CRITICAL THINKING AND SOCIAL NORMS AS BUFFERS AGAINST HATE SPEECH ACCEPTANCE

Medea Despotashvili

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Tbilisi State University (Georgia)

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between attitudes toward hate language and demographic, cognitive, and social factors among 250 individuals from Tbilisi, Georgia, and its regions. Using a face-to-face survey methodology, participants completed three measures: The Comprehensive Thinking Style Questionnaire (CTSQ), Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), and a Hate Language Scale. The results indicated significant gender differences, with women showing stronger disagreement with hate language. Education level was inversely correlated with tolerance for ageism, while thinking styles revealed that closed-mindedness positively correlated with acceptance of hate language, whereas open-minded and effortful thinking negatively correlated. Social comparison of opinions was associated with lower tolerance for direct hate language, reflecting the influence of societal norms. These findings highlight the protective role of education, cognitive openness, and social comparison in reducing prejudice and have practical implications for designing interventions aimed at mitigating hate language.

Keywords: Hate language, comprehensive thinking style, social comparison.

1. Introduction

The rise of digital communication has amplified the prevalence and impact of hate speech, fostering significant social and psychological challenges. Concurrently, critical thinking and social comparison have emerged as vital components influencing individuals' engagement with hate speech and their responses to it. This literature review explores the relationships among language of hate, critical thinking, and social comparison, focusing on their interplay and implications in contemporary society.

1.1. Language of hate

Hate speech, defined as language intended to demean or harm individuals based on group characteristics such as race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, is a pervasive issue in both offline and online settings (Sue et al., 2007). Its impact extends beyond the targeted individuals, affecting entire communities by fostering division, fear, and hostility. Studies show that hate speech can desensitize individuals over time, normalizing discriminatory attitudes and increasing societal polarization (Soral et al., 2018).

In digital spaces, hate speech is amplified by the anonymity and reach of social media platforms (Jane, 2014). Algorithms that prioritize engagement often exacerbate the problem by promoting polarizing content, creating echo chambers that reinforce hateful ideologies. Victims of hate speech frequently experience psychological harm, including increased stress, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Soral et al., 2018). The societal implications of this phenomenon call for an interdisciplinary approach to mitigating its effects.

1.2. Critical thinking

Critical thinking, the ability to analyze and evaluate information systematically, plays a crucial role in countering the spread of hate speech. It enables individuals to identify logical fallacies, recognize bias, and challenge the underlying assumptions of harmful rhetoric (Facione, 1998). Educational interventions that foster critical thinking skills have shown promise in reducing susceptibility to hate speech and misinformation (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

Media literacy programs that incorporate critical thinking principles have proven effective in equipping individuals to discern the intent and credibility of online content (Ennis, 2018). Such programs emphasize the importance of evaluating sources, understanding the influence of algorithms, and engaging

in respectful dialogue. By promoting critical engagement, these interventions reduce the likelihood of individuals contributing to or passively endorsing hate speech.

1.3. Social comparison

Social comparison theory, introduced by Festinger (1954), posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and attributes to those of others. In the digital age, social media platforms have intensified this phenomenon by curating idealized representations of others' lives (Chou & Edge, 2012). This intensified social comparison can influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors, including their engagement with hate speech.

Research indicates that upward social comparisons, where individuals compare themselves to perceived superiors, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and resentment (Vogel et al., 2015). Conversely, downward social comparisons, involving perceived inferiors, may reinforce biases and prejudices. In the context of hate speech, social comparison dynamics can either perpetuate hateful ideologies or provoke critical reflection, depending on individual and group factors.

1.4. Intersections and implications

The interaction between language of hate, critical thinking, and social comparison reveals complex dynamics that shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Critical thinking serves as a moderating factor, enabling individuals to critically assess the validity of social comparisons and challenge the premises of hate speech (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). For example, individuals with strong critical thinking skills are less likely to internalize the negative effects of upward social comparisons and more likely to engage constructively with others.

Educational initiatives that integrate critical thinking and social-emotional learning can mitigate the harmful effects of hate speech and social comparison. These programs promote empathy, self-awareness, and respectful communication, fostering resilience against the psychological impact of hate speech (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Additionally, technological interventions, such as algorithmic moderation and content warnings, can reduce the visibility and spread of hate speech in digital spaces (Nguyen et al., 2021).

2. Method and design

2.1. Participants

The research was conducted in Tbilisi, Georgia. Participants were recruited from the capital city (70%) and various regions of the country (30%). The sample consisted of 250 individuals from diverse demographic backgrounds, encompassing a wide age range (18 to 75 years), different education levels, and various professional sectors. A face-to-face survey method was employed, where respondents were contacted individually and asked to complete a structured questionnaire.

2.2. Measures

Comprehensive Thinking Style Questionnaire (CTSQ): The CTSQ contains 24 items where respondents rate statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale comprises four subscales, each demonstrating good reliability in the current sample: Actively Open-Minded Thinking ($\alpha = .812$; M = 2.8, SD = 0.8); Close-Minded Thinking ($\alpha = .826$; M = 3.0, SD = 0.9); Preference for Intuitive Thinking ($\alpha = .879$; M = 3.32, SD = 0.8); Preference for Effortful Thinking ($\alpha = .813$; M = 3.35, SD = 0.9).

Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM): The INCOM measures social comparison using 11 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The scale differentiates between two dimensions of social comparison: Social Comparison of Abilities (α = .813; M = 2.9, SD = 0.9); Social Comparison of Opinions (α = .753; M = 3.34, SD = 0.6). Each dimension includes a reverse-coded item (Items 5 and 11) to control for acquiescence bias.

Hate Language Scale: A 32-item scale assessed attitudes toward hate language. The scale comprised four subscales addressing hate language directed toward different groups: elderly individuals, women, religious communities, and LGBTQ individuals. Each subscale included two types of items: Direct Hate Language; Reversed Hate Language. Respondents rated statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

2.3. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests. Gender and education level differences were examined. Pearson's correlation and ANOVA were used to explore relationships among variables.

3. Perception of hate language

The hate language questionnaire assessed respondents' agreement with hate language statements. Lower scores indicated stronger disagreement with hate language Overall, participants disagreed with hate language, particularly expressions of sexism. However, neutral responses were more frequent for reverse ageism, homophobia, and reverse homophobia.



Figure 1. Attitudes towards different forms of hate language.

Female respondents disagreed more strongly with hate language (F = 6.641, df = 4, p < .05). Reverse statements showed gendered differences only for reverse ageism, where male respondents were slightly more agreeable (M = 3.04) compared to females (M = 2.9; F = 6.152, df = 4, p < .05).



Figure 2. Attitudes towards different forms of hate language.

ANOVA revealed that education level significantly influenced attitudes toward ageism (F = 3.269, df = 3, p < .05). Post hoc analysis using the Tukey HSD test indicated that respondents with higher education found hate speech less acceptable (M = 1.9) compared to those with secondary education (M = 2.6).

3.1. Hate language and its connection with comprehensive thinking style and social comparison

Language of hate, both in its direct and reversed expression positively correlated with age, closed minded thinking style and negatively correlated with actively open minded thinking style and preferred effortful thinking. It means, that both direct and reversed hate language was more accepted with the older age and also amongst the respondents having higher scores in closed minded thinking styles. On the contrary, higher the scores in preferred effortful thinking and open minded thinking style, less is the tolerance towards direct and reversed hate language. In addition, direct expression of hate language negatively correlated with social comparison in opinion, implying that higher is the score in social comparison in opinion, less is the tolerance of direct hate language. It can be mean that people for whom it is important for their opinions to be in lone with ideas accepted and spread in their community, more and more social activism in media and social media increases sensitivity towards hate language. But it does not influence sensitivity towards reverse hate language.

		Hate Language	Reversed Hate Language	Age	Social Comparison of Opinion	Close Minded Thinking Style	Actively Open Minded Thinking Style
Hate Language	Pearson Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
Reversed Hate Language Age	Pearson Correlation	.845**					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	Pearson Correlation	.264**	.252**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.002				
Social Comparison of Opinion Close Minded Thinking Style Actively Open Minded Thinking Style Preference for Effortful Thinking	Pearson Correlation	172*	.080	120			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.035	.329	.144			
	Pearson Correlation	.414**	.383**	.330**	178^{*}		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.030		
	Pearson Correlation	260**	273**	083	.073	402**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001	.315	.374	.000	
	Pearson Correlation	435**	370**	166*	.006	196*	.237**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.042	.943	.017	.004

Table 1. Hate language and its correlation with age, social comparison and comprehensive thinking style.

4. Discussion

The findings highlight significant patterns in attitudes toward hate language across demographic and psychological variables. Female respondents exhibited greater sensitivity toward hate language, which aligns with studies suggesting women often display higher empathy levels (Hoffman, 2008). The gendered response to reverse ageism indicates societal norms that might differently influence perceptions of intergenerational equity.

The relationship between education and attitudes toward ageism underscores the role of education in fostering critical perspectives. This finding supports theories emphasizing the role of education in reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Correlations with thinking styles reveal the cognitive processes underpinning tolerance or intolerance of hate language. Actively open-minded and effortful thinking styles, associated with critical

evaluation and cognitive flexibility, reduce acceptance of hate language. Conversely, closed-minded thinking aligns with greater tolerance, supporting previous findings on the rigidity-prejudice link (Adorno et al., 1965).

Social comparison of opinions correlated negatively with tolerance for direct hate language, suggesting that media-driven social norms can influence collective attitudes. This aligns with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison, emphasizing the importance of normative alignment in shaping individual behaviors.

5. Conclusion

This study elucidates the complex interplay of demographic, cognitive, and social variables in shaping attitudes toward hate language. The findings emphasize the protective role of education, cognitive openness, and social comparison in reducing tolerance for hate speech. These results have implications for designing interventions to combat hate language, suggesting targeted approaches based on gender, education, and cognitive training to foster greater sensitivity and reduce prejudice. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring longitudinal changes and incorporating qualitative methodologies for deeper insights.

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