RESEARCH NOTE/NOTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Cyberhate Victimisation among Young People: a Gender and Generational Perspective

La victimización por ciberodio entre la juventud: una perspectiva de género y generacional

Rocío Ortiz Amo
29rocii@gmail.com
Cristina Cuenca-Piqueras
ccp693@ual.es
María José González-Moreno
mgm302@ual.es

University of Almería, Spain

ABSTRACT

Hate speech-related behaviours on the Internet among adolescents and young people are causing concern all over the world. The victim and gender perspective is most commonly studied in recent scientific research given the overlap between hate crimes and hate speech. This paper presents the results of a representative survey conducted by telephone in which 600 young people shared their experiences as victims of unpleasant comments on social media for a variety of reasons. The results are analysed descriptively by gender and age group, as well as by the motive for receiving these offensive or hateful comments. A total of 44.5% of the respondents stated that they had been victims of offensive or hate speech. The most frequent reasons were because of socio-political opinions, followed by their views on feminism. Differences were found to be associated with gender—specifically in the case of those attacked for their opinions on feminism—and with age, nationality or origin and opinions on feminism. One of the main factors for being a victim of offensive or hateful comments is one's stance on feminism and gender, with women being more affected than men, and adolescents more affected than young people.

KEYWORDS: cyberhate; young people; gender; social media; victimisation.

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RESUMEN

Los comportamientos relacionados con el discurso del odio en Internet entre adolescentes y jóvenes están causando preocupación en la comunidad internacional. La perspectiva de víctima y de género está presente en las investigaciones científicas más recientes debido a la naturaleza interseccional de los delitos de odio y del discurso de odio. Este trabajo recoge los resultados de una encuesta representativa administrada telefónicamente a 600 jóvenes sobre la experiencia de ser víctima de comentarios desagradables en las redes sociales por diferentes motivos. Los resultados se analizan descriptivamente por sexo y grupos de edad, según el motivo de haber recibido estos comentarios ofensivos o de odio. Un 44,5% de los encuestados declararon haber sido víctimas de comentarios ofensivos o de odio. Los motivos más frecuentes fueron las opiniones sociopolíticas, seguidas de las opiniones sobre el feminismo. Se encontraron diferencias asociadas, por un lado, al género solo para las opiniones sobre el feminismo y, por otro, a la edad, la nacionalidad o el origen y las opiniones sobre el feminismo. Las principales causas de ser víctima de comentarios ofensivos o de odio están relacionadas con las opiniones sobre el feminismo y el género, más entre las mujeres que entre los hombres, y más entre los adolescentes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ciberodio; jóvenes; género; redes sociales; victimización.

1. Introduction

This paper examines part of the results of the research project titled "Digital citizenship among Andalusian youth: keys to cyberactivism and social cybermovements in Andalusia" (2019 PRY109/19 COLECTIVO). This project centred around investigating the use of new technologies by young people from a positive viewpoint, analysing the Internet as a tool for youth social participation. In addition, the digital presence of third-sector entities in Andalusia was investigated.

A multitude of analyses have attempted to explain why cyberhate occurs, and the issue of "online anonymity" is a variable that can be found throughout. However, there are fewer studies concerned with how sexism intersects with the hatred displayed on social media.

To examine this issue from a gender perspective, we have based our work on the findings of previous research projects focused on online and offline sexual harassment (Cuenca-Piqueras *et al.*, 2020) and on fear in the streets (González and Cuenca, 2022). In these studies, some of the differences in online gender-related violence suffered by young men and women came to the fore.

Therefore, our aim with this work is to shed light on the extent of the violent comments made on the Internet and social media among Andalusian young people and delve into their content. As such, by adding the gender perspective to this analysis, we will gain deeper understanding of how this phenomenon affects women and men differently, and we hope to offer an explanation for these inequalities.

2. Defining cyberhate

Cyberhate has become a central and highly relevant scientific and social issue in recent years. Growing polarisation and radicalisation in many societies has turned cyberhate into an increasingly present and visible phenomenon (Wachs *et al.*, 2022). Cyberhate is an expression of hatred against "others", "strangers" or "enemies", and is conveyed as offensive, insulting or threatening texts, speeches, images and videos that aim to belittle or harm people because of certain characteristics of the group to which they belong (Wachs and Wright, 2019).

