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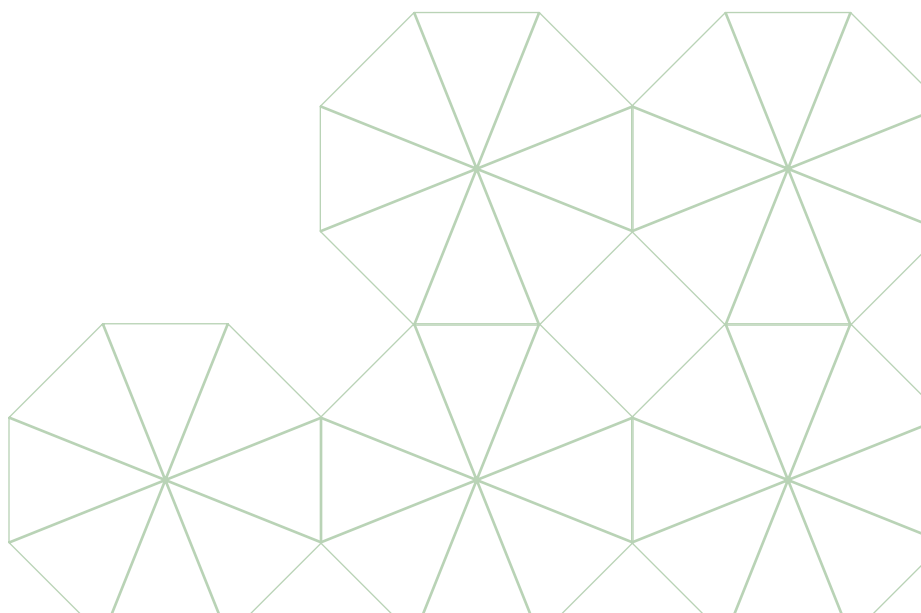
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Introduction

Over the past several years, hate speech and hate-related incidents have become a growing concern in American schools¹ and across the world.² Online spaces, in particular, have emerged as one of the settings where hate speech occurs. Given that nearly 97 percent of U.S. teens report using the internet daily and the percentage of teens who use the internet “almost constantly” continues to grow from 24 percent in 2014–2015 to 46 percent in 2022,³ young people born in the digital age are especially vulnerable to negative content online.⁴ In recent years, researchers interested in the well-being of children and adolescents have expanded their focus from traditional bullying behavior and victimization situated in physical spaces to similar phenomena in cyberspace.^{5,6} Although limited, research on hate speech is growing.⁷ In this brief, we draw from recent empirical studies and systematic reviews pertaining to online* hate speech and its impact on student well-being to inform reflection questions for educators and leaders. We first summarize current debates around the definition of online hate speech and its connection to related phenomena, such as cyberbullying. We then analyze online hate speech through a social justice perspective, focusing on student subgroups that are disproportionately targeted by such speech. Specifically, this perspective involves analyzing the systemic inequalities and oppressions that contribute to the prevalence of online hate speech and online hate speech’s impact on marginalized communities. Lastly, we draw from the related cyberbullying research literature to provide practical insights for educators and leaders in creating safe and supportive school environments that protect students from online hate speech.



Online Hate Speech: Unique and Prevalent Phenomenon Among Youth

In the research literature, there exists substantial ambiguity with respect to the definition of hate speech.² After conducting a systematic review of hate speech research, Kansok-Dusche and colleagues suggested that “online hate speech” (also referred to as “cyberhate,” albeit sharing some similarities with “cyberbullying” and “insult”) is a distinct phenomenon of hate speech. The researchers offered the following working definition of “hate speech”:

Hate speech is a derogatory expression (e.g., words, posts, text messages, images, videos) about people (directly or vicariously) on the basis of assigned group characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion). Hate speech is based on an intention to harm and it has the potential to cause harm on multiple different levels (e.g., individual, communal, societal; p. 11).²

Following this definition,[†] online hate speech occurs in virtual contexts. Online hate speech is often seen as closely overlapping with other similar phenomena, such as cyberbullying or insults that occur online.⁸ However, nuanced differentiations among these phenomena are worth highlighting. Definitions of online hate speech and its distinction from several related phenomena are listed in Table 1.

Specifically, cyberbullying involves a repeated activity, whereas online hate speech could manifest as a single act.^{10,11} Online hate speech is also distinct from cyberbullying based on the characteristics of the target. Online hate speech often aims to denigrate a collective group of people whereas cyberbullying expressions attack the individual (although the reason the individual is the target may be their group membership).¹² Moreover, cyberhate denigrates the common characteristics of a social group, which differs from insults posted online that

denigrate the characteristics of a specific individual.² As we highlight the distinctions among these related phenomena, it is important to note that an individual may experience cyberhate, cyberbullying, and online insult simultaneously in a single incident. In this brief, we focus specifically on literature that attends to the increasingly concerning phenomenon of online hate speech and the empirical evidence on its prevalence.

