The impact of hate speech on mental health among youth (aged 18 to 35 years) who are active in peacebuilding and interfaith dialogue in Lebanon

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1. Introduction

Online hate speech (OHS) has become one of the most problematic topics in the life of today's youth. Despite growing societal, academic and regulatory interest in the rising risk of OHS, not much is known about the relationship between OHS and mental well-being among youth active in peacebuilding or interfaith dialogue. Yet, the field of interfaith dialogue is supposed to tackle the issue of hate speech. To address these gaps in the practice of peacebuilding and the literature, this study investigated the correlation between OHS and emotional resilience and mental health well-being among young people active in peacebuilding and interfaith dialogue in Lebanon. It explores how resilient and vulnerable youth active in interfaith are to hate speech and the correlation between hate speech and mental health among youth aged 18 to 35 years old who are activists/volunteers in interfaith in Lebanon.

2. Online hate speech as defined by youth

What is hate speech?

In common language, "hate speech" refers to offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics (such as race, religion or gender) that may threaten social peace.

There is no universal definition of hate speech under international human rights law. The concept is still widely disputed, especially in relation to freedom of opinion and expression, non-discrimination and equality.

To provide a unified framework for the United Nations to address the issue globally, the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as"any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor."[1]

What is online hate speech?

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[1] https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech

During the Youth Event of the 9th United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Global Forum in Fez, Morocco, a breakout session with 80 participants was held entitled "Countering and addressing online hate speech on social media". Besides discussing freedom of speech and violation of tolerance during this session,participants came up with the following definition of hate speech:

> "It is the narrative communicated live or through the various digital platforms, verbally or non-verbally, in which one or more elements of an identity of an individual or group is attacked with hatred or even dehumanised due to their belonging to a race, religion, gender, sexual preference or ethnicity, that is to say, minorities in general. And it's a prejudicial form of harassment in online and real-life spaces that can become life-threatening."

3. Methodology

A survey was designed and disseminated through social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and WhatsApp), and 58 responses were collected from people residing in Lebanon.

Among the 58 respondents, the valid sample consists of 42 young participants (64% women) aged 18 to 35 years old, recruited from seven Governorates of Lebanon. Self-report questionnaires were administered to assess exposure to OHS, the platforms it occurs via,the elements of people's identity it targets the most and its impact on mental health and resilience. Analyses revealed that OHS was strongly linked to religion, gender and ethnicity.

The following strengths and limitations of the user survey were identified:

Strengths:

- Participants' peacebuilding experience was diverse,so the results were reliable regardless of seniority
- User-friendly questions were adopted, allowing participants to express themselves, rather than the 5-point Likert scale, which might not be engaging
- A standardised survey was used, so the questions were reliable. The questions were well-phrased and clear,so all participants understood them in the same way
- The survey was disseminated mostly through networks of volunteers involved in peacebuilding, which increased the validity of the provided information

Limitations:

- The data collected was self-reported by users. Therefore, it may reflect their own perspectives and different considerations or definitions of hate speech
- The responses may be influenced by a mainstream culture of not saying "No" or "I don't know"
- The participants' mood or surroundings at the time of completing the survey may have influenced their responses
- Respondents dislike typing their answers, especially when they are long

4. Findings

Of the 58 respondents, 42 are active in peacebuilding, of which 31 are Lebanese, eight Syrian, two Palestinian and one Yemini. The age group distribution showed 18- to 25-year-olds have the highest participation in peacebuilding volunteering in Lebanon (38%)while26- to 30-year-olds have the lowest participation (14%). However,activists in the 26- to 30-year-old age group are highly engaged in peacebuilding with more than three years of experience.

