Exposure to Online Hateful Content and Users' Engagement: A Silencing Effect

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Although there has been recent interest in the effects of exposure to online hate speech targeting ethnic minority groups, there are some underexplored areas. In a context dominated by debates over free and hateful speech across social media platforms, it has never been more pertinent to investigate whether exposure to Facebook content targeting Roma people, Europe's largest ethnic minority group, leads to different levels of willingness to act (either positively, countering hateful content, or negatively, enhancing it). By a 4 × 2 experimental design (degree of hate speech × valence of accompanying comments) conducted in Romania, this research shows people's general tendency to keep silent and avoid supporting or reacting in favor of the Roma minority group. Results can be used for evidence-based solutions to limit and discourage online hateful content.

Keywords: online hateful content, engagement, bystanders, discrimination, Roma minority

Digital technology offers plenty of opportunities as well as risks, including the spread of hateful content. Hate speech is considered a direct form of discrimination, causing harm at the level of a person's identity through means of communicative actions (Crowley, 2014). Hateful content is targeting people who are members of a historically victimized group based on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, or another minority group to vilify them (Simpson, 2013). The dissemination of hate can increase the marginalization of targeted individuals or groups and preserve discrimination (Guiora & Park, 2017). It also leads to lasting psychological and physical damage as it causes mental or emotional distress, self-worth questioning, and even restrictions in terms of self-expression on social media (Saha, Chandrasekharan, & De Choudhury, 2019).

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Although the issue of hate speech concerning race, gender, or migrants has been addressed in several scientific approaches (Tong, Stoycheff, & Mitra, 2022), hate speech against Roma, the largest minority group in Europe (Molnar, 2021), is less explored in an online context (see Miškolci, Kováčová, & Rigová, 2020) and in Romania (see Molnar, 2021).

The focus of this study on the Roma community in Romania is not merely a case-specific inquiry but holds broader implications because of unique historical and social dynamics. Though Roma people represent the largest minority group in Europe (Molnar, 2021), Romania hosts the largest Roma community on the continent (Bumbu, 2012). This community's long history in Romania is fraught with discrimination and exclusion, a legacy marked by periods of slavery (Lari, 2010). Furthermore, despite being the second largest minority in Romania (World Population Review, 2022), the Roma community faces a unique level of scrutiny and discrimination. This is evidenced by the work of organizations such as the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of Holocaust in Romania (Institutul Național pentru Studierea Holocaustului din România, 2015) and the nongovernmental organization Active Watch, both of which monitor hate speech in the Romanian media (European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance [ECRI], 2019). Their findings consistently show that the Roma community is the preferred target of discrimination, even when compared with other minority groups that could be discriminated against in terms of religion, ethnicity, sexuality, or ideological orientation.

To date, few studies have focused on Roma online hate speech (Enarsson & Lindgren, 2019) and even fewer have analyzed the causes (Molnar, 2021) and effects (Miškolci et al., 2020) of further propagating or reacting to hate speech on social media.

Reactions to hate speech can take various forms, of which in this study we will analyze two types of stances about the recipients of the hateful content: either supporting and defending the group that is the target of hate speech (which we will call positive engagement, including online immediate reactions or willingness to further support the group in various ways), or further enhancing the hate speech, which can often make use of the social media platforms affordances, that is further engaging with the content (like, share, or commenting in a derogatory manner about the targeted group), which we will call negative engagement.

Considering this context, using an experimental design, we seek to explore if and how exposure to different degrees of online hateful content targeting Roma people influences users' reactions either to support the discriminated population or to further propagate hate speech. At the same time, we are interested in revealing whether different degrees of hateful content, accompanied by either more hate or counterspeech, might influence users' engagement. Two main theoretical frameworks guided our research. The first is the bystander effect, which specifically refers to the phenomenon where an individual's likelihood of intervention decreases in the presence of passive bystanders during a critical or problematic event (Fischer et al., 2011). The other guiding theoretical framework is the spiral of silence theory, which posits that people tend to voice their opinions only when they perceive them to be in line with the majority view (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). We believe the study contributes to the body of literature on Roma online hate speech to support evidence-based programs to prevent Roma's discrimination and combat hateful content targeting ethnically diverse groups online. Furthermore, we believe that the findings from this study could be applied to research focused on other minority groups, such as immigrants or members of the LGBTQIA+

community. For instance, the same classification of speech could be tested in different sociocultural contexts and among various communities. In addition, other studies could integrate this methodology with an analysis of media representations of specific minority groups, examining the potential influence of the media in shaping public perceptions.

Literature Review

Hate Speech and its Various Degrees

Some researchers suggest that online hate speech represents "the use of violent, aggressive or offensive language, focused on a specific group of people who share a common property, which can be religion, race, gender or political affiliation through the use of Internet and Social Networks" (Castaño-Pulgarín, Suárez-Betancur, Tilano Vega, & Herrera López, 2021, p. 1).

As previous studies suggest, hate speech is primarily a matter of language use and could take different forms. Based on the intensity of the harmful intent, Sharma, Agrawal, and Shrivastava (2018) suggested three different classes of hate speech, showcasing various categories of harmful speech found in social media. Specifically, class-I hate speech encompasses incitement to violence, extremism, and propaganda; class-II hate speech includes actions such as intimidation, trespassing, accusations, threats, and hostility; and class-III hate speech includes sarcasm, irony, trolling, and bullying.

