

## Adolescent Perspectives About Online Hate Speech: Qualitative Analysis in the SELMA Project

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**Received:** 30 October 2020; **Accepted:** 16 August 2021

### Abstract

**Objective.** This paper aims to study the views, perceptions and representations of online hate speech among adolescents in the Greek cohort of the SELMA Project. **Methods.** Qualitative research was conducted in focus groups of 36 Greek adolescents and the data were processed through thematic analysis method. **Results.** The majority was unfamiliar with the term "hate speech" and confused it with cyberbullying. The target characteristics of hate, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, physical weakness, disability, sexual orientation, and appearance emerged. Regarding people involved in hate speech, perpetrators in both hate speech and bullying were described to share common characteristics. The emphasis was placed on the victims' resilience, as well as their socialization, as protective behaviors. Participants stressed the value of the right to freedom of speech, although there was no agreement on its limits. Additionally, it was highlighted that awareness of what is right and wrong is mostly taught by parents, while the role of education was also important. An important finding was that the majority of teenagers were optimistic, supporting the belief that it is possible to find a realistic solution. **Conclusion.** The findings support the need for prevention strategies in the school environment, so that adolescents will be able to recognize and potentially combat hate speech in the online and offline worlds.

**Key Words:** Online Hate Speech ■ Qualitative Research ■ Thematic Analysis ■ Adolescents ■ Focus Groups.

## Introduction

Hate speech has attracted interest internationally and has raised increasing concerns at interpersonal, community and international levels (1, 2). Although the content and the meaning of the term can be roughly understood, on a scientific level there is no established, uniquely and universally accepted definition. According to the definition of the European Commission against Racism and Xenophobia (3), hate speech does not target the actions of the individual, but the basic characteristics of which his or her personality is composed,

such as race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation and gender. People of different ethnicity or race, migrants and descendants of immigrants, members of the LGBT community and disabled people are often targeted; anti-Muslim (4), anti-Semitic (5, 6) and sexist language are forms of hate speech (7, 8).

The emergence and evolution of the internet has played an enormous role in spreading hate speech because of its multiplier effect, as opinions can "travel" around the world and gain enormous publicity. Moreover, the anonymity of the user makes the internet a very effective tool for dissem-

ination of opinions for both legitimate and non-legitimate purposes. Many messages are published on hate sites, that is, websites dedicated to the promotion or incitement of hatred against specific groups. Online hate speech can also be found in social media, blogs, forums, online games, videos and music, as well as electronic and personal messages (9).

Hate speech, online and offline, afflicts individuals, groups and society as a whole (10). Victims experience anxiety, feelings of depression, and the fear of actualization of online threats in the real world (11). Furthermore, frequent exposure to such behavior leads to desensitization, and normalization of the phenomenon (12).

Once the implications of hate speech have been understood, the right to speak without any restriction is under negotiation. However, freedom of expression is a constitutional human right in democratic societies, and has been a valuable tool for social minorities to be heard. To counteract hate speech, measures have been taken at the level of European legislation. The prohibition of discrimination was established in 2012 (13). In contrast, US governments have prioritized the protection of free expression years before [2005, development of policies in order to prevent an escalation of hate speech (14)]. The lack of alignment of legislation at an international level has had significant implications for tackling hate speech online. Countries with less restrictive internet policies may become havens for those who do not wish to comply with their own countries' laws (14).

In this context, SELMA (9) (Social and Emotional Learning for Mutual Awareness, <https://hackinghate.eu/>) is a two-year project co-funded by the European Commission, aiming to tackle online hate speech by promoting mutual awareness, tolerance, and respect. As the first step of the SELMA approach to online hate speech, the opinions of adolescent students from four European countries (Greece, Germany, the United Kingdom and Denmark) were evaluated through focus groups. Processing of these observations was taken into account in the design of the SELMA toolkit, which is aligned with the age groups under study, aim-

ing at acceptance of diversity. The present article focuses on the focus groups of Greek adolescents. Greek society has changed considerably over the past 30 years in terms of the composition of its population. Nowadays, immigrants from different national origins account for 10% of its population (15). As Greece has been experiencing inflows of people from the Middle Eastern war zones, xenophobia, racism and far-right parties have become a concern in Greek society (16).