Behaviours related to hate speech on the Internet among adolescents and young people are arousing interest and concern in the international community given that this is the most common harmful content to which this group are exposed (Smahel *et al.*, 2020; Wachs, 2022). Exposure to cyberhate is mostly unintentional. Therefore, it is difficult to protect adolescents from cyberhate without restricting their rights to privacy and free access to the Internet (Reichelmann *et al.*, 2020).

Social media has become rife with hate speech that preaches extreme violence and discrimination, with this discourse being used to project certain socio-political beliefs and discriminate against marginalised groups (Banaji and Bhat, 2021). Hate speech on the Internet comes in different forms, whether harassment, abuse or violence, and it is a digital reflection of real-world power relations and domination, but with the specific advantage of anonymity and impunity thanks to the use of avatars and troll accounts on social media (Poland, 2016).

Victim and gender perspectives are present in the latest scientific research, the result of the overlap between the different lines of cyberhate discourse (Zempi and Smith, 2021). The most recent literature contains works investigating the interrelationship between online culture and misogyny in the form of anti-feminism and cyberbullying women on social media (Ging and Siapera, 2018; 2019; Golbeck, 2020; Richardson-Self, 2021). Cyberbullying is especially relevant among younger women, who are exposed to it more intensely and frequently (Cuenca-Piqueras *et al.*, 2020). The success of certain feminist cyber movements, such as #MeToo and other similar campaigns, such as #BlackLivesMatter, has provoked a counterreaction from anti-feminist cyber movements (Bailey, 2021; Bonet-Martí, 2021; Jackson *et al.*, 2020) rooted in 21st-century far-right extremism (Hermansson *et al.*, 2020; Lavin, 2021), thus turning social media platforms into increasingly polarised and violent spaces.

An additional line of research within gender studies has recently begun delving into the use of new technologies and the dissemination of the feminist movement. In this regard, when Internet usage started to become more widespread, the feminist movement was optimistic about the possibilities for change it entailed; ICTs offered it new opportunities for dissent. As was the case with the consciousness-raising groups of the seventies, public and private spaces converged, but this time on the Internet. Social media provided this group, which had traditionally been relegated to the private sphere, with an opportunity to seize control of the public sphere (Hanash, 2020).

When we speak of the fourth wave of feminism, we immediately think of women, many of them millennials, who use social media and the Internet to voice the inequalities they suffer. The feminism movement has been able to leverage the immediacy, visibility and room for growth that social media offers. Moreover, some analyses of cyberactivism argue that in this form of participation, activity is not merely shifted to the virtual space, but it also fosters innovation and new forms of action (Fernández-Prados and Lozano-Díaz, 2022). Embracing technology, however, has brought repercussions; feminists have become the target of misogynistic reactions, insults and online threats (González and Cuenca, 2022). Author Laura Bates' website "Everyday Sexism Project", which collects experiences of inequality and misogyny towards women, even resulting in the publication of a book, exemplifies how social media can be a powerful tool for disseminating feminist messages. Other similar initiatives launched in 2017 and 2018, namely the #MeToo and #Time'sUp movements, respectively, while Spain witnessed the rise of the #Cuéntalo initiative. This phenomenon, which became known as hashtag activism, entailed breaking the silence by allowing all women to share their stories. These initiatives offer women a platform to makes their voices heard, allowing them to participate in the creation of a collective memory that previously did not exist, exposing hidden realities in the process. The #MeToo movement took off on a global scale, culminating in *Time* magazine choosing "the Silence Breakers" as its Person of the Year in 2017.

However, all of this progress meant that some women would pay a high price, falling victim to *trolling* (posts containing hate messages), *doxxing* (making personal data and photos public to incite intimidation and harassment), revenge porn, and even rape and death threats (González and Cuenca, 2022). In fact, studies that analyse anti-feminist countermovements already contain sections dedicated to online attacks. With this in mind, Bonet-Martí (2021) claims that the anti-feminist response has prompted the creation of androcentric websites and forums that have given rise to a manosphere—a series of forums, websites and other online spaces that promote hostility towards women and opposition to feminism—where misogynistic discourses are shared, cyberbullying against feminists is incited, threats are made, images are digitally modified to sexualise the subjects, and all other types of violence are promoted.

3. Objectives

The main objective of this work is to perform an initial study of the issue of hate speech on social media and the different reasons for it from the perspective of the young Andalusian victims.

In addition, in our look at cyber hate speech, we hope to describe the most common sociodemographic sex-gender and age-generation variables and detect any significant links that may exist between them.