Another classification of hateful speech refers to five possible degrees of hate speech (Ghanea, 2013). This spectrum ranges from discriminatory speech—which refers to expressions that belittle or stereotype specific groups but without openly promoting hatred or violence—to hate speech, where the language demeans or devalues a group, fostering an environment of intolerance. Beyond these categories lies incitement to hatred, which involves actively encouraging or promoting hatred, and incitement to terrorism, a more severe form explicitly encouraging acts of terrorism. At the extreme end of the spectrum is incitement to genocide, a term used for language that actively promotes or supports acts of genocide against a specific group (Ghanea, 2013). In the study of online hate speech, existing categorizations often focus on the intensity of threats, including high, moderate, or low levels (Neshkovska & Trajkova, 2017).

Recognizing this complexity, we opted to create our own categorization (which can be applied to any minority group if further adapted) to better capture the multifaceted nature of hate speech in the online environment, tailored to the specific context of our study. Our categorization builds on previous work on intensity of threat but further refines these categories to account for contemporary manifestations of hate speech (Neshkovska & Trajkova, 2017). Our proposed classification includes four different categories: neutral content (non-offensive language using labels to identify and refer to characteristics of Roma minority in Romania; e.g., Roma people receive state benefits); derogatory speech (mildly offensive language used to denigrate the Roma minority; e.g., tziganes, illiterate people); hate speech (offensive language showing visible intolerance toward the Roma minority; e.g., crows, parasites), and full hate speech (extremely offensive language used to show disgust toward the Roma minority; e.g., dirty crows, filthy gypsies). A recent study analyzing the effects of labeling on the perception of ethnic minorities found that when labeled with a neutral (versus derogatory) term, the

Romani were perceived more positively (moral, sociable, and competent; Gligorić, Vilotijević, & Većkalov, 2021). This indicates that various degrees of hate speech (i.e., in terms of severity) could have various implications for how other people perceive the target(s) of hateful content.

Although previous classifications have emphasized intensity levels ranging from discriminatory speech to incitement to genocide (Ghanea, 2013), our typology is refined to reflect the specific experiences and challenges faced by the Roma community in Romania, recognizing that hate speech may be contextually dependent (Bumbu, 2012; Lari, 2010). By employing this tailored categorization, we aim to provide a more comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding of hate speech.

Effects of Hate Speech on User Engagement

Exposure to hateful content is interesting because of its implications for user immediate reactions, often labeled as online engagement. User engagement with a social media post is generally defined by the interactions users have with the post (i.e., in terms of likes, comments, and shares; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019) or their various reactions to the post (report, flag, or counterspeech as a comment; Kunst, Porten-Cheé, Emmer, & Eilders, 2021). Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that unlike positive content, hateful content published on Facebook can significantly drive more engagement in the form of comments, regardless of the popularity of the content creator (Gagliardone et al., 2016, p. 36). However, recent academic data drafted by Kunst et al. (2021) proved that users are more prone to engaging in online conversations (i.e., either by flagging or reporting the comment or by engaging in counterspeech activities) when facing hateful comments to various content posted online. Thus, if a comment contains strong hateful remarks toward various outgroups, such as abusive language or incitement to violence, respondents who support solidarity citizenship norms would feel more inclined to act against hate speech and digitally defend the victim (Kunst et al., 2021). Therefore, there is evidence suggesting that in some cases, comments are more powerful than content itself in making people more engaged in the online environment.

Although mere exposure to hate can have a contagious effect on the emotions of other viewers (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014) and determine a higher involvement with the topic, predictors of people's reactions to hateful content are underexplored.

There are various layers that should be considered. First, there is the content (i.e., containing or not hateful messages). Hate speech exposure is identified as a predictor for users' willingness to engage with hateful content (Kunst et al., 2021). Furthermore, negative and hateful posts can determine a higher level of engagement than positive content (Gagliardone et al., 2016). At the same time, attitudes of online users toward members of outgroups can influence their willingness to engage with hateful content as well (Kalch & Naab, 2017).

In this study, we will explore all these layers and use the general terms of "positive" and "negative" engagement to reflect people's stance about a particular group target of hate speech, that is, the Roma population. Whenever people's reactions are considered as a form of support for the Roma people, we will label them as "positive," and whenever their reactions would further propagate the hateful content, we will label them as "negative."

Bystander Effect in a Hate Speech Context

Various forms of engagement with antisocial behavior could be explained using the *bystander effect* (for an overview of the literature on the bystander effect, see Fischer et al., 2011; Rudnicki, Vandebosch, Voué, & Poels, 2023), a social psychological phenomenon stating that individuals noticing hateful speech would engage in the conversation based on their perceived urgency of the matter (Leonhard, Rueß, Obermaier, & Reinemann, 2018; Obermaier, Fawzi, & Koch, 2016; Obermaier, Schmuck, & Saleem, 2023). Unless people perceive an immediate threat within a hate speech comment, they will not intervene in the conversation by approaching counterspeech activities. In our study, we argue that exposure to hate speech can be understood as a specific form of an emergency, especially for someone highly engaged with social media, and, therefore, positive engagement can be conceptualized as a specific form of helping behavior by bystanders. Especially concerning social media content, there is a consensus that people intervene to share content and ideas either because they are enthusiastic in demonstrating that they are experts (i.e., perceived social recognition) or because they want to help someone who would benefit from the content (Hossain, Dwivedi, Chan, Standing, & Olanrewaju, 2018).

