

VIOLENCE, MISOGYNY, AND RACISM: YOUNG ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

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RESUMEN

Hate speech, misogyny and racism are examples of the violent extremism spreading on online platforms and presented as counter-narratives to democratic systems. Online violence generally manifests itself in social media and instant messaging services. Toxic speeches and behaviours are propagated over the Internet, promoting "online othering" (Harmer & Lumsden, 2019) based on the idea that discrimination and harassment are legit forms of freedom of expression.

This chapter aims to identify and analyse young adults' perceptions of hate online. To put it forward, we developed an exploratory study with four focus groups (N = 33) to understand how participants socialise, mobilise and dispute social media content and conversations in their everyday online experiences (Santos, Amaral, & Simões, 2020). The main results show that participants identify hate speech and aggression online with political polarisation, misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia. Personal experiences of participants reinforce the existence of online gender-based violence on social media.

Palabras clave

Hate speech, social media, gender-based violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary social life has been conditioned by the global spread of violent extremism, the rise of mass surveillance, and the Internet's speed (Littler & Lee, 2020). As the digital ecosystem evolved into a "hybrid public space" (Castells, 2012), the public sphere is fragmenting into multiple online platforms. It enhances unmediated, disruptive, and unregulated participation. Considering the current hybrid mediatic ecosystem, "participatory experiences can become more fluid and less consistent" (Brites, 2015, p. 20). As participation involves more than access or interaction (Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren & Álvares, 2013), technology should be framed as a context and not variable (Bimber, 2017).

The theory of 'connective intelligence' advocated by Kerckhove (1997) argues that individuals are connected in high social complex networks. The behaviour of the collective becomes crucial to understand how ideas propagate. Kerckhove (1997) believes that people do not think collectively but instead create individually, sharing them with others they linked. It is in the process of sharing that the collaboration has valued the course of interaction. In this perspective, individual and collective identities are not confused: each individual has ideas that can be influenced by interaction with others, but not in their essence. While collective intelligence theories highlight the group element as the central aspect of the network (Surowiecki, 2005; Johnson, 2001), Kerckhove's perspective underlines the individual's importance as an active player in collaborative networks.

Although the Internet is frequently recognised as a public space that may enhance collective action (Loader, 2008), digital technologies also operated profound transformations in the public domain and private sphere. The increased connectivity opens up unprecedented opportunities but also presents itself as a means of spreading hatred against vulnerable groups. Public manipulation of the people's feelings, creating empathy with otherness, induces the referred to "individualised collective action" (Micheletti, 2003), i.e., spontaneous actions that fit into unorganised connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Empathy with othering and discriminatory practices against individuals or groups that do not share normative beliefs, values and attitudes, allows for the emergence of individualised forms of action (Kavada, 2016). The feeling of belonging to a group with similar opinions, values and attitudes appears as an element that mobilises collective actions (Bakardjieva, 2015).

Despite the Internet's unique opportunities, its negative and unforeseen consequences begin to be evidence in democratic societies (Littler & Lee, 2020). Jakubowicz and colleagues warn that "critical changes in both technology and politics have driven the growth of hate speech" (2017, p. 5). As Siegel point out, "once relegated to the dark corners of the Internet, online hate speech has become increasingly visible on mainstream social media platforms" (2020, p.56). The multiplication of social media

opportunities has allowed the creation and amplification of network associations of extremist groups and individuals who shield themselves from anonymity (Jakubowicz et al., 2017).

There are websites of organised hate groups, but informal groups and individuals' logic has helped spread hate speech through social media (Siegel, 2020). Profiles, pages, groups or channels that are "explicitly racist, misogynistic or discriminatory" (Siegel, 2020, p. 62) exist on conventional social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, as well as on mailing lists and discussion forums such as Reddit or 4chan, more restricted spaces for communities that know how to hide their digital footprint.

As social media is not disconnected from the so-called offline world (Amaral, 2016), hate speech, misogyny, and racism are examples of the violent extremism that spreads on these online platforms. The polarisation that is generated in social media and emphasises hate speech originates from the "culture wars" from the nineteenth-century in Germany, which Siapera describes as "the idea of a united culture and a struggle for cultural dominance resurfaces every time there is any attempt to claim or reclaim power" (2019, p. 22).

Under the umbrella of freedom of expression, toxic behaviours and speeches are reproduced across the Internet, enhancing 'online othering' (Härmer & Lumsden, 2019) as an opinion. As Herring and colleagues argue, "these practices, while clearly problematic, are nonetheless widespread and often tolerated, due in part to the pervasiveness on the Internet of civil libertarian values that consider abusive speech a manifestation of individual freedom of expression" (2002, p. 372).

