

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF HATE SPEECH IN VISUAL MEDIA

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Summary

The research will explore the hate speech concept and its psychological impact on society in the context of visual media. For the prevention of hate speech or to understand how to struggle, learning or being aware about media literacy are very essential. In this direction, the investigation focuses on effectiveness of media literacy, and its promotes possibilities among people via broadcasting. Visuals for teaching people are extremely important to react to hate speech when they face this kind of issue. Thus, this paper will examine what makes visuals very crucial in this case. Furthermore, there will be some examples, indicators, and expert opinions about considered topic as well. The core purpose of the exploration consists of discussion of hate speech and presenting solutions to it.

Key words: Hate Speech, Visual Media, Journalism, Psychological Effects of Hate Speech, Media Literacy, Social Media.

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1. Introduction

Hate speech in visual media has become a critical issue, particularly in the digital age where social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok facilitate rapid dissemination of harmful content. Undoubtedly, visual representations, such as images and videos, have a unique ability to influence emotions and perceptions, making hate speech in these formats especially damaging. With growing concerns over mental health and online harassment, it is crucial to examine the psychological impact of visual hate speech and explore solutions like media literacy to mitigate its effects.

Research has focused on verbal and written forms of hate speech; there is limited literature addressing the psychological consequences of visual hate speech. This study aims to answer the question: How does exposure to hate speech in visual media impact individuals' psychological well-being, and what role can media literacy play in mitigating these effects?

2. Objectives of the Study

Investigate the psychological impacts of hate speech in visual media, specifically on anxiety, depression, and social alienation. Analyze how media literacy can empower individuals to critically engage with harmful content and reduce its negative effects. Offer recommendations for educators and policymakers to implement strategies that enhance media literacy and protect vulnerable groups.

The study focuses on visual hate speech across digital platforms, specifically social media, and examines its impact on the mental health of marginalized communities. It does

not cover verbal hate speech or hate speech in traditional media formats. The study limits its analysis to the effects of visual content that explicitly targets individuals or groups based on race, religion, or gender.

3. Theoretical Framework of Hate Speech and Media Literacy

Development of technological innovations affects people's lifestyles and their behaviors. In this case, sustainable use of social media has also an undeniable impact on their behaviors. It changes their speaking, and approaches as well. Thus, hate speech arises as a negative part of human behavior. There are several opinions and definitions on hate speech also in the context of journalistic approach. The term 'hate speech' goes beyond being a simple label for a particular type of expression; it also serves as an evaluative term that condemns its subject and calls for potential punishment. Some argue that the term is misleading because it implies that "intense hatred toward a person for any reason" is the core characteristic. However, this is not the interpretation commonly held by most legal scholars and philosophers (*Anderson & Barnes, 2022*).

On the other hand, Sellars (2016) emphasizes that defining hate speech objectively is challenging, especially when trying to distinguish between the harmful forms of speech and those that are acceptable. The numerous different approaches to the term are difficult to summarize, but by examining them along with their contexts, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in studying hate speech.

4. Key Theories on Hate Speech

Defining hate speech is particularly challenging due to its complexity and the varying contexts in which it occurs. The consensus view is that different types of speech may or may not qualify as hate speech, depending on the context, which is often overlooked in definitions. While insults and epithets can be easily recognized, the lack of context can lead to misinterpretations of hate speech (*Sellars, 2016*). Furthermore, online hate groups have developed ways to conceal their messages using symbols or benign terms as codes, which are only identifiable to those familiar with them. She also mentions that determining which forms of hate speech are most harmful is even more elusive, as the link between harmful speech and its consequences is hard to predict.

5. Media Literacy: Theoretical Perspectives

Media education, known as "media literacy," refers to the "knowledge, skills, and competencies required in order to use and interpret media." Contemporary views of media literacy involve a "critical" approach, where individuals reflect, analyze, and evaluate not just the content of media messages but also the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which those messages are created, distributed, and consumed (*Kamerer, 2013*). Similarly, media literacy is about "taking control" of one's media experiences. He suggests that being media literate allows individuals to clearly differentiate between the "real world" and the "world manufactured by the media," providing them with tools to navigate media effectively and avoid harmful distractions.