Noticing a critical situation and recognizing it as an emergency are important steps for a positive intervention to occur (Fischer et al., 2011; Leonhard et al., 2018; Obermaier et al., 2016). The assessment of an emergency as a true one is easier for more obvious ones. Given this idea, the higher the severity of the threat and harm related to an incident, the higher the probability of intervention from the users witnessing the incident. In line with this reasoning, countering is more likely to occur when people witness severe or intense forms of hateful content. Thus, witnessing severe hate speech and considering it as a high threat to the victim group are two crucial variables that lead to positive interventions (i.e., supporting the group targeted by hateful content). People are more likely to react and combat online hate speech through positive engagement in supporting interventions.

Specifically related to our study, we assume that more severe forms of hate speech targeting the Roma community are associated with more positive user engagement (in the form of supporting Roma people) and, in turn, with less negative user engagement (in the form of further denigrating Roma people), as a form of bystander reaction to an emergency situation. Thus, we formulate our first two hypotheses:

H1a: The more severe the hate speech against Roma people is, the more likely an individual positively engages to support Roma people.

The corresponding type of reaction, that is, the severity of the hate speech leading to a decreased willingness of people to further denigrate Roma people (i.e., negative engagement), could be seen as another form of bystander effect, that is, when people perceive the threat to be high, but they do not necessarily feel themselves as directly responsible to react, the effect of such content could be to reduce the potential of further harming a threatened group. Although mild forms of hateful content could not be perceived as directly harmful, stronger forms of hate speech could directly collide with people's moral values, leading them to remain silent rather than engage negatively in the conversation. This means that when people notice the severity of the negative content targeting a group, they are likely to refrain from further engaging with it. We test this corollary to the bystander effect in this study:

H1b: The more severe the hate speech against Roma people is, the less likely an individual negatively engages to further denigrate Roma people (silencing effect for negative engagement).

Although we do not wish to suggest that people's positive reactions in support of Roma people need exposure to hateful comments, we believe it is important to see if there is a sort of a (very welcome) boomerang effect of extremely hateful content, to understand where public policies or social platforms reactions should first intervene to reduce the effects of hate speech.

Beyond the severity of hate speech, some contextual features in which it is situated could have important implications for bystanders' willingness to intervene (Leonhard et al., 2018). On SNSs, particularly on Facebook, which allows for many users' reactions (in the form of likes, shares, comments, and reports), some key characteristics of the situational context matter as well. These reactions can be either supportive or opposing (Ernst et al., 2017). Supportive ones include liking or commenting on hateful content in a confirmative manner, whereas opposing ones can range from reporting the content to commenting in a dissenting way (Leonhard et al., 2018).

Comments accompanying social media posts are shown to have significant importance as well. Usually, the readers of social media posts perceive comment sections as relevant and interesting. Furthermore, "comments sections offer new possibilities to lay communicators to participate in public discourse" (Naab, Kalch, & Meitz, 2018, p. 778), which makes researchers assume that in some contexts, they could be even more important than the content itself. For example, evidence suggests that pro-Roma comments can have a positive outcome in the discussion, either by closing the hateful "chain reaction" or by encouraging other pro-Roma social media users to get involved in the conversation and speak up against hate speech (Miškolci et al., 2020). Moreover, specifically related to the Romanian Roma community, research suggests that the valence of the comments sections on Roma-related Facebook posts significantly influences people's attitudes toward the community itself (Boțan, Buturoiu, Corbu, & Voloc, 2020). In other terms, the valence of comments accompanying social media posts is changing the public discourse, and, if the comments are rude, inflammatory, and even outright hate-inspiring directed against minorities, they can lead to a general hostility climate.

Spiral of Silence and Hate Speech

One theoretical framework explaining people's willingness to speak out publicly is the classic *spiral of silence theory* (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). According to this theoretical framework, people assess the opinion climate and publicly express their opinion when they perceive themselves to be in the majority. Applying this to the online environment, there is recent evidence showing that people's willingness to express their opinion online decreases when they perceive themselves to be in the minority (e.g., Masullo & Duchovnay, 2022). This occurs in online discussion groups or comment sections (Leonhard et al., 2018). Thus, with particular reference to online hate speech on Facebook, other users' reactions can be used as a benchmark for assessing the opinion climate about the topic of hate content. As a result, when exposed to hateful content directed against the Roma people and supported by hateful comments, people will be less inclined to engage in behavior that supports Roma people and more inclined to engage in behavior that further denigrates Roma people. This is explained by people's willingness to follow the majority's opinion

(i.e., to behave like most other users) when they perceive their opinion to be in the minority. In such a context, we formulate two other hypotheses:

H2a: *Hateful content about Roma people supported by hateful comments will make people less likely to engage in behavior that supports Roma people (silencing effect for positive engagement).*

H2b: *Hateful content about Roma people supported by hateful comments will make people more likely to engage in behavior that further denigrates Roma people.*

Although these hypotheses might, to some degree, seem to contradict H1a and H1b, we believe that there are different mechanisms in place that could make people react differently than expected in H1a and H1b. Although at a first glance it might seem to make sense that more hateful comments should lead to a stronger boomerang effect (i.e., to make people want to react positively toward Roma people with a bystander type of reaction to an emergency situation), we argue that people's reactions depend to a high degree on other people's openly manifested attitudes. The more hateful content added by the comments potentially create the illusion of a majority of people agreeing with the way the Roma people are depicted by the hate speech in the first place, which in turn could silence people's reactions that would support the Roma minority, as a typical spiral of silence effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

On the other hand, based on the same assumptions of the spiral of silence theory, when exposed to hateful content targeting the Roma people and counterargued by positive comments, people might be more inclined to engage in behavior that supports Roma people and less inclined to engage in behavior that further denigrates Roma people. The main explanations are also related to the way people perceive the opinion climate; people want to follow the perceived majority. In such a context, we formulate the last two hypotheses:

H3a: *Hateful content about Roma people counterargued by positive comments will make people more likely to engage in behavior that supports Roma people.*

H3b: *Hateful content about Roma people counterargued by positive comments will make people less likely to engage in behavior that further denigrates Roma people.*

Method

For this study, we conducted a 4 × 2 between-subjects experiment (see Table 1), plus a control condition (for more details, see the section dedicated to Stimuli). The conceptual model is explained in Figure 1.

Table 1. Overview of Experimental Conditions and Control Condition.

	Neutral content	Derogatory speech	Hate speech	Full hate speech
Positive comments	N = 103	N = 102	N = 90	N = 131
Negative comments	N = 123	N = 122	N = 99	N = 107

Control (neutral content, no comments), (N = 101).
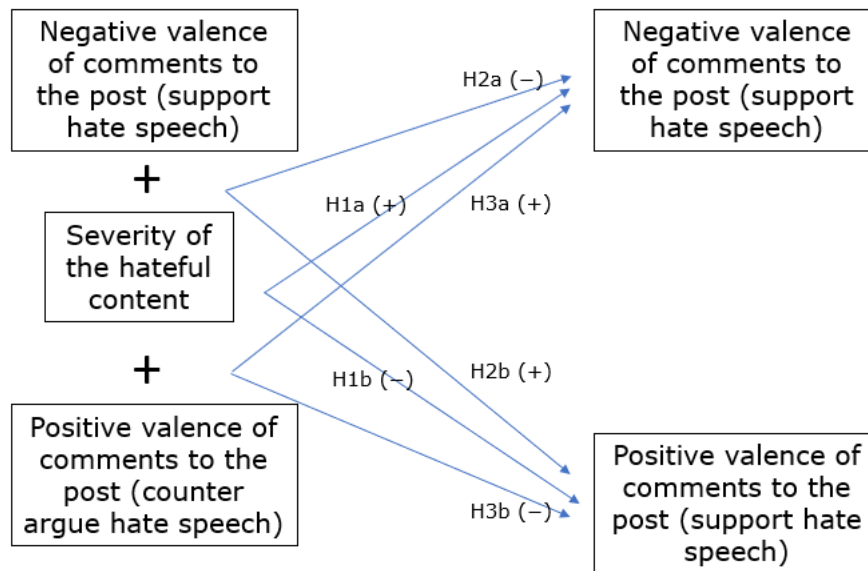
Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Sample

The experiment was conducted by QUESTIA, a national polling organization, using an online panel (*N* = 978), targeting the population of Romania that has access to the Internet and is aged 18 or higher, using quotas for gender, age, and geographical region, in March 2021. The mean age in the sample was 45.10 years (SD = 13.23); the age range was 18–84 years old. The sample is composed of 56.5% women and 43.5% men. In terms of education, the sample is composed of 2% low-educated people (elementary and secondary levels completed), 46.4% people with medium education (more than secondary, less than bachelor studies completed), and 51.2% people with high education (bachelor, master, or PhD levels completed). People living in urban areas represent 84.8% of the sample. The sample was skewed to some extent, overrepresenting women, highly educated people, and urban areas.

Procedure

The questionnaire comprised four parts: informed consent; a pretest part consisting of demographics, moderators, and control variables; a random assignment to one of the nine conditions (exposure to a Facebook post consisting of either neutral, derogatory, hate, or full hate content followed by either positive or negative comments) plus control conditions (neutral content, followed by no comments); and a posttest part containing the dependent variables and the manipulation checks. Randomization was successful with age ($F_{8,974} = 1.26$, $p > .05$), gender ($F_{8,974} = 1.49$, $p > .05$), education ($F_{8,974} = .44$, $p > .05$), and opinion about Roma people ($F_{8,974} = 1.47$, $p > .05$).

