

Predictors of lack of emotional awareness in emotional regulation of youth facing online hate speech

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Abstract:

Digital natives are wellknown multiplier vector factors that perform a massive impact on youth over the internet. Digital naratives usually have both positive and negative impact on individuals' wellbeing. Starting from the assumption that lack of emotional awareness in emotional regulation of youth in tensed digital environments can be predicted by several socio-psychological individual characteristics, our team has investigated variable relationships under a micro research driven from the database collected under the Erasmus+ project Hate's Journey. Our team has elaborated an 18 items online instrument designed with single item measures, DERS-SF and other scales, investigating diverse perceptions regarding digital wellbeing and conduit. Under the project investigation, we have analyzed 206 valid responses of youth from Romania, Turkey, Spain and Latvia. Multiple linear regression analysis results confirm that internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech, and digital behavior regulation, represent significant predictors, accounting for 46% of lack of emotional awareness in emotional regulation variance of youth facing online hate speech. Conclusions and implications are discussed.

Keywords: online hate speech, emotional awareness, difficulties in emotional regulation, internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech, digital behavior regulation

1. Introduction

Emotions are a part of all our daily life, affecting the majority of our actions, sometimes without being aware of their interfering. Emotions do not force us to respond in certain ways, but they do influence us in acting or doing something that makes sense in a particular context. Emotions are actually malleable and this feature allows for controlling them. The ability to understand and balance emotions is called emotional regulation or emotional control (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Gross, 2002). Gross (2002) states that one of the greatest challenges of our lives is the ability to control emotions. Emotional regulation is not a single process, but it comprises several components, naming the ability to be aware of the experienced emotions, to pay an attention to the evolution of the emotions, to understand and to label, to sort and to classify, to direct and regulate them for the purpose of the individual (Kaufman et al., 2015; Victor & Klonsky, 2016; Campos et al., 1989).

Emotional regulation is represented by fluctuations in one or more features of emotions, such as the care situation that generates emotions, attention, assessment, subjective experience, and physiological or behavioral modification (Berking & Wupperman, 2012). It leads the change in emotional dynamic referring to latency, time of occurrence, magnitude, duration and subjective responses type, behavioral and physiological outputs (Berking & Wupperman, 2012). It can lessen, boost or sustain emotion, relying upon personal objectives (Berking & Wupperman, 2012). Likewise, it can alter the extent in which the emotional reaction is consistent with the triggering emotion (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Cicchetti et al., 1991).

But the most expected result of emotional regulation is the decrease in the duration and intensity of negative emotions (Cicchetti et al., 1991). Thus, emotional regulation is an important element that supports human civilization, because society can be defined as the sum of coordinated social interactions of the individuals that compose it, interactions that need to manage how emotions are manifested and expressed (Mauss et al., 2007; Campos et al., 1989; Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Eisenberg & Fabes, 2006).

There are theories that suggest that emotional regulation is part of the larger process of individual self-regulation, a process by which the individual maintains his physical and mental homeostasis, self-actualizes, builds his identity and acquires the sense of self. In turn, emotional regulation has captured other processes such as anxiety, rumination or anxious sensitivity (Berking & Wupperman, 2012)

According to Bandura's theory of social cognition (1991), human behavior is motivated and regulated through a continuous process of self-influence. This process comprises three operational mechanisms (Bandura, 1991): 1) self-monitoring of one's own behavior regarding its determinants and effects; 2) judgment of behavior in relation to personal standards and external circumstances and 3) emotional self-regulation. These three mechanisms operate on the same

principle, that of self-efficacy, a principle by which the feeling of self and identity is acquired and which has a major impact on the emotional, thinking, motivational and behavioral processes. While emotional regulation involves modulating emotions through internal processes, the process of self-regulation is conceived as involving the control, direction and correction of one's actions towards their goal. The self-control process enables the goals, the competition between them and their hierarchy, the priorities and standards used for monitoring and evaluating progress (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003). Thus, while emotional regulation is focused on the emotional experience and its consequences, leaving the purpose unspecified, in the process of self-regulation, the purpose is always kept in view (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003).

Emotional regulation can be conceptualized as a part of the whole, which is an element of the process of individual self-control (Eisenberg & Fabes, 2006). There is no unanimous consensus on the definition and conceptualization of the methods of emotion management (Eisenberg & Fabes, 2006). Cicchetti et al. (1991) define the emotional regulation as internal and external individual aspects by which the emotional reaction is diverted, managed, adjusted and altered to allow persons to be flexible in emotional circumstances. Thus, emotional regulation is represented by the capacity to adjust one's emotional arousal to cultivate an efficient level of commitment with the surroundings (Cicchetti et al., 1991).

