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Articles

Cross-cultural correlates of homophobia: comparison of Italian and Spanish attitudes towards homosexuals

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Abstract

Background: Homophobia or the reaction against homosexuals could be based on the structural ideology of the society, on its institutions or on power relationships, which can incite contempt, sometimes even to deadly violence, regarding those not complying the national culture reference model. Such behaviors are born from the belief that homosexuality must be fought against and opposed as it threatens social order, and could be increased augmented by the campaigns of politicians spread in the mass media.

Methods: The aim of this study is to investigate and compare homophobia in Italy and Spain, two Mediterranean countries related from a cultural and traditional background and for general acceptance of homosexuals, and to verify the role of current national culture on recently rising homophobic attitude. Italian and Spanish subjects were studied by means of self-administered questionnaires consisting of: Modern Homophobia Scale to evaluate homophobic attitudes, Homophobia Scale to evaluate the affective, cognitive and behavioral components towards homosexuality, Stereotype Content Model to identify stereotypes about homosexuality, the scale of 11 Emotions and the subscale of Prejudice Attitude Test assessing the social distance, to assess the prejudicial behavior across the two countries.

Results: Results showed that despite homophobia levels are low for both populations, with positive emotion and stereotype, Italians showed a greater social distance and a lower quantity and quality of contacts with homosexuals than Spanish. Comparing for political orientation, ideological right-flaw Italians resulted in significantly higher personal discomfort, aggressiveness and cognitive negativism, and lower quantity of contacts than Spanish. Social distance was higher scored in right-flaw than left-flaw oriented subjects from both Italy and Spain, with Italians scoring higher than Spanish. An alternative interpretation of homophobic attitude in Italy, known for recently rising attempts to homosexuals, was provided in comparison with Spain. Political orientation could provide for the differences observed in social distance in each country, but not between them. Specifically, this study's results indicate that genderist and homophobic campaigns from the Italian right parties could have transmitted values and attitudes of greater prejudice and rejection towards homosexuals.

Conclusions: This research contributes to the objective of raising awareness about the mechanisms underlying the homophobic matrix conveyed from national culture, politics and mass media, and its consequences on psycho-social disease.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, the study of homophobic attitudes has reached a remarkable relevance within social and psychological sciences. George Weinberg (1972) defined homophobia as a “heterosexual individuals’ fear of being in a closed place in close contact with homosexuals and, in regard to homosexuals, self-directed hate”. Today the definition of homophobia consists in a set of beliefs, emotions and negative behaviors towards homosexuals, both women and men, based on the arbitrary thought that identifies the “other” (the homosexual) as the different, inferior or abnormal one. In its irreducible difference the homosexual is located elsewhere, outside the common realm of human beings (Borrillo, 2009; Weishut, 2000). There are different forms of homophobia or homonegativity: a) external homophobia (characterized by affective-irrational and cognitive motivations), b) general homophobia, specific, anthropological, liberal-institutionalized (Borrillo, 2009; Castellazzi, 2014; Graglia, 2012; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2011) and c) internalized homophobia (Gonsiorek, 1985).

Moreover, homo-negativity can be manifested both through explicit and implicit forms (Prati & Pierantoni, 2011). The reaction against homosexuals could be based on the structural ideology of the society, on its institutions or on power relationships, which can incite contempt, sometimes even to deadly violence, regarding those not complying the reference model. Such behaviors are born from the belief that homosexuality must be fought against and opposed as it threatens social order. The reports from the Eurobarometer, the ILGA-Europe’s Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Trans and Intersex People (ILGA, 2021) and the Pew Research Center regarding the years provide a clear insight into public opinion on homosexuality, even correlating with political scenario as in processes through which people form their political attitudes and behaviors. Although homophobia appears to be strongly present in Europe, some countries are extremely open to homosexuality. Last Pew Research Center survey conducted on 2019 followed-up to a 2013 report that found many of the same patterns as seen today (Poushter & Kent, 2020). In many of the countries surveyed, there also are differences on acceptance of homosexuality by age, education, income and, in some instances, gender. In addition, religion and its importance in people’s lives shape opinions in many countries. Political ideology also plays a role in acceptance of homosexuality. In many countries, those on the political right are less accepting of homosexuality than those on the left. Although there has been an increase in acceptance of homosexuality across many of the countries surveyed at both times, countries that support right-wing populist parties in Europe, many of which are seen by LGBT groups as a threat to their rights, appear less

supportive of homosexuality in society. Measurements of ideology on a left-right scale result in those on the left tending to be more accepting of homosexuality than those on the ideological right. Spain is regarded as one of the gay-friendliest European countries, with 89% people saying homosexuality should be accepted by society, against in comparison 75% of Italians. However Spanish people with a favorable opinion of the Vox party, which recently has begun to oppose some gay rights, are much less likely to say that homosexuality is acceptable than those who do not support the party. The above reports show how Italy has changed its view on homosexuals in the last twenty years becoming increasingly open towards homosexual people and their right. Although Italy approved same-sex civil unions in 2016, the country lags behind its EU partners in creating anti-homophobia measures, and attempts at progress could have been held back by a macho culture, Catholicism and support for far-right parties, as recently observed (for instance see Giuffrida, 2020). Italian LGBT rights associations have linked a rise in hate crimes in 2019 to the prominence of far-right Lega, which continues to poll as Italy's most popular party. Beyond politics, other cultural factors, such as religion or the educational level, may underlie the differences in homophobic behavior. Countries with greater levels of education are significantly more likely to say that homosexuality should be accepted in society than those who have less education; significant differences of this nature are found in both countries with generally high levels of acceptance, such as Italy, and low levels (Poushter & Kent, 2020). Religion, both as it relates to relative importance in people's lives and actual religious affiliation, also plays a large role in perceptions of the acceptability of homosexuality in society. Those who are religiously unaffiliated, sometimes called religious "nones" (that is, those who identify as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular") tend to be more accepting of homosexuality. In most cases, the affiliated comparison group is made up of Christians. But even among Christians, Catholics are more likely to accept homosexuality than Protestants and Evangelicals (Poushter & Kent, 2020). While all of these factors are clearly important, public opinion continues to be different and stereotyped across countries. In Europe differences can be traced back to eastern countries who for decades have experienced state atheism and western countries that, to a greater or lesser extent, have guaranteed freedom in religious matters; in this regard, Italy and Spain could have a similar progress for acceptance of homosexuality and LGBTQ unions, but the osmosis between Catholic values, suggested and often imposed by the Church of Rome, and political activity, favored by past governments of the Christian Italian right-wing parties, determined in the past decades a "confessionism of morals" which delayed implementation of the principles of freedom and equality from the Constitution over time (Baldassarre, 2020).

