HATE SPEECH IN THE ROMANIAN ONLINE MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ROMA MINORITY

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ABSTRACT

In addition to their potential to stimulate conversation and participation in the (online) public sphere, social media have also become a springboard for hate speech (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Ethnic minorities are among the preferred targets of online hateful content. In this paper, we report findings from an experiment that measured the extent to which exposure to various degrees of hate speech on Facebook, accompanied by positive or negative comments, might influence Romanians' willingness to engage civically with the Roma minority. The results show that the level of civic engagement is negatively impacted by exposure to hateful content, ranging from derogatory to extreme hate speech. People's willingness to support the Roma minority is reduced by exposure to hateful Facebook posts accompanied by negative comments. Furthermore, negative comments are associated with lower levels of civic engagement, which may suggest that reactions to hate speech could play a more significant role than the post itself.

Keywords: online hate speech, Roma minority, civic engagement, counter speech, positive vs. negative comments.

INTRODUCTION

Although being praised for their potential to foster democratic deliberation (Rishel, 2011; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), social media continue to be saturated with

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hate speech and uncivil discourse. Despite the constant efforts of social media platforms to resist harmful user-generated content, there is still a huge amount of hateful content flooding them. A March 2021 report of the UN Special Rapporteur of minority issues emphasizes the "overwhelming scale of hate speech targeting minorities on social media" (de Varennes, 2021, p. 2), while a 2016 Eurobarometer survey (Special Eurobarometer 452, 2016) shows that 75% of the people who follow or participate in online debates have witnessed or experienced abuse, threat, or hate speech.

Although targets of discrimination have varied in Romania historically and geographically (Aluas & Matei, 1998), the Roma minority is one of the groups most exposed to hate speech in Romania (Codreanu *et al.*, 2019; Răileanu *et al.*, 2018). Romania's second largest ethnic minority, Roma people (still) face discrimination with regard to employment, accessing public services, healthcare and legal services, and education (Marin & Csonta, 2012). Additionally, their representation in both mainstream (Crețu, 2014) and social media (Breazu & Machin, 2019; Molnar, 2021) is mostly a negative one; they are often associated with promiscuity, laziness, criminality, illiteracy, immorality, and resistance to integration into mainstream society. As shown by different studies and reports (Pew Research Center, 2019; Pogány, 2006; Tileagă, 2006), the Roma people are the most socially unaccepted, denigrated, and discriminated ethnic minority in Europe, and particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. While many of them live in poverty and struggle with social exclusion (Pavlova, 2021), the Roma are oftentimes considered "as beggars, criminals, profiteers, and lazy, being a target of marginalization and social exclusion, as well as perpetual discriminatory and violent practices on an interpersonal, institutional, and national level" (Sam Nariman *et al.*, 2020, p. 1).

Stereotypically perceived as the «enemy», a "disruptive minority" (Crețan & Turnock, 2008, p. 296), Romani population has been the target of vilification and stigmatization campaigns motivated, among other factors, by outbursts of populism and nationalism (Crețan & Turnock, 2019).

The technological progress and the inexpensive, easy Internet access practically enabled everyone to propagate their ideas and rhetoric, reaching a wide audience at a fast rate. Studies have shown that online hate speech might pose a threat to democracy as it may silence minorities and undermine their political participation in democratic processes (Maitra, 2012; West, 2012). Exposure to online hateful content influences also individuals' willingness to engage in online civic intervention; according to Kunst et. al (2021), people are more likely to take action when exposed to comments that contain obvious hate speech than when confronted with a more subtle form of hate speech.

In this paper, we seek to determine if and how Romanians' civic engagement is affected by online hate speech targeting the Roma minority. We start from the premise that online activity can facilitate civic engagement (Citron & Norton,

2011) seen as the way in which "an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). Drawing on an experimental research design, we examine the extent to which exposure to online hate speech against the Roma influences Romanians' active support for a specific Roma issue (*e.g.*, donating to a cause supporting Roma people's rights). We believe that this study is timely, given the high rate of discrimination against this minority in Romania and the breeding ground for online hate speech provided by the social media.

