Hate speech toward youngsters in online media

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Abstract

The 21st century has come and is ahead of us, presenting fast changes in people's ways to interact while witnessing massive progress in media and communication. Generation Z, born in 1995, has by now become part of our societies' young workers force at a time when the internet was already well installed. Their progeny, the alpha generation (born after 2010), is part of an ultra-connected world, their parents have been documenting their lives from early birth. In 2020, when the mondial pandemia started spreading, it became a worldwide urge and need to communicate online. To confront the massive societal transformations, education may be getting late raising voices about these virtual relationships and interactions. How does hate speech appear and spread in these conditions? Where to set boundaries when the "ghost is in the wire" and may remain anonymous? Who should we turn to, who is responsible for social media? What are the consequences of mental health? Eventually, which solutions can we, youth workers, implement to support youngsters and prevent hate speech from raising? Those are the questions we wish to investigate.

Keywords: education, hate speech, online media, transformations, youngsters
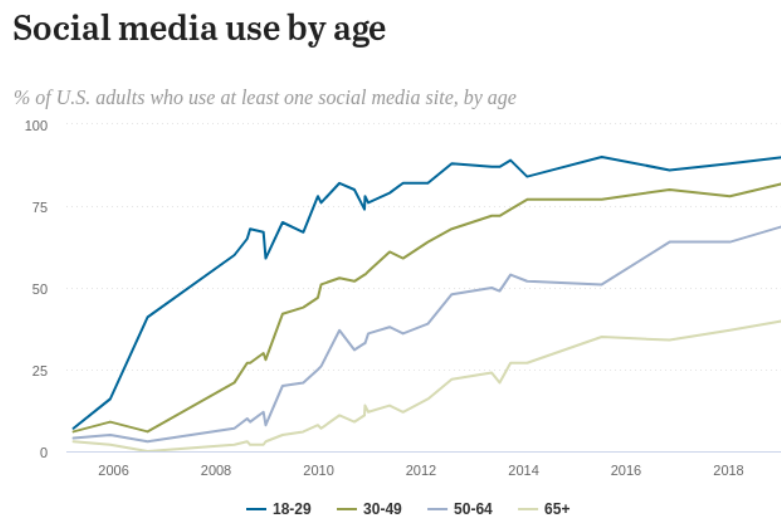
1. Introduction

Starting from the beginning of the 21st century, the internet has drastically changed modern communication and culture. Its main idea and decentralized nature make it an excellent place for any person to share their knowledge, ideas, beliefs and worldviews. Nowadays, many youngsters have constant access to the internet, and most of them are active on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and the like. According to the European Union's Kids Online Study, 82 percentage of adolescents aged 15 up to 16 have a profile on social networking websites (Wachs et al., 2021).

Even though all social media platforms have a leading role in connecting people and generate many interactions, unfortunately, these popular websites are full of harmful and often hateful content. It starts from disinformation, goes to fierce political debates and ends with hate towards

minorities or aggressive behaviour in the comment section. Nevertheless, those most prominent and most influential social media companies, such as Facebook, Google or Twitter, have policies concerning whether or not hateful content forms are allowed on their page. Quite often, these rules are performed inconsistently and oftentimes are vague and ambiguous. They could be hard to understand for regular users. In addition, most of the hate content is not being filtered. There are special moderators, who look for inappropriate content, tend to filter or ban hostile users. Unfortunately, it is still far from being enough. Solutions might emerge from reaching a level of sophisticated AI that automatically screens most of the content. Since then, education and prevention might be a fair start.

As depicted on the following chart, based on the data gathered from 2015 to 2019, the most active group on social media are youngsters (Shenton & Dixon, 2004). In a highly fragile age, this media consumption makes them the primary audience and target of hate speech online.

FIGURE 1. SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY AGE

Social media use by age

% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site, by age

18-29 — 30-49 — 50-64 — 65+

Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2019.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2021

2. Ins and outs

Exposure to online hate among young social media users is a valid concern. The collective identity generated by social media through the world is being shown as a welcoming place for the individuals with common interests, giving them opportunities to become part of a bigger network and community to belong to. However, one big issue with social media is the unnamed, unrecovered position, which creates a space where hate speech spreads easily, without consequences (Paz, Montero-Díaz & Moreno-Delgado, 2020).

A psychological process, called online disinhibition, is the lack of restraint one feels when communicating online compared to speaking in person. That has results to increase toxicity and lower empathy among online users. Academics, authors and influential people nowadays discuss the presence and consequences of hatred on the internet. Most of the research conducted has been mainly focused on the long-term results of hateful content, depicting that it could reinforce discriminatory views. Data show that access to aggressive and hateful speeches may heavily influence the probability of users engaging in violent or malicious behaviour. However,

it would be interesting to investigate further the factors that may bring an exposed individual taking hateful actions and the substantial damages of such exposure.