In a study examining the phenomenon of online hate in eight countries[†] researchers found that cyberhate is a pervasive challenge around the globe faced by young people ages 12 to 18 years old.¹³ The youth sample from India reported the lowest percentage (31 percent) of exposure to online hate speech and adolescents from Spain reported the highest percentage (68.5 percent). In the United States sample, 36 percent reported being exposed to cyberhate and 24.5 percent reported being perpetrators of cyberhate. According to another recent report focusing on cyberbullying, nearly half of teens in the United States have been bullied or harassed online.¹⁴ It is possible that the rate of cyberhate differs in research studies due to variations in scholars’ definitions of online hate speech, the age groups included in the samples, and the specific measures used to assess it.⁵ Overall, however, empirical evidence supports the prevalence of online hate speech in the United States and globally. However, less is known about younger children, as no cyberhate studies have focused on children younger than 12 years old.² The lack of cyberhate research on younger students mirrors the sparsity of research on internet use in this group; however, this does not suggest that younger children are protected from negative or violent content in online spaces.¹⁵ Hence, as more children start to use the internet at an early age,¹⁵ more research is warranted to better understand young children’s experience of and exposure to online content.

Table 1.
Definitions of Online Hate Speech and Differentiation from Related Phenomena

<i>Construct Term</i>	<i>Definition and Differentiation</i>
Online hate speech/Cyberhate	Online hate speech, also called cyberhate, is the online modus of hate speech, defined as “a derogatory expression about people on the basis of assigned group characteristics.” ²
Cyberbullying	Cyberbullying is broadly defined as repeated aggressive and hostile messages intentionally sent to harm an individual through electronic media. ⁹
Online insult	Online insult, unlike cyberhate, denigrates the characteristics of specific individuals and may occur repeatedly whereas cyberhate expressions target the characteristics of specific social groups and can be carried out as a single act, although both phenomena occur through electronic media. ²

Social Injustice Toward Individuals from Minoritized Groups^s Expands Through Online Hate Speech

Online hate speech is a part of the larger pattern of historical and current injustice toward individuals from minoritized groups, reflecting the deep-seated prejudice, stereotypes, and systemic discrimination within our society. Although online hate speech is prevalent among all youth, historically minoritized groups continue to be more susceptible to harm related to cyberhate.⁵ As highlighted in the definition of hate speech, minoritized groups are often targets of hate speech posted in online spaces. Such group identity could be related but is not limited to country of origin, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and other social identities — protected classes under civil rights legislation. In a report created by the UK Safer Internet Center,¹⁶ results showed that 20 percent of young people with disabilities witnessed cyberhate targeting their group compared to 12 percent of their counterparts with no disabilities. Moreover, 20 percent of youth from Black, Asian, and Middle Eastern ethnic-racial backgrounds reported exposure to cyberhate compared to 11 percent of their White peers. Evidence suggested that girls (87 percent) more frequently than boys (77 percent) encountered cyberhate on social media sites. In another study, 42 percent of multiracial/other-race adolescents reported experiences of cyberhate, whereas 29 percent of Black and 20 percent of White adolescents reported similar experiences.¹⁷ These findings suggest that youth with multiple minoritized identities might be greater targets of online hate speech.

Recently, in a report generated by the Pew Research Center based on survey data collected from American teenagers, Black teens were two times more likely than their peers to report that their race made them a target of online abuse.¹⁴ Additionally, Black and Hispanic teens were more likely than their White peers to report cyberbullying as a major problem for people their age. Moreover, nearly one in ten teenagers who disclosed previous encounters with negative incidents online indicated that their sexual orientation was the reason why they were targeted.¹⁴ These findings highlight ongoing discrimination and prejudice toward individuals with minoritized group identities and shed light on the maltreatment of these individuals in cyberspaces.

Implications for Educators and Leaders

Despite the high prevalence of online hate speech, there is limited research on cyberhate intervention strategies and their effectiveness.¹⁸ In Blaya's review of extant intervention programs against cyberhate, she identified three key areas for hate speech intervention: law, technology, and education. While key stakeholders (i.e., legislatures, leaders in the information and communications technology industry, and education leaders) need to collaborate in order to effectively prevent and counter cyberhate, educators and school leaders may contribute to this collective effort through implementing local educational prevention and intervention strategies. One particular educational approach involves Media and Information Literacy

(MIL), which provides young people with skills to consume online content critically; identify hateful, disturbing, and misleading information; and advocate for positive values.¹⁸ A study evaluating the effectiveness of the Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media school-based intervention in traditional public schools and charter middle schools suggested that MIL is effective in increasing students' awareness of negative content online and its impact on individuals exposed to such content, and in preventing students from engaging in harmful behaviors.¹⁹ Researchers have also generated practical applications based on theory and previous empirical study findings for educators and teachers to effectively integrate critical media literacy into classrooms at all grade levels (for more information, see original text cited in References).²⁰