Furthermore, about this issue Potter (2022) notes that media literacy is a widely discussed concept in communication studies, with varying interpretations across different disciplines and groups, including academics, activists, educators, and policymakers. While some scholars argue that there is a shared understanding of what media literacy entails, pointing to definitions like the one created at the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, others contend that the term's meaning varies significantly depending on context. This disagreement is not confined to a specific region but appears globally, indicating that the understanding of media literacy can differ greatly. Despite this diversity, certain common elements, such as the ability to access, analyze, and produce media for specific purposes, are consistently recognized by scholars as central to the concept.

6. Link between Hate Speech and Media Literacy

Despite the broad range of perspectives on media literacy, there is a general consensus among scholars that it involves both knowledge and skills (Potter, 2022). Knowledge about media industries, messages, audiences, and effects is essential, but it is the application of this knowledge that empowers individuals to protect themselves from harmful content and make informed decisions to improve their lives. Some researchers, like Martens (2010) emphasizes the importance of this combination of knowledge and skills in media literacy education, with a focus on using media consciously and self-reflectively. Scholars also agree that media literacy involves a reciprocal relationship between media producers and consumers, as outlined by Rosenbaum, Beentjes, and Konig, where both parties influence each other in the processes of media production and consumption. This interaction further illustrates the complexity of defining media literacy, as it encompasses a broad range of factors and skills necessary to navigate the media landscape effectively. Livingstone (2004) argues and claims that, similar to print literacy, media literacy should be recognized as an essential tool that enables citizens to actively participate in society, while also allowing the state to regulate the ways in which citizens engage and the purposes of that engagement.

7. Psychological Impacts of Hate Speech

To understand hate speech is really important to review some other term, such as free speech which impacts directly on it. So, Howard says that (2019) the term "free speech" can refer to different concepts. One meaning is the moral right to freedom of expression, which is a fundamental ethical principle that individuals should be free to express themselves and communicate with others. Another interpretation is the legal right to freedom of expression, which is enshrined in the laws of specific jurisdictions, such as the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Political theorists often assume that this legal right should, or at least should be interpreted as a direct reflection of the moral right to free speech. However, concerns about human error and institutional design suggest that the moral right to free speech might not always align perfectly with legal frameworks. However, Howard essentially notes (2019) the definition of hate speech varies widely. It does not simply refer to speech expressing hatred; for instance, expressing hatred in response to a grave injustice might be considered appropriate. Hate speech, however, is a legal term used to describe expressions of hatred directed at specific individuals or groups in certain contexts. (Sellars, 2016) The rapid advancement of technology

and the widespread use of social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have significantly contributed to the global spread of hate speech. This unprecedented ability for hate speech to proliferate online presents unique challenges in terms of prevention and counteraction. According to the United Nations, there is no universal definition of hate speech under international human rights law, as the standards for defining it vary between countries with laws that prohibit such speech. Although defining hate speech is complex, some nations have tackled the issue by addressing it within their legal frameworks, taking into account their unique social norms and historical contexts. So, it appears in media in a different according to those details. Historical factors, mental approaches affect hate speech perception, and it also forces to promote media literacy in this direction.

8. Analysis of Hate Speech

Hate speech on social media platforms has become a significant challenge in the digital era, with the rapid spread of harmful content facilitated by the increasing use of social networks. Social media platforms, such as Reddit, have shown that hate speech can easily spread across different sections of the platform, often starting in niche areas and extending to broader communities. The technological features of social media, such as anonymity and the rapid sharing of content, both enable and exacerbate the spread of hate speech, while certain technology-based solutions may help mitigate this issue. These platforms' architecture, including recommendation systems and content-sharing mechanisms, unintentionally amplify hate speech, encouraging engagement and making it more likely for such content to reach a wide audience quickly. The anonymity offered by social media creates a toxic environment, where users may post offensive comments without facing real-life consequences, leading to aggressive behavior and a lack of trust within online communities. This fosters social fragmentation, anxiety, and stress, particularly among minority groups who are often the targets of online hate speech. The spread of hate speech through social media not only causes harm on a personal level but also fuels social unrest, radicalization, and even hate crimes. Politically, hate speech can distort public discourse, creating echo chambers where users are only exposed to content that reinforces their biases, hindering healthy debates and policymaking. The digital age complicates the regulation of hate speech, as content crosses borders, and social media platforms struggle to balance free speech with user safety, leading to inconsistent policies and enforcement (*Hassim, Nasir, & Zamri, 2024*).