PROLIFERATION OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

Scholars, pundits, authorities and social media platforms themselves unanimously recognize that hate speech on social media is a serious problem with grave consequences. The communicative affordances of social media have opened up new opportunities for generating and spreading online hate messages. Hate speech, especially online hateful content, is essentially a discursive phenomenon which seems to share a close compatibility with the new (social) media communicative paradigm, where the participatory web redefines social media's role as a many-to-many dynamic of discursive practice (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018, p. 54). Online hate speech speech benefts benefits from the low-cost and high-speed dissemination opportunities provided by social media, which seem to serve as a springboard for hate speech. Virtually, anyone with internet access could potentially produce, publish, and disseminate hateful materials affecting many people almost instantly. Social media platforms allow people to knowingly or unknowingly be exposed to hate speech online, even though these platforms do not directly increase exposure to this type of speech (Costello *et al*., 2018; Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2014). However, these social media platforms offer like-minded people, sharing similar worldviews, a virtual space (the echo-chambers) in which they can voice and amplify their beliefs, including hatred comments against different targets (Costello *et al*., 2018; KhosraviNik, 2017), leading to the so-called "discursive spiral of hate" (Kopytowska *et al*., 2017, p. 68). Despite ongoing attempts to monitor, assess and censor hate posts distributed on social media platforms, hate speech remains largely an uncontrollable phenomenon. While having taken huge efforts to flag and ban hateful messages circulating on their platform, Facebook's trumpeted "zero tolerance approach" to hate speech seems to have hit a wall. Former UK politician turned Facebook top flack Nick Clegg grimly admitted that "with so much content posted every day, rooting out the hate is like looking for a needle in a haystack" (Marantz, 2020).

Hate speech is a significant problem for any society, since it consists of a wide range of (verbal, nonverbal, symbolic) actions used to disparage, degrade, and even persecute members of specific minority groups because of their membership

(Simpson, 2013). Online hate speech can be defined as discrimination against disempowered social groups on the grounds of skin color, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, political beliefs, immigration, and religion (Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2017; Blazak, 2009). While online hate speech targets a collective, cyberbullying targets individuals whose distressing online experiences seem to actually mimic the "traditional" offline bullying to which these individuals were already the victims of (Olweus, 2012). In our study, we seek to empirically measure the extent to which exposure to hatred content posted on Facebook and targeting one of the largest and highly discriminated minorities in Romania may affect people's willingness to engage in issues regarding the rights of the Roma minority. Therefore, we attempt to shed light on the effects that ethnic origin-motivated online hateful speech may have on people's ability to use civic engagement strategies to work towards the empowerment of the targeted ethnic minority.

EFFECTS OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

The negative consequences of (online) hate speech have been largely acknowledged by the growing body of literature in the field. Hate speech can cause damages that range from long lasting psychological harm (Nielsen, 2002; Maitra, 2012; Boeckmann & Liew, 2002) to physical violence (Muller & Schwarz, 2018; Fyfe, 2017), which can be inflicted in people either directly or indirectly (Keipi *et al*., 2017; Lee & Leets, 2002). Exposure to online hate speech can have long-term effects on targeted individuals (*e.g*., increasing feelings of anger, loneliness, fear) as well as long-term implications that impact negatively on the democratic societies and lead to erosion of social trust, increased polarization and proliferation of extremist ideologies (Lee & Leets, 2002; Tynes, 2006; Foxman & Wolf, 2013; Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2017). New technological affordances prompted by social media have made possible a (virtually) uncontrollable spread of information online, which often favors the circulation of misleading information. A recent study (Hameleers *et al*., 2021) focusing on the link between incivility, hate speech and misinformation has shown that partisan attacks, negative assessments and hate speech most likely occur in false information statements. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have fueled the toxicity of hate speech online, especially of the hate speech delivered by radical right politicians to promote their exclusion-oriented agenda and shift blame for the pandemic onto minorities and immigrants (Caiani, Carlotti & Padoan, 2021).

Repeated exposure to hate speech may lead to desensitization, *i.e*., people become less sensitive to hate speech and more prejudiced against the targets of this type of verbal behavior (Soral *et al*., 2017). In her study of perceived harm of racist slurs targeted at African, Asian or Hispanic Americans, Leets (2001) showed that repeated exposure to racist speech increased ethnic minority participants' levels of

desensitization in the sense that they seemingly become more tolerant to this type of speech. Similarly, a more recent study shows that hate speech (*i.e*., exposure to derogatory language) targeting immigrants and minority groups leads to increased political radicalization and erodes anti- discriminatory norms via desensitization (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Hate speech targeting the Roma seems to be "socially tolerated" by Reddit users, despite attempts of some people to offer more neural and nuanced views on both Roma and Romanians (Molnar, 2021, p. 1122).