The present study aims to evaluate online hate speech-related perceptions among adolescents in Greece, including attitudes and views, both relating to the phenomenon itself (from the perpetrator's, victim's and observer's point of view), and ways of dealing with it. Due to the insufficient number of previous studies of the phenomenon in Greece, and due to the absence of predetermined perceptions, qualitative research was considered to be the most suitable method. In this method, the researcher is not interested in the facts themselves in an objective dimension, but in the meaning attributed by the participant's personal interpretation. Concerning the research questions, the research design aimed at exploring the views of Greek adolescents on online hate speech. Their understanding of the concept of freedom of speech and possible limitations were explored. The perceptions of hate speech were recorded, as well as the distinction between hate speech and bullying. Also the teenagers' perceptions regarding perpetrator and victim characteristics, and observers' behavior were investigated.

## Subjects and Methods

### Focus Groups

The data were gathered through the research method of focus groups as a stand-alone method; the manuscript was reported according to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (17), and the relevant COREQ checklist is provided as an online-only Supporting Information file. The focus group method was chosen *inter alia* because it enables participants to

interact both vertically with the moderator/facilitator and horizontally among the team members, offering rich material for processing (18). The aim of the survey was not only to identify individual participants' perceptions and attitudes, but also to create dynamic interaction among them. The facilitator's part was limited, and interest was focused on what is considered to be important by the participants themselves (19), and they were encouraged to speak their minds and describe detailed experiences.

A total of four focus group discussions were conducted, involving 36 participants from 8 schools (1st and 2nd Secondary School of Geraka, 13th and 21st Secondary School of Acharnes, 4th and 5th High School of Petroupoli, 1st High School of Kifissia, Hellenic American Educational Foundation High School). Quiet and spacious rooms at the schools were selected as venues, at a time convenient to the participants. They were moderated by two experienced moderators-researchers who collaborate with the Adolescent Health Unit, Second Department of Pediatrics, School of Medicine, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. The interviewers were not part of the research decoding team. No relationship was established prior to research commencement between the researchers and the participants, who knew nothing about them. The participants neither had any information nor did they develop any further relationship with the researchers. No characteristics about the interviewers were reported.

The participants were sixth grade students of elementary school, and junior and senior high schools; this homogeneity allowed greater freedom in participant interaction, and different perspectives (20). The sample consisted of thirty-six teenagers, who were divided into four focus groups of 9 people each. In two of the four groups, the participants' ages ranged from 11 to 12 years, and in the other two from 14 to 16 years of age.

This resulted in two groups of younger teenagers (early-middle-adolescence) and two more mature (middle-late adolescence) groups. The girl:boy ratio was 1:3. Participants attended public and private schools in Athens. They were gathered

by the snowball method, through the network of schools collaborating with the Adolescent Health Unit, and were approached face to face. Written permission to participate was secured from the parents of the participants. Five students were not able to participate due to personal inconvenience. The focus groups were pilot tested prior to implementation with the students. The duration of the focus groups was 48min for FG1, 1h 22min for FG2, 1h for FG3, and 1h 25min for FG4. The interview data were audio recorded and transcribed; data saturation was not discussed and the transcripts were not returned to the participants for comment or correction. There was no need for repeat focus groups to be held. The details about the Methodological Framework for Data Analysis are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

### ***Ethics Statement***

Written informed consent was obtained from the parents of all adolescents for participation in this study

### **Results**

The results of the qualitative research using the thematic analysis method are presented in this chapter. The findings are listed by major themes, relevant to the research questions. Additionally the thematic tree representation map of the analysis which was generated is depicted in Figure 1.

#### ***Major Theme 1: Freedom of Speech***

Determination and conditions of freedom of speech: The debate on hate speech was reflected in an attempt to determine the concept of "freedom of speech", given the inextricable connection between the two concepts, since the unconditional defense of one can lead to the manifestation of the other. Freedom of speech was described as the right to express ideas, thoughts, emotions, desires, preferences, opinions, beliefs freely, without limitations and fear of possible criticism.