There is no consensus in the scientific literature about a definition of hate speech online and its multiple forms. According to Cohen-Almagor, hate speech is "bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics" (2011, p. 1). As Siegel argues, "by providing efficient ways to reach new audiences and disseminate hateful language, the Internet enables hate groups to be well represented in the digital realm, fostering a sense of community among their members" (2020, p. 62). The difficulty in finding a standard definition lies in the multiple dimensions and the thin line with offensive speech or incitement to violence. It is a problem faced by governments and the online platforms themselves to define regulation. Twitter's hateful conduct policy¹ states that

You may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, caste, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease. We also do not allow accounts whose primary purpose is inciting harm towards others on the basis of these categories.

1 <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/hateful-conduct-policy>

Facebook community standards² declare that

hate speech as an attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics: race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious illness. We define attacks as violent or dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, declarations of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or indifference, profanity and incentives for exclusion or segregation. We consider age to be a protected characteristic when it is mentioned together with another protected characteristic. We also protect refugees, migrants, immigrants and asylum seekers from the most serious attacks, although we allow comments and criticisms of immigration policies. Likewise, we provide some protections to characteristics such as the profession, when it is mentioned together with another protected characteristic.

YouTube writes in its hate speech policy³ that

hate speech is not allowed on YouTube. We remove content promoting violence or hatred against individuals or groups based on any of the following attributes: age, caste, disability, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, nationality, race, immigration status, religion, sex/gender, sexual orientation, victims of a major violent event and their kin, veteran status.

In an update on tackling online abuse, Instagram⁴ writes “our rules against hate speech don’t tolerate attacks on people based on their protected characteristics, including race or religion. We strengthened these rules last year, banning more implicit forms of hate speech, like content depicting Blackface and common antisemitic tropes”.

Following the feminist critique of the Internet as a universal sphere (Fraser, 1990), social inequalities are transferred to digital, promoting discrimination, harassment and hatred online. Noble (2018) argues that digital media technologies’ affordances can perpetuate social inequalities considering that algorithms perpetuate racist and misogynist stereotypes. Digital media have increased the spread of hate speech directed at disadvantaged or minority groups. Extremist behaviours and speeches motivated by gender-bias, race, ethnicity, religion or by group or individual characteristics are so common on the Internet that the very definition of cyberbullying has adapted to multiple forms of online attacks. Within social media contexts and cultures, othering and discrimination is disseminated and faced by individuals and stems from “forms of information and communication technologies

2 https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/hate_speech

3 <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2801939?hl=en>

4 <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/an-update-on-our-work-to-tackle-abuse-on-instagram>

facilitate, exacerbate and/or promote the enactment of traditional offline offences (such as domestic abuse and stalking)” (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019, p. 12).

Although the increasing scientific interest in online abuse prevalence, patterns and consequences, the research on men’s and women’s understandings of online hate speech is incipient. This chapter aims to identify and analyse young adults’ perceptions of online hate in its multiple aspects. The empirical study aims to understand the perceptions and meanings that young people attribute to hate speech based on their daily digital experiences and practices.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

This research’s methodological approach was qualitative, made operational through the realisation of five focus groups (FG) developed with university students. The methodological option focuses on promoting dialogue between participants (Kitzinger, 1994).

The strategy developed focused on guiding questions for the five FGs, enhancing the discussion of themes and identifying practices and contexts. The guiding themes were divided into five sections: online hate speech; online hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives of hate speech and otherness; hate speech and online gender-based violence; hate speech protagonists and contexts; hate speech and freedom of expression. To put forward the empirical study, we define the following objectives for the FG: i). Identify the sources of information that allow young university students to define the concept of hate speech; ii). Recognise the notion of hate speech that young university students have; iii). Characterise how young university students identify themselves with hegemonic and counter-narratives on otherness; iv). Understand whether the practices of using social media expose university students to hate speech and to which typification; v). Acknowledge the perceptions of young university students regarding gender violence and misogyny online; vi). Assess whether young university students relate gender violence and misogyny online with hate speech; vii). Analyse whether young university students associate hate speech with specific actors and political contexts; viii). Identify the perception of hate speech within the context of freedom of expression.

The five focus groups were conducted between October and December 2019 with 33 higher education students. The participants were 24 girls and nine boys, aged between 19 and 22, from Brazil ($n = 18$) and Portugal ($n = 15$).

