

## **Perspectives of Muslim and Minority Canadian Youth on Hate Speech and Social Media**

Adeela Arshad-Ayaz  
Concordia University  
adeela.ayaz@concordia.ca

M. Ayaz Naseem  
Concordia University  
ayaz.naseem@concordia.ca

Hedia Hizaoui  
Concordia University  
Hedia.Hizaoui@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The extensive user interaction made possible by social media has both pros and cons. On the one hand, educators have been thrilled with social media's potential in the possibility of engaging youth in debates on civil responsibility and citizenship. On the other hand, social media can also be used as a powerful weapon to marginalize and intimidate already vulnerable groups. Expressions of hate are not only hurtful to the targeted group but can also have a significant impact on the cohesion and harmony of an immigrant-based society like Canada. Our overarching objective in this paper is to understand the perspectives of marginalized Canadian youth, especially Muslim youth, regarding hate speech in online environments, and particularly on social media. In this article, we present the effects of online hate speech on marginalized youth—often the victims of hate speech—in Canada. In particular, we present effects on self-esteem and self-image, relationships with dominant group members, mental and physical health and well-being, and personal and group security.

### **Introduction**

In 2019, Statistics Canada, for the first time, released data on online crimes that were motivated by hate (Armstrong, 2019). According to the report, in 2017, as many as 2073 criminal hate-motivated incidents were reported to the police. These incidents amounted to a 47% increase from 2017. The online hate crimes, according to the report, were motivated by hatred of religion (+382 incidents)...race or ethnicity (+212 incidents)...[M]uch of this increase was a result of more hate crimes targeting the Black ... and Arab and West Asian populations... [H]ate crimes motivated by religion rose 83%...crimes motivated by hate against the Muslim population rose [by] +151%...[and] against the Jewish population ...[by] +63%. (Armstrong, 2019)

Hate that is motivated by religious, racial, and ethnic differences remains the highest reported online hate crime (Armstrong, 2019).

The broad image of the connection between social media hate speech and Canadian youth can be further elucidated by another report released in 2019 by Statistics of Canada that outlines the characteristics of Canadian youth between the ages of 15 and 30. It states that there are over 7 million youth in Canada, 30% of whom are between the ages of 15 and 19. Two figures are of great importance to our study: the first is that 27% of youth between the ages of 15 and 30 are members of a visible minority. The second is that almost 93% of young Canadians use social networking sites.

What is worth reflecting on in these statistics is the fact that Canadian youth are not always passive consumers or victims of hateful content. They are users who, in their pursuit of fame, fun, or prestige, can become creators of hateful trends. Some influencers attract millions of followers and billions of likes in a matter of days. Helen Liu (2021) examined how teens targeted ethnic-cultural and racial minorities and denigrated the history of African American slavery through the content of a racist version of the TikTok trend known as "How's My Form" (p. 3).

Evidence not only from Canada but also from other parts of the world shows that in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, social media use increased exponentially due to global quarantine measures that restricted social interactions (Feldkamp, 2021). One of the platforms that benefited most was TikTok (Anderson, 2021). TikTok is one of the most downloaded and popular applications among youth worldwide and Canadian youth as well (Daigle, 2019).

These claims are supported by a recent report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (O'Connor, 2021) – a London-based think tank – which examined the content of 1,030 TikTok videos for hate speech (and extremism), totalling only about eight hours of content. O'Connor (2021) found videos spreading hate against Asians (Chinese), Muslims, Jews, LGBTQ, refugees, and migrants. The videos also promoted white supremacy, glorified hate preachers, and praised attacks on minority and religious groups. The analyst and author of the report expressed concern about the nature of youth engagement with and on social media, saying, "to think that young people are not only viewing such content that is hateful of communities and supportive of extremists but also actively creating this content, too, is especially concerning" (Guynn, 2021, para 13).

These statistics are indeed concerning at all levels. Even more disturbing, however, is the tendency to normalize hate speech in everyday life both by the perpetrators who do not perceive their actions to be spreading hate, as well as by the recipients of hateful actions who tend to internalize the hatred directed at them. The ubiquity, reach, and widespread popularity of social media among youth make these concerns even more pressing. Although freedom of expression in all its forms is fundamental to democracy, speech on social media has served as a powerful weapon to marginalize and intimidate already vulnerable groups. Expressions of hate are not only hurtful to the targeted group but can also have a significant impact on the cohesion and harmonious working of a society.

The overarching objective of this paper is to understand the perspectives of marginalized Canadian youth regarding hate speech in online environments, especially on social media. As

part of a larger project on combating discrimination and online hate, our research focused on the complexity and intersectionality involved in cyber violence, especially in relation to marginalized identities. This article specifically presents the effects of online hate speech on marginalized youth—often the victims of hate speech—in Canada. In particular, we present effects on self-esteem and self-image, relationships with dominant group members, mental and physical health and well-being, and personal and group security. We also discuss some potential solutions to the above-mentioned problems stemming from online hate speech as reported to us by the Canadian youth we interviewed for the project.