The design and instruments (questionnaire and stimuli) were approved by the ethics committee of the university. Although we acknowledge the possibility that respondents might have been emotionally impacted to some degree by the wording of the stimuli or comments, especially those in the "hate speech" and "full hate speech" conditions, the only way to assist respondents in this experimental setting was through the debriefing. Thus, at the end of the survey, participants were debriefed about the fictional stimulus and comments—that it did not reflect the researchers' opinions on the matter and was created to better understand effects of hate speech about the Roma people—and thanked for their participation.

Stimuli

The stimuli were designed in the form of a Facebook post, suggesting a high level of engagement (309 comments, 21 shares, 467 reactions), which was kept constant in all experimental conditions, including the control condition. Three of the 309 comments were visible in the eight experimental conditions, being portrayed either positively or negatively (see Appendix 1). We constructed the stimuli, looking for factual data related to two prominent stereotypes about Roma people in Romania: lack of education and avoiding "honest work." The comments were meant to enhance the stereotypes (negative comments) or to counter them (positive comments), as to reflect a supportive or negative attitude about the Roma minority. Even though they might not be entirely considered as counterspeech, in the sense that they rather counter the negative perceptions than the way the language frames them, we maintain that they are a form of counterspeech in the broader "counternarrative spectrum," as they "aim at challenging [. . .] transmitted ideas of hatred, prejudice or even extremism" (Ernst et al., 2017, p. 7). We used as facts the penetration rate of illiteracy among the Roma community in Romania and the use of state aids as the sole source of revenue for Roma families.

Manipulation Checks

To make sure participants in this study perceived the stimuli as intended, we used the following manipulation check variables. First, people in the control, neutral, and derogatory with positive comments conditions perceived the Roma people as being portrayed negatively to a lesser extent than people in the other conditions ($F_{1,977} = 58.68$, $p < .01$). Second, people exposed to social media content followed by negative comments perceived that the comments were derogatory to a greater extent than those exposed to social media content followed by positive comments ($F_{1,876} = 37,76$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, we tested whether people acknowledged the information they were exposed to. In this respect, we asked them to

evaluate whether the post they were exposed to suggested that "Numbers reflect statistics of the European Union" (*M* = 3.32, SD = 1.03) and that "The post advances the idea that a lot of Roma people are illiterate" (*M* = 3.69, SD = .99).

Measures

Engagement (dependent variable) was operationalized for this study to capture two possible directions: (a) *positive engagement* and (b) *negative engagement*. Positive engagement was measured by asking participants to indicate, on a scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely) to what extent they would (1) comment positively about the Roma community on the post they read, (2) report the post, (3) sign a petition supporting Roma people's rights, and (4) go to a meeting defending Roma people's rights. Negative engagement was measured by asking participants to indicate on a scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely) to what extent they would (1) like the post they read, (2) share the post, and (3) comment negatively about the Roma community on the post they read. The seven items are grouped into two factors, with loadings ranging from .588 to .883 for *positive engagement* (*a* = .822, *M* = 2.28, SD = .93) and loadings ranging from .732 to .837 for *negative engagement* (*a* = .767, *M* = 2.18, SD = .97).

We used two control variables, *people's attitude toward Roma people* and *education*. The first was measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good); respondents were asked to evaluate their attitudes toward Roma people (*M* = 3.63, *SD* = 1.65). We measured education on a 9-point ordinal scale (*M* = 5.30, SD = .75).

Findings

Generally speaking, compared with people in the control group, exposure to various degrees of hateful content (varying from derogatory to full hate speech) is linked to lower levels of negative engagement (like, negative comment, and share) and positive engagement (positive comment, report post, sign a petition, go to a meeting to support Roma people; see Table 2 for descriptives).

Table 2. Descriptives of Main Dependent Variables, by Experimental Conditions.

Experimental condition		Negative action	Positive action
Control	M(SD)	2.52(1.03)	2.49(0.86)
	N	101	101
Neutral post with negative comments	M(SD)	2.18(0.88)	2.14(0.85)
	N	123	123
Neutral post with positive comments	M(SD)	2.41(1.01)	2.36(1.02)
	N	103	103
Derogatory content with negative comments	M(SD)	2.27(1.05)	2.38(0.99)
	N	122	122
Derogatory content with positive comments	M(SD)	2.11(0.93)	2.13(0.90)
	N	102	102
Hate speech with negative comments	M(SD)	1.91(0.89)	2.21(0.96)
	N	99	99
Hate speech with positive comments	M(SD)	2.13(0.96)	2.24(0.92)
	N	90	90
Full hate speech with negative comments	M(SD)	1.97(0.93)	2.26(0.97)
	N	107	107
Full hate speech with positive comments	M(SD)	2.13(0.91)	2.35(0.90)
	N	131	131

We ran OLS regressions to look at the main effects of the various combinations between the severity of hate speech and the type of comments on both negative and positive engagement (controlling for opinion about Roma people and education). The severity of hate speech was evaluated using both previous literature and our own classification system, dividing speech into four distinct categories: neutral content (non-offensive language using labels to identify and refer to characteristics of Roma minority in Romania; e.g., Roma people receive state benefits); derogatory speech (mildly offensive language used to denigrate the Roma minority; e.g., tziganes, illiterate people); hate speech (offensive language exhibiting visible intolerance toward the Roma minority; e.g., crows, parasites), and full hate speech (extremely offensive language expressing disgust toward the Roma minority; e.g., dirty crows, filthy gypsies).