For Thompson (1994), the process of emotional regulation is given by the intrinsic and extrinsic operations accountable for observing, assessing and altering emotional responses, especially their intensity and duration, through which an individual seeks to achieve their purpose. After Mauss et al. (2007) emotional regulation can be represented by the intentional or mechanical effort of an individual in order to determine what emotions to possess, when and how to possess them and how to manifest them.

The way individuals manage their emotions influences their physical and mental health, but also their social relationships (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Frewen et al., 2012). Most mental disorders are related to difficulties in emotional adjustment (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Frewen et al., 2012). In other words, emotions are malleable, which means people can control them in ways to diminish, intensify or maintain the intensity of the emotion, depending on the goals.

People use different strategies of emotional regulation. The most common are: acceptance, avoidance, distraction, expressive suppression (trying to inhibit or reduce the emotional expression of emotional experiences), mindfulness, problem solving, cognitive reassessment (reinterpreting a situation to change its emotional relevance), rumination (repetitive negative thoughts) or concern (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Campos et al., 1989; Frewen et al., 2012; Gross, 2002; Kaufman et al., 2015; Victor & Klonsky, 2016). For example, a person who is stressed because he or she is about to make a public speech might try to distract from the speech to calm down. A person who is angry at the partner may use suppression, trying to keep the negative emotion for themselves only. A person with social phobia, who is afraid of interactions in non-family groups, could avoid attending a public event.

The psychological literature includes many different strategies for emotional regulation, but there is little data on how they relate to each other. Thus grouping them into smaller categories

could provide people with more effective ways and tools to regulate their emotions. Thus, the researchers analyzed hundreds of studies that reported associations between the different emotional regulation strategies that people tend to use to manage their negative emotions. They analyzed what their common features were and then tried to group them into much simpler categories. They have found that people tend to use more strategies simultaneously. If one of them doesn't work, they immediately move on to the next one. Based on the common characteristics found, they grouped these strategies into three main categories: 1. Emotional disengagement, 2. Negative states fixation (or aversive cognitive preservation), and 3. Adaptive commitment (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Gross, 2002; Mauss et al., 2007).

Emotional disengagement includes strategies such as distraction and avoidance. When people use these strategies they try to feel better by directing the train of thoughts and attention elsewhere, escaping from the present moment. Fixing on negative states includes strategies such as rumination (Berking & Wupperman, 2012). When using strategies in this category people tend to remain stuck in repetitive negative thoughts about personal or self-blame failures. Adaptive engagement includes strategies such as acceptance and problem solving. When people use these strategies they tend to be flexible and try to feel better looking for solutions to problems or accepting what cannot be changed (Frewen et al., 2012; Berking & Wupperman, 2012).

The researchers believe that the most useful strategies are those in the adaptive engagement category, but emphasize that the strategies in the other two categories can be useful in certain contexts Frewen et al., 2012; Berking & Wupperman, 2012. For example, when we ruminate we think intensively about our problems and analyze them in depth. This analytical process could help us explore variants and find solutions to our problems.

Therefore, the way people regulate their emotions has an effect on the way they feel but also on their relationships and activities (Gross, 2002; Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003). A healthy interaction involves adjusting and coordinating emotions with others in different contexts. For example, it can be helpful if we manage to calm ourselves in a tense situation or accept the opinion of someone we disagree with.

One of the most anticipated results of emotional regulation is the decrease in intensity and duration of dysfunctional negative emotions Frewen et al., 2012; Berking & Wupperman, 2012. However, there are situations in which the strategy used is unhealthy. For example, some people resort to alcohol or drug abuse as a way to change their emotions and feel better, or become aggressive and in online scenarios turn to hate narratives (Rad et al., 2019).

The communicative potential of the Internet helps to spread the expression of hatred of nationalist, racist or religious nature, which can incite discrimination, hostility and violence (Williams, 2006; Herz & Molnár, 2012). This reality is the basis of the present study.

Hate speech consists in denigrating the reputation of a social group or individual, by stereotypes due to ethnic, racial or religious characteristics, accompanied by instigating hostility, violence and discrimination against that group or individual (Herz & Molnár, 2012). In particular, hate speech includes any attitude that tends to endanger the rights of a religious, national or ethnic

group, by clearly violating the standards of equal dignity and respect for cultural characteristic between human groups (Herz & Molnár, 2012).