9. Consequences of Hate Speech

The passage by Abuín-Vences, Cuesta-Cambra, Niño-González, and Bengochea-González (2022) explores the detrimental consequences of repeated exposure to hate speech, populism, and selective perception, showing how they contribute to desensitization and the development of cognitive biases. These psychological shifts can deeply influence both behavior and beliefs. Discourse, as a form of human communication, includes verbal and non-verbal messages that can communicate ideologies and influence individuals' attitudes. When harmful messages such as hate speech become common in discourse, they lead to desensitization. Initially, individuals may react strongly to hate speech, but over time, these negative reactions diminish, causing people to normalize the harmful messages. This desensitization reduces

emotional responses to violence, decreases empathy for victims, and makes individuals more accepting of violence as normal behavior. The more desensitized an individual becomes, the more persuasive hate speech becomes, leading to an escalation in prejudice and aggression. Beyond individual effects, hate speech can contribute to broader societal issues, such as political intolerance, which undermines democratic values and threatens equal rights for marginalized groups. The delivery of hate speech by figures, especially those with aggressive or untrustworthy characteristics, can also harm the credibility of the speaker, particularly when the speaker holds a position of power, such as a political leader. These further damages the integrity of public discourse and promotes division. Another key element in the consequences of hate speech is "selective perception." Individuals tend to favor messages that align with their pre-existing beliefs while rejecting those from opposing perspectives. This bias not only influences personal opinions but also exacerbates political polarization, where emotional reactions to the identity of the speaker overshadow rational engagement with the content of the message. This phenomenon is particularly evident in political communication, where the emotional response to the speaker often trumps a thoughtful analysis of the message itself. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggests that peripheral cues, such as the credibility of the message sender, play a significant role in persuasion. In political communication, individuals are often less motivated to carefully evaluate messages, which makes them more susceptible to biases like selective perception and intergroup prejudice. These cognitive biases, combined with desensitization and polarization, shape how people process hate speech and political discourse. In summary, repeated exposure to hate speech, populism, and selective perception leads to desensitization and cognitive biases. These processes not only escalate prejudice and aggression but also fuel political polarization, ultimately undermining democratic values and social cohesion.

10. Media Literacy in Mitigating the Influence and Results of Hate Speech

Role of Media Literacy in Society

Media literacy is crucial because it addresses the relationship between textuality, competence, and power. Literacy, a concept rooted in a long-standing struggle between enlightenment and critical scholarship, is seen by some as a democratizing tool that empowers ordinary people, while others view it as elitist and a source of inequality. Essentially, debates around literacy reflect discussions about how and for what purposes the public engages in society. Without a democratic and critical approach to media literacy, individuals will remain passive recipients, simply consuming online information (*Livingstone, 2004*). The real promise of media literacy lies in its ability to transform media users into active participants, shifting them from being passive consumers to engaged citizens. Because of media literacy society learn important information about several nuances.

Approaches to Hate Speech

This study explores students' opinions and attitudes toward the integration of media literacy (BF) in the educational environment. The general consensus among students is that educating adolescents in the area of audiovisual media literacy (AMI) is highly important (*Santiago del Pino & Goenechea Permisán, 2020*). The responses to most statements, covering aspects of analysis, production, and active participation as agents of societal change, reflect a strong agreement, with ratings generally falling between "Fairly agree" and "Strongly agree." However, when asked about their interest in the legal practices of adolescents across various formats and media channels, the values drop slightly to the "Fairly agree" level. Notably,

34.7% of students expressed only moderate interest, and 7% (representing five future secondary school teachers) showed little to no interest in the topic. In this context the table shows a medium overall perception of hate speech and violence online. Respondents report occasional exposure to violent content and note that trolling discourages online participation, while concern about preventing online bullying of minors is particularly high.