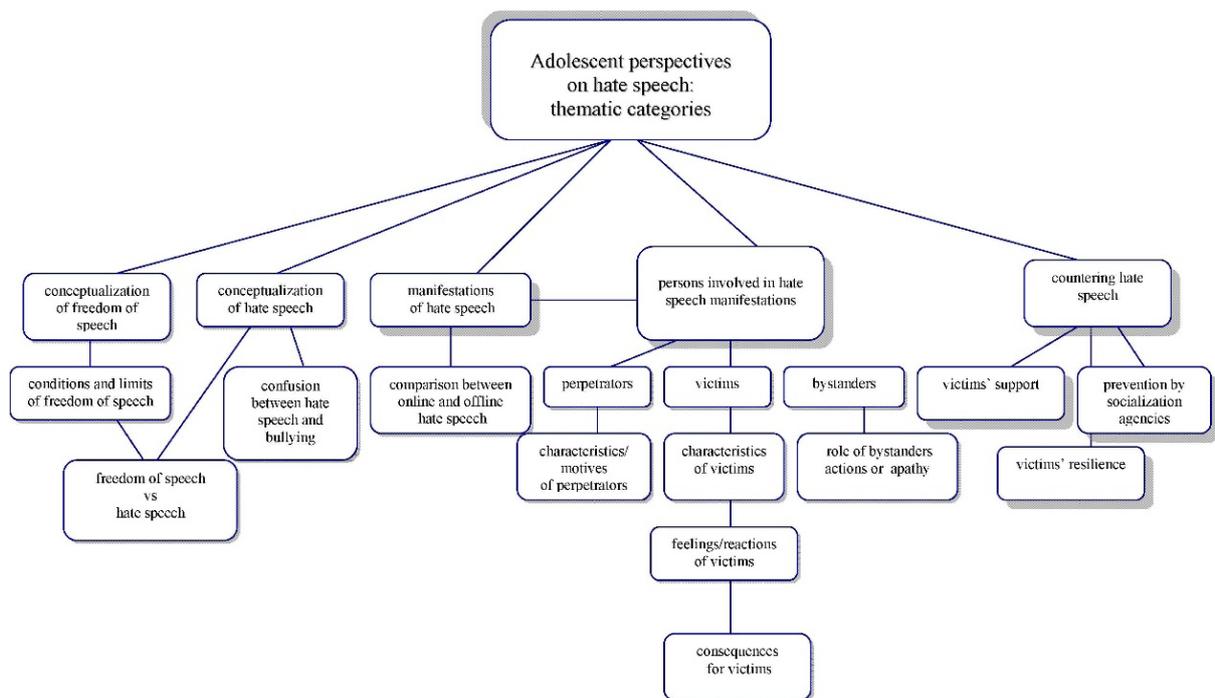


Figure 1. Thematic tree representation map - Thematic Categories concerning adolescent perspectives on hate speech.

B. “Do not restrain anyone from saying what they believe” (FG2: 9)

The results about forms of expression are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

*Limits to freedom of speech:* Regarding whether restrictions on freedom of expression should be imposed, the participants seemed to be divided. Most of them agreed that some restrictions are legitimate. The adolescents who were in favor of the restrictions, explained that speech should not offend, diminish or condemn the interlocutor or his views. They deemed it necessary to avoid negative characterization and references to sensitive matters, to restrain bad intentions, as well as seeking to impose one’s opinion on others. These practices constitute a violation of human rights, according to the participants.

G. “Religion in some countries is a very sensitive issue and it should not be so easily targeted” (FG2: 266-267).

However, a large proportion of the respondents supported the opposite view, according to which expression should not be subject to restric-

tions. The argument of the violation of freedom of speech was used to defend this position. The participants’ conflicting views reflect the dimension that exists both in society and in the laws of different states. Surprisingly, according to some adolescents, offensive speech and hate speech is “legitimized” in cases where the recipient of the messages is considered provocative. However, the participants’ opinions converged on the belief that a person’s conscience should act as a guide and measure of what it is permissible to say and what is not. Awareness of what is right and wrong is taught mostly by parents and other agents of socialization, such as schools.