Hate speech is primarily a matter of language use. Leets and Giles (1999) have shown that any form of harmful speech (*e.g*., racism, sexism, ageism) depends on either the speaker's intended or receiver's perceived harm conveyed by the utterances that denigrate or insult different minorities defined by ethnicity, gender or age. Members of ethnic minorities (*e.g*., Jews, African Americans, Roma) are often the targets of hate speech and previous research (Leader *et al*., 2009; Mullen, 2004; Mullen & Rice, 2003) has shown that ethnophaulisms, *i.e*., ethnic slurs and epithets, are essential components of hate speech. Furthermore, there is an increasing scholarly interest in the consequences that ethnophaulisms have on their targets. Mullen and Rice (2003) pointed out that being the target of ethnic slurs predicted the exclusion of ethnic immigrants from the host American society. Both the complexity and the negative valence of ethnophaulism seem to be relevant predictors of the exclusion of ethnic groups (Mullen, 2004; Mullen & Rice, 2003). Nevertheless, according to empirical evidence (Mullen & Smyth, 2004), complexity plays a more important role in the intensity of the effect (Mullen & Smyth, 2004).

Based on the intensity of the harmful intent of the hate speech, several studies have suggested different classes (Sharma *et al*., 2018) or degrees (Ghanea, 2013) of hate speech that differ in the intensity of the real or perceived harm. According to Sharma *et al*. (2018), hate language used on Twitter can fall into three categories, based on the perceived intensity of the harmful speech. Thus, hate speech range from incitement to violence (class I hate speech displaying a high degree of what Tirrell (2017) labels as "toxic speech", which includes extremism and propaganda) to cyber banter (class II hate speech which includes aggressive language used to intimidate, to threat, to project fear) and, finally, to criticizing, via irony and sarcasm, to trolling and bullying (class III hate speech), the least harmful type of hate speech usually referred to as derogatory language. Another classification of hate speech (Ghanea, 2013) uses measurements of the intensity of feeling to distinguish between discriminatory speech (least harmful) and incitement to hatred on the spectrum of racist hate speech, which also includes incitement to terrorism and incitement to genocide (most harmful).

Our study is premised on the idea that the type of language used to denigrate minority groups such as the Roma influences people's attitude towards them. Ideally, social media platforms are expected to impact positively on the democratization of the society by enhancing connectivity and civic engagement.

However, these platforms also offer a fertile ground to the proliferation of hate speech, misinformation and of polarizing content, which may cause people to retreat from civic engagement and, ultimately, show less tolerance for ethnic minorities such as the Roma. One of the research questions of our study is: to what extent does the exposure to various degrees of online hate speech directed against Roma people lead to more (or less) civic engagement with the Roma minority group? (RQ1) To this end, based on the existing literature to date (*e.g*., Ghanea, 2013; Sharma *et al*., 2018; Tirrell, 2017), we have built an *ad hoc* discursive classification of online hate speech directed at Roma people, which includes the following categories (together with examples of expressions): neutral language (labels to identify and refer to the Roma minority in Romania, *e.g*., Roma recipients of state benefits, high rate of illiteracy among Roma people), derogatory language (mildly offensive language used to denigrate them, *e.g*., tziganes, illiterate), hate speech (offensive content displaying intolerance towards the Roma minority, *e.g*., crows, parasites, thieves) and extreme hate speech (extremely offensive language used to threat and to show disgust towards the Roma minority, *e.g*., "dirty crows sucking on the state benefits", "filthy gypsies", "useless foul-mouthed crows" – all these expressions were developed for the purpose of this research experiment, based on studies such as on Ghanea, 2013; Sharma *et al*., 2018; Tirrell, 2017). A recent study (Gligoric *et al*., 2021) showed that linguistic labels attached to the Romani ethnic minority in Serbia do matter when analyzing social perceptions of this minority. Thus, although the effect they found is much smaller than the effects of previous similar studies, the authors conclude that the Romani elicit more positive perceptions (*i.e*., are seen as more moral, sociable and competent) when the language used to refer to them is neutral, as opposed to derogatory. The technological affordances of social media make it possible for users not only to spread or be exposed to hate speech, but to engage in counter speech, too. According to Bartlett and Krasodomski-Jones (2015), counter speech is a "common, crowd-sourced response to extremism or hateful content" (p. 5). Reacting to harmful content online, reporting abusive content and rating user comments are part of the online civic engagement, a type of user engagement that is more likely to be shown by supporters of solidarity citizenship norms, the so-called "good citizens" (Kunst *et al*., 2021). Examining the strategies to counter hate speech online, Miskolci *et al*. (2018) revealed that while the Roma minority in Slovakia was portrayed negatively via Facebook posts, pro-Roma comments discouraged further hate and encouraged people with a pro-Roma attitude to get engaged in conversation. Conversely, research focusing on hate speech against the Muslim minority have shown that while it may not cancel hate speech altogether (as suggested in Miskolci *et al*. 2018's abovementioned study) counter speech may reduce the possibility that the target of the hate speech, *i.e*., the Muslim minority, engage in further hateful online conversations (Obermaier *et al*., 2021).

