Ethnic Cyberhate and Prejudice: A Bidirectional Relationship

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Submission: November 20, 2023; **Published:** December 18, 2023

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Abstract

Nowadays, it might be interesting to explore the topic of cyberhate and particularly ethnic cyberhate. The importance of addressing this issue stems from the fact that the phenomena of victimization including bullying and attack through hate speech is among the causes of high malaise in minorities. For these reasons, our purpose is to briefly describe ethnic cyberhate phenomenon and to explore the relationship between exposition to online ethnic hate speech and the prejudice against ethnic minorities. As we will explain, increasing exposure to online ethnic hate speech the sensitivity to online hate decreases and its expression becomes more accepted; this is related to an increase in feelings of disapproval for the othere other hand, prejudice seems to influence people's worldview and generate biases that lead to justifying the offenses and the insults or to defend the group affected. Therefore, the relationship between the two phenomena seems to be bidirectional, and we propose to explore this relation in the future to individuate moderators and to intervene on the spread of online hate speech.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Hate Speech; Ethnic Hate Speech; Prejudice; Homogeneity

Introduction

With the term hate speech Cohen-Almagor [1] identifies a specific type of bias-motivated, offensive, and hostile speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived individual characteristics [e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or disability] with the intent to attack, and humiliate them. Among the characteristics targeted by hate speech there is also ethnicity, and nowadays, it might be interesting to investigate ethnic hate speech manifested through content on the internet, called cyberhate or online hate speech [2]; actually, Bilewicz & Soral [3], based on the review of previous literature, state that the phenomena of victimization including bullying and attack through hate speech is among the causes of high malaise in minorities. In a study that looked at a group of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 from eight different countries, the percentage of cyberhate victimization motivated by ethnicity ranged from 17.9 % to 12.1% [4]. The frequency with which participants were attacked was very rare in most cases, however, in a few cases [between 1.7 % and 0.5%] it was significant [4]. In ethnic cyberhate the language takes on specific characteristics like providing extremely simplified representations of minority group members, choosing terms that are not very complex and keeping to a very superficial level [3]. In addition, some authors [5] have identified that when

hate speech is directed at the individual its express disapproval of certain behaviours while in messages containing generalized cyberhate, terms that refer to the concept of quantity, such as millions, all, or many, prevail, which emphasize the abstract, less specific nature of the insult. Another aspect that points to the concept of perceived homogeneity of the outgroup is also the heavy use of the third-person plural personal pronoun [they] with greater frequency than the use of the first-person plural personal pronoun [we] [5], this suggests that the minorities to whom the offense is directed are perceived as a single, uniform entity whose main characteristic is that they are other than themselves. One issue often faced by those in minority groups is the inability to avoid further future victimization because of the inability to change the characteristics underlying the offenses [6], the non-situational and specific nature of the verbal assaults directed at them may exacerbate this difficulty.

Hate Speech and Prejudice: The Influence of Hate Speech on Prejudice

It is well- known that being exposed to cyberhate could influence the formation of prejudice, a negative judgment that is made toward a person or group, which is often born and

maintained without direct experience of that individual or community to which it is directed [7]. In this process, social norms seem to play an important role; in fact, the respect for social norms, which condemn the use of hate speech, is able to limit its use even by individuals who hold moderate levels of prejudice toward the outgroup, when disdain for the victimized group is not widely spread in the context and when people are sensitive to cyberhate [3]. On the other hand, disapproval towards hate speech stems from the knowledge that the behaviour enacted is morally condemnable, so desensitization towards hate speech expressed on the web would make such social warning less effective [3]. Indeed, as interactions based on attack and hate increase, sensitivity to online hate decreases and its expression becomes more accepted, no longer considered a violent and abusive phenomenon, and concomitantly accompanied by an increase in feelings of disapproval for the outgroup [8,3]. The influence of hate speech could have a positive effect on the intergroup relationship, such as eliciting compassion for the victims and a greater feeling of closeness with the outgroup [8]. However, positives attitudes that would be generated in individuals who encounter hate speech on the web with high frequency are suppressed by the decrease in sensitivity to the brutality of the content, which is shown to be a key mediator of the process that through exposure to cyberhate causes the increase in prejudice [8].

It might be interesting to note that the many hostile comments that are disseminated seem to constitute an alternative prescription, whereby users observe the behaviour disseminated by the majority and are guided by it [9]. As a result of a diminished sensitivity to hate speech, that prevents it from being identified as a signal for the violation of a common principle, and the simultaneous establishment of a shared feeling of normativity of the offense, even those individuals who would have been deterred from participating and repressed their discriminatory ideology become advocates of hate speech by teaming up around the most extremist leaders who reach an ever-growing number of followers [3]. Then, the prevalence of online hate gradually increases the tendency to view it as acceptable and prescriptive behaviour, influencing both explicit and implicit prejudice toward the outgroup [9]. As proof of this, explicit evaluations of ethnic minority, in terms of likability and positive feelings, and implicit evaluations are found to be more negative in individuals who read comments that are overtly offensive toward the targeted 21 than in those who are confronted with messages that support the outgroup [9].

Hate Speech and Prejudice: The Influence of Prejudice on Hate Speech

It must also be considered that pre-existing prejudice influences the perception and possible justification of comments and posts containing hate speech. Users who hold a high level of racial prejudice against black people, if confronted with content that attack and offend the target tend to motivate the act as a legitimate expression of freedom and minimize the severity but will be less inclined to define verbal aggression as a manifestation of their opinion when offense is directed at white people [10]. On the other hand, people showing low levels of prejudice against the African tend to justify less with freedom of speech the insult of a white person directed at a black person compared to when a black person insults a white person [10]; likewise, they will tend more to want to assign to the verbal attack the definition of a hate crime if the target audience are black users as opposed to white user [10]. Having said that, prejudice that influence people's worldview generate biases that lead to vicious conclusions in both cases, whether there is high level of prejudice and thus leads to lower consideration of the target and greater justification for hate speech, or whether there is low level of prejudice and leads to a feeling of protection toward the target experienced as historically disadvantaged [10].

Conclusion

Made this point, we could argue that the relationship between exposure to online ethnic hate speech and prejudice formation toward the outgroup is a bidirectional relationship in which each of the two agents has factors that influence the other. From our point of view, it might be interesting in the future to understand other factors mediating this relationship, with the intent to take inspiration to implement strategies that counter the spread of online hate speech acting for example on the phenomenon of perceived homogeneity of the outgroup or investing in the diffusion of social norms that condemn hate speech.

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