Data was analysed through qualitative content analysis using the MAXQDA software.

3. RESULTS

All the FG participants indicated that they access the Internet and social media every day. The most popular platforms among participants are Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The main uses of social media are to follow pages, search for news and connect with friends.

Results show that participants identify online hate speech as offences and violence, creating toxic environments.

P2: Hate speech is a position of a person who is going to attack a minority directly, and gratuitously usually...so that...and those people are affected by that speech which is from someone who comes from a class that doesn't have any repression, and it's, anyway, a kind of this rude hate interaction.

P3: I think it's pretty negative comments. Not necessarily only to minorities, most of the time, yes, but not necessarily. But, we see a lot of hate speech in other situations.

Moderator: For example...

P3: Eh... I don't know. For example, we talk a lot about minorities, but also... Ah, for example, women and men. Women suffer much more, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't happen, that there is hate speech against men. Not that they don't deserve it.

P4: I think they always have the purpose of attacking. It's not something that happens unintentionally. It's never constructive criticism. It's always really to belittle.

[FG2]

The participants argue that online aggression is often justified as freedom of speech. Participants show opposition to the idea that discrimination is an opinion.

P5: Because they are based on freedom of expression and believe that they can say whatever they want, especially on social networks, without caring how the other will react, even because they hide in the discourse of "ah, it's just my opinion". So, "you have to respect my opinion regardless of whether I agree with you or not, regardless of whether I offend you, without putting yourself in the other person's shoes.

Moderator: So, in that sense, do you think that hate speech falls within the freedom of speech? Everyone can say whatever they want?

P5: No.

P1: *I don't think so because freedom of speech is directly related to opinion, right? And hate speech is not opinion because if it hurts another person's existence, it can no longer be considered an opinion; it is hate speech.*

[FG1]

Participants identify anger and frustration within a political polarisation on social media. Brazilian students recognise political bias associate with male toxic speeches.

P1: *I think that after the elections, things became very, like, either you are on one side or you are on the other. Either you do one thing, or you do another. There is no middle ground. If a person defends Bolsonaro, I will never talk to that person; I won't even look them in the face because I don't want contact. Like, that's not how things work, right?*

P4: *This ends up being linked to intolerance as well.*

P1: *Yes, and then I think there ends up being intolerance on both sides. When you are trying to defend minorities at all costs, people end up being more aggressive, which, in my opinion, is a little risky because people are being attacked. And when you are attacked, it is easier to react than a person attacking because he thinks he has the right to attack. In my view, it is how the people who are on the other side, who support Bolsonaro and think like...*

P5: *... that they have legitimacy in their hate speech, even because...*

P2: *... the president has the same opinion.*

[FG1]

Participants recognise hate speech types on social media, such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, misogyny and harassment, when recall experiences lived or witnessed.

P1: *In my case, what I have the most contact with, what I see most is racism and homophobia because on Twitter there is a lot. And also because of the political issue in Brazil.*

P2: *Religious intolerance too. (...)*

P3: *Transphobia also exists and it is also very problematic (...) I have personal contact with xenophobia, but I end up having contact through social networks, these things, and so on.*

(...)

P4: *I think that with me, xenophobia is always linked to chauvinism*

P2: Yes.

P4: *Right? I always feel some attack because I am a woman and a Brazilian.*

P2: *Brazilian ...*

(...)

P6: *I think that in social media, if I am attacked for my gender or if it was because I commented on something that the person didn't like and then to try to take away the value of my opinion, they go there and call me a slut.*

P3: Yes.

P2: *I think that's the most common thing.*

Moderator: *Is it the most common?*

P3: yes

Moderator: *And gender violence is not only for the female gender?*

P2: *No, it's... like, the same thing as a homosexual commenting and the person saying "ah, you're gay. Your opinion doesn't count because you are gay", you know? It's like any kind of thing, really... I think that goes for anyone, like; they will always try to demoralize you because of who you are, you know? If a black person goes there and comments, the person will say, "your opinion doesn't count because you are black". This happens a lot on social media.*

[FG1]

All participants acknowledge having witnessed online hate and violence, especially in the school context and related to homophobia or xenophobia.

P2: *I have seen it with other people, yes. I have a friend who is homosexual, and he has been bullied for being homosexual. I don't want to go into too much detail because I think it's invading his privacy. However, he was bullied for being homosexual at school, and that's why he stayed. He was very excluded and, anyway, I was his friend but only after school we became friends because I moved away. However, he suffered a lot of bullying because he was homosexual.*

Moderator: *Online or at school?*

P2: Online. But, you know, sometimes it's not even direct bullying. It's the fact that people just don't consider the other person, like, leave them excluded. He suffered a lot from that. I don't think it ever got to a physical level, but he was excluded, anyway.