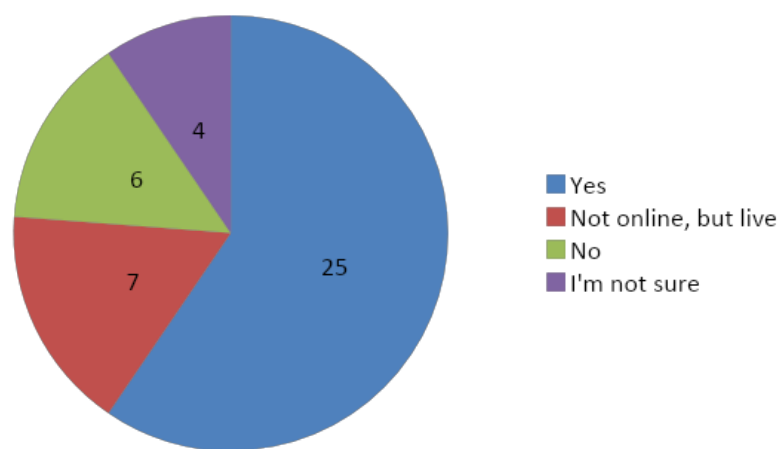1. **Have you ever been subject to any form of online hate speech?**

Figure 1: Of the 32 participants who said they have been subject to hate speech, 25 reported being subjecttoOHS and seventoreal-world hate speech.

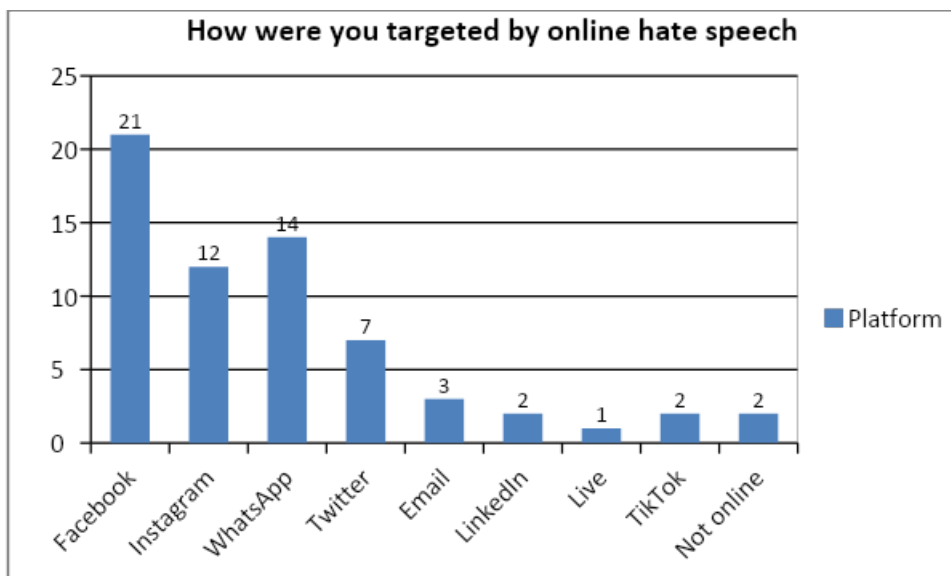2. **How were you targeted by online hate speech?**

Figure 2: Although TikTok is one of the most popular social media platforms among young people, this study did not find any significance when linking it to hate speech. It was surpassed by Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, which were the source of an alarming amount of hate speech.

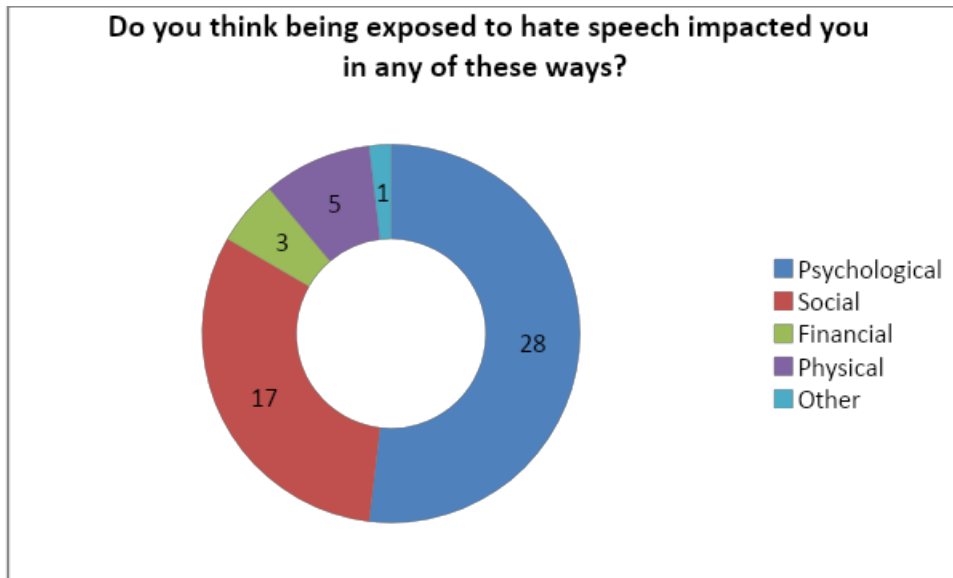### 3. Do you think being exposed to hate speech impacted you in any of these ways?

