

Unmasking the Consequences: A Comprehensive Review of Sexual Minority Targeted Hate Speech and Its Impact on the LGBTQ+ Community

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore, from a theoretical perspective, the psychological effects of online hate speech on the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting the profound negative impact of this phenomenon. To effectively present this argument, this study offers a concise overview of relevant literature, encompassing challenges in defining LGBTQ+ online hate and efforts to reduce the occurrence of hate crimes targeting the LGBTQ+ community. By enhancing the understanding of the widespread nature of this new form of hatred, this paper proposes the necessity of prioritizing substantial responses to support LGBTQ+ youth within the digital societal frameworks, explaining in conjunction with collaborative efforts across multiple sectors, which will be most effective in mitigating the harm caused by online hatred.

Keywords: Hate speech, Internet, LGBTQ+, Online abuse

1. Introduction

The emergence of the internet as a virtual community space signifies a remarkable feat of technology and ushers in a new era of social interactions (Wall, 2001). Particularly, LGBTQ+ youth utilize online platforms to create safe environments where they can explore their gender and sexuality, while forming genuine connections with their peers (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015). However, there exists a darker side to internet usage, as LGBTQ+ young individuals increasingly find themselves susceptible to online hatred (Marston, 2019).

Although the concept of online hate is not novel, there is a growing awareness of it within policy and scholarly circles. Historically, discussions on hate crimes have primarily focused on acts of violence and discrimination that warrant criminal justice responses, neglecting to address micro-aggressions and more subtle forms of daily hatred (Chakraborti, 2018). Nonetheless, online hate speech, including incidents that may not meet the criteria for criminal offenses, is now recognized as an independent problem. Research characterizes it as "endemic" (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017: p4), and it demonstrates that LGBTQ+ individuals face a greater vulnerability to online hate compared to their heterosexual, cisgender peers

(Powell et al., 2020; Marston, 2019). However, the current models employed by the criminal justice system fail to adequately address the nature and detrimental effects of this novel manifestation of online hate. Previous studies exploring LGBTQ+ online hate have not comprehensively examined the entire range of targeted abuse, resulting in a lack of contextual understanding of this harmful social issue (Williams, 2019). Additionally, while previous literature has highlighted the diverse impacts of offline hate, there has been relatively limited attention given to the consequences of online hate on LGBTQ+ youth. Consequently, research has neglected to address how the enduring nature of online hate amplify the direct and bystander effects experienced by LGBTQ+ youth (Williams, 2019). Understanding the severe consequences of offline hate, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012; McDermott, 2015; Williams, 2019), underscores the importance of comprehending the impacts of online hate on LGBTQ+ youth.

DEFINITION OF HATE SPEECH

While the inter-American system has established specific standards, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of "hate speech" in international law. According to a recent report by UNESCO that examined various definitions of hate speech in international law, hate speech typically refers to expressions that promote incitement to harm, such as discrimination, hostility, or violence, targeting individuals based on their association with a particular social or demographic group. It can encompass speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent actions, but some interpretations also include expressions that contribute to an atmosphere of prejudice and intolerance, as it is believed that this may contribute to targeted discrimination, hostility, and acts of violence.

As per the UNESCO report, it is important to note that hate speech, in its various forms recognized by national and international law, does not encompass broad and abstract concepts like political views, ideologies, faiths, or personal beliefs. It is also incorrect to categorize any insult, derogatory remark, or inflammatory expression about an individual as automatically falling under the category of hate speech. Vague definitions of hate speech can potentially be manipulated to include a wide range of expressions, undermining the precise application of the prohibition against hate speech. According to the UNESCO report, it is important to recognize that hate speech, as defined by national and international law, does not encompass broad and abstract concepts such as political views, ideologies, faiths, or personal beliefs.

It is incorrect to automatically categorize any insult, derogatory remark, or inflammatory expression about an individual as hate speech. Vague definitions of hate speech can lead to its misuse, as it may be manipulated to include expressions deemed offensive to those in power, resulting in the misapplication of laws to suppress dissenting and critical speech. It is crucial to differentiate hate speech from "hate crimes," which involve specific conduct such as threats and sexual harassment and fall outside the realm of protection provided by the right to freedom of expression. The lack of a clear definition of hate speech is also evident in national legislation. Thus these laws often contain vague and overly broad provisions that prohibit incitement to hatred, which are then abused to censor discussions that serve the public interest.