4. Methodology

This work collects the results of a representative survey conducted by telephone to 600 young people in the autonomous community of Andalusia in which they were asked about different aspects of their relationship with the Internet, such as access, use, skills and digital participation (see Table 1).

Table 1

Technical details of the survey of young Andalusians

Town or city	Resident of Andalusia between 16 and 30 years old (1,395,109 as of 1 January 2020)
Sample size	600 interviews, divided into two subsamples of 300 young people aged between 16 and 23, and between 24 and 30
Sample error	For the sample as a whole, a margin of error of ± 4 is estimated for a 95% confidence interval
Sample selection	Random and proportional to provinces, gender and age
Interview type	Telephone
Topic	Internet and youth (access, use, skills and digital participation)
Fieldwork	1–21 July 2021, conducted by CELESTE-TEL
Final questionnaire	21 questions (data matrix composed of 86 variables)

Source: own research.

The question that we have analysed from the questionnaire on cyber hate speech received by respondents is as follows: "Have you ever received unpleasant or offensive comments in a conversation on social media, forums or other online platforms?" (see Table 2). The questionnaire comprises multi-part yes or no questions on six reasons why respondents have been victims of attacks or unpleasant or offensive comments on social media: gender, sexual orientation, nationality or origin, aesthetics or personal appearance, views on feminism and views on some other political or social cause.

Table 2

Question from the questionnaire on cyber hate speech

Q.15 Have you ever received unpleasant or offensive comments in a conversation on social media, forums or other online platforms?
If yes, the comments attacked you because of...
1. Yes
2. No
    A. My gender
    B. My sexual orientation
    C. My nationality, origin or related characteristics (religion, language, skin colour, etc.)
    D. My aesthetics, my personal appearance
    E. My views or comments on feminism and/or gender relations
    F. My views or comments on some other social or political cause

Source: own research.

A gender-based descriptive analysis has been carried out on the experiences of those who, for any of the reasons indicated, have been the victim of unpleasant or offensive comments on social media, calculating the chi-square statistic (χ^2) to detect significance. Likewise, the respondents have been grouped into two subsamples according to an approximation of two generations of young people: Generation Z (16–23 years old) and Generation Y (24–30 years old) (Fernández-Prados and Cuenca-Piqueras, 2023). This allows us to perform a descriptive and comparative analysis of the reasons for cyberhate and highlight those that are most statistically significant.

5. Results

Of the young Andalusians studied, 43.4% have been the victim of one or more of the six types of hate speech indicated on social media. The most frequent reasons are for having posted comments on the Internet regarding a social or political cause (32.7%), followed by their views on feminism (29.4%) and their aesthetics and personal appearance (27.3%).

In general, young women (45.8%) receive more unpleasant comments on social media for any of the six reasons detailed above than their male peers (41.0%). Although the greatest differences between genders are found in the three most frequently reported motives, standing at around five percentage points, the only significant disparity according to the chi-square (χ^2) statistic is for "my views or comments on feminism and/or gender relations" (see Table 3).

Table 3
Reasons for receiving cyberhate by gender (%)

	M	F	TOTAL
My gender	15.4	14.5	15.0
My sexual orientation	12.6	12.0	12.3
My nationality, origin...	15.4	15.8	15.6
My aesthetics, my personal appearance	25.1	29.6	27.3
My views on feminism	26.2	32.8	29.4*
My views on socio-political issues	30.4	35.2	32.7
Any of the six causes of cyberhate	41.0	45.8	43.4

M = male; F = female; * p < 0.5; ** p < 0.01.
Source: own research.

In our analysis, we split the subjects into two age groups based on their generation: Generation Z, those between 16 and 23 years old; and Generation Y, those between 24 and 30 years old.

The majority of women in Generation Z report having received unpleasant or offensive comments on social media, while this figure was much lower for males in the same age range (40.1% of men compared to 52.4% of women). While in Generation Z females receive more cyber hate speech or comments than their male peers, in Generation Y the opposite is true (see Table 4). In addition, in this older group of young people, the only significant difference between genders is for hate speech based on sexual orientation (18.0% of men compared to just 8.9% of women). On the other hand, in Generation Z, the younger group of the two, the differences between women and men are significant for four of the six reasons (sexual orientation, nationality, views on feminism and views on socio-political causes), with women reporting the higher number in all cases. It is worth pointing out the high significance of gender difference in Generation Z for offensive comments made on social media as a result of views on feminism (25.3% of men compared to 41.4% of women).

