CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN YOUTH PERCEPTION ABOUT ONLINE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Dana Rad, Ph.D., Gavril Rad, M.B.Cd., Gabriela Kelemen, Ph.D., Henrietta Torkos, Ph.D.Cd.,
Aurel Vlaicu **University of Arad, Romania**
dana@xhouse.ro
rad.gabi@yahoo.com
gabrielakelemenuav@gmail.com
torkos_henriette@yahoo.com

Abstract:*The Internet is one of the greatest inventions in the history of mankind and that it has opened new horizons for human evolution. No matter how good and indispensable the web has become, it has inevitably emerged ways in which it can harm those whom it is meant to serve. Our research team has developed the project Keeping youth safe from Cyberbullying, aiming to deeper understand the dynamics of cyberbullying in online environments among youth. Our focus was in analysing the cultural differences between Romanian, Belgian, Turkish and Spanish youth perception about online freedom of speech, in 507 high school students. Results show that there are statistically differences in the opinion of Romanian, Belgian, Turkish and Spanish youth regarding the "voice" that should be heard on social media. Conclusions and implications are discussed.*

Keywords: *cyberbullying; online freedom of speech; cultural differences;*

1. Media literacy and online freedom of speech

Nobody can deny that the Internet is one of the greatest inventions in the history of mankind and that it has opened new horizons for human evolution. No matter how good and indispensable the web has become, it has inevitably emerged ways in which it can harm those whom it is meant to serve. Research has shown that excessive use of the Internet can cause problems for youth (Aker, F., 2015; Deniz, L., 2010; Tam, P., 2013).

Communication has always been essential in the evolution of the human species, which has been perfected for centuries by the efforts of linguists, sociologists and even the masses. The 20th century has brought an explosion of communication, and nowadays everyone can enjoy mobile telephony, email, social networks, wireless connection and more, people having access to it all in most of the populated areas of the globe.

Young people are the most open population to new technologies, and most of those living in the urban area have smartphones, computers connected to the internet, email addresses, social networking accounts, and increasingly use these tools to keep contact with relatives and friends.

Freedom of expression is the fundamental right of man to say whatever he thinks. It is a natural right that is related to the essence of the human being, as well as the right to life, to dignity, being probably the most important right for the functioning of a free and democratic society.

At the individual level, freedom of speech is a prerequisite for the development, fulfilment and dignity of each individual. This right helps us to know and better understand the world in which we live in, through the free exchange of ideas and information with our peers. Everyone has the right to freedom of speech. This right includes freedom of opinion and the freedom to receive or communicate information or ideas without the interference of

public authorities and without taking into account the borders. (Article 10.1 of the European Convention on Human Rights).

Freedom of expression is not only important as a right in itself, but also because it is essential for respecting other fundamental rights (access to information, political freedom, religious freedom, national minority rights, sexual rights, etc.).

Without free expression there is no exchange of ideas, there is no public debate, there is no possibility to inform, to choose, to express ourselves artistically. Our everyday choices, the way we dress, the music we are listening to, the books we read, the media we are informing about, are all expressions of the right to free expression.

Freedom of expression works in close connection with equality, the two being interdependent. Freedom of speech offers marginalized, minority, disadvantaged groups the opportunity to present their problems, the needs, the expectations of the society. Equality in the exercise of the right to free speech ensures or ought to ensure an equal voice in the public space of every group and individual in society, including marginalized groups. Access to public debate must be fair in order to prevent and combat social marginalization, concealment of the problems of underprivileged groups and dominance of the public agenda by majority / ruling groups (the dominant voice in society).

2. Research

The internet has exceeded the stage of traditional media, a simple means of mass communication. This environment provides access to a public space where information is instantly available, often free of charge, at the request of anyone. The exchange of opinions is accomplished with minimal effort over a large number of communication channels. In this context, the legislator is in a difficult situation to regulate through general rules in such a dynamic field, the content of which being comparable to human infinite and constantly changing mind.

The project *Keeping youth safe from Cyberbullying*, ID 2016-3-TR01-KA205-036619 under Erasmus+, had been developed by our research team aiming to deeper understand the dynamics of cyberbullying in online environments among youth, to develop educational resources for professionals involved in youth activities in order to prevent these type behaviours. One of our objectives is to analyse the cultural differences among the 4 participant countries related to youth opinions about online freedom of speech. In this regard, our team has designed an online questionnaire aiming to gather descriptive data, general perception about the frequency and typology of cyberbullying type incidents, perceptions about the safety of the educational environment, perceived parental support, and an auto evaluation scale centred on self-efficacy perceptions.