Building on the idea that the type of user-generated reaction (*e.g*., comments to Facebook posts) may influence people's attitude towards the target of online

hate speech, we seek to explore to what extent the exposure to positive (*e.g*., counter speech) versus negative comments (*e.g*., acceptance and amplification of hate speech) accompanying hateful content targeting the Roma leads to more (or less) civic engagement with this minority group among Romanians (RQ2). Furthermore, we seek to show the role (if any) that people's previous perception about Roma people plays in moderating the effects that exposure to online hate speech might have on civic engagement with this minority (RQ3). A recent study (Boțan *et al*., 2020) showed that exposure to different degrees of online hate speech directed at the Roma minority in Romania rather works towards diminishing negative stereotypes of this minority than enhancing them, at least among young, educated people. Given the well-documented media-reinforced negative stereotypes of the Roma minority in Romania (Crețu, 2014; Breazu & Machin, 2019; Molnar, 2021), we aim to examine how previously held attitudes towards this minority group might affect Romanians' willingness to support the Roma minority rights.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, we built a 4×2 between-subjects experiment, plus a control condition (see *Table 1*). We made up a Facebook post based on valid information about statistics of the European Union related to the rate of illiteracy among Roma people in Romania (9 % of Roma population is enrolled in secondary education, while only 2 % of them go to university) and state aids (almost 40 % of the Roma population rely on this type of financial aid as the single source of revenue for their families). We framed the main story differently, by using various degrees of hateful content (*i.e*., neutral, derogatory, hate speech, and extreme hate speech), while keeping the factual information unchanged. Each story (except for the control group) was followed by either positive or negative comments.

The positive comments were intended to counter the hateful content, whereas the negative ones were intended to increase the degree of hate that was already present in the main story (see *Table 1*). The stimuli were constructed in the form of Facebook posts showing high levels of user engagement, *i.e*., reactions, comments, and shares. People in the control condition received a neutral Facebook post, with no visible comments.

Table 1

Overview of experimental conditions

	Neutral content	Derogatory speech	Hate speech	Extreme hate speech
Positive comments	N=103	N=102	N=90	N=131
Negative comments	N=123	N=12	N=99	N=107
Control (neutral conyent, no comments)	N=101			

For the purpose of this research, we used the experimental method mainly because it allows us to observe causality effects (*i.e*., how the exposure to certain stimuli – as independent variables – might lead people to exhibit various behaviors – as dependent variables). Furthermore, to be able to interpret the results, we used regression analysis (performed with IBM SPSS Statistics software) for estimating the relationships between the dependent variable (civic engagement with its both individual and aggregate components) and the independent variables (experimental stimuli in the form of Facebook posts consisting of various forms of more or less hateful content directed against the Roma minority). The results of the regression analysis we performed are presented in *Table 3*.

SAMPLE

The experiment was carried out by QUESTIA, a national polling organization. It used an online panel (N=978), representative of the population (18+) of Romania that has access to the Internet, using quotas for gender, age, and geographical region. The sample had the following distribution: 56.5 % women and 43.5 % men; 2 % low educated people, 46.4 % people with medium education, and 51.2 % people with high education; 84.8 % urban residents. The mean age in the sample was 45.10 years (SD=13.23).

PROCEDURE

The questionnaire consisted of an informed consent, in which participants were briefly introduced to the aim of the study, were offered the details about the fact that their personal information is not going to be disclosed, that their answers are going to be interpreted on an aggregate level, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time, without repercussions[1]. This was followed by a pre-test part, including demographics, moderators, and control variables, a random assignment to one of the nine conditions (exposure to a Facebook post consisting of either neutral content, derogatory speech, hate speech, or extreme hate speech followed by either positive or negative comments) plus control condition (neutral content, no comments), and a post-test part with the dependent variables and the manipulation checks. Randomization proved successful with regards to age (F8, 974 = 1.26, p>.05), gender (F8, 974 = 1.49, p>.05), education (F8, 974 = .44, p>.05), and

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[1] The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA).

opinion about Roma people (F8, 974 = 1.47, p>.05). At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed (*i.e.*, they were told that the Facebook posts they were exposed to were artificially created for the purpose of this research; also, participants were provided with a contact from the leading researcher of the study if they needed further clarifications about the results) and thanked.