3. How hate speech affects youngsters

One in ten British children aged between 8 up to 11 testify they had seen nasty or worrying content online, when one-third aged between 12 up to 15 have encountered sexist, racist or discriminatory contents (Eisen, Matthews & Jirout, 2021; Meherali et al., 2021).

Hate speech in social media may have heavy and long-term impacts on people's mental health, especially if one is a direct victim, not just an observer. However, it is hard to judge an objective severity of different situations on the internet, as the initial psychological and physical well-being may change the results of observations drastically.

Some of the most common health problems encountered by youngsters experiencing or witnessing online hate regularly may be low self-esteem, insomnia, high anxiety, fears and insecurities (Oh et al., 2019; Gale, 2020).

Victims may develop a sense of loneliness or isolation. More potential outcomes could be feelings of depression, social anxiety, self-doubt, and lack of confidence identified in psychological well-being (Selma, 2019).

Additionally, teenagers who observe online hate speech may feel the violation of their dignity without seeing themselves as good, corresponding to some socio-cultural norms in society.

Physical harms that may occur in those circumstances go from self-depreciation to self-harm, such as mutilation and dramatic suicides.

Although youngsters understand that they might need support in difficult situations and identify sources of support - may it be their parents, friends or teachers - sometimes, they cannot seek help. That is due to the fear of being misunderstood or even of being rejected, denied. They might also feel deeply ashamed or embarrassed. Consequently, they usually prefer to handle those incidents on their own, enclosing themselves from external support.
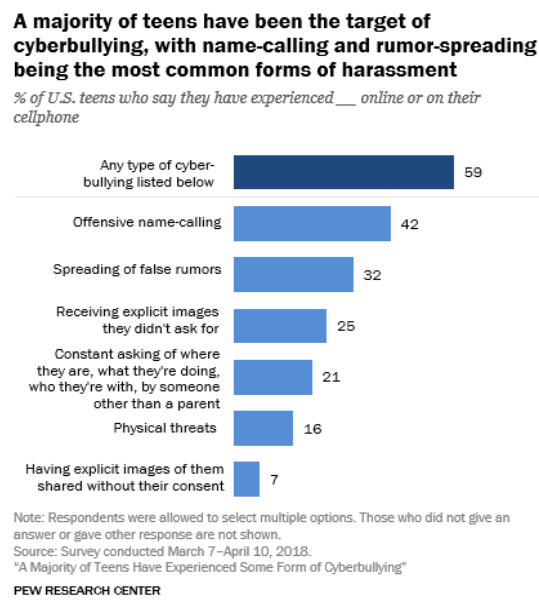
Besides the fact that hate speech affects each youngster differently and individually, it also has a significant impact on society. Regular hate may lead to a disguised norm in our communities and increase intolerance, discrimination and hateful behaviours in daily life. This problem also lower teenager's freedom of speech, which may stop sharing their opinions, influencing relationships and democracies (Costello & Hawdon, 2020).

In addition, online hate may also make our society more anxious, fearful and xenophobic. That may lead to hostility and raise prejudices towards nations when people get offended. Instead of deconstructing those preconceptions, it may reinforce them (Schoenbeck et al., 2021).

The most visible intervention of online hate speech is cyberbullying. Fifty-nine percent of U.S. teens, one out of two, give testimonies of being bullied or harassed online. Most of those experiences are happening on Instagram, more than on any other platform.

One out of five youngsters happened to skip school because they were victims of cyberbullying. It has been linked to teen depression and can even result in increased vulnerability and depression into adulthood (Anderson, 2018).

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF TEENS EXPERIENCED OF CYBERBULLYING

A majority of teens have been the target of cyberbullying, with name-calling and rumor-spreading being the most common forms of harassment

% of U.S. teens who say they have experienced ___ online or on their cellphone

Any type of cyber-bullying listed below	59
Offensive name-calling	42
Spreading of false rumors	32
Receiving explicit images they didn't ask for	25
Constant asking of where they are, what they're doing, who they're with, by someone other than a parent	21
Physical threats	16
Having explicit images of them shared without their consent	7

Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple options. Those who did not give an answer or gave other response are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted March 7–April 10, 2018.
"A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying"

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Source: Anderson, 2018

A significant amount of cyberbullying is motivated by hate toward sexual orientation or genders: LGBT+ youth are almost twice as likely to report being bullied online (Pappas, 2015; Pickles, 2019). At the same time, young women are twice as likely to have been sexually harassed online as young men (Duggan, 2017).

A common form of cyberbullying is called "doxxing", which is the act of publishing a victim's home address, phone, email or any other personal information to encourage other hateful people to harass the victim (Hua, 2017). Consequently, this may result in less freedom of speech because of fear, influencing individuals and communities.