Results depicted in Table 3 show that except for derogatory content with positive comments, all the other combinations significantly decrease people's negative engagement with the post (only marginally significant for a neutral post with positive comments; H1b validated). However, positive engagement was not significantly influenced by almost any combination. Neutral posts accompanied by negative comments significantly decrease people's positive engagement with the post, whereas derogatory posts with positive comments and hate speech with negative comments are only marginally significant ($p < .1$; H1a was invalidated). However, a trend could be observed, suggesting that maybe with stronger stimuli, all types of combinations would have a similar result: to decrease people's willingness to positively engage with the post. In other terms, the more severe the hate speech is, the more likely it is to decrease people's intentions to support Roma people.

Table 3. Regression Models Showing Effects of Exposure to Various Facebook Posts With Comments on People's Levels of Online Negative Engagement (Controlled for Opinion About Roma People and Education).

	Negative engagement			Positive engagement		
	B	***SE***	**β**	***B***	***SE***	**β**
Intercept	2.883	.187		1.648	.159	
Neutral post with negative comments	−.309	.125	−.106*	−.241	.106	−.086*
Neutral post with positive comments	−.074	.130	−.023†	−.049	.111	−.016
Derogatory content with negative comments	−.243	.125	−.083	−.058	.107	−.020
Derogatory content with positive comments	−.332	.131	−.105*	−.192	.111	−.063†
Hate speech with negative comments	−.581	.132	−.180***	−.210	.112	−.068†
Hate speech with positive comments	−.316	.135	−.095*	−.051	.115	−.016
Full hate speech with negative comments	−.505	.129	−.163***	−.095	.110	−.032
Full hate speech with positive comments	−.364	.123	−.128**	−.077	.105	−.028
Opinion about Roma people	.089	.018	.152***	.290	.016	.515***
Education	−.116	.023	−.160***	−.050	.019	−.071**

†$p < .1$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Subsequently, we used a two-way ANOVA to examine the effect of various degrees of hate and types of comments on positive and negative engagement (controlling for education and people's opinion about Roma people), but no interaction effect was found ($F_{3,964} = 1.60$, $p = .19$, $\eta^2 = .005$—for negative engagement; $F_{3,964} = 1.17$, $p = .28$, $\eta^2 = .006$—for positive engagement). Simple main-effects analysis showed significant results only for negative engagement—that is, like, share, and negative comment—both for the degree of hateful content ($F_{3,964} = 3.81$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .012$) and the type of comment ($F_{3,964} = 4.73$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .005$). Specifically, hate ($M = 2.04$, SD = .07) and full hate ($M = 2.05$, SD = .06) significantly decrease people's levels of negative engagement with the post, when compared with the control group ($M = 2.49$, SD = .09; H1a rejected and H1b confirmed). In addition, both positive ($M = 2.22$, SD = .05) and negative comments of the post ($M = 2.08$, SD = .04) significantly decrease negative engagement with the post, compared with the control group ($M = 2.49$, SD = .09[1]; H2a invalidated; H2b invalidated; H3a invalidated; H3b validated).

Summing up, we found that (1) the more severe the hate speech is, the less effective it is in mobilizing others to show support or further share it, but with no bystander positive reactions to counterargue it; (2) both negative and positive comments lead to a silencing effect, making bystanders even more passive than they normally are; and (3) the combination of hateful content and positive or negative comments does not have a significant effect on bystanders' reactions.

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[1] All *M* and *SD* values are based on modified population marginal mean, with opinion about Roma people (evaluated at 3.63 value) and education (evaluated at 6.20 value) as covariates.

Discussion

This study contributes with empirical data about the effect of various degrees of hate speech on people's willingness to support or further denigrate the Roma population, analyzing if positive or negative comments accompanying hate speech determine a variation in terms of engagement. This research shows people's general tendencies to keep silent when exposed to hateful content directed against the Roma minority. In addition, exposure to various degrees of hateful content is linked to lower levels of both positive and negative engagement when compared with people in the control group who were exposed to neutral content with no comments.

Results also show that the combination of content and comment did not significantly influence engagement. However, the fact that a comment has positive or negative valence significantly influences bystanders but not always in the expected direction: both supporting and countering comments accompanying hate speech lead to silencing effects.

Looking at all types of effects, an important note is related to the most powerful ones: the silencing effect on positive engagement is strongest for only moderate and, to some extent, contradictory content of posts and comments (i.e., the combinations of neutral language with negative comments and derogatory language with positive comments). One explanation might be found in the spiral of silence: such combinations might make it difficult for the bystanders to assess in any way the climate of opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), and therefore, people might be trapped in a spiral of silence and prefer not to intervene in any way. For negative comments, the most powerful silencers were offensive, and extremely offensive language targeting Roma people (i.e., hate speech and full hate speech according to our categorization of speech) was accompanied by negative comments. This suggests a sort of a boomerang effect of hate speech: in a situation in which people perceive very powerful hateful content enhanced by others' opinions, they refrain from further negatively acting against the discriminated minority. However, they do not react positively, either.