Figure 3: Of the 32 participants who reported having been affected by hate speech in one way or another, 28 stated that they have been affected psychologically, followed by 17 who said that they have been impacted socially by hate speech.

4. What aspect of your identity do you feel was being targeted by hate speech?
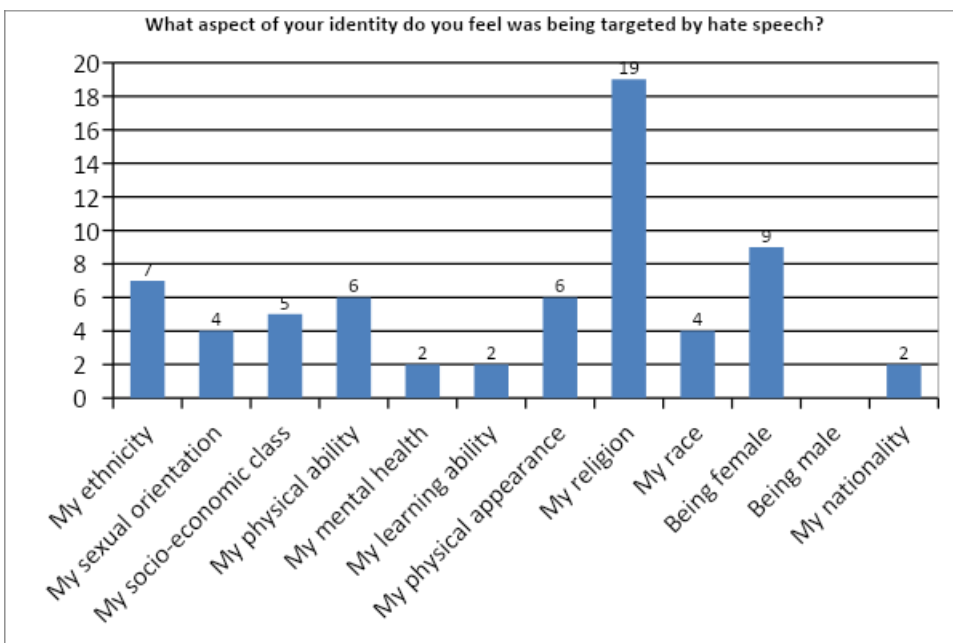
Figure 4: Of the 32 participants who said they have been subject to hate speech (25 online and seven in person), 19 said they were targeted due to their religious affiliation, followed by nine who were targeted due to being a woman and seven due to their ethnicity.

5. Are you receiving enough support to maintain your resilience against hate speech?
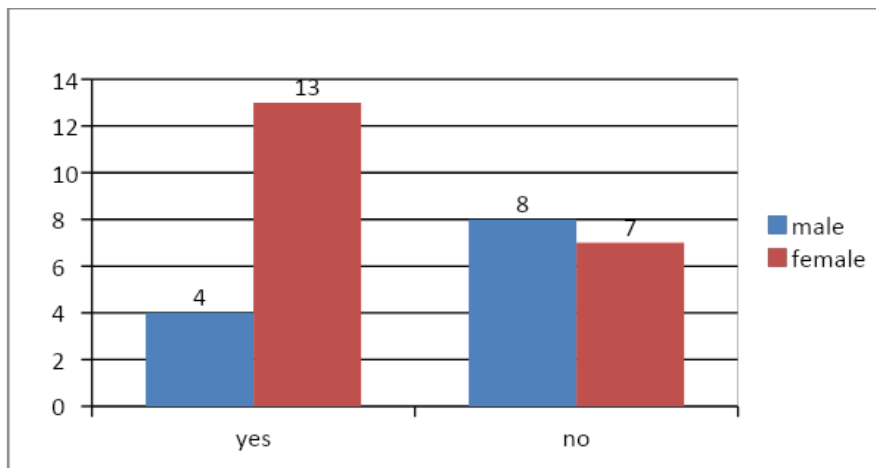