**Major Theme 2: Hate Speech**

*An attempt to approach the concept of hate speech:* The majority of participants were unfamiliar with the term “hate speech”. According to the older teenagers, hate speech is abusive or threatening speech used with the purpose of attacking and negatively affecting the target person or group. It expresses prejudice on the basis of specific attributes and/or

weaknesses. Otherwise, it can be expressed with demeaning comments and gestures:

B. *“It’s speech, let’s say, that offends a person or a general group in relation to their mutual characteristics, let’s say gender, or some weakness that they have”* (FG4: 46-47).

It was observed that the concept of hate speech is not clear for many of the participants. In fact, it was confused with other problematic behaviors in the online and offline worlds, such as violence, extortion, deceit, harassment and pedophilia. Results about where hate speech is detected are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

*Targets of hate speech:* Adolescents and scientific literature concur on the characteristics that are often targeted by hate speech. Ethnicity, skin color and origin were the most frequently mentioned characteristics reported, and the targeting of migrants was discussed extensively.

G. *“Generally it targets weaknesses. It targets vulnerable people. For example, their origin”* (FG2: 91-92).

Although religion is not one of an individual’s physical characteristics, it was considered to be a core element of human personality which is often targeted. Furthermore, people with disabilities and physical weakness often become targets of hate speech. Gender also drew attention, with women often becoming victims of unfavorable sexist comments.

It was pointed out that gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual choices and homosexuality are often the subject of hate speech. Adults and children who do not behave according to stereotypes established in society on the basis of their gender often suffer from verbal and physical violence. One such “unacceptable” form of behavior is femininity in boys.

Finally, the discussion about the objectives of hate speech expanded beyond the established protected features. The reference to appearance as a reason for attracting negative comments was particularly noted. Somatometric features, such as height, weight, and body type, were identified as targets for offenders, but also choices in appearance, such as clothes and hair color. The growing volume of such comments is a matter of concern

for teenagers. In addition, lifestyle, political views, social order, economic background, family status and family issues are often subject to criticism and hate speech, according to the adolescents’ observations. Results about the differences between offline and online hate speech are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

*Comparison between hate speech and bullying:* Much confusion and overlapping of the concepts of hate speech and bullying was observed in the majority of the survey participants. The term “bullying” appeared in the discussions repeatedly in place of the term “hate speech”, as if they have the same meaning. This was observed in younger focus groups’ data in particular, and probably revealed that age group’s familiarity with the term “bullying” but not with the term “hate speech”. It was common for older adolescents to believe that hate speech is a wider term, whose subcategory is bullying.

### **Major Theme 3: People Involved in Hate Speech**

*Perpetrators:* The majority of participants pointed out that the perpetrators in both hate speech and bullying share common characteristics, such as insecurity and their desire to appear strong in the eyes of their peers. They experience feelings of fear, anger, and rage because of personal, psychological, or family problems, and they pass them on to others. Some of them have no friends, while others are unable to discuss anything in a civilized way. It is worth noting the view expressed by one participant, according to which a perpetrator could be any of us who has experienced traumatic conditions that have led them to behave in this way.

*Victims:* Adolescents referred to the traits of personality that attract victimization. People with low self-esteem, shy, isolated, weak or seemingly weak people were perceived as the most popular targets of hate speech. According to the participants, in this case the victims bear the responsibility for victimization if they do nothing to prevent it.

G. *“They have a responsibility for being the perpetrators’ victims because of their character, because the perpetrators know they will not react”* (FG1: 341-342).