Discomfort towards homosexuals and transgender as well as sexual prejudice and homosexuals' self-directed hate could be consequences of beliefs about the nature of homosexuality but seem to be not directly conveyed by right-wing parties' politicians, since these essentialist beliefs predict antigay prejudice independently of right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and political conservatism (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Herek, 2000). It therefore becomes essential to understand what prejudices are reinforced by governments in various moments of political propaganda, how they are used and on what beliefs they have their roots. Particularly, youngs' social reasoning about sexual prejudice is complex and multidimensional, with media and school practice as influencers (Horn, 2007; Horn & Szalacha, 2009).

This study has been carried out in parallel in both countries, considering heterogeneous groups of people by age, sex, level of education, religious and political orientation, in order to obtain the most comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Efforts were made to pay attention to the stereotypical components and to the emotional involvement in the source process of the prejudicial attitude towards minority groups. Genderism, as the prejudicial belief that gender is rigid and only male or female, is a source of social oppression and psychological shame, such that it can be imposed on a person, but also that a person may internalize it from social and political institutions (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). Adolescents' conceptions of the acceptability of their peers are related not just to sexual orientation but also conformity to gender conventions (Horn, 2007; Roberts & Reddy, 2008). Over the years, several studies have been carried out to validate instruments which evaluate the degree of homophobia in relation to emotional and social factors (Carrera-Fernandez et al., 2013; Ciocca et al., 2015; Raja & Stokes, 1998). Some studies have examined the presence of homophobic attitudes in Italian students (Lingiardi et al., 2005), others examined groups of Spanish adolescents (INJUVE, 2008; Romero et al., 2005), highlighting how this attitude is more present in male individuals than in female peers, as known by literature (Herek, 1988), and in far-right parties (Nuñez et al., 2011; Quiles et al., 2003), then comparing the differences in scores between adolescents and adults (Galán et al., 2007).

Beyond these factors, we aimed to contribute to the comprehension of the conscious and unconscious mechanisms of the homophobic matrix related to cultural and political factors. Particularly, we wanted to provide an alternative interpretation of recent homophobic phenomenon, by comparison between Italy and Spain, two Mediterranean countries that are related from a cultural and traditional point of view and which nowadays are only 14% distant in acceptance of homosexuals, with Spain as third country for acceptance in Europe (Poushter & Kent, 2020). Nevertheless, the stereotype conveyed by the mass media, becoming common

thought, delineates Italy as a strongly homophobic country and Spain as extremely open to homosexual culture and way of life. Our hypothesis is that, despite general acceptance of homosexuals in Italy is increased on last decades, the homophobic attitude of Italian citizens towards homosexual minorities is greater than that shown by Spanish due to stronger stereotypes of Italians, which seem to be increased in ideological right parties. It was therefore our interest to investigate which factors, whether cognitive and emotional or ideological and cultural, could be related to any difference in homophobic behavior in response to the presence of gays and lesbians beyond their general social acceptance.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Subjects

The research involved a total of 520 cross-cultural subjects aged between 18 and 59 years, with a total mean age of 27.5 (St Dev = 8.331).

The Italian sample consisted of 258 subjects with a mean age of 30.4 (St Dev = 8.477). 29.5% completed high school studies and 70.5% attained university studies. 63.9% consider themselves Catholic, 19.4% atheist and 16.7% agnostic or “none” religion. About political orientation, 67.4% declared to be of ideological left-wing and 32.6% to be of ideological right-wing.

The Spanish sample consisted of 262 subjects, with mean age of 24.7 (St Dev = 7.113). 41.6% completed high school studies, while 58.4% achieved university studies. 42.7% consider themselves Catholic, 30.1% atheist and 27.1% agnostic or “none” religion. About political orientation, 69.5% declared to be of ideological left-wing and 30.5% to be of ideological right-wing. Based on the proportions of Italian and Spanish subjects for these variables, the two samples appear to be homogeneous for the “political orientation”.

The most active sex in the study was female: 74% in the Italian and 66.3% in the Spanish sample.

A transversal group comparison study was conducted through the creation of a self-report questionnaire, administered via online platforms.