This research that is focused on measuring online youth perceptions about freedom of speech, assumes that single item measures owns the same efficacy in identifying statistical trends like multiple items scales. Single item measures have been successfully used by researchers when measuring quality of life (Zimmerman et al., 2006). Single item scales are usually used to represent global constructs that are conceptualized as mono dimensions, like the one we have focused on, online freedom of speech.
The item that measured the perception about online freedom of speech is:
Item F – *Please rate your opinion regarding the following affirmation: I have the right to choose and to say whatever I want in the online environment.*
1. Totally agree; 2. Agree; 3. Neutral; 4. Disagree; 5. Totally disagree.
We start from the assumption that there is a statistical difference between Romanian, Belgian, Turkish and Spanish youth regarding the perception about online freedom of speech.

In order to test our hypothesis, we have used SPSS' one-way ANOVA analysis, where online freedom of speech perceptions were statistically observed based on residence country.

The study was conducted on a random sample of 507 high school students: 98 from Romania, 130 from Belgium, 224 from Turkey and 50 from Spain, aged 17-19, of both sexes, 68 male (48.6%) and 72 females (51.4%), from both rural and urban environmental origins.

In Fig.1, there are graphically depicted the mean differences among the four participant countries on the perception about online freedom of speech dimension. On scale from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for total agreement and 5 for total disagreement, Romanian youth has a mean score of m=3.11, Belgian youth score m=2.02, Turkish youth score m= 2.51 and Spanish youth score m=3.1. We can observe that Romanian and Spanish youth population show no statistical difference in between, slightly disagreeing with the fact that anyone can say anything with no censorship in the online environment. There is then a slight agreement with the statement that says that anyone can express anything they choose to in the online in Turkish youth, and on the last position, there is a disagreement with this statement in Belgium youth population. In other words, Romanian and Spanish youth are more carefully in choosing their own words when going online, then Turkish and Belgian youth.
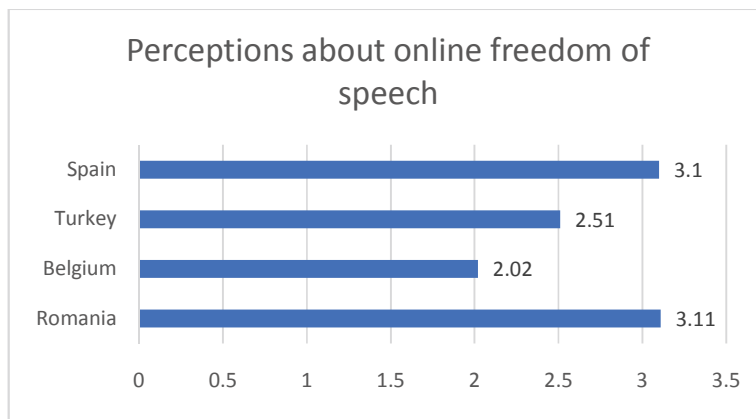

Fig.1 – Youth mean perception about online freedom of speech

Checking for statistically differences among these results, we can observe in Table 1. that our hypothesis is partially confirmed, meaning that there is no statistical difference between Romanian and Spanish youth responses, only between these two and Belgium and Turkish responses.

When running one-way ANOVA analysis, we have obtained the coefficient F=14.556, significant at a $p < 0.01$, data that support the assumption of cultural differences among the 4 countries related to youth perception about online freedom of speech.

Table 1. – Cultural differences on the perception of Romanian, Belgium, Turkish and Spanish youth about online freedom of speech

Descriptives								
I have the right to choose and to say whatever I want in the online environment.								
Country	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		

Romania	98	3.11	1.399	.141	2.83	3.39	1	5
Belgium	130	2.02	1.184	.104	1.82	2.23	1	5
Turkey	224	2.51	1.497	.100	2.31	2.71	1	5
Spain	50	3.10	1.199	.170	2.76	3.44	1	5
Total	502	2.56	1.429	.064	2.43	2.69	1	5

ANOVA

I have the right to choose and to say whatever I want in the online environment.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	82.529	3	27.510	14.556	.000
Within Groups	941.178	498	1.890		
Total	1023.707	501			

3. Conclusions and implications

Due to the fact that youth are excessively encouraged to be permanently alert and to report any behaviour that can generate emotional discomfort, feelings and experiences that have been considered part of daily life, such as when you are dissatisfied with somebody's political opinion, are now more likely to be treated as dangerous to mental health.

Nowadays youth face unique stress factors such as the ease of harassment activities in online social media. But instead of helping, the culture of victimization is not confronting but not only is at the centre these problems - fear of failure, ridiculous situations, discomfort, stigmatization, uncertainty. Our culture does not prepare young people to cope with the inevitable threats, in fact, despite being raised in a safer and better society than past generations, youth are now reporting higher levels of anxiety.

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