STIMULI

The stimuli (see Appendix for the English version) were created to mimic a real Facebook post, suggesting high level of user engagement (467 reactions, 309 comments, and 21 shares). This high level of user engagement was kept constant in all experimental conditions, including the control one. Out of the 309 comments, three were visible in the eight experimental conditions, and they used either a positive or a negative language to refer to the Roma minority.

MANIPULATION CHECKS

We used four manipulation check variables to make sure the stimuli were perceived as intended. Study participants in the neutral and derogatory followed by positive comments conditions + the control condition perceived the Roma people framed in a less negative way than people in the other conditions (F1,977 = 58.68, p<.01). People exposed to a Facebook post followed by negative comments perceived that the comments were derogatory to a greater extent than those exposed to a Facebook post followed by positive comments (F1,876 = 37,76, p<.01). Furthermore, we asked the participants to evaluate whether the Facebook 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 = 0.99); these two questions were intended to check if the participants acknowledged the accuracy of the information they were exposed to.

MEASURES

Civic engagement was operationalized both individually and on a composite scale. The individual levels of civic engagement (*i.e.*, sign a petition supporting Roma people's rights; participate in a protest supporting Roma people's rights; donate to a cause supporting Roma people's rights; let their own children go to a school where there are many Roma children) were measured on the following scales:

Petition: on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), respondents were asked to evaluate the probability of signing a petition supporting Roma people's rights (M = 2.48, SD = 1.24).

Protest: on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), respondents were asked to evaluate the probability of participating in a protest supporting Roma people's rights (M = 2.07, SD = 1.13).

Donation: on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), respondents were asked to evaluate the probability of donating to a cause supporting Roma people's rights (M = 2.04, SD = 1.10).

School: on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely), respondents were asked to evaluate the probability of letting their own children go to a school that many Roma children attend (M = 2.55, SD = 1.16).

Overall civic engagement was computed using a composite scale consisting of all the above-mentioned individual items. The items grouped in one factor, with loadings ranging from .780 to .861 (α = .857, M = 2.29, SD = .97).

MODERATOR

To measure their own attitude toward Roma people, respondents were asked to self-evaluate their attitude about Roma people on a Likert scale from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good); (M = 3.63, SD = 1.65). The question was addressed before exposing participants to the experimental stimulus.

FINDINGS

The main findings reveal that exposure to various degrees of hateful content followed by either negative or positive comments, as well as exposure to neutrally framed content followed by negative comments, lead to lower levels of engagement in civic actions (*i.e.*, signing a petition to support Roma people's rights; participating in a protest to support Roma people's rights; donating to a cause supporting Roma people's rights; letting kids go to a school attended by many Roma kids). Results show that, compared to the people in the control group (*i.e.*, exposed to neutrally framed content, followed by no comments), those in all the other experimental conditions exhibited lower levels of civic engagement (see *Table 2*).

Table 2

Descriptives of dependent variables, by experimental conditions (results in bold significant)

Experimental condition		Petition	Protest	Donation	School	Overall civic engagement
Control group	M	2.77	2.17	2.29	2.79	2.50
	SD	1.22	1.13	1.13	1.17	0.93
	N	101	101	101	101	101
Neutral speech + positive comments	M	2.52	2.21	2.07	2.77	2.39
	SD	1.31	1.24	1.16	1.16	1.05
	N	103	103	103	103	103
Neutral speech + negative comments	M	2.27	1.98	1.89	2.42	2.14
	SD	1.12	1.05	0.97	1.09	0.89
	N	123	123	123	123	123
Derogatory speech + positive comments	M	2.35	1.89	1.81	2.38	2.11
	SD	1.24	1.13	1.06	1.19	0.96
	N	102	102	102	102	102
Derogatory speech + negative comments	M	2.60	2.15	2.11	2.56	2.35
	SD	1.30	1.22	1.20	1.23	1.02
	N	122	122	122	122	122