Table 1

Perception of hate speech and violence online

Affirmations	Average
On the Internet I have come across videos or material published by violent groups by chance.	4.97
The comments of the provocateurs (trolls) on the Internet negatively affect my level of participation.	5.29
I'm concerned about how to prevent bullying that affects minors online.	8.86
Abstract: Degree perception of hate speech and violence online (0=min and 30=max) (0 to 15=low, 15 to 24=medium, 24 to 30=high)	19.13

Source: (Santiago del Pino & Goenechea Permisán, 2020)

On the other hand, this figure illustrates the distribution of information sources reported by the 72 respondents. Facebook emerges as the dominant platform, accounting for nearly half of all responses (48.6%), indicating its central role in information dissemination. YouTube follows at a considerably lower level (18.1%), while press forums (11.1%) play a more moderate role. Traditional news websites and Twitter are used to a similar extent (6.9% each), with blogs contributing slightly less (5.6%). WhatsApp is the least used source (2.8%), suggesting a comparatively minor role in this context.

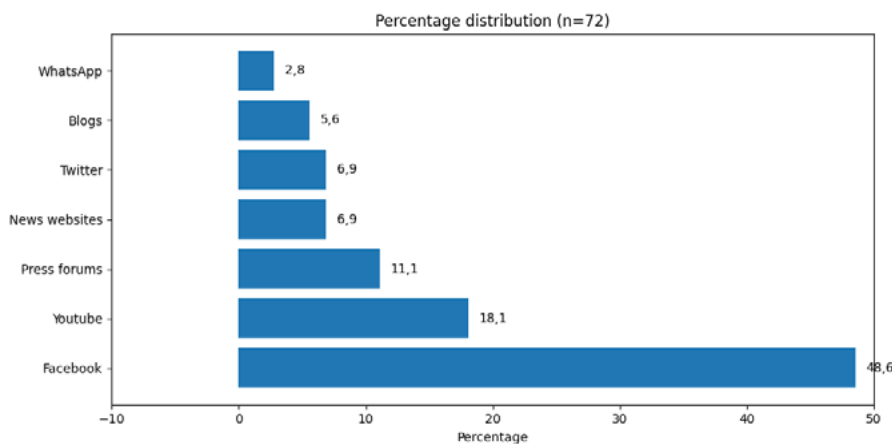


Fig. 1. Presence of the discourse of Hate and Violence online

Source: (Santiago del Pino & Goenechea Permisán, 2020)

The table indicates moderate self-perceived competence in dealing with hate speech and online violence. Respondents recognize the risks posed by digital media while expressing a reasonable, though not high, level of confidence in their ability to help teenagers cope with such content.

Table 2

**Self-Perpection of coping and teaching competence
in the face of hate speech and violence**

Affirmations	Average
The internet, the media and mobile phones offer more risks of spreading hateful and aggressive speech that opportunities to eliminate them	7.21
I can train teenagers to deal with hateful, violent or aggressive speech on the Internet	6.90

Source: (Santiago del Pino & Goenechea Permisán, 2020)

Table 3 shows a high level of perceived importance of teaching media literacy among respondents. The highest average score relates to the need to train adolescents to distinguish between high- and low-quality media content (9.33), underscoring the value placed on critical evaluation skills. Respondents also strongly agree on the importance of enabling adolescents to create quality multimodal content (8.74) and believe that critically educated citizens can positively influence the quality of media and information in their country (8.64). Interest in the legal practices of adolescents across media formats, while still notable, receives a comparatively lower score (7.14).

Overall, the composite AMI score of 34.44 places the assessment in the high range, indicating strong consensus on the importance of media literacy education.

Table 3

Importance of teaching media literacy

Affirmations	Average
It is important to train adolescents so that they can distinguish good quality media and content from poor quality media, both digital and analog.	9.33
I am interested in the legal practices of adolescents in any format and channel, and in all kinds of languages.	7.14
It is important to train adolescents so that they can create quality multimodal content.	8.74
Citizens critically educated about the media and information can influence the quality of the media and information in my country.	8.64

Abstract: Level of assessment of the importance of teaching in AMI = 34.44
(0 = min., 40 = max.)