LGBTQ+ AND ONLINE HATE

The definition of online hate is not consistently established in legal and academic research communities, and there is a notable differentiation between hate crime and hate speech. When it comes to determining what qualifies as online hate, criminal justice institutions typically focus solely on the criminal aspects. The Council of Europe, in conjunction with the Committee of Ministers, stands as the sole international intergovernmental organization to have officially adopted a definition of hate speech. Recommendation (97)20 defines hate speech as encompassing all forms of expression that disseminate, provoke, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or other types of hatred based on intolerance (Council of Europe, 1997, p. 107). This definition was further refined in 2008 by the European Union following a consultation process to include any conduct that publicly incites violence or hatred targeting a specific group of individuals or a member of such a group based on race, colour, religion, lineage, or national or ethnic origin (Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA).

Although the definition of hate speech provided by the Council of Europe and the European Union is clearer in its scope, it primarily focuses on public incitement to violence or hatred, thereby excluding private incidents. Furthermore, it remains ambiguous whether sexuality and/or gender identity are protected characteristics, as there is no mention of them in the legal summary.

In most countries, there is a distinction in the law between hate crimes (which are subject to criminal sanctions), hate incidents (considered non-criminal offenses), and hate speech (which may or may not constitute a criminal offense). However, hate speech, often occurring online, is frequently omitted from hate crime and hate incident reports. This presents a problem when addressing online hate solely from a legal standpoint. By neglecting to include online hate speech within the legal definition, the tangible harms and detrimental effects experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals who face online hate are underestimated.

Presently, the legal comprehension of online hate remains detached from contextual realities, such as the underlying causes and consequences of these actions (Siegel, 2020). This is despite the extensive literature that states the harms associated with broader forms of targeted online hate based on identity (Sellars, 2016). Policing online hate based on geographical boundaries poses inherent challenges, as does attempting to extend jurisdictional powers to enforce content and regulation laws in states that do not align with such measures. Consequently, the understanding of online hate becomes muddled by the interplay between judgments on criminal responsibility and the preservation of freedom of speech.

Academic research has placed significant emphasis on examining online hate that extends beyond what is legally defined as a crime. However, there are challenges in achieving consistency in terminologies, which likely impacts the understanding of LGBTQ+ online hate. Terms such as "hate," "harassment," and "abuse" are often used interchangeably in academic literature when discussing online hate (Hardy & Chakraborti, 2020). However, these terms may not accurately capture the motivating factors behind the perpetration of online hate incidents, and certain acts may not be protected under these umbrella concepts (Chakraborti, 2018). Consequently, despite the valuable contributions of academic definitions, the lack of a common understanding has resulted in a reputation for a porous approach to addressing online hate (Chakraborti & Hardy, 2017; Powell & Henry, 2017).

While legal and academic definitions of hate speech primarily focus on the physical manifestations of the act and its relevance to the jurisdiction of state criminal justice agencies, they overlook the crucial aspect of harm (Banks, 2010). A comprehensive definition of hate speech, which encompasses the notion of harm, recognizes that an important function of the law is to safeguard citizens from injury. The current endeavours of criminal justice systems are limited in their capacity to effectively combat LGBTQ+ online hate. As a result, online hate is proliferating exponentially in a digital realm that is increasingly perceived as lawless.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF HATE SPEECH

Hate speech poses a significant societal challenge in the present era. In recent years, there have been numerous investigations delving into the psychological effects of hate speech. However, the majority of these studies have primarily focused on examining how derogatory language influences the decisions, attitudes, and behaviours of majority groups (Carnaghi et al., 2011; Soral et al., 2018). In contrast, there has been relatively limited research dedicated to comprehending the psychological consequences of hate speech among members of minority groups. Furthermore, most of the studies in this area have relied on correlational data or analyses of existing records (Mullen & Smyth, 2004; Wypych et al., 2021). The lack of definitive evidence that establishes the causal impact of hate speech on the well-being of its targets has become a significant concern, particularly since causing harm lies at the core of hate speech's definition (Gelber, 2021).

The mental health of individuals can be significantly impacted by hate speech. Tynes et al. (2008) demonstrate a strong correlation between online racial discrimination and anxiety and depression. According to Brown (2015), hate speech has both immediate and long-term effects on the mental well-being of its victims. In the short term, hate speech can result in intense emotional distress, including feelings of anxiety, panic, shame, and fear. Similar to hate crimes, hate speech can cause psychological trauma and have detrimental effects on the affected communities (Gerstenfeld, 2017). The long-term consequences of hate speech encompass various issues such as stress, psychosomatic disorders, anxiety, depression, and even alcoholism (Brown, 2015). Hate speech victims may develop pathological coping mechanisms as a means of dealing with the abuse they experience. These maladaptive strategies can include emotional suppression, emotional transference, and cognitive dissonance (Brown, 2015). While these coping mechanisms may help individuals temporarily avoid severe emotional distress, they ultimately have detrimental effects on their overall well-being.