To this end, we interviewed twenty-five respondents (from an initial sample of 90 participants) aged 18 to 25 and studying at a central Canadian university. We used a purposive sampling technique to recruit participants. In the first phase, we administered an online questionnaire. We asked participants if they self-identified as having experienced “discrimination/othering” in their lives as a result of stereotypes/ misinformation (through social media) about their group identities. In the second phase, we further narrowed the list of participants. Those who reported experiencing marginalization/victimization as a consequence of hate speech on social media were invited for an in-depth interview. The twenty-five participants who self-identified as victims of hate speech were invited to share their experiences and narrate their stories. We obtained informed consent from the participants and assigned them pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. We transcribed the interviews and narratives and returned them to the participants for review.

### **Free Speech or Hate Speech**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes freedom of speech as a fundamental human right. Article 19 states, that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 1948). At the individual level, free speech is linked to human dignity and self-respect (Seglow, 2016), a right worthy of legal protection as “a collective enterprise” at the service of those expressing and receiving speech (Seglow, 2016, p. 1104) in verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. At the social and political level, freedom of expression is a mainstay of democracy and social harmony and a guarantor of the diversity of views (Tsesis 2009; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Graber et al., 2018; Levinson & Balkin, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). However fundamental, free speech is not unconditional. Several democracies resort to legal provisions to manage speech when it conflicts with other human rights, threatens social order, or jeopardizes democracy through hate and violence (Tsesis, 2009).

Given its complexity as an interdisciplinary topic and the multifaceted nature of its online and offline manifestations, hate speech is difficult to frame into a straightforward definition that establishes global consensus (Alkiviadou, 2019; Beausoleil, 2019; Harell, 2010; Mahoney, 2010; Laaksonen et al., 2020). However, the literature addressing this issue mentions characteristics that make it identifiable. Hate speech clearly has ill-natured goals (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Harell, 2010; Mahoney, 2010). It conveys a negative message (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Mahoney, 2010). It targets identifiable individuals or groups – usually

vulnerable minorities – and labels them as different (Laaksonen et al., 2020; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Harell, 2010; Mahoney, 2010; Beausoleil, 2019). It takes diverse and unconventional forms, such as vandalism of sacred sites and holy symbols (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Timofeeva, 2003; Mahoney, 2010). It can incite hostility and trigger genocide (Harell, 2010). Hate speech, then, refers to any expression that contains demeaning messages directed at individuals or groups based on race, colour, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, and disability, with the intent to harm and stigmatize them in a way that incites violence against them.

Many scholars argue that the trade-off between individual rights and collective rights is a serious challenge, especially in multicultural democracies where expectations for freedom of expression are undeniably high (Alkiviadou, 2019; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Harell, 2010; Müller & Schwarz, 2020). Müller and Schwarz (2020) note that laws against hate speech are valued by human rights and national security supporters but fiercely opposed by civil liberty and anti-censorship advocates. Alkiviadou (2019) found that the abstract nature of the concepts "harm and dignity" complicates attempts to balance freedom of speech and human rights when regulating hate speech. Alkiviadou further contends that the removal of expressions or material may provide a pretext for the legitimation of whimsical patrolling of the Internet. Several commentators caution against decontextualizing speech when determining its legitimacy and eligibility for protection by law (Enarsson & Lindgren, 2018). Others caution against the abuse and misuse of legislation under the guise of human rights protection through which less powerful people are persecuted/prosecuted in favour of influential figures (Alam & Siddiqui, 2016). As a result, several commentators emphasize the role of legislative bodies in ensuring that the rights of all citizens are protected by comprehensive and uniform laws (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002). Sections 318 and 319 of the Canadian Criminal Code address hate-related issues and make it a criminal offence to advocate genocide or incite hatred in public (Walker, 2018).

### **Criminal and Civil Laws as Legal Responses to Hate Speech**

The existence of hate speech laws signifies official recognition of the harm that hate speech causes (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002). Both nationally and internationally, criminal and civil laws have long existed to address discriminatory speech, as called for by the United Nations (Mahoney, 2010). Scholars such as Harell (2010) and Mahoney (2010) argue that as a multicultural democracy, Canada has been committed to protecting the rights of individuals against discriminatory and prejudiced behaviour and attitudes, as well as the spread of hate. Mahoney (2010) indicates that Canadian federal and provincial laws, which have been in place since the 1960s, enforce controls on hate speech while protecting freedom of speech. Hate speech is combated in Canada through two legal measures: first, the Criminal Code, which criminalizes the propagation and dissemination of hate in all its forms and punishes users by removing content or taking down sites from the web. The second legal measure is the empowerment of the Human Rights Commission to deal with complaints about the spread of hate speech.