2.2 Instruments

To evaluate homophobic attitudes the MHS (Modern Homophobia Scale) of Raja and Stokes (1998) was used. The MHS is composed of 46 total items and subdivided into two subscales: MHS-G (Modern Homophobia Scale-Gay) comprising 22 items, and the MHS-L (Modern Homophobia Scale-Lesbian), composed of 24 items. Each scale measures three dimensions of homophobic behavior: personal malaise, institutional homophobia and diversion/change. The

extent of personal discomfort and diversion/change allowed homophobic attitudes towards gays and lesbians to be studied on a personal level, while institutional homophobia allows the institutional level to be studied. Response format was of Likert type scoring from 1 (very disagreeable) to 5 (much in agreement).

To measure the affective, cognitive and behavioral components compared to homosexuality, we have used the HS (Homophobia Scale) of Wright, Adams and Bernat (1999), composed of 25 items divided within three subscales: negative behavior/feelings, behavioral feeling/aggression and cognitive negativism. The first two subscales make it possible to measure the presence of both negative and aggressive behaviors and feelings when coming into contact with homosexuals, while the third dimension allows us to evaluate the possible presence of negative thoughts about homosexuals. Answers are given within a scale of Likert type from 1 (very disagreeable) to 5 (much in agreement). The degree of contact maintained with gay and lesbian people was assessed through the use of a single question: "What kind of contact do you have with homosexual men/lesbian women?" by Navas and Rojas (2010). The response scale provided for six different alternatives, each corresponding to a given contact level, from 1 ("No contact. I only see them on the street or in public places, but I never talk to them") to 6 ("I have an intimate relationship with a gay man/lesbian woman") passing through increasingly inclusive levels.

The quality of the contact was also assessed through the means of a single question: "How do you consider the contact you have, or have had, with gay/lesbian men?" from Navas and Rojas (2010). Answers were calculated on a Likert scale from 1 (very unpleasant) to 5 (very pleasant). In order to confirm the results obtained through the administration of the MHS and HS scales and concerning the quantity and quality of contacts, the prejudicial behavior put in place when making inferences or having to relate with members of homosexual communities was assessed through the use of three different scales: the SCM (Stereotype Content Model) from López-Rodríguez, Cuadrado and Navas (2013), the scale of 11 emotions from Navas and Rojas (2010) and the PAT (Prejudice Attitude Test) from Navas and Rojas (2010).

The SCM, an indicator of cognitive prejudice, allowed us to assess the level of stereotypes that accompany attitudes towards homosexuals and lesbians. The SCM consists of nine items that refer to three stereotypical dimensions: Morality, Sociality and Competence, measured through a single question: "To what extent do you believe that gay men/lesbian women are: honest/and sincere/and reliable, pleasant, friendly, affectionate/and intelligent, skilled, competent?" The response format is of Likert type from 1 (at all) to 5 (much). The scale of 11 emotions, composed

of 11 items of positive emotions, subtle negative and ancient negative, allowed for the evaluation of affective prejudice towards lesbian women and gay men. Answers were calculated on a scale of Likert type from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very).

Based on the PAT results, considered as an indicator of behavioral injury or intention of conduct towards the minority group, only one item was extrapolated: the Social Distance that is preferred to be maintained with the members of the minority, upon the question: “If you had a choice, how far would you be willing to go in your relationship with gay men/lesbian women?”. The response format was a 5-point Likert, 1 (to form a family with a gay man/lesbian woman) to 5 (I prefer not to have sex with gay men/lesbian women).

2.3 Procedure

A self-report questionnaire was created to carry out the study. Where questionnaire adaptation did not already exist, items were translated either from Italian to Spanish or from Spanish to Italian. Translation was carried out by a bilingual expert and was adequately checked for any problems regarding either the understanding of the scales or their psychometric properties.

Subjects were first instructed concerning the time needed for completing the questionnaire (15 minutes), the research purposes and the task to be performed, and were asked to respond transparently to all the administered scales. Anonymity and privacy were ensured, so as to obtain the sincerest answers possible.

The questionnaire was divided into different sections in order to study all the relevant variables. In the first section the MHS, with its two subscales for the evaluation of the degree of homophobia specific to gays and lesbians (MHS-G and MHS-L, respectively), and the HS for the evaluation of the degree of general homophobia (HS); questions were included regarding both the contact with these minorities and their quality. These questions were put distinctly for both gay men and lesbian women. A second section was drawn up with questions to investigate the components of the prejudicial attitude (again put distinctly for both gay men and lesbian women): stereotypes were assessed using the scale to assess the emotions accompanying the contact with these minorities. The scale of 11 emotions investigated the emotions involved when meeting a homosexual. The Social Distance towards homosexuals was detected by means of the specific PAT subscale. Socio-demographic questions (age, sex, education, employment, sexual orientation, religious and political orientation) were included at the end of the questionnaire. Reverse wording items were subjected to the normal data conversion procedure. The questionnaire was uploaded to internet network platforms and delivered online, both in

Italy and in Spain. Once a significant number of subjects had been reached in both countries, response possibilities were closed and data analysis proceeded.

2.4 Study design

SPSS software was used to obtain some statistical inferences about the psychometric properties of the items. For the reliability of the scales used in our study, the alfa index of Cronbach (Table 1) was calculated, which can take values between 0 and 1, where values above 0.6 indicate a good reliability.

Table 1. Reliability of MHS and HS scales.