According to the participants, victims' reactions may vary, and depend mainly on their character. The usual reaction is acceptance of the situation and passivity. This was perceived by adolescents either as a lack of courage or as fear of the perpetrators. The repetitiveness of such incidents was likely to lead to their normalization, with the victim being persuaded of their supposed inferiority. Sometimes the victims might choose not to report the incident, which makes the work of coping with their problem even more difficult. Results about the effects on the victim, feelings and behaviors, are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

*Bystanders:* Passivity and indifference were described as a common reaction of bystanders. This was attributed to a lack of empathy and compassion. As the adolescents stated, something that is not happening to them does not concern them; although in their self-criticism they pointed out that this is a wrong attitude. The abundance of such incidents might lead bystanders to consider hate speech as something normal and legitimate. As one participant also stated:

G. "I believe there is a condition of apathy, just because it is commonplace. Everyone ignores it. They say: "Ah, they are attacking him, okay, they are not attacking me. I'm leaving!" (FG4: 497-498).

When the offender happens to be a person who is popular in the school, or at the top of the community hierarchy, observers may imitate their behavior. Of course, there are bystanders who might sympathize with the victim, especially when they share common characteristics that are being mocked. Results about the consequences of observer passivity are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

#### **Major Theme 4: Support and Prevention**

The majority of teenagers were optimistic and they supported the belief that realistic solutions could be found. In the offline world, support can be provided by members of the victim's close family and social circle.

The circle of peers was considered of particular importance, as it has the power to support the

victim, either by opposing the perpetrator, or by mediating in a positive way, and expressing their support to the victim. Indeed, an interesting suggestion was made for cases where the victims are shy and isolated from their social surroundings. Specifically, it was argued that:

G. "[...] we must try to develop friendships with these people, to incorporate them in our group of friends so that it will be more difficult for them to become targets" (FG4: 597-598).

Results about the online support of victims and on how victims can protect themselves are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File. Prevention was judged to be the most appropriate way to address this phenomenon. In achieving this goal, all factors of socialization play a crucial role. The family's role was considered decisive in bringing up children; adolescents referred to the reproduction of healthy patterns, and the absence of prejudice and negative stereotypes within the family.

B. "The most effective way to deal with something is not to get there" (FG1: 729-730).

However, the role of education for adolescents was also important. Alternative ways of approaching sensitive issues were sought. The duty of all society members to promote healthy standards and mutual respect, as well as the need to be alert for incidents of hate speech, was also mentioned. Individual responsibility to prevent hate speech was stressed. The development of critical competence, the adoption of good practices and healthy attitudes came up as important factors of prevention. A useful finding from the older teenagers pertained to the role of social skills as a protective factor against victimization. The development and maintenance of close relationships could act as a hindrance to perpetrators' plans, because the possible reactions from the victim's surroundings may prevent hate manifestations.

G. [...] "It is prevention to have friends to help you to deal with it" (FG4: 658).

More details and supporting information about the Results are provided in the online-only Supporting Information File.

## Discussion

The present study is an effort to evaluate online hate speech-related perceptions among adolescents in Greece. According to our findings, the majority of the adolescents were unfamiliar with the term “hate speech” and confused it with cyberbullying. Participants stressed the value of the right to freedom of speech, although there was no agreement on its limits. Ethnicity, race, gender, religion, physical weakness, disability, sexual orientation, and appearance were considered as target characteristics of hate, and the victims’ resilience and their socialization as protective behaviors.

Although the examples of hate speech are numerous and they occur every day in both the online and offline worlds, insufficient research has been conducted in this area into the perceptions of adolescents. Adolescents may recognize hate speech when they come across it, but their perceptions regarding the term are not clear, especially among younger participants. They realize that the intention of expressing hate speech is to incite hostility against individuals or groups because of their particular characteristics. Teens revealed that the elements of personality that may attract hatred are primarily related to origin, race and ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, gender, and disability, whereas body characteristics (weight, height, etc.) as well as features of appearance (dressing, hair color, etc.) may also be a stimulus for hate speech. Targeting appearance and looks is an emerging issue for adolescents because of the importance of image during puberty (21, 22). Overlapping and confusion was observed between the concepts of bullying and hate speech, which requires further research, and confirms the need to educate young people to recognize hate speech (9, 23).