Despite such legal regulations and law enforcement targeting individuals, groups, and social media sites, crimes against minorities are still on the rise around the world. Human rights advocates, scholars, and victims of hate view these measures as one-sided and uninfluential (Perry & Olsson, 2009, p.197). According to Mahoney (2010), jurisdictional and technological challenges complicate the enforcement of laws when it comes to online hate (p. 92). What's more, the challenge of proving the harmful effects on victims and collecting evidence from digital platforms leads, according to Perry and Olsson (2009), to "dilemmas that are difficult to handle from a legal point of view" (p. 196), making hate on social media still "loosely managed." Other scholars argue that anti-hate laws were designed to address conventional, offline hostile speech and behaviour and are therefore limited in their ability to address cyberhate (Bakalis, 2017). Some commentators nonetheless view harmful speech as part of the democratic debate and assert that individuals must learn to live with it. Such opinions are believed to have contributed to the normalization of hate and the trivialization and degeneration of public discourse, especially after the War on Terror that followed the 9/11 attacks, and which led to discriminatory expressions morphing into new content and forms. Overall, there is a disconnect between legal definitions of hate speech and the diverse and covert forms that hate speech acquires (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017, p. 4). Therefore, hate speech can be understood within two broad categories: hard hate speech, identifiable as prosecutable offences, and soft hate speech, which is lawful speech yet carries consequences for intolerance and discrimination (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). The majority of hate speech in cyberspace falls into the second category.

### **Social Media and Hate Speech**

As has been reiterated by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Obar and Wildman (2015), defining social media is a tough assignment. However, they agree on two fundamentals associated with a definition: First, Web 2.0 has radically advanced the social use of the Internet and changed users' online behaviour from receiving to producing and sharing content. Second, user-generated content, which refers to the various forms of content that users create, is the powerhouse that drives social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) thus argue that a simple definition is possible if based on a clear understanding of Web 2.0 and user-generated content. They define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and enable the creation and sharing of user-generated content" (p. 61). They also developed a classification that provides six categories of social media: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs, content communities (e.g., Flickr and YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Twitter and Facebook), virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life).

The social media are characterized by the dilution of temporal and spatial constraints. Compared to the erstwhile media, communication in the online world has several idiosyncratic peculiarities. Online communication is both borderless and uncontrollable. Due to its participatory nature, networked publics, multiple genres of participation, ability to bring out and/or communicate voices, networked audiences, and anonymity, social media has become one of the most important avenues for the expression and dissemination of hate speech.

## **Hate Speech and the Degeneration of Public Discourse in the Post-9/11 Era**

The 9/11 attacks brought about a global radical shift in national approaches to domestic security. Rigid immigration and refugee policies resulted in heightened hate against migrants, refugees, and minority groups. According to Arrocha (2019), in the post-9/11 era, a strong correlation can be seen between the increasing number of migrants and refugees and the rise of hate speech and xenophobia in Western countries that have been known to accept asylum seekers in the past. Arrocha (2019) notes that immigrants and refugees, especially irregular ones, are seen as a threat to domestic stability and a drain on the economy. Far-right views fueled such attitudes and sentiments, which gained significant popularity after the 9/11 attacks (Arrocha, 2019). In this vein, Mahrouse (2018) affirms that hostile attitudes and sentiments in Canada (particularly Quebec), the United States, and other Western nations were fueled by anti-immigrant rhetoric that led to the rejection or reluctant acceptance of unfortunate refugees who had fled the atrocities of the War on Terror. Mahrouse (2018) contends that post-9/11 discourse in these countries incited hateful social media communications that have generated hostility and violence against immigrants, particularly Muslims.

### **Social Media and the Rise of Islamophobia**

By examining the structural aspects of certain netizen discourses, Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez (2016) make the case that social media platforms have misrepresented Muslim people, culture, and religious tenets through Islamophobic statements. The study shows that Muslims are portrayed as a monolithic entity with brutal ideas and predatory behaviour that threatens world peace and will most likely destabilize Western societies and distort their cultural values and identities. According to Mahrouse (2018), the West disseminated the portrayal of “the dangerous Muslim man, the imperilled Muslim woman, and the civilized white person” (p. 474-475) and discreetly legitimized violence as a collective self-defence mechanism for whites. When investigating hate speech on TikTok videos, O’Connor (2021) found that anti-Muslim attacks online are based on the claims that “a systematic Islamification of Europe is underway” (p. 16).

Prominent political figures in the West have acted as role models for hate groups on social media, contributing significantly to the proliferation and normalization of hate speech and crimes (Mueller & Schwarz, 2020; Marhouse, 2018). Mueller and Schwarz (2018) hone on this issue to show that Trump's tweets, which were endorsed by leading news media and retweeted widely by his followers, exemplify how social media can spread hate and normalize the “acceptability of such content after a tweet by the president” (p. 29). In the same vein, O’Connor’s (2021) analysis of TikTok videos during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic showed that anti-Asian hatred escalated online after President Trump coined the phrase “China virus” in reference to the Chinese as the origin of the pandemic.

In relation to the impact of social media on public discourse, Ott (2016) shows how social platforms such as Twitter contribute to the degeneration of public discourse. Ott (2016) noted that the mediocrity of users’ rhetoric (e.g., Donald Trump) and their ability to propagate “sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia” (p. 64) has reached alarming levels and will continue to increase, establishing itself as the “epistemology of the moment” (p. 66).