Unlike the sparsity of research on online hate speech interventions, there are relatively more school- and evidence-based interventions focusing on other closely related phenomena (e.g., cyberbullying and bullying in physical settings). As we hope that future research will expand knowledge on how to reduce online hate speech, we draw from related research on bullying and cyberbullying interventions in this brief to provide some practical insights for educators and leaders. In their systematic review, Kansok-Dusche and colleagues suggested that there are empirical associations between individuals' experiences of conventional bullying and online hate speech as well as between experiences of cyberbullying and online hate speech.² Hence, students experiencing cyberbullying or bullying offline may also be susceptible to online hate speech. A meta-analysis on the effectiveness of school-based anti-cyberbullying programs suggested that evidence-based programs helped reduce students' probability of cyberbullying victimization by 14 to 15 percent.²¹ Multi-level school-based bullying programs encompassing school-level, classroom-level, and individual-level, as well as family-school partnerships, were also effective in reducing bullying victimization.²²

Importantly, there may not be clear demarcations or distinct boundaries between cyberbullying, bullying, and online hate speech. For instance, online hate speech may be triggered by an incident offline, and social media often plays a role in making physical incidents public. Therefore, as the field waits for research on anti-cyberhate interventions to advance, education leaders and practitioners may devote their energy to evaluating the effectiveness of currently implemented anti-bullying or anti-cyberbullying programs at their school and potentially adapt their current programs to incorporate MIL and/or critical media literacy¹¹ training to protect students from online hate speech.¹⁸⁻²⁰ From a socio-ecological perspective, equally important is to create a safe and supportive classroom environment and to help students develop empathy for peers who are victims of hate speech and develop self-efficacy toward intervening in hate speech based on the belief that hate speech is hurtful to any individual.^{6, 23} A 2022 study found that within a positive classroom environment, students who were empathetic and confident in their own skills to counter hate speech were most engaged in counterspeech.

In light of these lessons learned from previous research, we propose the following reflection questions for educators and leaders to consider in their effort to intervene and protect their students from being harmed by online hate speech.

Reflection Questions

Teacher Leaders:

- ▶ How often might teachers observe/witness online hate speech in their classrooms?
- ▶ What are some practical strategies that teachers can implement to address online hate speech when observed in their classrooms?
- ▶ Are teachers utilizing the available interventions and preventions for hate speech at your school? What are areas for development/improvement?
- ▶ What are some essential skills that teachers need in order to establish a safe and supportive environment for students to develop empathy for peers who are victims of hate speech and develop self-efficacy to intervene?

School Leaders:

- ▶ What data do you have about hate speech affecting your school community? Where might you get that information?
- ▶ What policies and procedures do you have in place to respond when hate speech incidents are brought to your attention?
- ▶ What is the policy in place at your school regarding the use of phones and electronic devices to access the internet during school hours?
- ▶ How are conversations that introduce and address incidents related to hate and cyberbullying being facilitated at your school? What resources are available for your school to help create a culture of respect and empathy for students and teachers to engage in conversations about online hate speech and related issues?
- ▶ What opportunities exist to hear from multiple stakeholders about students' experiences with hate speech experiences, response, and prevention? For example, are there student groups (e.g., clubs, organizations) at your school whose leaders may be able to inform your understanding?
- ▶ What resources or professional development opportunities, such as existing MIL and/or critical media literacy or anti-bullying or anti-cyberbullying programs, are available or needed to enhance the skills of teachers and school community members in addressing incidents of hate and cyberbullying effectively?

District Leaders:

- ▶ What data do you have about the rates or occurrences of hate speech in your district? Where might you get that information?
- ▶ What policies and procedures do you have in place to respond when hate speech incidents are brought to your attention? How are you supporting school leaders to address these incidents?
- ▶ How are school leaders and administrators trained to identify and respond to incidents of online hate speech? How can you encourage increased collaboration among key stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and parents, to establish a comprehensive and supportive approach toward addressing concerns related to online hate speech and promoting student well-being?
- ▶ What strategies has the district implemented to promote social justice and equity, particularly as it relates to online hate speech?

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About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders — teacher, site, and district— to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, especially for educational leaders. These research briefs compile and present current research in a concise format. They also include reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. Companion practice briefs gather and lift the voices and the experiences of educational leaders for dissemination among researchers.

21CSLA also regularly produces Research-Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research/webinars>

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Endnotes

* “Online” includes a wide range of platforms, ranging from static websites to interactive social media networks and gaming platforms.

† We recognize the limitations of this working definition, which primarily focuses on the intention of the speaker when analyzing hate speech statements. We also emphasize the significance of considering the recipient’s perception of a statement in instances of hate speech.

‡ The eight countries include Cyprus, Germany, Greece, India, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, and the United States.

§ We use the terms “minoritized groups” to refer to social groups that are marginalized or persecuted based on their social group membership because of systemic oppression.

|| For the purposes of this brief, it is important to acknowledge that “MIL” (Media and Information Literacy) and “critical media literacy” are distinct but related concepts. While both terms encompass the development of skills and competencies necessary to navigate and critically engage with media, they may vary in their emphasis and theoretical underpinnings. However, due to the limited scope of this document, a detailed exploration of the differences between these concepts is beyond its intended focus. For further information on the specific nuances and divergences between MIL and critical media literacy, we refer to the works of the cited authors.

Recruitment

Are you an educational leader willing to share your experiences to be highlighted in our companion 21CSLA Practice Brief? Visit <https://tinyurl.com/sharewith21CSLAPracticeBrief> to let us know!