(0 to 20 = low, 20 to 32 = medium, 32 to 40 = high)

Source: (Santiago del Pino & Goenechea Permisán, 2020)

11. Analogical Thinking and Media Literacy Education

Visual language, in contrast to verbal language, is often described as "analogical." This term captures the unique semantic features of visual communication, particularly the way visual images can serve as analogies to real-world objects. For instance, a photograph of an object

closely mirrors its real-life counterpart in shape, color, and structure, creating an analogical relationship between the image and reality. However, visual communication often extends beyond representational realism. A clear example of this is a TV commercial for Microsoft's Windows 95, which uses an abstract representation to convey the concept of multitasking. Rather than showing a person using a computer, the ad uses four colored squares from the Windows logo, each performing a routine (*Messarís, 1998*). As the tasks multiply, all squares perform their routines simultaneously, visually representing multitasking without showing any direct visual similarity to the actual process on a computer screen. This highlights that analogical thinking in visual media doesn't always require a clear visual match; instead, it relies on conceptual relationships between the visual form and its meaning.

This form of analogical thinking also applies to abstract and nonrepresentational images. Scholars like Rudolf Arnheim have argued that abstract images evoke meaning through conceptual relationships, not direct representation. For example, abstract art can be understood through its analogy to real-world phenomena, such as the association of chaotic expressionism with American freedom during the Cold War. However, abstract analogy isn't limited to art. Visual media in popular culture also use analogical thinking, such as the stylistic choices in "MTV-style" camerawork, which includes jump cuts, tilted framing, and eccentric cropping. These techniques, deviations from traditional visual composition, are interpreted as analogical expressions of youthful rebellion (*Messarís, 1998*).

Furthermore, visual styles can reflect cultural values, with rigid compositions often associated with authoritarian regimes. These examples show that visual images, whether abstract or representational, communicate meaning through both their content and form, where the style and structure of the image can carry deep analogical significance.

12. Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the psychological effects of hate speech in visual media, with a particular focus on its impact on vulnerable groups within digital spaces. The findings indicate that hate speech in visual media contributes significantly to psychological harm, causing emotional distress, anxiety, and depression, particularly for marginalized communities targeted by racial, religious, or gender-based hate. Additionally, the social fragmentation caused by the rapid spread of hate speech through social media exacerbates social polarization, fuels political intolerance, and undermines democratic values. Desensitization is another critical effect, where prolonged exposure to hate speech diminishes empathy for victims and increases the acceptance of violence. Finally, the study highlights the effectiveness of media literacy as a promising tool in mitigating the harmful psychological effects of visual hate speech. By promoting media literacy, individuals can be empowered to critically engage with media, recognize harmful content, and reduce their exposure to hate speech.

13. Solutions to the Hate Speech Threat

To combat hate speech in visual media, a comprehensive approach is needed, involving legal, technological, and educational actions. Governments should strengthen legal frameworks to regulate hate speech on digital platforms, ensuring clear definitions and international enforcement. Legal efforts should focus on preventing harm and holding offenders accountable

for the psychological and societal impact of their actions. Social media platforms must enhance content moderation by combining AI tools and human oversight to detect and remove harmful content, while also addressing the use of coded language and symbols targeting marginalized groups. Lastly, promoting digital empathy is crucial, tech companies should prioritize content that fosters tolerance and understanding, rather than harmful, divisive material, creating a more inclusive online space.

14. Media Literacy and Educational Recommendations

Media literacy education is key to reducing the psychological impact of hate speech. To improve media literacy, schools should incorporate programs that help students identify, analyze, and understand the effects of hate speech, promoting responsible media consumption. Since young people are especially vulnerable to online content, it's important for them to learn to critically engage with digital media. Public awareness campaigns by governments, NGOs, and community groups should educate the public on the risks of hate speech and provide advice on reporting harmful content. Additionally, teachers should receive specialized training to recognize hate speech and guide discussions on media literacy and its psychological impacts. These initiatives will help both students and educators effectively confront and challenge hate speech in visual media.

15. Recommendations for Journalism and Media Professionals

Journalism plays a vital role in combating hate speech in visual media. Journalists should follow ethical guidelines, avoiding the sensationalization of hate speech and ensuring responsible reporting that doesn't reinforce harmful stereotypes. Promoting counter-narratives is also crucial, highlighting positive stories of inclusion and unity to counter divisive hate speech. Collaboration with media literacy experts can help raise awareness of the effects of hate speech and educate the public on recognizing it. Lastly, transparency and accountability are essential; media organizations should openly discuss their editorial choices and take responsibility for their content. By doing so, journalists can build trust and foster a more responsible media environment.

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