## **Hate Speech Proliferation: Rallying Against Minorities**

Existing literature indicates that minority groups – identified on racial, religious, gender, ethnic, disability, and sexual orientation grounds – are consistent targets of hate speech (Alkiviadou, 2019; Baider, 2019; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Müller & Schwarz, 2020; O’Connor, 2021). A few common tactics and mechanisms have been identified that are used to normalize hostility and violence against minorities online and offline (Alkiviadou, 2019; Harell, 2010; Müller & Schwarz, 2018). Minority groups are identified and stigmatized through circulated and shared biases and prejudices (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Harell, 2010) to fuel communal negative and hostile feelings against them (Harell, 2010) and create social division (Baider, 2019). Through tacit and explicit messages of hate and rejection, ranging from intimidation to physical assault, they are portrayed as different and inferior (Alkiviadou, 2019; Baider, 2019; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002).

Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino (2002) argue that conveying a warning to the small target group – representative of a larger community – is the end goal behind verbal and physical assaults. Furthermore, Mahoney (2010) posits that violence and criticism are the main weapons deployed to attack and silence “human rights defenders” (p. 71). Social media platforms are believed to influence users’ judgments about how minorities should be perceived and treated (Müller & Schwarz, 2020). This strong influence on public opinion about foreign workers, Arabs, Muslims, and refugees is illustrated in studies by Baider (2019), Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino (2002), and Müller and Schwarz (2020). These studies document an increase in anti-minority sentiments and attacks in areas where social media platforms have been more widely used.

### **From Group to Movement to a Community of Hate**

Unlike traditional media, digital networks offer their users the ability to filter ideas and ideologies and subscribe to those most relevant to them (Müller & Schwarz, 2020). Alkiviadou (2019) emphasizes that this amplification of ideas, interests, and beliefs creates groups powerful enough to shape current public consciousness. Once this awareness is in place, it can be a harbinger of social movements that attract those indecisive about controversial issues and those who accept the information presented on websites as unquestionable truth (Perry & Olsson, 2009). Consistent with this idea, Müller and Schwarz (2020) note that Trump's tweets attracted people with pre-existing biases against the Muslim community or those with weak opinions who needed further validation and more persuasion.

In their review of the global outbreak of hate movements, Perry and Olsson (2009) criticize the notion that the continued use of cyber communication ultimately leads to a “fragmentation of identity” (p.186). Instead, they contend that these fragmented identities evolve into a “collective identity” (p.185), leading to a community shaped by the culture of those who create it. A “virtual communitarian culture” (p. 187) is an example of how individual identities forge a collective, multilayered culture that defuses certain ideas and attitudes. They also show that “sociability” and information are affordances that help anchor hate communities in ideologies of dominance and superiority that cause psychological harm and incite violence and crime, and can also lead to

genocide in some instances, such as the one in Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslims. This link between exposure to hate sentiments on social media and the occurrence of hate crimes and genocides in real life is largely evidenced in the literature on hate speech (Müller, & Schwarz, 2020; Mahoney, 2010; Harell, 2010; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Leanza, 2019; Müller, & Schwarz, 2020; Alkiviadou, 2019).

### **Online Hate; Offline Trauma**

Social media has become an incubator of hatred that materializes in real life. Müller and Schwarz's (2020) studies point to the high crime rates associated with increased use of Twitter and Facebook. This finding was corroborated by Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino (2002), who found that while crimes induced by online hate are directed at individuals, they carry a threatening message to the community. As Beausoleil (2019) argued, the number of social media-related hate crimes in the United States increased by 17% in 2017. For example, eleven people were killed in a Pennsylvania synagogue by Robert Bowers who professed anti-Semitic sentiments. In 2015, nine members of a church were shot and killed by Dylann Roof, who admitted he was motivated by white supremacist sentiments. Both Bowers and Roof were influenced by hate on social media. These cases, along with the 9/11, Quebec, and New Zealand massacres, and many other attacks, bear witness to the atrocities of hate.

Similarly, there is evidence that hate speech has a “real and immediate” psychological impact (Harell, 2010, p. 410) on its victims, reflected in “affective, cognitive, and behavioral” manifestations (Boeckmann, & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002, p. 220). A traumatized individual or group is likely to experience psychological and physical trauma (Harell, 2010). On a social level, victims who are unable to report harm or seek justice for fear of further “victimization” (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002) withdraw from social activities and from the Internet to evade online attacks (Leanza, 2019). Racial minorities are self-silenced due to their fear of expressing their political ideas and personal beliefs (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002). This fear of being attacked decreases their access to services, amenities, and opportunities and diminishes their enjoyment of citizenship (Harell, A. 2010).

In addition to being traumatized, silenced, excluded from social and political life, and denied economic opportunities, target groups are ironically denied the right to express their feelings and opinions in the aftermath of assault (Mahrouse, 2018). Mahrouse's examination of Canadian media coverage of the Quebec massacre (2018) showed how love and solidarity were magnified while terror, fear, and grief were avoided. Downplaying and denying racism was another tactic used by dominant groups to silence victims of hate speech, according to Mahrouse. Societal norms dictated a discourse that included “grief, grievance and gratitude (Mahrouse 2018, p. 474).” Victims have had to temper their rhetoric to gain the attention and compassion of Canadians and avoid challenging the national legacy that Canadians are open-minded and indiscriminate.