SCALE	α
<i>MHS</i>	
<i>MHS-G</i>	.900
F1: Personal discomfort	.822
F2: Institutional homophobia	.757
F3: Diversion/changing	.747
<i>MHS-L</i>	.867
F1: Personal discomfort	.874
F2: Institutional homophobia	.780
F3: Diversion/changing	.825
<i>HS</i>	.872
F1: Behavior/negative feeling	.785
F2: Feeling/behavioral aggressiveness	.652
F3: Cognitive negativism	.651

Data analyses showed that all scales and subscales adopted in our study were characterized by a good internal consistency of the items. Scales were originally validated in previous studies. HS scale yielded an overall alpha reliability coefficient of $r = .936$, ($p < .01$) and a 1-week test-retest reliability coefficient of $r = .958$ ($p < .01$), computed on 84% of the original sample (Wright et al., 1999). The psychometric characteristics of the Italian HS version (Ciocca et al., 2015) were calculated with Cronbach's α coefficient for internal consistency ($\alpha = .9528$), whereas, in the test-retest reliability, a Pearson coefficient of $r = .958$ ($P < 0.01$) was found, with concurrent validity of the Pearson coefficient between the Index of Homophobia and the HS used indicating a high level of correlation ($r = 0.658$, $P < 0.01$). The coefficient alpha for each factor of MHS scales was calculated (Raja & Stokes, 1998), and only factors with a greater than 0.80 were included in the final scale. From this procedure resulted: MHS-L (24 items total) and the MHS-G (22 items total). For MHS-L ($\alpha = .95$), factor 1 ($\alpha = .89$), factor 2 ($\alpha = .92$), and factor 3 ($\alpha = .90$). These three factors accounted for 47.3% of the variance in MHS-L scores. For MHS-G ($\alpha = .95$), factor 1 ($\alpha = .91$), factor 2 ($\alpha = .85$), and factor 3 ($\alpha = .90$). These three factors

accounted for 44.9% of the variance in MHS-G scores (Raja & Stokes, 1998). Regarding the PAT, the indices of discrimination of the items (greater than 20 in all groups) and estimated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha, with values between .74 and .89) offered more than acceptable results (Rojas-Tejada et al., 2012). The Social Distance subscale, composed of a single item, showed significant correlations ($p < .01$) with all other scales (Rojas-Tejada et al., 2012). Validity of SCM scale was assessed by Fiske et al. (2002), from which factors used in our study showed a consistency, calculated with Cronbach's alpha, of .94 (Competence) and .90 (Warmth).

One way ANOVA was used to assess any significant difference between mean scores obtained from Italian and Spanish samples across the different questionnaire scales and subscales. Result data are presented as mean \pm standard deviation (St Dev).

3. Results

Table 2 shows results obtained from both the MHS and HS scales were all around the score of “1”, indicating that homophobia levels were generally low for both populations. However, they were significantly lower for Spanish than for Italians. Significant differences between Italian and Spanish subjects are shown with respect to the degree of homophobic behavior expressed by the MHS and HS scales. Results showed higher scores for Italians both for HS in all its dimensions, and for MHS, except for the “institutional homophobia” in MHS-L, where the scores, on a statistical level, can be considered equal for both countries.

Table 2. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores in MHS and HS scales of Italians and Spanish

SCALE	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
MHS						
MHS-G	1.46	.565	1.18	.258	50.21	.000
F1: Personal discomfort	1.44	.620	1.16	.318	42.10	.000
F2: Institutional homophobia	1.55	.653	1.23	.313	52.27	.000
F3: Diversion/changing	1.20	.510	1.09	.262	9.58	.002
MHS-L	1.50	.526	1.26	.300	41.37	.000
F1: Personal discomfort	1.34	.563	1.13	.301	28.23	.000
F2: Institutional homophobia	1.77	.673	1.70	.386	2.15	.143
F3: Diversion/changing	1.13	.470	1.04	.276	6.88	.009
HS	1.47	.509	1.28	.265	27.70	.000
F1: Behavior/negative feeling	1.37	.512	1.25	.315	10.61	.001
F2: Feeling/behavioral aggressiveness	1.42	.444	1.25	.275	28.96	.000
F3: Cognitive negativism	1.67	.772	1.37	.428	29.73	.000

Figure 1 shows highly significant ($p < 0.001$) ANOVA comparisons between Italians and Spanish for total scoring of MHS subscales (MHS-G and MHS-L, $p < 0.001$) and for HS scale ($p < 0.001$).

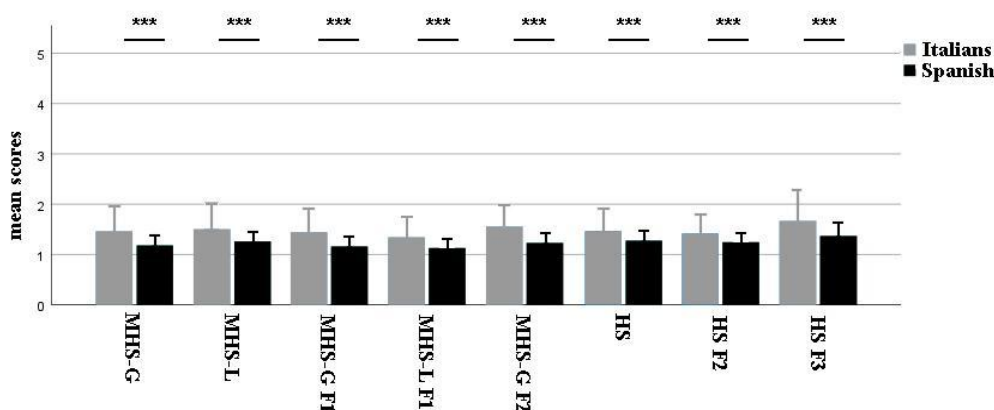


Figure 1. Variance analysis: highly significance ($p < 0.001$) of differences between mean scores of MHS and HS scales and subscales between Italians and Spanish

ANOVA comparisons for each MHS subscale resulted in significantly higher scores of Italians in both MHS-G and MHS-L F1 subscale “Personal discomfort” ($p < 0.001$), in MHS-G F2 subscale “Institutional homophobia” ($p < 0.001$) and in both MHS-G and MHS-L F3 subscale “Diversion/changing” ($p < 0.01$). ANOVA comparisons resulted in significantly higher scores of Italians even in HS F1 subscale “Behavior/negative feeling” ($p = 0.001$), F2 subscale “Feeling/behavioral aggressiveness” ($p < 0.001$) and F3 subscale “Cognitive negativism” ($p < 0.001$).