Figure 5: The above graph shows that men are less likely to receive support than women. This could be due to stereotypes associating men with being tough,so they shouldn't seek support.Of the 32 participants who said they have been subject to hate speech, 15 declared that they don't receive enough support to make them resilient to hate speech targeting them.The other 17 said they do receive support, mostly from friends and family or through education, building self-awareness on the topic and using adaptation strategies and self-motivational speeches. A single voice said they were receiving professional help from a therapist.

When asked about possible sources of support for resilience to hate speech, most of the 15 respondents who have not received support had no answer–a few suggested increasing awareness.

The last survey question was about sharing an experience during which participants believe they were subject to hate speech. The responses were personal and unique. Each participant shared an occasion when part of their identity was attacked and threatened. The stories had different themes, including sexual orientation and gender roles, mental health, racism and nationality, physical appearance, opinion, body shaming, language and sociopolitical ideology.

Despite being the last question in the survey, most people were able to share long answers. This highlights an important aspect, i.e. the need to express themselves and be heard – they needed someone to truly listen to their stories and experience all their frustration, pain, agony, hope and much more on each rereading.

6. Conclusion

The above findings highlight the need to develop intervention programmes and the relevance of focusing on internal and external developmental assets[2] to mitigate negative outcomes for activists exposed to OHS. Young people active in peacebuilding and interfaith dialogue are generally twice as vulnerable to hate speech as others because they are not only affected by narratives directed at them as an individual but are exposed to all kinds of discriminative narratives directed at any other individual or group.

Not having an answer to a question is an answer in itself. When asked to suggest some tools or mechanisms to increase resilience to OHS and providers of said tools/mechanisms, 22 of the participants who didn't feel that they received support did not answer the question. This raises alarm bells that they are unaware of ways to get emotional support when facing hate speech or to be resilient to hate narratives.

One of the outcomes of this research is the importance of establishing programmes within peacebuilding and prevention of violent extremism organisations to provide volunteers, and activists in general, with adequate knowledge on hate speech and ways to maintain resilience and emotional and mental well-being. Moreover, it is crucial not just to raise awareness but to have an ongoing programme through a project line to maintain mental resilience among youth active in peacebuilding.

Focus should be given to actions and training programmes that are beneficial for youth active in peacebuilding, such as awareness of gender and mental health and skills and tools that reinforce emotional resilience for volunteers in prevention of violent extremism with a focus on OHS and social media skills and tools that help combat hate speech.

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[2]Half of the assets focus on the relationships and opportunities they need in their families, schools and communities (external assets). The remaining assets focus on the social-emotional strengths, values and commitments that are nurtured within young people (internal assets).

About the Author

Ali Kifah Mahmoud is a youth trainer and activist in the fields of inter-faith dialogue, youth, peace and nonviolent communication. He believes that "we rise by lifting each other", hence empowering others is his driving force. Although his background is in finance, he followed his passion and shifted to peacebuilding. This move inspires him to keep encouraging others, especially youth, to follow their dreams.

Ali is part of several local and international networks focused on peace, dialogue, youth and other related topics, including UNAOC cohort 2022, Adyan Foundation, Aiserve Foundation, Forum ZFD, and Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism – iDove. The current times of hardship in Lebanon as well as in the world, pushes him to contribute to a positive change in his community and the wider society. Ali joined JLI's PVE, Youth and Faith Research and Capacity-Sharing project because he is eager to learn and gain new skills in preventing violent extremism (PVE).

About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partner-ships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

This paper is published under the "Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), Youth & Interfaith: Research Capacity Building Project". Read more about the project on the following link:
https://jliflc.com/pve-youth-interfaith-project/