The above review of research on online environments shows how hate speech is on the rise in social media and how a coalition of hate movements fueled by anti-minorities and anti-refugees throughout Western countries transcends local and national boundaries. Because of its



technological, psychological, and social manifestations, hate speech has spread and migrated from online spaces to the offline world. Though by no means is the movement unidirectional. In the process, its nature has changed from harmful to toxic and from individual offences to a collective threat that manifests itself in crimes and genocides. Over the past decade, countries and international institutions have responded to hate speech in the form of legislation that criminalizes and punishes offenders. These measures have angered advocates of free speech who view free speech as a democratic value and a fundamental human right. Tailoring responses that balance freedom of speech and other human rights that are threatened by hate speech has proven to be a major challenge for legislative authorities. Collaborative efforts indicate that awareness of the impact of hate speech on national security and global peace is growing. Nonetheless, further efforts by web intermediaries and academics through more targeted research on this phenomenon are needed to curb hate speech.

### **Canadian Youth's Perceptions of Hate Speech and Social Media**

As mentioned above, we interviewed thirty-five respondents between the ages of 18 and 25 studying at a central Canadian University. We administered an online questionnaire to the participants and asked if they self-identified as having experienced “discrimination/othering” because of stereotypes/misinformation about their group identities. Thirty-five participants who identified as victims of hate speech were interviewed and asked to narrate their experiences and stories. A post-transcription participant check was carried out. We assigned pseudonyms to the participants to ensure confidentiality. Below, we report some of the significant insights gleaned from the narratives of Canadian youth on their perception of hate speech in online environments, especially social media.

The emergence of social media has profoundly impacted the global public sphere. Social media have expanded the global public sphere past the geospatial and territorial limits of the traditional public sphere. Kopytowska (2013, 2015 a, 2015b, 2015c) refers to this expansion as the mediated public sphere, in which the netizens (citizens of the mediated public sphere) collaboratively construct new realities (Naseem, 2015, 2020; Arshad-Ayaz, 2020). The anonymity, instantaneous access, and interactive nature of virtual environments make them ideal sites for the propagation of hate speech. Recent examples of politicians' use of social media to spread hateful messages have contributed to the degeneration of public discourse in both online and offline environments.

“If the President of the United States of America can say hateful things on social media, then why can't we.” This was the reaction of John Snow (pseudonym), one of the participants in our study. John went on to comment that the recent degeneration of public discourse in online and offline environments can be directly linked to the deterioration of norms of public decency. According to John:

When national and international public figures start using hateful language in their public speeches, and pronouncements...and are appreciated for it, then the youth also get encouraged to do so. You see, when someone hears President Trump say that Mexicans are criminals and rapists [reference to President Trump's Campaign Launch speech in 2014], or that Haiti is a “shithole,” they think if he can say that in public, why can't we

say that on Facebook? And this is not happening in America alone. The Philippines president, I don't remember his name, also does that. So does the Hungarian president, and I am sure many other so-called world leaders are using hate speech. And they are doing that in public...not anonymously. These are the public leaders; they are supposed to be role models. What kind of role models are they? And why are we surprised if their followers or other people then also spread the same sort of hate speech on social media?

Many of the youth interviewed for the project echoed John Snow's sentiments. Rania, a young Canadian of Jordanian-Palestinian descent, expressed her anguish at being insulted online. Rania explains that her family moved to Canada as professionals many years ago. She nevertheless started recently to feel targeted by anti-immigrant hate speech, especially on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. According to Rania:

It's my name. My name gives it away. Although my parents are from Jordan and Palestine, and I was raised in Canada since I was two years old, people just think we are either Syrian refugees or immigrants or just Arabs. While it is not as bad in Canada, lately, everyone whose name sounds Arabic is considered a refugee or migrant. Because of the rhetoric against migrants and refugees by leaders like Trump, there has been an increase in hate speech against refugees and migrants in general. And this is now also happening in Canada and other places. See what happened in New Zealand (Rania referred to the mass shootings at mosques in Christchurch on March 15, 2019). And social media is so full of it that it has become really depressing for someone like me. Our leaders should be telling people to be civil rather than fanning hate. Honestly, I don't think it is going to get better. What are the choices for people like me? Should I just stop using social media? What will that do? It is not going to stop them from saying hateful things. Leaders have to control this thing if they want peace in society.

John and Rania's sentiments are consistent with the findings in the literature that the post-9/11 era saw a proliferation of hateful speech initiated by national and international leadership. The degeneration of public discourse led to an exponential increase in hate speech directed at immigrants and refugees both online and offline. Online hate speech creates a toxic climate in which hostility and violence thrive, and the likelihood of physically harming these groups multiplies (Arrocha, 2019, Mahrouse, 2018, Müller & Schwarz, 2020).

The rise of Islamophobia in online environments is another theme mentioned by most of the respondents we interviewed for this project. While some respondents attribute the rise of Islamophobia to the affordances of social media such as anonymity, algorithms, etc., others relate it to the deterioration of public discourse. Maryam (pseudonym) attributes the surge of hate speech on social media in part to the affordances of these platforms. She explained: "I do not think people are afraid to express (hate messages) because you can be anonymous on the internet, or you can create a fake profile or take another name (pseudonym)." For Nicky (pseudonym), features such as the "like" function on social media make it difficult for some people to stand up against hate speech even if they wanted to. Here is what she says:

Even if some people wanted to stand up against hate speech, it is difficult because they are afraid that they will not get the 'likes.' In fact, they will be targeted more and more if they are critical.