In such tensed contexts, youth become vulnerable victims of such digital offensive narratives, their real life adaptive emotional regulation strategy might be altered and they are confronted with uncertain emotional type of response. Typical digital behaviors like digital outing confidence, digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness will either boost or diminish the emotional awareness as part of youth emotional regulation strategy when facing online hate speech.

2. Methodology

2.1.Objective and hypothesis

The scientifically literature depicts evidence in numerous research contexts of the associations between psychosocial factors, like that internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech, digital behavior regulation, and difficulties in emotional regulation (Suler, 2004; Eisenberg, 2000; Harris et al., 2009; Herz&Molnár, 2012; Tsesis, 2009; Janssen, et al., 2012; Williams, 2006; Frewen et al., 2012; Kelemen et al., 2019; Rad et al., 2019; Rad, Dughi, Roman & Ignat, 2019; Rad, D., Dixon, D., & Rad, G., 2020). Therefore, this research's focus is to examine if there is a significant prediction coefficient and how much variability of the absence of emotional awareness as part of the emotional regulation process is accounted by the internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech, and digital behavior regulation of youth under tensed situations in digital environments like online hate speech.

For investigating the interactions of the youth digital emotional regulation strategies, our team has implemented the project Hate's Journey funded under Erasmus+. Our research team has designed a multiple specific sections online questionnaire addressing 206 youth from Turkey, Spain, Latvia, and Romania.

2.2.Participants

A total of 206 participants from Romania (24.8%), Latvia (24.8%), Spain (24.8%), and Turkey (25.7%), characterized by an average age mean of 30 years, male respondents (39.8%) and female respondents (60.2%), with an educational level, of 3.9% - primary school, 1.9% - professional school, 29.1% - high school, 32% - Bachelor degree, 29.1% - Master degree and 3.9% - PhD level. Regarding professional status, unemployed respondents represent 5.8%, students represent 43.7%, volunteers represent 1% and employed are 49.5%.

The online time spent by respondents was: never or hardly ever (1%), every week (8.7%), almost daily (20.4%), several times per day (46.6%) and almost all the time (23.3%). As a general picture, the number of constant internet users is superior 69.9% when compared to non-users.

This research has used convenience sampling or consecutive sampling, due to the fact that its purpose was explorative. The total of participants were consecutively selected according to the

order of appearance when completing the online questionnaire shared on social media platforms by each of the 4 project partner countries, each country targeting at least 50 respondents, according to the convenient accessibility principle. The sampling process ended by the time each of the 4 project partner countries reached their sample saturation (50) and time saturation (3 months). Data collection procedure was organized by four entities: Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades (Spain), Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad (Romania), Ucarli Genclik Dernegi (Turkey) and Young Folks (Latvia).

2.3. Instruments

The main instrument used in this research is the short form of the Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale DERS-SF. The DERS-SF was constructed to evaluate trait-level perceived emotion regulation capability as described by the Kaufman et al., (2015). The measure is scored on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 stands for *almost never* and 5 for *all the time*, such that increased scores reveal higher deterioration or non-regulation. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in the original construction and validation investigation indicated a 6-factor arrangement (Victor et al., 2018). The 6-factor arrangement was considered more explainable and was translated into six subscales: (a) lack of emotional awareness (*Awareness*; “I am attentive to my feelings,” reverse-scored – items 1, 4, 6); (b) lack of emotional clarity (*Clarity*; “I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings” items 2, 3, 5); (c) difficulty regulating behavior when distressed (*Impulse*; “When I’m upset, I become out of control” items 9, 14, 17); (d) difficulty engaging in goal-directed cognition and behavior when distressed (*Goals*; “When I’m upset, I have difficulty getting work done” items 8, 11, 13); (e) unwillingness to accept certain emotional responses (*Non-acceptance*; “When I’m upset, I become angry at myself for feeling that way” items 1, 12, 16); and (f) lack of access to strategies for feeling better when distressed (*Strategies*; “When I’m upset, I believe there is nothing I can do to feel better” items 10, 15, 18).

