

# Flame wars

A PSYCHOLOGICAL TOOLBOX



HATE  
TRACKERS

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# FLAME WARS

A psychological toolbox

**HATE** BEYOND BORDERS  
**TRACKERS**



Agenzia Italiana  
per la Gioventù



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# SOCIAL MEDIA PANORAMA

Social media has become a significant part of our daily lives. Globally, billions of people regularly use social media platforms. For example, in 2023 Facebook surpassed 2.9 billion monthly active users, Instagram reached 14 billion users and TikTok overcame 1 billion active users. These numbers indicate the widespread use of social media worldwide. Social media usage has grown in recent years due to their ability to connect people, share content, and influence opinions.

People use social media for a variety of reasons. Some common motivations are:

01

**connecting with friends  
and family**

02

**sharing personal  
experiences and  
content**

03

**professional  
networking**

04

**accessing news  
and information,  
entertainment through  
videos and images**

05

**expressing their  
opinions  
and viewpoint**

Motivations for using social media can vary significantly from person to person and change over time. Understanding these motivations is crucial to grasp how people interact with social media platforms and how these platforms influence social and cultural dynamics.

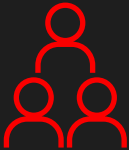
# THE IDENTITY

Every single social media user is a person with a specific identity.

There are two types of identity:



**Personal identity is that 'thing' that makes you different from all other people.**



**Group identity is when you identify with certain groups of people to which they feel they belong. Membership in these groups informs their behavior and shapes beliefs, values, and relationships.**

In our daily life, we play a lot of identities! For example, most of us will seek out people of a similar age when we join a youth group. Similarly, in international contexts, we tend to identify with the other people of the country we belong to. If I ask you to divide into four groups, you probably divide based on your nationality, because it is the aspect of your identity more dominant in this specific context.

The concept of identity is often confused with the term personality, but personality is just the psychological component of identity. The other two components of identity are physical aspects (e.g. hair, eyes, height - the info in our ID) and social characteristics (e.g. age, location, occupation).

# FROM STEREOTYPES TO DISCRIMINATION

Which are your features that are judged by others?

This is the conceptual link between **identity** (a neutral description) and **stereotypes** (a judgment).

Stereotypes are widely held but fixed and oversimplified images or ideas of a particular type of person or thing.

They are necessary to help us in social interactions, to make fast decisions, and to help us to adapt our behavior in social contexts.

For example, if I see a child, I classify it as a child with specific characteristics in my mind: not cognitively developed, easythinking, he/she doesn't know complex words, so I adapt my behavior in the interaction based on these characteristics.

Stereotypes do not necessarily need to be negative (this is a stereotype as well).

Stereotypes can be negative and/or positive. Many stereotypes attribute positive qualities to entire groups, such as "Jamaicans are relaxed" or "gay men have fantastic fashion sense". While positive stereotypes may seem harmless enough it is important to recognize that all stereotypes are problematic because they have a damaging effect. For example, belief in the stereotypical notion that 'all Asians are brilliant at school' may lead teachers to presume that all people of Asian origin do extremely well in Maths and other subjects and, therefore, not notice who has difficulty.

# FROM STEREOTYPES TO DISCRIMINATION

Stereotypes are one of the three components of biases, the cognitive one.

A bias is a false or inaccurate set of beliefs. It is an implicit (outside of our awareness) and automatic mechanism. They exist because of our brain's need to simplify the information we are being subjected to.

People are often biased against others outside of their social group (out-groups), showing prejudice (emotional bias), stereotypes (cognitive bias), and discrimination (behavioral bias). These three aspects of bias are related.

Different stereotypes evoke different emotional responses. These include derogatory attitudes or overt hostility, called prejudices.

Stereotypes and prejudices are at the base of discrimination. Discriminations can be direct - this tends to be more obvious (e.g. racist comments or sacking a woman due to pregnancy) or indirect - less obvious (e.g. forcing everyone in a company to start work at 8.00 in the morning when this may negatively affect working mothers).

# HATE SPEECH: DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

Not all negative speech is hate speech. It is why it is important to distinguish clearly between free speech and hate speech.

You could, for example, disagree with a religious doctrine or policy without being hateful. You can certainly disagree or criticize a public official or any other person without it being hate speech.

Free speech encourages debate whereas hate speech incites violence.

**IF SOMETHING TARGETS A GROUP OR PERSON  
BECAUSE OF AN ASPECT OF THEIR IDENTITY,  
IT IS HATE SPEECH.**

Hate speech is any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language concerning a person or a group based on their identities.

Hate speech, particularly online, often describes those targeted as being 'the other', in opposition to the author's group, and even dehumanize them. Hate speech perpetrators often see 'the other' as enemies and the sole cause of problems in society.



# HATE SPEECH: DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

Hate speech is more common against migrants (xenophobia), Muslims, and people with different sexual orientations: gay ordinary, and so on.

We can classify hate speech into three major categories:

- 01** The first involves physical violence that can bring to kill people that are part of different social media groups: the out-group.
- 02** The second, which is most often associated with hate speech, involves dehumanizing and demonizing the out-group and its members. It refers to the use of violent language. dehumanization and demonization characterize groups of people in extremely negative ways.
- 03** The third one is more subtle. A very early precursor to hates peech is simply creating an in-group ("us") versus an out-group ("them") dynamic, and distinguishing "them" as a separate group with different ideas and beliefs. The spread of hateful rhetoric can be an early warning of violence.