Findings from this study reveal people's general tendency to keep silent and avoid engaging or acting out as a reaction to Facebook posts consisting of various degrees of hateful content directed against the Roma minority group. Furthermore, results show that exposure to any type of comments from other users does not lead to positive engagement; therefore, solutions to reduce and discourage hateful content targeting minority groups should be carefully designed (i.e., to ensure they consider people's general tendency to keep silent rather than to intervene in contexts in which hateful content is present).

The silencing effect might be explained by the fact that discrimination of all sorts falls under the social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010), people being less inclined to admit that they would engage with a hateful post, regardless of the direction of their potential intervention. Although at the level of the sample the mean indicates that people's attitudes about Roma are slightly negative, engaging in accordance with these beliefs would be socially undesirable and unacceptable. Controlling for people's attitudes showed a positive correlation: the more positive people's attitudes toward the Roma people, the stronger their positive reactions but also the stronger their negative engagement. However, the correlation with positive engagement is much stronger. This suggests that the bystander effect of countering hateful content when

perceiving a threatening situation is overshadowed by the possible spiral of silence effect: when in a situation in which the dominant opinion is perceived as strongly negative, regardless of people's own opinion, they will react by becoming (more) silent.

As the silencing trend was registered irrespective of prior opinions or exposure to negative or positive comments, it is somewhat difficult to find a possible line of explanation concerning the lack of intervention through comments in the online bystander effect (Naab et al., 2018). The bystander effect, meaning the tendency to help a victim or a victimized group in a problematic circumstance that diminishes with the number of spectators, is also present in an online setting (Scaffidi Abbate et al., 2022). The counterintuitive finding that people would not counter, even when the situation is perceived as highly threatening, might occur because depersonalized comments offending minority groups at a general level induce less social connection to the victims compared with those against known individuals (Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012).

All forms of discrimination and hate speech harm societies and individuals (Carlson, 2020), and the negative emotions that are aroused through hateful posts influence people's perceptions. A positive aspect the study reveals is that people have a general tendency to avoid engaging with Facebook posts consisting of various degrees of hateful content directed against the Roma minority group, and this way the harm is not spread any further. However, as shown above, people do not have a positive perception or defend the Roma, either.

Theoretical Implications

This study provides insights for both the spiral of silence theory and the bystander effect. Findings suggest that when confronted with a potentially threatening situation, such as severe forms of hate speech against a minority group, people are more likely to be pulled into a spiral of silence in the online environment, even when there is a strong counter argumentation by other participants, than to react positively to the threaten group, *if the dominant perception of the minority group at society level is negative*. In other words, the spiral of silence is more powerful than the bystander effect in situations in which the dominant opinion in society is negative, as is the case with the Roma minority in Romania (Angi et al., 2014). It might be the case that this general negative perception at society level breaks the necessary steps for a bystander effect to occur, as theorized by Latané and Darley (1970): noticing a critical situation, evaluating the situation as critical, feeling personally responsible to intervene, deciding how to help, and finally acting to defend the victim. The personal responsibility step might, in this case, be reduced by the negative assessment of the "climate of opinion" at the society level. This is also the reason why, even when the dominant voices (valence of all comments in this case) in a situation are positive toward the victims, people might still perceive the majority opinion as the one imbued in the society's stereotypes and preconceptions. In short, it is less probable for bystanders to interfere when they have negative opinions of the victimized group (Hayes, 2019) and they avoid speaking up in contradiction with main preconceptions (Moisuc, Brauer, Fonseca, Chaurand, & Greitemeyer, 2018), and it is highly probable for a silence effect to occur, when there is a clear negative perception about a minority group at society level.

Practical Implications

We advocate for both the media and authorities to actively work on changing these underlying negative stereotypes, virtually through awareness campaigns and focused educational content. Understanding the multifaceted nature of online hate against specific groups, as observed in our study, emphasizes the need for a more nuanced approach that targets the underlying causes and perceptions. The observed prevalence of derogatory and full hate speech in our sample underscores the urgent need for enhanced monitoring and regulation of online platforms. We found that even neutral or mildly derogatory terms can significantly shape perceptions of ethnic minorities. This discovery lends support to the importance of education and awareness programs and education interventions in schools that focus on sensitizing people to the subtleties of language use and negative stereotyping of Roma people. The potential solutions to the harmful effects of hate speech against Roma minorities should not necessarily focus on positively reacting to counter hateful content but rather to report the inadequate language immediately, which could be only triggered with long-term educational interventions.

As shown in other studies, penalties impose behaviors but fail to address the prejudices behind them (Card, 2001), so for people to report hateful content they should empathize with the victims by understanding the consequences of hate speech and have an improved attitude toward the vilified groups, which could be a long-term effect of educational interventions and media awareness campaigns. Moreover, considering the low level of intent in engaging with hateful posts irrespective of the positive or negative valence, and considering the bystander effect and that people tend to allocate the responsibility to interfere to online moderators (Goodman, 2013), perhaps the strategies to combat hate speech should consider either allocating dedicated personnel to identify and moderate hateful content or investing in training the algorithms to spot hate more effectively. Another line of action consists of tracing clear boundaries in terms of language that can be used on social media to maintain oneself within the limits of civility, as this would encourage users to engage more in counter speech or reporting actions, while strong language, as shown above and in accordance with these results, encourages a silencing effect.