Regarding the sample data descriptive (N=206), the following single research items were used:

- for **digital behavioral regulation** (M=3.31, SD=1.14) assessment this research used a single item measure – **Item 8.3** *On a one to five scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree, please indicate the level of your agreement with the following statement: I know what to do if someone acts online in a way I don't like.*

- for **ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech**(M=1.96, SD=1.06), assessment this research used a single item measure – **Item 24.3** *On a one to five scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree, please indicate the level of your agreement with the following statement: Online hate speech is just words..*

- for **internet content awareness** (M=3.88, SD=1.00) assessment this research used a single item measure – **Item 25.3** *On a one to five scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree, please indicate the level of your*

agreement with the following statement: *I understand the role social media websites/apps play in shaping the information and content I see.*

2.4. Research design

We have performed a multiple regression analysis, an extension of simple linear regression. We have user MRA to predict the value of the DV lack of emotional awareness based on the value of internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech and digital behavior regulation variables.

3. Results

The descriptive statistics for the variables utilized in this research are: lack of emotional awareness (m=6.93; SD=2.50), internet content awareness (m=3.88; SD=1), ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech (m=1.96; SD=1.06), and digital behavior regulation (m=3.31; SD=1.14).

Table 1. Regression analysis for the *DV* lack of emotional awareness and the *IV* internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech and digital behavior regulation

Model Summary ^b									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.684 ^a	.468	.460	1.840	.468	59.187	3	202	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), I know what to do if someone acts online in a way I don't like., Hate speech online is just words., I understand the role social media websites/apps play in shaping the information and content I see.

b. Dependent Variable: 5. Lack of emotional awareness (items 1, 4, 6)

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	601.151	3	200.384	59.187	.000 ^b
	Residual	683.897	202	3.386		
	Total	1285.049	205			

a. Dependent Variable: Lack of emotional awareness (items 1, 4, 6)

b. Predictors: (Constant), I know what to do if someone acts online in a way I don't like., Hate speech online is just words., I understand the role social media websites/apps play in shaping the information and content I see.

Model	Coefficients ^a					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	11.554	.628		18.399	.000
	<i>I understand the role social media websites/apps play in shaping the information and content I see.</i>	-1.011	.137	-.404	-7.389	.000
	<i>Hate speech online is just words.</i>	.749	.121	.318	6.168	.000
	<i>I know what to do if someone acts online in a way I don't like.</i>	-.653	.119	-.298	-5.468	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Lack of emotional awareness (items 1, 4, 6)

Altogether, in the computed equation presented in Table 1, selected independent variables **IV₁-IV₃** account for 46% variance of the lack of emotional awareness as a factor of emotional regulation, with all three variables internet content awareness (Beta=-7.38, $p<0.01$), ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech (Beta=6.16, $p<0.01$), and digital behavior regulation (Beta=-5.46, $p<0.01$), being significant predictors.

4. Conclusions and discussions

The present study investigated if the internet content awareness, ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech and digital behavior regulation are powerful predictors of lack of emotional awareness in the framework of hate speech. The obtained results confirm the proposed hypothesis. These results suggest that if an individual is enveloped by a decreased internet content awareness, a high level of ignoring attitude towards the negative effects of hate speech and decreased digital behavior regulation strategies, then there is a 46% probability that the individual will develop a lack of emotional awareness as a factor of emotional regulation when facing a digital hate speech.

Hate's Journey project has tried through several actions and events to create the necessary reflexes among young people to prevent the use of violent language on the Internet. Since people are no longer simply consumers of online content, but also producers, what is a huge resource for young people can be transformed into a destructive force if it is not contained. Hate speech that appears in an online context does not manifest out of thin air, but mirrors the neighboring cultural and social environment. Therefore, it is important to identify and describe the present social

environment that may encourage the elevation in online hate speech, the places where hate speech tends to develop, and the individual groups that are mostly targeted.

The extent of this phenomenon is supported by numerous European studies and reports which show that in the EU member states there is an increasing number of physical and verbal attacks against minorities, often repeated and continuous, attacks that need to be monitored and combated vigorously. Hate crimes and hate speech are often closely linked: violence, physical and verbal attacks, and other forms of discrimination are often accompanied, encouraged, or justified by hate speech, and hate speech, in turn, serves to normalizing and legitimizing acts of violence and hostility motivated by prejudice and racism. This is why, within the project, the focus was placed on developing adequate awareness approaches and procedures focused on raising awareness for the victims and society in general, regarding online hate expression and associated crimes. Approaches are needed to help identify them and increase the number of reports and denunciations, as well as to promote a more conscious use of language, in order to reduce the use and impact of such expression.

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