Regarding the variables “Quantity of contacts” and “Quality of contacts” with gays or lesbians (named Quantity-G or Quantity-L and Quality-G or Quality-L respectively), results in Table 3 showed higher scores for the Spanish population.

Table 3. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of quantity of contacts with gays (Quantity-G) and lesbians (Quantity-L) and quality of contacts with gays (Quality-G) and lesbians (Quality-L) of Italians and Spanish

	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
<i>Quantity-G</i>	3.43	1.100	3.99	.735	47.08	.000
<i>Quantity-L</i>	3.30	1.338	3.76	1.106	18.67	.000
<i>Quality-G</i>	4.15	.775	4.48	.698	27.20	.000
<i>Quality-L</i>	4.05	.816	4.39	.759	24.03	.000

Figure 2 shows ANOVA comparisons resulted in significantly lower scores of Italians in all quantity (Quantity-G and Quantity-L) and quality (Quality-G and Quality-L) of contact scales ($p < 0.001$), together with ANOVA comparisons resulted in significantly higher scores of Italians in social distance (Distance-G and Distance-L; $p < 0.001$). Significant differences between Italians and Spanish found in the variable “social distance” relates about the item choice of how intimate a relationship established with gay and lesbians might be for the subject. This choice depends on the emotions and the surrounding stereotypes.

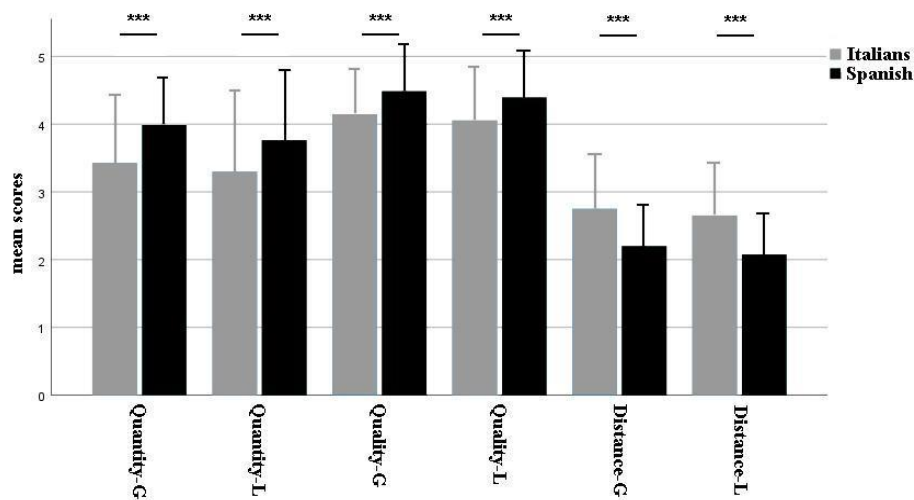


Figure 2. Variance analysis: highly significance ($p < 0.001$) of differences between mean scores of quantity of contacts with gays (Quantity-G) and lesbians (Quantity-L), quality of contacts with gays (Quality-G) and lesbians (Quality-L), and social distance from gays (Distance-G) and lesbians (Distance-L) of Italians and Spanish

Comparison of mean scores in Table 4 showed that Italians had higher scores than Spanish, indicating that Italians prefer to maintain a greater social distance from gays and lesbians than that which is preferred by the Spanish. This difference between Italians and Spanish is consistent with that of quality and quantity of contacts, which in Italians appear injured.

Table 4. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of social distance from gays (Distance-G) and from lesbians (Distance-L) in Italians and Spanish

	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
<i>Distance-G</i>	2.75	.804	2.20	.694	70.69	.000
<i>Distance-L</i>	2.65	.852	2.07	.685	71.99	.000

The analysis of responses to prejudicial attitudes is showed in Tables 5-8 and revealed a relevant result. For the emotion and stereotype variables no significant differences in the scores were obtained. Tables 5-6 show that the mean score of the variable “positive emotions” was set around “3.8”, the mean score of variable “subtle negative emotions” was set around “1.4” and the mean score of variable “ancient negative emotions” around “1.1” for both Italians and Spanish gays and lesbians, indicating that both experience positive emotions towards gay and lesbian people with almost identical emotive responses towards homosexuals. Tables 7-8 show that the mean scores of stereotypes evaluated on variables “Morality”, “Sociality” and “Competence” of gays and lesbians were around “4” for both Italians and Spanish, indicating that there are no strong leading stereotypes about them.

Table 5. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of emotions towards gays in Italians and Spanish.