The proliferation of Islamophobic hate speech on social media has consequences for both Muslim and non-Muslim youth. As one respondent told us:

I receive a lot of hate comments whenever I comment on some news stuff. So, when I write ISIS does not represent me. They say – no you are ISIS... Not true...but they insist this (ISIS) is Islam. This happens every time. I have a duty to speak up against ISIS. But now I stopped doing that. I used to stand up...I have encountered many hateful comments online and offline. The way media portrays us online is that Muslims are killing other people... media is perpetuating stereotypes. I feel vulnerable because of my identity as a Muslim. I don't put my last name. I used to put my last name. Now I removed it. And I removed my picture as well. But they know from my postings that I am a Muslim, and maybe they see calligraphy on my wall. Any marker of religion instigates wrath of hate on social media.

Commenting further on the ramifications of Islamophobia, Maryam said,

Many Muslim children are having identity issues...hateful messages insisting that all Muslims are violent are circulating in everyday conversations on social media, many Muslim youth for sure, don't want to be a Muslim...and this happens on a subconscious level...they don't even feel it happening to them... However, it's not only the Muslim children and youth who are affected by Islamophobia; it's also the Canadian youth. Because of the hateful messages, they will miss out on knowing who we are as real people...they will only be able to see us as some hatemongers on social media want them to see us...this will be the real tragedy.

Gregory echoed Maryam's perception of hate on social media, saying:

When I go on YouTube, and I watch a lot of videos...coz I follow politics and religion... There is always a lot of hateful comments in the comments section...you have these people...they call them trolls...that write the most hateful thing that you can even imagine...not necessarily about my religion... But I often see things against Islam...I see people often saying the most horrible things about Islam... Like Islam is the cancer of the planet...and that it should be exterminated...horrible things like that... That a normal person cannot say it in person...but hiding behind that wall... He feels secure to do so...and that's a bad thing. Because there is no limit to what we can say on the Internet... And anyone can say anything... Even if they don't mean it... without even realizing it. Now, I have known many Muslims for a very long time, and I know that they are normal people...ummm... like they are like us... not all of them are even religious. I feel that had I not known them and just relied on social media, I would have had a very negative image of them.

Regarding the restrictions imposed by the architecture of social media, Gregory blames social media algorithms for preventing any form of serious discussion or thoughtful conversation about real-life issues. On the restrictions imposed by the architecture of social media, Gregory explains:

Sometimes... You know there are things that I don't necessarily agree with...but FB is a strange platform where only the likeminded exist...see they only had a "like" button for a very long time. I call FB a platform for mutual sucking up...you know... I mean, you click "like" on my post, and I will click "like" on your video, and we will all be one big happy group of friends on FB... you see what I am trying to say FB is not a place to have the type of critical dialogue... the type where you say...excuse me you are wrong, and your ideas are based on stereotypes...maybe you professors have that type of FB page, but generally FB is a place for friends and friendships are based on like-mindedness, and we all understand that...an odd person who breaks these unsaid rules gets "un-friended."

Closely related to Islamophobia on social media is the hate speech against minorities that shapes the perceptions of those who have immigrated to Canada for financial, political, or other reasons. In more ways than one, the anti-minorities tirade on social media aims to create an unworthy Other who is only here to leech on the social services and economic resources from Canadians. The hate diatribe on social media against minorities has gained momentum in the wake of a similar diatribe in the U.S. during the Trump administration. While the Canadian government has been much more open to accepting Syrian refugees, the public sentiment on social media has been anything but welcoming and at times openly hostile (Naffi and Davidson, 2020). The rallying against minorities has affected the mental health and physical well-being of many young immigrants. One respondent in our study describes these effects in the following words:

It has been extremely difficult for me to concentrate on my studies. You know, for many of us our online interactions are the only social activities we engage in, and when such interactions become hateful, our social life gets filled with hate. Many online conversations are full of hatred for immigrants...when I question such comments, I am accused of taking things personally. At what stage do we stop being immigrants and become Canadians? Aren't all people except Aboriginals immigrants to Canada? There is so much hidden in the hateful messages about immigrants actually, it is about the color of your skin and your religion. In Canada, unlike the US, people like to pretend to be polite so they don't say things directly, they hide behind titles like immigrants and refugees, but if you ask me, it is all about the color of skin. What makes it most difficult is that I don't even talk to my parents about it. They will either get worried. I mean there is nothing they can do except getting worried about me. I don't want them to worry, you know but not having anyone to talk to makes it even more difficult.

Another respondent who has immigrated from Algeria expressed her encounter with hate speech as:

Hateful messages in my online interactions hurt my perceptions about who I am...at times. I want to reject my own identity. I mean, I am not that lazy immigrant, milking the system...If all immigrants are despised and considered suspicious, then why is the Canadian government accepting immigrants?