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS: FROM HATE SPEECH TO FLAME WARS

To understand the process of hate speech (why it exists and how it works) we can refer to a psychological model, based on the individual and mental mechanisms.

Hate speech arises based on stereotypes (cognitive aspects) and prejudices (emotional aspects) and this is an action of discrimination.

Every one of us can become a hater. Because it depends on 3 aspects:



**Automatic cognitive  
mechanisms  
(stereotypes)**



**Individual  
characteristics  
(personality) and status**



**The context**

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS: FROM HATE SPEECH TO FLAME WARS

The online context has specific characteristics that can cause and explain the hate speech:

Being anonymous in today's digital age means not revealing some personal information, such as gender, weight, age, occupation, or ethnic origin, while engaging in online activities. Several studies have shown that anonymity is a main factor in inducing the online disinhibition effect.

Echo chambers reinforce our existing beliefs. This leads to polarization of ideas (we think the same things and they are opposite between them). In the online world, personalized algorithms make this effect very prominent!

Fake news plays an important role in fueling hate speech and extremism online. It is at the base of misinformation, which refers to the unintentional spread of inaccurate information.

The impact of fake news is on individuals, but also on the entire society.

The impact of online hate speech is stronger than offline hate speech, because online hate speech is more pervasive, less under control, and with the worst potential psychological impacts.

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS: FROM HATE SPEECH TO FLAME WARS

A flame war is an intense and ongoing argument that takes place in online forums and other online discussion spaces.

The flame becomes a flame war when other users respond to the thread with their own flame message.

Two main characteristics of flame wars are:

Focus on the person and ignore totally the ideas. Flame involve deeply personal attacks, often regarding the creator's sexuality, intelligence, choice of fandom, family, or friends, with random cursing thrown in. If there is any reference to the product, it will be used to insult the creator (eg: "How stupidare you to have written this awful trash?").

A popular stereotype of a Flame Review is that it is badly spelled and typed in All Caps, but this is not compulsory.

# LABORATORY: HOW TO ANALYZE

An activity that helps to develop critical thinking, to analyze and classify hate speech.

Within the three typologies of hate speech of the previous classification, there are other 6 categories that differ in their intensity. There is a more specific and detailed model (The hate speech intensity scale) that describes the intensity of hate speech from disagreement to death. Every degree has a specific color.

Within this scale, a distinction is made between **rhetoric** and **response**. Rhetoric includes negative words or phrases associated with the targeted out-group.

Response includes proposed actions that the in-group should take, in response to the actions of the out-group.

Climbing the scale we start from **the lower level of hate speech** which is disagreement. It involves disagreeing with the ideas or beliefs of a particular group. While there is nothing wrong with disagreeing with ideas or beliefs, what makes this category an early warning to future hate speech is the creation of the "us vs. them" framework. This is also problematic because in most cases, it will involve oversimplification and stereotyping of the out-group.

The **second level** has the rhetoric that highlights nonviolent negative actions associated with the out-group, such as claims that the group stole. They use nonviolent negative metaphors.

# LABORATORY: HOW TO ANALYZE

The **third early-warning typology** includes negative characterizations or insults. This is worse than just negative nonviolent actions, as it makes an intrinsic claim about the group. It is a generalization, not limited to just a single action.

The **fourth degree** uses strong metaphors that compare the outgroup to subhuman entities, such as pigs, rats, and monkeys.

The **fifth category** refers to literal violence allocated to out-groups either in their past, present, or future nonlethal violent actions. This also includes metaphorical or aspirational violence that is either nonlethal or lethal.

# LABORATORY: HOW TO REACT

There are 3 macro-types of reactions to a hate speech or a flame war:

**PASSIVE** - the focus is on ourselves

**AGGRESSIVE** - the focus is on others

(irony is here because it is a way to belittle the response of others and self-affirm)

**Assertive** - the focus is on ourselves and others at the same time, because there is mutual respect

Nonviolent communication is a model to help people to move from the jackal to the giraffe. It is based on the principle that to overcome hate speech it is necessary to understand that there is another person on the other side of the screen with feelings and needs.

# LABORATORY: HOW TO REACT

Based on this model we have to train ourselves to:

- 01** To listen and observe, without judgment, the interlocutor. **OBSERVE** means to not evaluate, to talk about a specific action, without generalizing with words like: always, never...
- 02** To perceive and express our **FEELINGS**. It means being able to separate feelings from opinions, evaluation, and criticism.
- 03** To understand our **NEEDS**, especially when the conversation is emotional, it is important to not forget questions such as: what are my needs?  
What result will I achieve from this conversation?
- 04** To ask a **REQUEST** to satisfy needs.  
After expressing our feelings and needs, we must conclude the speech with specific requests, formulated not in the form of an order, intimidation, demand, or obligation.

An example of an application is: "I noticed that we arrived late. This makes me feel frustrated because in this period I need to be fast and avoid wasting time.

Are you willing to arrive on time at our next meeting?"



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