(...)

P3: Ahh, a situation that I just remembered. It didn't happen to me. But I saw prints. They sent me prints. When I arrived here in 2017, some Portuguese people on Twitter, there are also some, but they sent me the prints, making extremely offensive comments about Brazilians who had come here to study.

P4: Xenophobia.

P5: This happens a lot.

P4: "Ahh, because the Brazilians come here and steal my place at the university". The person doesn't know that they are entirely different places, completely different application methods, and many offensive things. "Ahh, because Portugal is full of Brazilians, that they have nothing to do and keep coming here, to take my job and my spot in college."

[FG2]

Only one participant (female) reported being a victim of online violence.

Moderator: Have you had any experiences, directly, of any situation, at all, of an offence or any harmful practice that you have been involved in? Any bad experiences?

P1: I have. When I was in Elementary, I created a Facebook group, which happened to be public, just to insult me. Except people weren't even smart and went and added friends of mine. In conclusion, those people told me.

P2: Only... Only the situation was soon resolved because my mother acted, the school acted, and that was it. But yeah, I've had those kinds of problems. In this case, a group specifically created just to, well...

P3: Insulting gratuitously.

[FG5]

Participants also reported that social media is a platform for patriarchal, misogynistic, and sexist behaviours.

P1: In the case of the video, the sex videos... hm... if they were a boy, criticizing, it's not going to kind of criticize it's going to be "okay it happened; the boy is a king. "You get on with your life." Women are more like: "I can't believe she did that," but it's more because we have to defend a stance on just - of the sex videos - we have to defend a stance that we got here, of all the history that the woman went through, we got here, we can't throw it all away just because of one girl who did it on the street. That's criticized a lot more because she did this is like this, is like that. And then, at the same time, women are always judged on social networks; it's because they are thin, because they are fat, because they are pretty because they are ugly.

P2: But most of the contexts start from a...

P1: From women.

[FG3]

Minorities are named as the groups most vulnerable to hate speech. Both Brazilian and Portuguese participants stressed online racism's intensity, being transversal to the different hate speech typologies identified.

Moderator: Is online hate speech random? Is that entirely arbitrary or are there more affected groups?

P3: I think there are... I think it's a little bit of both. As the teacher said, some aspects are a little bit "random," or others, for example, that are really, for example, homosexuals, in this case, women. Black people. It is a little sad, for example, I have a class in college that deals exactly with these issues, which is Diasporas in America, which is about these discriminations, to think that I am talking, for example, about the time of the Discoveries, and today we are in the 21st century, and the problems are the same, it is frightening. Then it's also that issue, it may be "random", but it's those people who are fatter, thinner people, the extremes.

[FG4]

4. CONCLUSIONS

This empirical study endeavoured to understand and analyse the perceptions that young university students make of hate speech online in its multiple typifications. Although the study results cannot be generalised to young adults' population, the data indicate a normalisation of hate speech against target groups. It is noted that the participants take a critical position but assume that online aggressions are

common behaviours in the digital environment. All participants reported knowing other people's experiences, in addition to being regularly confronted with bias-motivated posts and comments addressed to individuals or groups. In fact, despite participants identify violence and hate speech online as wrong and harmful, their normalisation on social media platforms is difficult to overcome.

The results show that the participants identify hate speech online as being bias-motivated and aimed at individuals or groups due to their characteristics. Alongside racist and xenophobic discourse, attacks on religious, ethnic and sexual minorities are recognised as otherness forms. Participants identify aggressions intimidation, dehumanization, and harassment that reproduce structurally patriarchal and racist normative systems.

Disapproval, discrimination and violence behaviours are perceived as having a deliberate intention to inflict suffering on individuals or groups, underlining their difference due to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or nationality, among others. Participants also refer that hate speech online, in general, is presented as an opinion contrary to any attitude or position of others, and is therefore often justified with freedom of expression.

At the confluence of the results, the need to reinforce strategies to develop critical and civic literacy skills among young audiences as ways of combating hate speech online and its normalisation should be stressed. Although several initiatives and actions have been implemented in the last few years, violent extremist speech has been growing in Europe, finding a way of spreading to different audiences in the online environment. School curricula should include hate speech online and offline and empower young people with tools that promote critical thinking and civic strategies to combat discrimination and violence.

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