Hate speech + positive comments	M	2.49	1.98	2.08	2.59	2.28
	SD	1.26	1.03	1.02	1.13	0.95
	N	90	90	90	90	90
Hate speech + negative comments	M	2.41	2.04	1.99	2.40	2.21
	SD	1.24	1.16	1.07	1.06	0.99
	N	99	99	99	99	99
Extreme hate speech + positive comments	M	2.47	2.12	2.17	2.54	2.33
	SD	1.23	1.10	1.08	1.12	0.94
	N	131	131	131	131	131
Extreme hate speech + negative comments	M	2.48	2.04	1.99	2.53	2.26
	SD	1.23	1.12	1.09	1.22	0.96
	N	107	107	107	107	107

Even though not all the effects proved to be statistically significant (for the levels of significance of each reported mean from above, please consult *Table 3* below), there is a general trend showing that exposure to hateful content on social media leads to lower levels of civic engagement aimed at supporting the rights of Roma people. Furthermore, neutrally framed messages targeting the Roma minority group followed by negative comments lead to lower levels of civic engagement; this result shows that, sometimes, comments accompanying a social media post weigh more than the content from the post itself (*Table 3*).

Specifically, results show that exposure to neutral content followed by negative comments, exposure to derogatory speech followed by positive comments, exposure to moderate hate speech followed by negative comments, and exposure to extreme hate speech followed by negative comments lead to lower levels of civic engagement (understood as willingness to signing a petition, to donate, to let one's own children go to a school attended by many Roma children), as well as overall civic engagement. Exposure to various degrees of hateful content followed by negative comments makes people less willing to engage in actions that support Roma people or to let their children in schools attended by many Roma pupils. Nevertheless, the same effect (*i.e.*, lower levels of civic engagement) is linked to the exposure to derogatory speech followed by positive comments.

Table 3
Regression models showing the effects of exposure to various Facebook posts on people's levels of civic engagement

	Petition			Protest			Donation			School			Overall civic engagement		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	2.772	.123		2.168	.113		2.287	.109		2.792	.115		2.505	.096	
Neutral speech + positive comments	−.248	.173	−.061	.045	.159	.012	−.219	.153	−.061	−.025	.162	−.007	−.112	.135	−.035
Neutral speech + negative comments	−.504	.166	−.135**	−.185	.152	−.054	−.393	.147	−.119**	−.369	.155	−.106*	−.363	.130	−.124**
Derogatory speech + positive comments	−.419	.174	−.103*	−.276	.159	−.075†	−.473	.153	−.132**	−.410	.162	−.108*	−.395	.135	−.125**
Derogatory speech + negative comments	−.174	.166	−.046	−.021	.152	−.006	−.181	.147	−.055	−.235	.155	−.067	−.152	.130	−.052
Hate speech + positive comments	−.283	.179	−.066	−.191	.164	−.049	−.209	.158	−.055	−.203	.168	−.051	−.222	.140	−.066
Hate speech + negative comments	−.358	.175	−.087*	−.128	.160	−.034	−.297	.154	−.082†	−.388	.163	−.101*	−.293	.137	−.091*
Extreme hate speech + positive comments	−.299	.164	−.082†	−.046	.150	−.014	−.119	.145	−.037	−.250	.153	−.074	−.179	.128	−.063
Extreme hate speech + negative comments	−.296	.172	−.074†	−.131	.157	−.036	−.296	.151	−.085	−.259	.160	−.070	−.246	.134	−.079†

†$p < .1$[2], *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

[2] Even though these levels are not generally accepted as being statistically significant, we believe that they are important to be mentioned, as they can show a trend which, in the case of exposure to stronger stimuli, might turn out to be statistically significant.

Generally, negative comments seem to be powerful in making Romanians less willing to engage in actions meant to support Roma people. For example, in *Table 2*, there is a clear difference between those in the control group, exposed to a neutral Facebook post followed by no comments – M = 2.29, SD = 1.13 *vs*. those exposed to neutral content followed by negative comments – M = 1.89, SD = .97). The same trend can be seen with reference to actions related to letting their children in schools attended by Roma pupils. *Table 2* also shows that those people exposed to neutral content followed by negative comments are less willing (M = 2.42, SD = 1.09) to let their children in schools attended by many Roma pupils than those in the control group (exposed to neutral content followed by no comments, M = 2.79, SD = 1.17); results are significant, according to the data provided in *Table 3*. With only one exception (derogatory speech), all the social media posts followed by negative comments led to significantly lower levels of engagement in actions that support Roma people. Exposure to derogatory speech followed by positive comments led to the lowest levels of engagement in actions that support Roma people, letting us assume that this type of content might make people more confused and, therefore, less willing to engage in any positive action related to Roma people.