Regarding the limits of freedom of speech, a division of opinions was observed. Some participants were in favor of restrictions, whereas others expressed the view that the set of limitations acts as a hindrance to the free exchange of ideas. The differences of opinion between adolescents strongly reflect the divisions in society, state legislation

and international literature. Participants, however, agreed that we ourselves, whose personality has been shaped by family and education, are the right persons for setting limits, on the basis of our personal judgment.

Perpetrators in the offline and online world were described as individuals with personal and family problems. The anonymity of the internet was portrayed as a powerful weapon in their hands. Participants also noted that perpetrators may have been victims in the past, without specifying an act of violence; one idea is more in line with victims’ behavior in terms of cyberbullying (24), and raises questions about the existence of a larger body of peer violence (25).

Interestingly, victims of hate speech were often described by adolescents more as individuals with particular personality traits, rather than people of specific characteristics which differentiate them as minority groups. The victims were depicted as usually introverted, socially isolated, people who differ in their choices and interests. A small minority of participants stated that victims are people who provoke others. The latter is a point to be considered by designers of behavioral prevention programs, as it is a key argument in “legitimizing” hate speech.

As for the observers who witness incidents of hate speech, the most frequently reported attitude was passivity; this may signal “normalization” of hate speech. Certainly there are those who sympathize with the victim, especially if the targeted characteristics are common. Imitating the perpetrator is a reaction of concern; according to adolescents, this occurs when observers identify with common traits in relation to the perpetrator, when they feel fear or threat, but also when the perpetrator has a high status in the community hierarchy.

Finally, the participants stressed the need to support the victims. Advanced methods for online hate speech detection should be developed (26). The social environment and family should support victims and deplore perpetrators’ harmful attitudes. However, the most effective way to deal with the problem is prevention, hopefully integrating problem-focused coping strategies, self-

assertiveness, and media skills (27). By adopting healthy patterns, and through respect for diversity, schools and family can promote empathy and co-existence based on mutual respect and acceptance. Also particularly useful for teachers was the finding that teenagers believe that victimization can be avoided by socialization and forming healthy relationships. Cultivating social skills and enhancing the resilience of children can help them function proactively in the environment.

The volume of published academic papers on hate speech, after an initial growth of interest from 1992 onwards, has increased considerably since 2005 (28) and exponentially since 2011 (29), due to the spread of social media platforms which have transformed public discourse and changed the way people interact and communicate. Nevertheless, few surveys have reflected the perceptions about online hate among adolescents (30) in the last few years and not to such an extent as the present paper. In Greece, the scientific empirical research on online hate speech is limited, although there has been considerable research on cyberbullying. Therefore, this study was undertaken as an initial investigation into this area in terms of adolescents' perspectives on the phenomenon, and the results were part of a comprehensive research program carried out by the SELMA project to achieve a holistic understanding of the online hate speech. These findings provide insights which can help design future relevant surveys, since adolescent perspectives may contribute to a meaningful dialogue in order to address hate speech phenomena. Prevention strategies in the school environment should be considered, in order to help adolescents recognize and potentially combat hate speech online and offline. Additionally, an observatory for monitoring hate speech at school, community and country levels would contribute a great deal to identifying and addressing possible manifestations of this growing phenomenon.

There are several limitations of this research. First of all, the choice of a qualitative study with a limited sample of 36 adolescents limits gener-

alizability, as such a small sample might not be broadly applicable to many different types of people or situations (31). The findings should be further elaborated by other research designs, such as quantitative research methods. Comparative studies with other European and non-European countries would seem of special interest.