	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
Positive emotions	3.75	1.090	3.78	.946	.103	.749
Subtle negative emotions	1.60	.635	1,57	.648	.300	.584
Ancient negative emotions	1.10	.380	1.15	.409	1.628	.203

Table 6. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of emotions towards lesbians in Italians and Spanish

	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
Positive emotions	3.80	1.083	3.85	.954	.399	.528
Subtle negative emotions	1.42	.581	1.47	.625	.829	.363
Ancient negative emotions	1.08	.327	1.13	.452	2.354	.126

Table 7. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of stereotypes towards gays in Italians and Spanish

	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
Morality	3.93	.835	3.82	.963	2.151	.126
Sociality	4.05	.860	3.91	.941	3.254	.072
Competence	4.00	.850	3.85	.932	3.308	.070

Table 8. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of stereotypes towards lesbians in Italians and Spanish

	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
Morality	3.95	.835	3.82	.963	.988	.321
Sociality	4.01	.834	3.91	.943	1.749	.187
Competence	4.03	.835	3.89	.949	3.092	.079

We wanted to further investigate whether “political orientation” as a factor correlated with homophobic differences observed between Italians and Spanish as measured from our questionnaire. Italians sample has a 258 total number of subjects, divided into 174 subjects who declared to be of ideological left-wing and 84 subjects to be of ideological right-wing. Spanish sample has a 262 total number of subjects, divided into 182 subjects who declared to be of ideological left-wing and 80 subjects to be of ideological right-wing. For each sample, we compared the political orientation with the mean scores of homophobia subscales that resulted more significantly different ($p < 0.001$) between the samples in the previous comparisons, that are, MHS-G, MHS-L, HS, MHS-G and -L F1 “personal discomfort”, MHS-G F2 “institutional homophobia”, HS F2 “Feeling/behavioral aggressiveness”, HS F3 “Cognitive negativism”, Quantity-G and -L, Quality-G and -L, and “Social distance” from gays and from lesbians (named Distance-G and Distance-L respectively). Table 9 summarizes results of ANOVA comparisons, and Figure 3 shows bar charts of each of subscale mean scores. Italians right-wing subjects showed significantly higher scores than left-wing subjects in MHS-L, HS, MHS-G and -L F1, MHS-G F2, HS F2 and F3 ($p < 0.001$) and in Distance-G and -L ($p < 0.001$), and significantly lower scores than left-wing subjects in Quality-G and Quality-L ($p < 0.001$) and in Quantity-G and Quantity-L ($p < 0.01$). On the other side, Spanish right-wing subjects showed significantly higher scores than left-wing subjects only in MHS-L ($p < 0.001$), HS ($p < 0.01$), MHS-G F1 and MHS-G F2 ($p < 0.001$), HS F3 ($p < 0.01$) and in Distance-L only ($p < 0.001$), and significantly lower scores than left-wing subjects in “Quality of contacts” with gays and with lesbians ($p < 0.01$) only.

Table 9. Variance analysis: differences between political orientation (right- vs. left-wing) and mean scores of homophobia subscales significantly different between Italians and Spanish

Subscale	Political orientation	ITALIANS		SPANISH		F	p
		Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev		
MHS-G	Right	1.39	.498	1.19	2.66	.097	.755
	Left	1.49	.593	1.18	.256		
MHS-L	Right	1.81	.704	1.35	.327	12.176	.001
	Left	1.35	.326	1.22	2.78		
MHS-G F1	Right	1.72	.812	1.26	.427	11.823	.001
	Left	1.30	.444	1.12	.245		
MHS-L F1	Right	1.61	.761	1.17	.351	2.143	.144
	Left	1.21	.376	1.11	.275		
MHS-G F2	Right	1.91	.812	1.33	.342	12.455	.000
	Left	1.38	.474	1.19	.289		
HS	Right	1.73	.651	1.35	.294	8.039	.005
	Left	1.34	.362	1.22	.278		
HS F2	Right	1.61	.550	1.28	.266	1.308	.254
	Left	1.33	.349	1.23	.279		
HS F3	Right	2.08	.940	1.50	.468	11.896	.001
	Left	1.47	.580	1.31	.396		
Quantity-G	Right	3.17	1.14	3.87	.753	2.768	.097
	Left	3.55	1.06	4.04	.723		
Quantity-L	Right	2.95	1.39	3.69	1.04	.541	.463
	Left	3.46	1.28	3.80	1.13		
Quality-G	Right	3.90	.785	4.29	.799	9.473	.002
	Left	4.26	.744	4.57	.633		
Quality-L	Right	3.78	.822	4.20	.891	7.639	.006
	Left	4.18	.783	4.48	.679		
Distance-G	Right	3.01	.843	2.45	.745	16.001	.000
	Left	2.63	.755	2.09	.642		
Distance-L	Right	2.98	.891	2.35	.658	19.697	.000
	Left	2.49	.788	1.96	.663		