In sum, the applied and practical implications derived from our research not only align with the goals of our study but also contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges and potential solutions in combating hate speech against marginalized communities. Our specific study observations lead to these concrete strategies, and we believe that they offer a critical pathway toward addressing this pressing issue.

Limitations and Future Directions

Like all research employing an experimental design, our study is not without its limitations. The sample we used is skewed from the point of view of education and residence, which could affect the results. However, we controlled for education, which could potentially affect findings. In addition, there are studies suggesting that various types of engagement operate on different types of cognitive involvement (Heiss et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2018), which makes their aggregation questionable. This is the reason why we opted to report both positive and negative engagement. However, the positive engagement included items that report engaging not only online in the social media environment but also in real life. All measures are self-reported attitudes and can be used only as proxies for real-life behavior.

Considering other limitations of the study—the analysis of one topic, depicted in one specific way, which poses difficulties in generalizing about any type of hate speech against Roma—future research should study different Roma-related topics and portrayal effects. The study could render different results in different cultural contexts, especially considering the intensity of anti-Roma attitudes in various countries. As this study relies on self-report data that can be altered by the social desirability bias, conceivably, future research should include data on behavioral measures. In addition, similar studies might test the "competition" between the dominant opinion in a given situation against the dominant opinion at society level, which might yield interesting new theoretical insights into how both the spiral of silence and the bystander effect occur (or not) in a given situation.

Conclusion

Since there is a trend toward a silencing effect and people are less inclined to engage with hateful posts, future campaigns on combating hate speech should reinforce the need to report skewed or abusive communication. The current research sought to explore the effects of different degrees of online hateful content targeting Roma on users' levels of engagement with the post, along with the effect of negative or counterspeech comments. We have found a silencing trend in terms of engagement that needs further exploration and explanation. Social media can offer the tools to counter hate, but it is also the battleground of arguments and diffused responsibility. This study proposes some possible lines of action in addressing online hate speech based on empirical data and contributes to the body of literature on engagement and counteractions to fight discrimination directed against minority groups, specifically the Roma people.

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Appendix 1. Example of Stimuli Used in the Experiment (With English Translations)

Neutral Language and Positive Comments (RO)

Neutral Language (EN)

Recent E.U. statistics show that illiteracy rate remains high among the Roma population: 9% of Roma people pursue secondary education and only 2% pursue higher education. For almost 40% of the Roma population, the main source of income is state aid, most Roma people being involved in the parallel labor market.

Positive Comments (EN)

P1. It happens like this because no one gave them a chance to go to school, from the teachers who did not receive them in class to the other kids who discriminated them and gave them all kinds of nicknames.

P2. Well, what chances do they have when even at school people make differences? We should have more understanding for them and support Roma mothers to take their kids to school.

P3. I think that we should be worried that so many Roma people receive state aids instead of receiving real support to be integrated into the labor market and to get a chance to be like the rest of us. We should all help them; it's harder for them than for us.

Neutral Language and Negative Comments (RO)

Gabi Popescu
10 hrs ·

Statistici recente ale Uniunii Europene arată faptul că rata de analfabetism rămâne ridicată în rândul populației rome, 9% dintre romi urmează studii secundare și numai 2% urmează studii universitare. Pentru aproape 40% din populația romă cea mai importantă sursă de venituri sunt ajutoarele de la stat, majoritatea romilor fiind implicați pe piața muncii paralele.

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Maria Ionescu Se intampla asa, desi au avut chiar multe sanse sa mearga la scoala, de la invatatoarele care i-au primit cu bratele deschise pana la colegii care nu i-au discriminat si i-au tratat normal.

Like · Reply · See Translation · 2hrs

↳ 16 Replies

Nicoleta Curea Au avut o mie de sanse, nimeni nu face diferente la scoala. Nu ar trebui sa avem atata intelegere si mamele de tigani sa-si tina plozii acasa, nu la scoala!

Like · Reply · See Translation · 2hrs

↳ 17 Replies

Ștefan Știrbu Eu zic ca n-ar trebui sa ne ingrijoreze faptul ca atatia tigani primesc ajutoare, ci mai degraba faptul ca ar putea beneficia de suport pentru a fi integrati pe piata muncii si pentru a fi in rand cu noi, ceilalti. Nu noi ar trebui sa ii ajutam, de ce ar fi mai greu pentru ei decat pentru noi?

Negative Comments (EN)

N1. This is indeed happening; although they had a lot of chances to go to school, everybody welcomed them with open arms from the teachers to the rest of the colleagues who didn't discriminate them and treated them normally.

N2. They had a thousand chances, no one makes differences at school. We shouldn't have so much understanding for them, and gypsy mothers should keep their brats at home or on the streets, not at school!

N3. I think that we should not be worried about the fact that so many gypsies receive state aids, but rather about the fact that they could receive real support to be integrated into the labor market and to live like the rest of us. We're not supposed to help them; why is it harder for them than for us?