Numerous new hypotheses arose from the results of the research which need to be tested and further explored. The vicious circle of hate speech between perpetrator and victim, the association of poor social skills and victimization with hate speech offenders, the relationship between the offender's popularity and bystanders' reactions, appearance and body features as targets of hate speech, as well as hate speech and the conceptual overlap with bullying, are some of the topics to be investigated.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, adolescent perspectives were depicted vividly by the focus group reports. An important finding was that the majority of participants were unfamiliar with the term "hate speech". Additionally, it was highlighted that awareness of what is right and wrong is taught mostly by parents, while the role of education is also important. Regarding people involved in hate speech, the perpetrators in both hate speech and bullying seem to share common characteristics, while the victims were described by the participants as shy, isolated, weak or seemingly weak people. This study was one of the first about adolescents' perceptions of hate speech in Greece. It may contribute to a meaningful dialogue to address the hate speech phenomena. The design of interventions, and the development and delivery of tool kits, hopefully as part of the school curriculum, would help school communities to counter hate speech. Furthermore, an observatory for monitoring hate speech would contribute a great deal at school, community and country level, in identifying and addressing possible manifestations of this growing phenomenon.

**What Is Already Known on This Topic:**

Online hate speech is a phenomenon of growing concern that causes harm all levels as victims experience anxiety, feelings of depression, and fear of actualized online threats in the real world. SELMA (Social and Emotional Learning for Mutual Awareness, <https://hackinghate.eu/>) is a two-year project co-funded by the European Commission, aiming to tackle online hate speech by promoting mutual awareness, tolerance, and respect. The opinions of adolescent students from four European countries (Greece, Germany, the United Kingdom and Denmark) are being evaluated and the processing of these observations is used for the design of the SELMA tool kit.

**What This Study Adds:**

Adolescent perspectives may contribute to a meaningful dialogue in order to address hate speech phenomena. There is a need for prevention strategies in the school environment, so that adolescents will be able to recognize and potentially combat hate speech in the online and offline worlds. Furthermore, an observatory for monitoring hate speech would contribute a great deal at school, community and country levels, in identifying and addressing possible manifestations of this growing phenomenon.

**Authors' Contributions:** Conception and design: MT, HM and AT; Acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data: MM, LB, EP and TNS; Drafting the article: MM, LB and FB; Revising it critically for important intellectual content: LT, TB, and TP; Approved final version of the manuscript: MM, LB, EP, LT, TNS, FB, TB, TP, MT, HM and AT.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Supporting Information File

### Methods

#### *Methodological framework for data analysis*

The data were processed using the thematic analysis method. Two researchers, working independently from each other (M.M, an MSc female high school educator with a background in Psychology, trained in thematic analysis methodology; L.B., a high school educator with a PhD in qualitative research). During the interview, no notes were taken on para-linguistic data as the analysis was focused on the content at the semantic level (1). Thematic analysis is a coding method, which is undertaken using the stages of locating, describing and grouping repetitive thematic motifs. This method was chosen because, in contrast to other qualitative approaches, it gives the researchers the freedom of not committing themselves to a certain ontological or epistemological position, allowing them to substantiate their own theoretical analysis (2).

This study followed Braun & Clark's (2) six stages of thematic analysis. The two researchers worked as data coders and no Qualitative Coding Software was implemented for data coding. During the first stage of the analysis, the researchers became familiar with the data. The second step of the analysis was the "line by line" coding, namely identifying and generating initial codes for each of the transcribed focus groups' data unit. The third stage of the analysis included searching for themes, meaning common patterns using a combination of codes. The major themes were listed as the subjects, and the minor themes as the sub-categories. At this stage, the researchers' aim was to understand, interpret and link the data on the basis of their research plan and epistemological assumptions (3). During the fourth stage of the analysis, subjects were re-examined, themes were redefined, and the coherence of each subject was checked. Some subjects were grouped under wider thematic categories, while others which were segmented became separate topics. The fifth stage concerned the comprehensive, accurate definition

and naming of themes, trying to include all the individual data found during the analysis. A thematic tree representation map of the analysis was generated. The last step was to produce the report and write the findings. In the final analysis, the most vivid, illuminating and representative extract examples were quoted. Each quotation is identified by its codification which includes the focus group number (FG: 1-4), the sex of the respondent (B for boy and G for girl) and the line number of the transcribed data.