However, most situations should always be understood from both sides - sometimes, what one person thinks is acceptable may offend another person. Therefore, before making a new post online, you should question yourself – may this harm or offend anyone? Education has a significant role to play in self-respect and recognizing others' boundaries (Onah & Alexander, 2020; Windisch & Olaghere, 2020).

4. What we can do to prevent hate speech online

Getting aware of the hate speech issue in our society, we searched for concrete suggestions of solutions. The first step would be to recognize and raise awareness on this topic. Teens are a prime target for hate because many of them are looking for some belonging. Some patterns can be observed:

1. Hate speech has been described as an expression – for instance, employing speech, images, videos or online activity – that can raise hatred against a person or people due to the characteristic they experience or a group to which they relate.

2. The "glorious past:" the idea that the author's group has fallen from a once-glorious past. The fall from glory is often attributed to the "other." For example, extreme political groups may convey unsubstantial stereotypes, such as immigrants arriving in country, local citizens were more affluent, had better jobs, and enjoyed a more lavish lifestyle.

3. "Victimhood:" when hate groups portray themselves as victims at the hands of the "other."/stranger. Groups may promote the idea that immigrants are "stealing" their jobs or such stereotypes (Gabay et al., 2020).

Even if the online hate is successfully recognized, it is essential to understand the most appropriate solution to support the "victim". Of course, one should never be indifferent, but one should not immediately throw in a sharp exchange of words to exacerbate the situation. One way we can fight hate speech is by speaking up about equality, inclusivity and diversity. Some refer to this method as counter speech. The more we can undermine hate speech with loving words, logical arguments, and truth-telling, the more hate speech will begin to lose its power.

Another method that can fight hate speech is education, particularly media literacy. When it comes to bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and hate crimes, the more people are educated on these issues, the more we can prevent them in the future.

Here are some advice and tips you can do to help young people recognize and respond to online hate:

1. **Teach** empathy and emotional literacy.

2. Use everyday moments to teach young people to notice, be sensitive to and label other people's emotions.

3. Promote respect for diversity as a social norm. Address hurtful and offensive comments when they happen. As a parent/caregiver, you have the power to influence how a young person behaves toward others. Model tolerance and empathy for them.

4. **Talk** about the existence and impacts of hate.

5. Young people benefit from learning about hate speech from a trusted adult, rather than being exposed to it on their own.

6. You can facilitate dialogue by being prepared. This includes identifying ahead of time concerns that may arise when a kid encounters hate-motivated content.

7. Be aware of news events or events in the community that may lead a young person to express hatred toward others.

8. **Acknowledge** the emotional costs and be supportive.

9. Being the target of online hate speech can be distressing and painful.

10. Let young people know you are aware of the emotional impacts and willing to listen to how this exposure affects them.

11. **Digital/media literacy.**

12. You can teach young people critical thinking skills. Ask them to consider the ways in which media are created by people, and therefore represent those people's values and perspectives.

13. Show young people how to verify sources. Many online hate websites go to great lengths to make their sites/pages look legitimate.

14. **Reporting hate.**

15. Encourage the kids in your life to report hate speech when they encounter it online. This can be done by reporting the content to the site administrator or internet provider.

16. Getting support after experiencing hate is essential. Preparing a report is one way to obtain an assistant. You can reclaim hate speech, hate crimes or threats of violence in the following ways: even anonymously.

17. Contacting the police.

18. **Be there.**

19. Witnessing hate speech can be upsetting. Encourage the young people in your life to reach out to you, or a resource like Kids Help Phone, when they feel uncomfortable with anything they have seen online (Gruwell, 2017; Robinson & Graham, 2020; Keen & Georgescu, 2020).

20. **Active/ passive listening.**

5. Conclusion

There are possible measures against online hate speech in this article, and their implementation in youth work was discussed. The goal is to identify the best practice models that youth and social workers can adapt and implement in their daily work to foster young people's digital media literacy and contribute to preventing online hate speech. Because of the rapid changes that our society faces due to digitalization, promoting children and youngsters' media and Internet literacy is essential. Additionally, more thought needs to be given to raising a more nuanced approach to the concept of what constitutes a 'public' space on the Internet. Thorough consideration needs to be paid to the fact that online interactions among individuals can sustain hate movements. The pervasiveness of online hatred on massively used websites, such as online newspapers, may influence certain groups and affect their ability to enjoy the Internet. Youngsters sensitized to this issue and using digital media with care can curb hate speech on the Internet and advocate for actively observing Human Rights. Awareness raising between young people for hate speech contributes to combat hate, racism, sexism and discrimination on the Internet. Youngsters should be strengthened in their dedication to democracy and Human Rights – this is the first step to make the Internet a more welcoming place in the future.

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