Many respondents noted the lack of real dialogue between the dominant group and minorities on social media. According to Wendy (pseudonym), dialogue is interrupted by outbursts, accusations of being ungrateful, and sometimes outright hostility. As she said:

If I post something and it leads to anger, I try to stop commenting...It is kind of like...you are in a classroom...you don't want to be that person sitting in the corner and saying...I don't agree with you because BLABLABLA... you'd rather be quiet ...it is the same in social media...because you don't want to write something that people do not agree with...and you are a little bit scared...because on the Internet everything comes back to you...nothing gets deleted on the Internet...everything is always there.

She went on to say: "That's why some young people are saying let's get away from social media. Because it is a complex two-sided fake world, they are being apprehensive about it. Doubtful about it. And this needs intervention because it is a new space, and we need to maximize the advantages we get out of it (Aman)."

Interestingly, the respondents we interviewed for our project did not distinguish between online and offline hate. For most of them, online hate is a reflection of offline hate in the wider society. As one respondent named Paul put it:

Online hate does not happen in a vacuum...of course, there is hate in the society...it's the same hate that is expressed online. The difference is that on social media, people think they cannot be identified and thus express their hate openly. You see, we (Canadians) always compare ourselves with the Americans. The difference is that Americans are more open and in your face about their feelings, even their hate. The Canadians are more guarded in their one-on-one interactions. But on social media, they are also quite open about their hate for immigrants and minorities.

Speaking about the effects of online hate speech, Paul narrated the following example from his experience:

People were more mean also online in high school. There was this boy in school who was bullied a lot on MySpace. They also used to bully him at school...they drove him to the point that he got so aggressive that he started saying he is going to shoot everyone. At that point, we had to tell everyone at school what is happening. In high school, people care more about being accepted...but then when you are at university, it gets better.... I am much stronger now and will be about to deal with cyber violence but not if I was in high school. I would have been immature. Now I am more assertive. I think I would know how to deal with it.

Another female respondent named Aman expressed her view about online hate resulting in offline trauma in the following words:

My problem is that my name and my profile picture announce me being an immigrant and a visible minority... and if you think online interactions are any different than offline world, let me tell you they are a mirror image of each other ...and you know how immigrants are treated in this world...so yes there are stereotypes about immigrants online as they are in real-life. It is especially sad for me as I am actually an international student paying heavy tuition but getting treated with hostility both online and offline simply because I am seen as an immigrant.

When asked if they had ever reported instances of hate speech on social media to the authorities, almost all respondents answered no, and several expressed skepticism about the usefulness of reporting it to the authorities. About 50% of the respondents said they did not even know who to contact to report incidents of hate speech. According to one respondent,

I don't even know where to go to report online hate speech. I am a student at the university (name withheld), and such information is not provided to us by the university. I don't remember ever receiving such information. In any case, even if I knew where to go, I'd be extremely skeptical as I know nothing is going to happen. You see...they want proof of everything...how can I prove who is saying what? Everyone is anonymous online. But it is certainly hurtful. It does hurt a lot to read hateful comments. So, we just talk among ourselves. It is sad that Canada is going this way, and there is simply no discourse about it. The school doesn't care. The government doesn't care. I hope we don't become like Americans.

When asked about the extent of online hate speech in Canada, most respondents drew comparisons with the United States. While most agreed about the alarming rate at which hate speech is escalating in Canada, they shied away from calling it a movement or a community of hate. However, all respondents were of the view that if left unchecked it is only a matter of time before it replicates hate speech in other divided countries such as the United States.

### **Conclusions**

Online hate speech is real, and it will stay unless countermeasures are taken. Relia et al. (2019) found a strong link between the number of racist tweets and real hate crimes in 100 US cities. Canada is no exception to such trends. The foregoing discussion provides evidence that online hate speech is growing in Canada to an extent where it has become normalized. This has serious implications for the well-being of Canadian youth — both perpetrators and victims of hate speech. The main targets of hate speech on social media in Canada are immigrants and minorities, particularly Muslims. The data from Canadian youth we interviewed for our project corroborate most of the themes in the recent literature on the prevalence of hate speech on social media. Canadian youth seem to think that the current political leadership in North America and beyond is fomenting hate speech on social media for their political goals. Most respondents cited leadership in the United States (Donald Trump), the Philippines, India, and Myanmar as examples of leaders who fanned hate speech. According to the respondents interviewed for the project, once the political and national leaders employ hate speech, their supporters and others start seeing it as “normal.” Over time, hate speech becomes part of the social discourse. The degeneration of public discourse can be an important factor in the rapid rise of hate speech on social media. Our respondents also see the architecture of social media platforms, especially features such as particular algorithms and anonymity, as major reasons that encourage people to use hate speech on social media platforms. Algorithms are designed to attract people so that they stay on the platform and/or keep coming back. Once someone views hate-related materials, the algorithms keep showing them similar content in their feeds. Similarly, the built-in anonymity encourages people to say things they normally would hesitate to say.

Coming back to the main aim of the paper, namely, the effects of online hate speech on marginalized youth in Canada, including especially the effects on self-esteem and self-image, relationships with dominant group members, mental and physical health and well-being, and personal and group security, the interview data is revealing. There is a near consensus among the youth interviewed for the project that online hate speech has major consequences on their lives.