### Results

#### **"Major Theme 1: Freedom of Speech"**

Forms of expression: According to participants, expression is not limited to the spoken and written word, but may take various forms. Art, through creative forms, such as painting, music, lyrics, video, dance, photography, and graffiti, provides alternative means of transmitting messages and interacting with others. Other forms of expression are the use of symbols, signals and gestures, as well as political acts, such as voting and demonstrations. Furthermore, the religious expression of faith was mentioned. This could be manifested by symbolic acts, such as women covering their faces with a veil (e.g. niqab).

#### **"Major Theme 2: Hate Speech"**

**Where hate speech is detected:** The respondents unanimously supported the assumption that hate speech is a phenomenon that concerns both the offline and online worlds. Participants reported that:

G. "In social media we face it continuously... there are offensive comments all the time" (FG2: 61-62).

Offending comments were recalled by adolescents from various websites, such as social media, namely Facebook, instagram, twitter, snapchat, webpages of various kinds, applications where everyone can express themselves, such as blogs, chats, posts, and finally YouTube videos and online games. Hate speech can also be expressed in an in-

direct, oblique way, by commenting with “like” or “dislike” under someone’s words.

G. “Yes, because there are websites where you can add a like or dislike feature to comments. If you choose “dislike” you basically support it negatively. So this may offend or upset you, and it can be indirect because it is not written “ (FG2: 66-68).

**Differences between offline and online hate speech:** According to the majority of participants, online hate is more severe than offline hate speech. The first and most common reason mentioned was the ease of access to a large number of people on the internet, which contributes to the direct expression and rapid dissemination of users’ views. Consequently, a hate speech incident may spread to many people. Hence, user anonymity is the internet feature that reinforces the spread of online hate speech, and makes it harder to cope with.

G. “I think there are many more incidents on the internet than in real life, as there are now many applications where you do not have to write your real name or even have a real profile (...) When one does not see the other person face to face, it is easier to insult, since there are no consequences» (FG4: 622-627).

### “Major Theme 3: People Involved in Hate Speech”

#### **Effects on the victim: feelings and behaviors**

Hate speech was perceived as having an obvious and huge impact on the emotions and behavior of the victims.

B. (...) “Even if you have confidence, and you do not want to believe it, what others say always affects you “ (FG2: 171-172).

Targeting makes people experience feelings of sadness and loneliness. Their self-confidence suffers, which results in feelings of inferiority. Their daily routine is characterized by insecurity and the continuing threat of a possible assault. The effects may include the victim’s deliberate isolation from the social and school environment. Some victims might start to struggle to conceal the particular

characteristics that cause their targeting, such as their religious beliefs. It was also pointed out by adolescents that the victim may experience psychological problems, impairment in functioning, frustration in life in general, and even thoughts about and attempts to commit suicide (FG4: 536-537). At this turning point, the vicious circle of violence and hatred might continue, as it was observed that a victim can often become a perpetrator.

**The consequences of observer passivity:** The consequences of observer passivity may lead to the spread and escalation of the phenomenon, which entails even greater insensitivity in the audience. Feelings of insecurity and fear are intensified in teenagers. Anxiety was expressed about tomorrow’s society, which seems to be built on foundations of individualism and erroneous standards.

### “Major Theme 4: Support and Prevention”

**Online support of the victims:** Participants also identified ways to deal with cyber hate speech. A simple, direct and easy way of supporting a target of online hate speech was by using the ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ sign, or reporting someone’s offensive comments.

The prosecution of cybercrime as well as the assistance of support lines was also envisaged as an effective measure to fight hate speech. Participants noted that the protection of browsers should be prioritized by the web developers, and protection arrangements should be in place. Effective reporting and blocking capability was also highlighted.

The victim’s personal responsibility in dealing with hate speech was emphasized. Participants advised the timely and prompt reaction of the victim right after the incident in order to deal directly with the problem, so as to avoid future implications and exacerbation of the problem.

G. “From the moment it starts, if you let it evolve then it will be even more difficult” (FG2: 194).

Protection, according to adolescents, could be provided if they share their problems with a trusted person, such as their parents or teachers. Sometimes, it would be useful to speak to the perpetrator directly, to set boundaries, and express

their dissatisfaction to the hateful person, so that the latter will understand that their behavior is not acceptable.

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