The harmful effects of online hate speech extend beyond the immediate dangers it poses. Exposure to hate speech can have significant psychological impacts on individuals, affecting their overall well-being. It can contribute to increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and desensitization (Awan & Zempi, 2016). These psychological influences can further deteriorate an individual's morale and overall mental health.

In a democratic society, it is crucial for states to uphold both freedom of expression and ensure equality and safety for all individuals. Striking a balance between these objectives can be challenging, but it is the duty of states to identify and appropriately address incidents that undermine the rights to personal integrity and security of LGBTQ+ individuals. By doing so, they aim to effectively protect these rights and promote a safe and equal society. Inter-American instruments acknowledge that the right to express one's sexual

orientation and gender identity holds a distinct level of protection. This acknowledgment is grounded in the recognition that such expression encompasses a fundamental element of personal identity and dignity.

EXPERIENCES OF THE VICTIMS OF HATE SPEECH

Researches examining the effects of derogatory language has demonstrated that hate speech inflicts emotional and psychological harm (Leets & Giles, 1997) and induces genuine pain (Eisenberger, 2015). Consequently, victims of hate speech experience diminished quality of life (Vedeler et al., 2019), heightened rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Wypych et al., 2021), and an increased likelihood of suicide attempts (Marshall et al., 2011). For immigrant groups, hate speech contributes to greater acculturation stress (Wypych & Bilewicz, 2022). Among LGBTQ+ individuals who encounter hate speech infrequently, 36% reported having suicidal thoughts, whereas this percentage rose significantly to 50% for those experiencing frequent exposure (Soral, 2021). Feelings of shame regarding sexual orientation can accelerate social isolation or even lead to aggression towards other LGBTQ+ individuals (Burn et al., 2005). Furthermore, exposure to hate speech among LGBTQ+ individuals results in negative emotions, internalization of stereotypes related to one's sexuality, and a propensity to avoid coming out (Fasoli, 2011). Most of the existing research in this domain relies on correlational studies, where participants self-report their encounters with hate speech. Such studies do not allow for a precise examination of the causal effects of hate speech exposure on well-being and are susceptible to various confounding variables. The sole existing experimental study that investigated the psychological effects of hate speech on LGBTQ+ individuals revealed that highly "out" gay individuals reported increased levels of internalized homophobia and body concerns when exposed to homophobic slurs compared to neutral words (Bianchi et al., 2017). Thus, it indicates that hate speech impacted internalized homophobia and body concerns primarily among highly "out" gay individuals underscores the potential role of LGBTQ+ identity identification in determining the psychological consequences of hate speech exposure.

In this context, the prevalence of hate speech targeting the LGBT community in online spaces exacerbates the psychological burden on individuals. Understanding the psychological effects of hate speech requires considering the existing mental health disparities and the added impact of targeted online abuse on the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Online hate speech directed towards LGBTQ+ activists and the broader LGBTQ+ community has significant psychological effects. A study focusing on the experiences of LGBTQ+ activists in Moldova and Ukraine reveals that online hate content leads to emotional distress, depression, sleep disturbances, exhaustion, panic attacks, fear, and a desire for social isolation (Nyman & Provozin, 2019). The harmful impact of hate speech prompts many victims to delete or close their social media accounts as a defense mechanism. Both direct and indirect hate speech have similarly negative effects on LGBTQ+ activists (Nyman & Provozin, 2019).

Another study examining online abuse within the LGBTQ+ community highlights the detrimental effects of insults and threats on mental health, including feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety, depression, stress, shame, self-blame, and social isolation (Hubbard, 2020). Victims often experience guilt for their LGBTQ+ identity and resort to self-imposed isolation as a means of reducing exposure to hate speech. The online mistreatment can also contribute to suicidal thoughts (Hubbard, 2020).

Research conducted by Dragowski et al. (2011) indicates a strong correlation between verbal and physical abuse based on sexual orientation and the manifestation of posttraumatic stress symptoms. These symptoms can include avoidance behaviors, where individuals purposefully avoid certain places, people, and situations that trigger negative thoughts and emotions (Parekh, 2017).

The continuous exposure to hateful messages targeted at LGBTQ+ individuals can result in the internalization of negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community (Ghafoori et al., 2019). This perpetuates the stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community and can lead to the development of internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia can lead to severe outcomes such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Wotten, 2018). Individuals who internalize negative attitudes towards their own sexual orientation or gender identity may employ defense mechanisms like concealing their true identity (Global Perspectives on the Trauma of Hate-Based Violence, 2020). The prevalence of online hate speech targeting the LGBTQ+ community influences victims to engage in self-censorship and hide their gender identity or sexual orientation in order to gain social acceptance (Berecz & Devinat, 2017). Consequently, individuals who choose to hide their true selves are forced to live a double life, which significantly impacts their mental health (Berecz & Devinat, 2017).