The consequences on the mental and physical well-being of the victims manifest in problems that range from alienation, identity issues, and deterioration of mental and physical health, to cyber and in-person bullying.

As evident from the research results reported above, the Canadian minority youth feel that the use of hate speech by political leadership has emboldened the majority group to follow suit. As one young interviewee explained, “it almost seems as if Canadians were just hiding their feelings of hate against Muslims. As soon as the political leadership opened the gates on social media, it encouraged people to shed off the veneer of tolerance and come out as Islamophobes.” The increase in online hate speech has affected the mental and physical well-being of Canadian youth from minority backgrounds. The most significant effect reported by the interviewees has been on their self-image and personal sense of security. Many respondents reported that online hate speech has forced them to question their own identities and their relationships with their white Canadian peers. As Maryam told us, “I have a constant feeling that I am being looked at as an enemy or an adversary. It’s not a nice feeling. I don’t see them as enemies. Why do they do so? I sometimes question myself. How long will it be that I also look at them as...you know... ‘them’?”

Yet other Muslim youth reported feeling physically insecure. They cited recent unprovoked attacks on Muslims and the desecration of mosques and burial sites as reasons for their feelings of physical insecurity. According to one respondent, “these acts of hate and violence are becoming more and more frequent. They make me feel insecure and apprehensive for myself and my family.” He went on to say that he has never lived in a majority Muslim neighbourhood but now he is increasingly thinking of doing so in order to feel secure. However, he said, “I don’t believe minorities should ghettoize...but what choice would I have if these incidents continue to grow?” Last but not least, these feelings and perceptions of hate and insecurity deeply affect the minority youth’s academic performance. Several respondents reported a decline in their ability to concentrate, their confidence levels, and their overall academic performance.

According to most respondents, what further complicates the issue is that the youth, especially the victims of hate speech, are ill-informed of possible avenues for redress. Almost all of our respondents said they were not aware of any mechanisms/offices at their academic institutions or workplaces where they could report online hate incidents. As one respondent explained, social media are considered private space and the university thinks that if something happens on social media, it is not its responsibility or jurisdiction...as a student, I cannot afford to hire a lawyer...and I don’t want to get the police involved...I don’t think the police will do much in any case. It is all because there is no political will or pressure on either university administration or other social institutions.

Most of the young people we interviewed admitted having experienced hate speech in their daily (online) lives, but almost none reported the incident to the school, work, or police authorities. Interestingly, many respondents confirmed that they discuss incidents of hate speech among peers who happen to have been victims of online hate speech. One crucial insight from the interview data is the lack of hate-speech-related educational resources that can illuminate how it manifests, operates, and evolves; which channels disseminate it; and what individual and

institutional approaches can prevent it. According to our respondents, there are few, if any, courses at colleges (CEGEPs in Quebec) or universities that address issues related to hate speech on social media. The popularity of social media as an educational resource is growing. The rapid spread of videos that feature educational content attests to this reality. For example, #learnontiktok, which was launched in 2020, attracted more than 7 billion views and generated around one million videos (Liu, 2021, p. 81). However, there are hardly any courses on the social aspects of these networking sites or their implications for good citizenship. One respondent, Paul, stated:

I guess the best thing for people would be ...if there was a class ...being taught on the ethics of social media and the Internet, people would think twice before just ...*blurting* what they think...you know they would think about...not hurting someone...or the effects of what they say to others...things like that. Again, authorities can maybe monitor their websites more closely, but I am not sure how that plays into the freedom of speech...because as soon as you take someone's opinion off, then it is considered a violation of freedom of speech, and it becomes very tricky. In addition, people with a large number of followers on social media take stuff very personally and get easily offended when someone writes a comment that goes against their status. It is humiliating them.... If I am talking to you, if I am commenting on you, everyone sees it, and that makes social media so powerful...it makes it a little more hurtful because of the number of audiences. I can talk and fight with you face-to-face, but on social media, it is multiplied.

While the literature highlights the link between the rise of online hate speech and the proportional increase in attacks on immigrants and minorities, not much action has gone into policymaking to correct the situation. Online hate speech has not traditionally been of great concern to policymakers and politicians; it has been viewed as sporadic occurrences typically associated with immigrant and minority groups. We contend that the rise of hate speech on social media should be regarded as an alarm signal of the moral bankruptcy of citizenship. Knowledge of what constitutes responsible citizenship is primordial for the harmonious functioning of any society. There is an urgent need for more research that examines the connection between the normalization of online hate speech and divisions and fractures at all levels of society.

A UNESCO study on countering online hate speech (Assimakopoulos, Baider, & Millar, 2017), concludes with a recommendation to examine the definitional, jurisdictional, comprehension, and interventional dynamics of online hate speech to gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. We nonetheless would like to see education and multifaceted research added to this list. More research on how education can be used to counter hate speech is needed. We recommend developing and introducing courses in critical social media literacy and citizenship education in teachers' education programs to prepare them to take the initiative in schools once certified. At the same time, educational initiatives based on multidisciplinary and multifaceted research can be developed and introduced, not as one-off stand-alone courses, but as required courses in almost all disciplines.



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