Table 4

Reasons for receiving cyberhate by gender and generation (%)

	16⎕23			24⎕30		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
My gender	9.2	15.2	12.1	21.7	13.8	17.8
My sexual orientation	7.2	15.2	11.1*	18.0	8.9	13.5*
My nationality, origin…	8.7	17.2	12.9*	22.1	14.4	18.3
My aesthetics, my personal appearance	25.8	35.2	30.4	24.3	24.0	24.2
My views on feminism	25.3	41.4	33.2**	27.0	24.1	25.6
My views on socio-political issues	27.8	39.3	33.4*	32.9	31.0	32.0
Any of the six causes of cyberhate	40.1	52.4	46.2*	41.8	39.2	40.5

M = male; F = female; * $p < 0.5$; ** $p < 0.01$.
Source: own research.

6. Discussion

After analysing and presenting the results of the study, we can see that almost half of the young Andalusians interviewed have been targeted by at least one of the six types of hate speech on social media. As other authors point out, hate speech on social media has increased in recent years, becoming an epidemic that continues to beleaguer platforms (Bustos Martínez *et al.*, 2019; Ramírez-García, González-Molina and Moyano-Pacheco, 2022). Social and political issues top the list in terms of motives for receiving online hate, followed by views on feminism and aesthetics and personal appearance. Hate speech has developed into a problem in both the social and political realms, spurred on by the social media platforms

themselves, which foster polarisation and social conflict (Kim *et al.*, 2022; Ojeda–Copa *et al.*, 2021). Hate posts regarding feminism—constructed around stereotypes or preformed notions—abound on social media and contain high levels of verbal violence (Gonçalves and Willem, 2021). As our results show, young women generally receive more unpleasant comments on social media for one of these six reasons, but mostly because of gender issues.

Likewise, in Generation Z, those aged between 16 and 23, a much greater proportion of women report having received unpleasant or offensive comments on social media than their male counterparts. As other authors have pointed out, it is typical for members of Generation Z to have a social media account on which they and their peers comment and opine on all topics, seemingly with no filter, which often results in comments that can be considered offensive (Álvarez *et al* ., 2019). However, with regard to cyberhate comments and speech, that women in this age group receive more cyberhate comments than their male counterparts may come down to the fact that women are more likely to post feminist content than men are, and this triggers a response in the form of cyberhate comments (Martín, 2018). However, in Generation Y, older male youngsters receive more hate speech on the basis of their sexual orientation than women (Zunino *et al.*, 2020).

In Generation Z (the younger of the two generations studied), on the other hand, the differences between women and men are significant for four of the six reasons (sexual orientation, nationality, views on feminism and views on socio-political issues), with the women most affected in all cases. It is worth pointing out the high significance of gender difference in Generation Z when it comes to offensive comments on social media regarding one's stance on feminism. The latter may boil down to the fact that younger women and members of Generation Z in general are more likely to participate in cyberactivism (Fernández-Prados and Cuenca-Piqueras, 2022); remember that the last social cybermovements of the 2010s were spearheaded by adolescent girls (Fernández Prados *et al.*, 2021; Lozano-Díaz and Fernández Prados, 2021).

Another issue to consider is the social context. Since 2017 we have been witnessing a shift within feminism, resulting in what is referred to as the "fourth wave" of feminism. The turning point in Spain was the mobilisation that followed the sentencing of the perpetrators of the La Manada gang rape case and the global demonstrations on 8 March. Technology has played a pivotal role in this fourth wave, facilitating the mobilisation, organisation and dissemination of the fight against inequality and the eradication of violence against women. However, at the same time, a counter-movement has reared its head in Spain, represented by groups including the Foro Español de la Familia (Spanish Forum for the Family) and HazteOír (Make Yourself Heard) social change groups and ultra-right party Vox. Moreover, studies concerning the Spanish manosphere have started being published, analysing the impact of different online spaces such as Forocoches, Hispachan and prostitution websites, specifically Spalumi.com and Follatemallorca.com (García-Mingo and Díaz-Fernández, 2022).

7. Conclusions, study limitations and future lines of research

Given that this work focuses on just one specific aspect of a larger research project, we are aware of the numerous study limitations. Many of these issues emanate from the fact that cyberhate shown towards feminism is a very complex social phenomenon and, therefore, a more detailed analysis is required in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the topic.

In the question we pose, not only do we ask directly about unpleasant or offensive comments received regarding one's opinion of the feminist movement, but we also try to include issues directly related to misogyny, inquiring about offensive comments received based on gender, as well as other issues more loosely related to beauty stereotypes and canons by asking about aesthetics or appearance. Many issues are left out while others are vague.