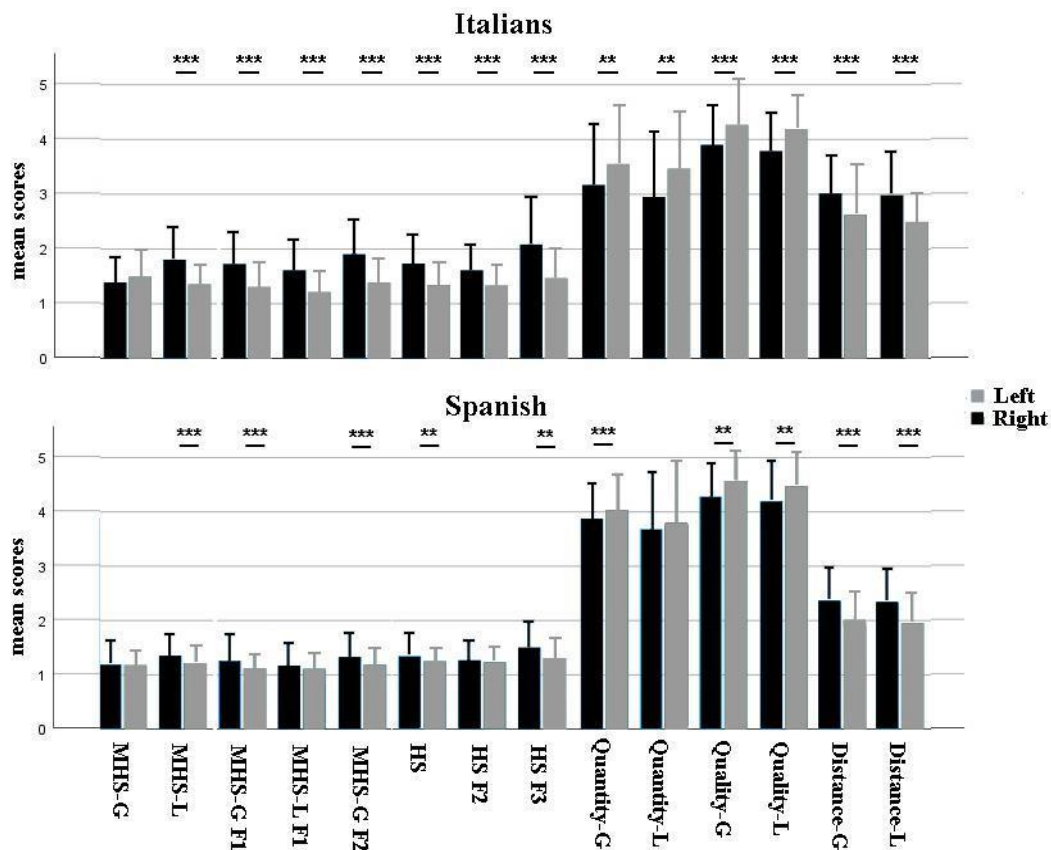


Figure 3. Variance analysis: differences between mean scores of MHS and HS scales and subscales, quantity of contacts with gays (Quantity-G) and lesbians (Quantity-L), quality of contacts with gays (Quality-G) and lesbians (Quality-L), and social distance from gays (Distance-G) and lesbians (Distance-L) for ideological right-wing (Right) or left-wing (Left) politically oriented Italians compared with Spanish.

Taken together, these comparisons account for a stronger homophobia in the ideological right-wing of Italians compared with the left-wing, which is significantly marked in MHS–L F1 “personal discomfort”, in HS F2 “Feeling/behavioral aggressiveness” and in Distance-G subscales if compared with Spanish.

4. Discussion

We intended to carry out a cross-cultural study design on homophobia involving samples from two countries, Italy and Spain which are known to share an overlapping cultural background. Our starting hypothesis was that, despite the increased acceptance of homosexuality in Italy in recent years as documented by last surveys (Poushter & Kent, 2020) the homophobic attitude of Italians was greater than that expressed by the Spanish. The growing populist propaganda of the right-wing parties in the recent government formed in Italy has aimed at alienating and stereotypically judging homosexuals in society. It was recently observed that the increasing

attacks and episodes of violence against Italian LGBT people are not seriously following with specific anti-racist measures as in other European countries, and the current state of Italian law lacks for adequate protection of LGBT people (Giuffrida, 2020; Magnacca, 2020). Therefore, our research subsequently focused on which variables within the Italian sample could be linked to the eventual differences observed in homophobic attitudes compared to the Spanish sample. The topic of our research was divided into two sections: one concerning homophobic attitudes to gays, lesbians and homosexuals in general, and the other concerning the components that cause the prejudicial attitude, both highlighting significant results.

Homophobic manifestations, both implicit and explicit, collected in our questionnaire allowed us to confirm the hypothesis that Italian sample subjects commit homophobic behaviors to a greater extent than Spanish. However, an analysis of these results revealed that the responses obtained in the MHS-G, MHS-L and HS scales are in the score range of “1.”, indicating that neither Spain nor Italy, according to the sample examined and also to previous surveys data, can be considered as having a homophobic attitude. Particularly the Spanish sample subjects appear to be even significantly less homophobic than Italian.

The quantity and quality of contact with gay and lesbian people was proved to be significantly in favor of the Spanish, and to an extent suggesting that people in Spain could have high contact with these minorities, significantly higher than people in Italy. The quality of the contact is also considered significantly more positive by the former if compared to the latter.

The second section of the research seems to suggest that the emotions (in their ancient positive, negative and subtle negative components) and the stereotypes (in their components of morality, sociality and competences) could play no significant role in the differences observed between Italians and Spanish samples, since they also proved to be positive for both. However, the preferred social distance from gays and lesbians resulted significantly greater for the Italian than the Spanish sample, this proving the existence of other specific factors inducing a refusal of interaction with homosexuals and that probably threaten their social inclusion.

The scores obtained in this dimension could support the hypothesis that Italians show a specific homophobic attitude than Spanish, not necessarily due to cultural background neither to demographic factors, but to characteristic prejudices that could widespread within one country, for instance through social communication and mass media. The obtained data is remarkable because the social distance, being the behavioral component of the prejudicial attitude, which is obtained by the union of the stereotypical and emotional components of the same, was expected to be positive for both countries, since emotions resulted to be positive and there were no particular negative beliefs in the cognitive component, but this was not the case.