It is important to note that transgender individuals face particular challenges in this regard, as physical changes during the transitioning process can be difficult to conceal. This may explain why transgender individuals often feel more threatened, vulnerable, and anxious when confronted with hate speech (Walters et al., 2017). Polders et al. (2008) identified several factors that contribute to the increased vulnerability of LGBTQ+ individuals to depression. However, their research indicates that low self-esteem and frequent exposure to hate speech are the only factors strongly correlated with depression vulnerability within the LGBTQ+ community. The correlation between hate speech and vulnerability to depression should be acknowledged by the general public, especially considering the higher rates of suicide within the LGBTQ+ community compared to the general population (Berecz & Devinat, 2017).

Hate speech has destructive psychological effects on its victims, and its prevalence in the online environment can lead to desensitization, thereby reducing the reporting and enforcement of such cruelties (Soral, Bilewicz & Winiewski, 2017). Additionally, victims of hate speech may normalize the abuse and employ avoidance as a coping mechanism (Hubbard, 2020).

Further research on desensitization and normalization as mechanisms perpetuating online abuse is indeed crucial. The detection and reduction of hate speech present significant challenges, as it requires navigating through contextual and subjective judgments. While algorithms and human moderators can play a role, a more proactive approach is necessary to effectively address online hate speech.

IMPACT OF STRONG IDENTIFICATION WITH THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY AND IMPACT OF HATE SPEECH

The level of identification individuals have with their social groups can vary, and this identification can influence their responses to threats or achievements concerning their group's status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Strong identification has been associated with positive psychological outcomes for minority groups, as indicated by research on the "social cure" hypothesis (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2014).

Belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, for example, has been found to reduce feelings of mental distress and alienation, contributing to improved self-esteem, stability, and perceived well-being (Lewis et al., 2002). However, it is important to note that strong in-group identification can also have negative effects on well-being, often referred to as a "social curse" (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; McCoy & Major, 2003). Chronically stigmatized groups may perceive discrimination as widespread, enduring, and pervasive, which can further harm their self-esteem (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). When social identity forms a crucial part of one's self-concept, threats to that social identity become threats to the self (McCoy & Major, 2003). Bianchi et al. (2017) conducted research that highlighted the significance of coming out as a moderator in the relationship between hate speech exposure and internalized homophobia. They found that the negative effects of hate speech were most pronounced among gay individuals who openly disclosed their LGBTQ+ identity, compared to those who kept their identity hidden. This suggests that strong identification might amplify the impact of hate speech rather than mitigate it. However, a direct examination of this effect is yet to be presented.

Conclusion

Studying the harmful psychological effects of online hate speech should be a priority, and understanding the factors that predict and moderate these consequences is crucial. Given that LGBTQ+ individuals are particularly vulnerable to online hate speech and experience more severe effects, it is essential to focus research initiatives on their specific reactions and coping mechanisms, as well as the development of effective countermeasures. Raising awareness about the impact of hate speech and promoting healthier coping mechanisms is a valuable approach. By educating individuals about the detrimental effects of hate speech and providing resources for resilience and support, it is possible to empower victims and mitigate the negative consequences. In addition, improving social media algorithms and machine learning techniques can contribute to better identification, classification, and censorship of homophobic content. Training algorithms to recognize and flag hate speech, including user comments and instances of satire that may perpetuate harm, is an important step towards creating a safer online environment.

One potential solution is to employ collective intelligence, where a diverse community of users actively participates in identifying and combating harmful content. By involving a wide range of perspectives and experiences, collective intelligence can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of hate speech and its impact. This approach recognizes the importance of engaging the community itself in the process of monitoring and responding to hate speech. Developing mechanisms that promote collective intelligence entails fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, including social media platforms, users, researchers, and policymakers. It involves implementing measures such as user reporting systems, content moderation guidelines, and educational initiatives to empower individuals to identify and challenge hate speech effectively. By leveraging the collective intelligence of the online community, approaches can be taken towards creating a safer and more inclusive digital environment, where hate speech is actively countered through collaborative efforts and a shared commitment to respect and dignity.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers, social media platforms, policymakers, and the transgender community is crucial for designing effective interventions and strategies. By combining expertise and perspectives, comprehensive approaches can be developed that address the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals and work towards reducing the prevalence and impact

of online hate speech. Overall, a multi-faceted approach that includes research, education, technological advancements, and collaborative efforts is necessary to tackle online hate speech and protect the well-being of those affected, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community.

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