Further investigation is required in this line of work in order to better define the aspects that we are inquiring about. Intersectional analyses would also be appropriate to examine how two or more variables interact with one another, as online hate is perhaps different in the hypothetical case of a cisgender, white woman with a body that meets traditional beauty standards than when the hatred is directed at a trans woman, or someone in a sexual, ethnic or functionally diverse minority, for example.

Although initial studies are under way on the extent of the online violence suffered by activists, most proposals take a qualitative approach that employs ethnographic techniques, studying online spaces in order to analyse human relations, communities and digital culture (Hanash, 2020). Therefore, we are beginning to familiarise ourselves with some of the main issues of the phenomenon, but defining the scope and ascertaining to what extent cyberhate towards feminism affects Internet users is still a complex task.

In this analysis, we have focused on unpleasant and offensive comments, with our findings indicating that around half of young Andalusians are subject to them on social media, as they reported in the survey. In particular, young women from Generation Z are the ones who suffer the most from such offences. In fact, online hate speech has shifted from targeting Generation Y males to being mostly aimed at Generation Z females.

Our results confirm another trend regarding the reasons why someone may become a victim of cyberhate. Younger women are especially likely to suffer violence given that holding views on feminism is a leading cause of cyberhate, and herein lies the greatest difference between them and their male peers.

In short, the youngest members of this group, women and views on feminism are the most prominent sociodemographic variables and motives for receiving online hate speech or cyberhate, with this becoming increasingly significant and evident.

This first approach provides plenty of food for though, and a number of research questions have arisen. One would be concerned with finding out how many more displays of violence are committed online by anti-feminists. Some studies indicate that threats of physical or sexual violence, posting intimate images without consent—some even digitally manipulated—or publishing personal data, such as telephone numbers or addresses, on the Internet are all common occurrences. There are potentially many acts that take place outside of this relationship, such as identity theft and massive attacks on websites, and these are only growing in number as technology advances.

Another important aspect to analyse is the frequency of violence and reverberations it has on the lives of those who have suffered it. The study carried out by Amnesty International (2017) brings some of these issues to light, underlining that 55% of women who suffered cyberbullying experienced stress, anxiety or panic attacks. Likewise, two out of three women reported feeling powerless in the face of this violence.

It would also be interesting to explore how this form of violence can end up achieving what it seeks: self-censorship by those who post feminist content online. According to the Amnesty International report (2017), in the sample of eight countries that was analysed, 76% of women who claimed to have been subject to harassment or threats on social media had changed the way they use these platforms due to the violence they suffered. For this reason, we believe that it would be interesting not only to analyse the violence suffered on social media, but also consider the feminist comments and content that are no longer shared online for fear of repercussions.

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Rocío Ortiz Amo, University of Almería

Holder of a bachelor's degree in Social Work from the University of Almería and
PhD in Health Sciences from the University of Huelva, Rocío Ortiz Amo is currently
a doctoral assistant professor in the University of Almería's Department of Social
Work and Coordinator of the bachelor's degree in Social Work. As a researcher she
has collaborated with the GISA research group, run by the University of Almería's
Department of Sociology, and with the Centre for the Study of Migration and
Intercultural Relations (CEMyRI). Her research focuses on social work, social work
professionals, care, gender, disability, ethics and humanisation.

Cristina Cuenca-Piqueras, University of Almería

Cristina Cuenca-Piqueras is a Doctor of Sociology, awarded by the University of
Malaga, and currently works as a doctoral assistant in the University of Almería's
Department of Sociology. In a research capacity, she too collaborates with the
Indalo Group of Applied Sociology – GISA (SEJ419) research group and with the
Centre for the Study of Migration and Intercultural Relations (CEMyRI). Her lines
of research include gender and gender-based violence, with a particular interest in
sexual harassment in the workplace.

María José González Moreno, University of Almería

She is a graduate in Sociology from the University of Granada and holder of a PhD
in Sociology from the University of Almería, where she is also a full professor. She
works alongside her co-authors on the GISA research team, run by the University of
Almería's Department of Sociology, and with the Centre for the Study of Migration
and Intercultural Relations (CEMyRI). In addition, she is currently the head of the
University of Almería's Department of Sociology. Her research focuses on the study
of gender inequalities, feminist theory and all its applications in education, film,
social media and domestic and community spaces.