Going through the reason of homophobic differences between Italian and Spanish subjects, the political ideology seemed to be a crucial factor. Personal discomfort, particularly towards lesbians, Feeling/behavioral aggressiveness and Cognitive negativism scores were significantly higher in ideological right-flaw Italian subjects if compared with Spanish ones (as emerging from Figure 3 comparison), indicating that Italian right-flaw parties could transmit values and attitudes of greater prejudice and rejection towards homosexuals. Even the quantity of contacts with gays and lesbians seems to be lower scored by Italian right-flaw oriented subjects. On the other side, social distance from gays and lesbians appears to be higher scored in right-flaw than left-flaw oriented Italian and Spanish subjects, with Italians scoring higher than Spanish, suggesting that political orientation could provide for the differences observed in social distance in each country, but not between them.

This analysis realizes some limitations that could be overcome through future research. Firstly, sociodemographic data was not used as a dependent variable of interest for our study, but only as data for a general research framework screening. The participation of both women and men in both countries was not subjected to an assessment of the dependent variable, but simply as an indication of how many men and women have participated in the study, without further investigating the sex differences in response between the two countries. However, previous studies largely demonstrated both a higher homophobic attitude of the males and a more favorable attitude of male participants towards lesbian women than gay men (Kite & Whitley, 1996; Raja & Stokes, 1998). Our sample, largely female, was however oriented to focus on different variables. A second limitation was found in administering the questionnaire not only to the heterosexual population incorporating more facets of sexual orientation (homosexuals, bisexuals, asexual). Allowing asexual, homo and bisexual people to participate in the study, can however permit, in countermeasure, an understanding of the internalized homophobic phenomenon and its influence in the everyday life of the homosexual or bisexual homophobic individual. Through future studies, the role of socio-demographic variables within homophobic behavior can be examined with greater specificity, both in Italy and in Spain and, above all, the differences in response that can be achieved by comparing male and female populations. In addition, the differences in response that can be obtained from a sample of the adolescent population (Injuve, 2008; Pichardo, 2007; Romero et al., 2005) could also be examined (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Horn, 2007; Lingiardi et al., 2005; Nuñez, Moreno & Moral, 2011; Quiles et al., 2003; Raja & Stokes, 1998). Adolescence is also known to be a peculiar phase in which young forms their political attitudes and behaviors, mostly by political socialization with parents in family and in social contexts (Flores & Morrison, 2021; Sapiro, 2004). Young people seem therefore to be the most vulnerable to the influences of political propaganda against homosexuals

and the most susceptible to homophobia and intolerance, and social media could be a means through which adolescents form homophobic political ideologies, contributing to the re-establishment of already outdated stereotypes and prejudices.

Aware of these limits, this pilot study was to lay foundations for a general understanding of the homophobic phenomenon and its evolution. Results and observations from the comparison between the Italian and the Spanish populations could be extended to other countries which are strongly similar for culture and traditions and generally increasing the acceptance of homosexuality, but that over the years they go through various legislatures and reassembly the political scenario in order to condition the national culture and eventually re-enacting intolerance and prejudices previously overcome, as in Italy it has recently happened by following identity populism as a political strategy.

The results of this research led us to ask why, given that homophobic attitudes are low, and stereotypes have little influence and being positive emotions, the social distance maintained by the Italian sample appears to be significant and in contrast with the results obtained in its two dimensions. Neither emotionally nor cognitively Italian or Spanish subjects seem used to acting in homophobic and discriminatory behavior. But we have highlighted the differences that instead emerge in personal discomfort and institutional homophobia between right-flaw people in Italy compared with Spain, differences related also to behavioral aggressiveness and negativism against homosexuals.

We can speculate more fully on these negative reactions as mental health repercussions induced by the recent genderism of Italian right parties such as the slogan used in political mass propaganda. Since homophobia also relates to homosexuals' self-directed hate, we should also take into account the effects that genderist and discriminatory media campaigns could have in inducing discomfort in homosexuals themselves regarding self-identity and body. Gender dysphoria is the feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics. Transgender and gender-nonconforming people might experience gender dysphoria at some point in their lives, even feeling at ease with their bodies, either with or without medical intervention, but those attending transgender healthcare services and treatment have a higher risk of psychiatric morbidity, this confirming the vulnerability of this population (Dhejne et al., 2016). Gender dysphoria is a diagnosis listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-American Psychiatric Association, 2013), focusing on one's discomfort as the problem, rather than identity as previous. In fact, over the years social and political were recognized as factors contributing to the conceptualization of gender incongruence and to the

diagnosis of gender dysphoria (Beek et al., 2016). Significant percentages of both natal men and women reported ambivalent or incongruent gender identity even associated with gender dysphoria (Kuyper & Wijsen, 2014). In male to female transition, gender dysphoria is associated to psychotraumatic phenomena of introjection and identification of different mental representations of self and body images, affected by a partial and fragmentary prevalence of contents (Settineri et al., 2018). Current research needs to focus on gender dysphoria, homosexual discomfort and homophobia associated to media and political propaganda and psychopathological consequences for the population. Subjective norms, fears or beliefs against minorities could be conveyed from political parts, and our politicians could play a key role in protection of LGBT people from aggressions, social isolation and mental disease. We hope that our contribution will encourage the formation of more detailed studies on factors influencing changes in homophobic behavior as politics and prevention campaigns.

Disclosure, conflict of interest and ethical policy

All who meet authorship criteria for this manuscript and for this research study are listed as authors. Each author certifies that this material has not been and will not be submitted to or published in any other publication before its appearance in the Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology.

Authors disclosed any conflict of interest influencing the results or interpretation of the manuscript. Authors declare no financial relationships with commercial interests.

The research project was carried out in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration and followed the standards of the Italian Law for psychological research. Informed verbal consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews. It should also be noted that an anonymization procedure was followed with reference to the personal data and details of the participants. The privacy rights of human subjects were always observed.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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