Interestingly, exposure to a neutral content followed by negative comments led to lower levels of civic engagement, letting us assume that the comments to the post did play a more significant role than the post itself. In terms of moderation, we could not find any significant moderation effect of existent opinions about Roma people on any type of the above-mentioned effects. Romanians' previously held attitudes towards the Roma people do not seem to play any role in making the former more or less engaged in actions supporting the latter.

DISCUSSION

Hate speech covers many forms of expressions which incite, promote, or justify hateful content. In Romania, online hate speech against the Roma minority runs the risk to escalate into something more dangerous than hatred, namely incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence (Cordeanu *et al*., 2019; Răileanu *et al*., 2018), due to its increased proliferation. The prominence of negative framing of Roma ethnics in social media (Breazu & Machin, 2019), which usually consists in pejorative labels such as "lazy", "promiscuous", "criminal", "immoral" and "resistant to integration" (Molnar, 2021), has severe repercussions for the entire community and the way it is perceived by the rest of the population. Due in part to such toxic labelling, amplified by the power of technological platforms to disseminate information to an unprecedented scale, the Roma are the most discriminated ethnic minority in Central and Eastern Europe (Pavlova, 2021).

Our study shows that negative Facebook comments to hate speech targeting Roma can have a consistent effect in the sense that they generate less civic support for this minority. Our research indicates the importance of online comments, which become key when evaluating the topic or subject of the posts. More precisely, exposure to neutral information about the Roma minority accompanied by negative comments results in a lower level of support for this ethnic community than posts that contain offensive (hate speech) or malignant language (extreme hate speech), but which are accompanied by positive comments. Furthermore, exposure to various degrees of hateful or neutral content followed by negative comments results unequivocally in lower levels of support towards Roma and, therefore, in less civic engagement. This is even more concerning since online engagement has been previously proved to have the potential to facilitate civic participation (Citron & Norton, 2011). Recent research indicates, however, possible remedies, such as reinforcing online civic engagement (Kunst *et al*., 2021). Reacting to harmful online content, reporting abusive content and rating user comments are part of the online civic engagement, a type of user engagement that is more likely to be shown by supporters of solidarity citizenship norms, the so-called "good citizens" (Kunst *et al*., 2021). Moreover, counter speech strategies have the potential to increase the likelihood that people engage positively with the targets of hate speech (Kunst *et. al.*, 2021). In line with such findings, our study pinpoints the necessity to foster solidarity rhetorical mechanisms, which might counter argue the widespread negative narratives about the Roma minority. As shown by our research, positive online comments have a consistent impact in terms of generating reactions; they can, therefore, be used as an effective tool for reducing social fractures and hate speech proliferation.

Additionally, our research data show that the lowest level of support towards the Roma minority (*i.e.*, donating money to a cause supporting Roma people's rights, M = 1.81, SD = 1.06) is linked to the exposure to derogatory speech followed by positive comments. We argue that this somehow puzzling result – since derogatory speech is a mild form of verbal violence – might be related to the confusion that such ambivalent messages create. As previously shown, the predominant public discourse about Roma ethnics is devastatingly negative (Codreanu *et al*., 2019; Răileanu *et al*., 2018), therefore positive comments annexed to neutral / mildly negative information must certainly produce cognitive dissonance, which is in turn translated into low support and willingness to take actions to either help or protect the Roma minority. This result might also be explained via two correlated phenomena: a) the increased proliferation of prejudices against Roma in the online environment (Breazu & Machin, 2019) and b) the general desensitization (*i.e.*, people become less sensitive to hate speech and more prejudiced against the targets of this type of verbal behavior) to messages about Roma ethnics (Soral *et al*., 2017).

