https://prensa.presidencia.cl/discurso.aspx?id=73020> (accessed 28 March 2022).
- Quijano A (2010) Coloniality and modernity/rationality. In: Mignolo WD and Escobar A (eds) *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*. London: Routledge, pp. 22–32.
- Rebolledo A (1994) La ‘Turcofobia’. Discriminación antiárabe en Chile, 1900-1950.. *Historia (Wiesbaden, Germany)* 28: 249–272.
- Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2021) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*. Available at: reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf (accessed 24 October 2019).
- Riffe D, Lacy S and Watson BR, Fico F. (2014) *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Roberts SK (2009) *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rossini P and Maia R (2021) Characterizing disagreement in online political talk. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 17(1): 90–104.

- Rojas-Pedemonte N, Amode N and Rencoret JV (2015) Racismo y matrices de “inclusión” de la migración haitiana en Chile: Elementos conceptuales y contextuales para la discusión. *Polis. Revista Latinoamericana* (42): 1–14.
- Ruiz NG, Horowitz JM and Tamir C (2020) *Many Black, Asian Americans say they have experienced discrimination amid coronavirus*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 1 July.
- Saldaña M and Rosenberg A (2020) ‘I don’t want you to be my president!’ Incivility and media bias during the presidential election in Chile. *Social Media+Society* 6(4): 1–11.
- Sassen S (2002) Towards a sociology of information technology. *Current Sociology* 50(3): 365–388.
- Sennett R (1997) *Carne y piedra: el cuerpo y la ciudad en la civilización occidental*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Solomos J and Back L (1994) Conceptualising racisms: Social theory, politics and research. *Sociology* 28(1): 143–161.
- Steinfeldt JA, Foltz BD, Kaladow JK et al. (2010) Racism in the electronic age: Role of online forums in expressing racial attitudes about American Indians. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16(3): 362–371.
- Strömbäck J (2008) Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(3): 228–246.
- T13 (2020) Migrantes contagiados se niegan a realizar cuarentena en cité en Quilicura. Available at: www.t13.cl/videos/nacional/videomigrantes-contagiados-se-niegan-realizar-cuarentena-cite-quilicura (accessed 24 October 2019).
- Torre-Cantalapiedra E (2019) Migración, racismo y xenofobia en internet: análisis del discurso de usuarios contra los migrantes haitianos en prensa digital mexicana. *Revista Pueblos y Fronteras Digital* 14: 1–28.
- TVN (2018) Chadwick: El “Plan Humanitario de Regreso Ordenado” No Debe Ser Entendido Como Una Agencia de Viajes. *Televisión Nacional de Chile*, 24 Horas. Chile. Available at: <https://www.24horas.cl/nacional/chadwick-el-plan-humanitario-de-regreso-ordenado-no-debe-ser-entendido-comouna-agencia-de-viajes-2840466> (accessed 2 August 2019).
- Valenzuela-Vergara EM (2019) Media representations of immigration in the Chilean press: To a different narrative of immigration? *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43(2): 129–151.
- Valenzuela S, Arriagada A and Scherman A (2012) The social media basis of youth protest behavior: The case of Chile. *Journal of Communication* 62(2): 299–314.
- van Dijk TA (2000) *New(s) Racism: A discourse analytical approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- van Dijk TA (2001) Critical discourse analysis. In: Hamilton HE, Tannen D and Schiffrin D (eds) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 352–371.
- van Dijk TA (2007) *Racismo y discurso en América Latina*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- von Unger H, Scott P and Odukoya D (2019) Constructing im/migrants and ethnic minority groups as ‘carriers of disease’: Power effects of categorization practices in tuberculosis health reporting in the UK and Germany. *Ethnicities* 19(3): 518–534.
- Wade P (2010) *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. London: Pluto-Press.

Author biography

Macarena Bonhomme is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, and Adjunct Researcher at the Centre of Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES).

Amaranta Alfaro is Instructor Professor and Researcher at the Journalism Department, Universidad Alberto Hurtado.