Furthermore, technology platforms, such as Facebook, unfortunately offer a fertile ground to the proliferation of hate speech, which cause people to retreat from civic engagement and show less tolerance for ethnic minorities such as the Roma. Our data also indicate that the engagement measured via comments (positive or negative) can have a greater negative impact (in the sense of decreasing willingness to support Roma ethnics) than the posts themselves. Facebook users should not, therefore, engage with any type of malicious posts or negative comments in order to reduce their online prominence. This pervasive phenomenon of the amplification of hate speech in social media even when people are not openly hateful or willing to express hatred just by sharing content, which incite to verbal or factual violence, needs to be more consistently addressed by technology companies that fuel (even if unintentionally) hate speech by not introducing moderation or various regulations for the users of their platforms. Nonetheless, as previously emphasized, counter speech strategies are effective when tackling hate speech (Kunst *et al.*, 2021), therefore more studies are needed and more public policies should be put in place in order to reduce the negative effect of derogatory and hate speech. An efficient strategy that might reduce intentional or unintentional hate speech proliferation should be implemented by news media organizations and journalists via offering more fact-based, transparent, and constructive news in an attempt to help people overcome their prejudices and by social media users, who should be aware of their responsibility in spreading disengaging, hateful post and comments, which reduce the strength of the social fabric of any society.

CONCLUSION

Social media's characteristic as a many-to-many discursive practice (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018, p. 54) gives room not only to the democratic expression of opinion, but also to a wide array of language-based phenomena brought under the umbrella of hate speech. Exposure to online hate content may influence both individuals' attitude and civic engagement towards the targeted minorities. User generated content and user comments are paramount when it comes to the formation of both attitudes and intention to support minorities' issues. Negative posts and negative comments, even when triggered by positive or neutral posts, influence to a great extent individuals, negative perceptions on Roma ethnics and reduce people's civic engagement towards this minority. Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of the online proliferation of hate speech in various forms, with a special focus on vulnerable categories, such as ethnic minorities, our findings indicate that a counter speech enabled by positive comments can be effective in raising willingness to engage civically with the Roma minority, whilst reducing the amplification of prejudices against this ethnic group. These phenomena are largely

fuelled by the widespread negative frames national and international media (both on and offline) use to portray Roma and by the rapid proliferation of negative online comments referring to Roma. Moreover, due to the algorithms platforms use in order to maximize their profits, negative comments about Roma members and communities produce more engagement than positive comments and, therefore, gain more visibility, reinforcing prejudices and thus becoming the "default narrative" about this minority group.

Efforts to combat digital anti-Roma hate speech may focus on generating counter-narratives that challenge the stigma associated with the Roma population, thus mitigating the extreme forms of hate speech against this minority (the largest in Europe). Our study comes with some limitations as well. First, even though we included four different types of online content portraying the Roma minority group (varying from neutral to extreme hate speech), we might have missed some important nuances, mainly because it is very difficult to make a clear and completely objective delineation between various degrees of hateful content. Second, the comments accompanying the posts were also framed as either positive or negative, even though in real-life contexts they are often mixed. Third, the whole design of the current study was developed taking into account some country characteristics (*i.e.*, the language itself being one factor influencing the effects), therefore results might be strongly linked to the cultural context, and, thus, difficult to be generalized to all the other European countries where Roma people live. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study provides some insights into the proliferation of malign content via social media and the importance of comments in amplifying hateful speech. Not only that factual, neutral posts are overshadowed by negative comments, but such comments drastically reduce any kind of support for minority groups.

In a nutshell, our data show that social media content increasingly undermines support for minorities, which calls for consistent measures such us countering the negative information with positive reports on minority groups, which should be reinforced by social media participants in order to limit the harmful effect of hate speech and negative comments. Further research studies could include a more nuanced type of social media exposure (both in terms of content and comments). Other studies could investigate the way other emerging, yet popular social media platforms (*e.g.*, TikTok) are involved in nurturing various forms of hateful content directed against Roma people, and into the way exposure to such content might feed other types of attitudes and behaviors.

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Appendix: Experimental stimuli

Posts

Variant 1 – Neutral

Recent EU 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.

Variant 2 – Derogatory

Recent EU statistics show that many gypsies are still illiterate, only 9 % go to secondary or high school and only 2 % go to college. Nearly 40 % of gypsies live mainly on the back of others, mostly from state aids, and most moochers make money off the books.

Variant 3 – Hate speech

Recent EU statistics show that most gypsies, wretches of crows, are illiterate, only 9 % go to secondary or high school and 2 % go to college. Crows don't kill themselves with work either, 40 % live especially from freeloading off state aids and most moochers make money off the books.

Variant 4 – Extreme hate speech

Recent EU statistics show that many filthy gypsies are still illiterate, only 9 % go to secondary or high school and 2 % go to college. The foul-mouthed crows are just useless beings who take advantage, 40 % live by sucking from state aids and most mucky crows make money off the books.

Comments (change of value only)

Variant 1 – Positive

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 about the fact 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.

Variant 2 – Negative

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?