

# Internet Practices and Differences in Youths' Acceptability of Online Verbal Violence

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to examine the perception of verbal violence by youths in online exchanges. Undergraduate students gave their opinions on a number of violent and nonviolent messages in a forum. It was observed that verbal violence arouses an ambivalent attitude, i.e., it is considered both unacceptable and humorous. The results showed that the acceptability of verbal violence is related to the topic of discussion and to youths' Internet practices. Verbal violence is more often rejected when the topic of discussion is less serious. A high acceptability of verbal violence is associated with a high level of time spent on the Internet and a high use of humor in a youth's own messages. The results contribute to identifying the communication norms for youth in online environments.

## KEYWORDS

Aggressive Language, Computer-Mediated Communication, Internet, Social Media, Verbal Violence, Youths

## INTRODUCTION

Verbal violence or verbal aggression is “an exchange of messages between two people where at least one person in the dyad attacks the self-concept of the other person in order to hurt the person psychologically” (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61).

Youths are very often confronted with more or less severe forms of verbal violence on social media: Mockery, name-calling, hating comments, harassment, physical threats, etc. (e.g., Anderson, 2018; Moor, Heuvelman & Verleur, 2010; Rowe, 2015). This violence occurs in a wide range of online venues like social media platforms, SMS or emails (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Youths can be victims of online verbal violence but also witnesses, by reading the messages of people in their networks. According to a recent survey, 59% of 13-17-year-old Americans have been bullied or harassed online (Anderson, 2018) and 67% of 18-29-year-olds have been personally subjected to harassing behavior online (Duggan, 2017) (as opposed to 33% of those 30 years old or older who report the same), 86% of the 18-29-year-old age group have witnessed some type of harassing behavior directed toward others online.

It is important to understand how this crucial exposure to verbal violence affects the communication norms among youths in cyberspace. This is particularly true because youths are “digital natives” and

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have experienced booming social networks (boyd, 2014). Therefore, much of their experience with social interaction takes place online, and they have developed their communication competence largely through the use of online media (in comparison with older people) (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011).

One potential risk of this situation is that youths end up perceiving online verbal violence as being acceptable and normative. In fact, in accordance with the conformity process, people use others' attitudes and behaviors as a guide to determine their own attitudes and behaviors (Sherif & Sherif, 1953). What most others do (i.e., descriptive norms) and what most others approve or disapprove of (i.e., injunctive norms) define what is appropriate behavior for people who want to be included in the group (Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno, 1991). One risk is that youths perceive verbal violence during online exchanges as being normative.

The objective of this study is to explore verbal violence acceptability for those 18-20 years old. Studying this age group is relevant because they are much affected by verbal violence and because they have much experience with online exchanges (i.e., they have been users for several years). They are supposed to know what appropriate online behaviors are.

Addressing the question of communication norms that are built by youths in online discussion spaces is important. These norms can guide the more or less confrontational and respectful nature of online discussions in extracurricular settings (for example, participation in debates on news sites) but also in scholarly contexts (for example, on a blog or Facebook page of a student's group). This type of research could then have educational implications.

## BACKGROUND

### The Displays of Verbal Violence on the Internet

Researchers have identified the displays of verbal violence in face-to-face situations (Infante & Wigley, 1986). It includes different kind of negative comments or criticisms (e.g., appearance or competence attacks), teasing or ridiculing the person, swearing at the person (using obscene language for example), threats (Sabourin, Infante & Rudd, 1993).

Some displays of verbal violence may be ambiguous because they also constitute a form of play or humor. Identifying the degree of aggression will then depend on the context. For example, insults, that are negative evaluations of a person using depreciative terms (Laforest & Vincent, 2004) can be in some cases a local form of humor in a given group (ritual insults, Labov, 1997). In the same way, teasing has two possible functions depending on the author intention: Expressing positive affect through playful joking or inflicting psychological harm through harassment (DiCioccio, 2010).

These different displays of aggressiveness can take place on the Internet. Three forms of online verbal violence have been highlighted by researchers, namely, flaming, cyberbullying and trolling.

Flames are hostile, aggressive, uninhibited, intimidating, insulting, and offensive messages (Turnage, 2007) sent by means of insulting, swearing or using other offensive language (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010). Flames are quite common on the Internet, even though it is difficult to accurately assess their importance (Rösner & Krämer, 2016). Flames are typical of online exchanges and are related to the anonymous nature of discussions that promote disinhibition and aggression (Christopherson, 2007). However, some authors are more cautious and indicate that flames depend on the social context (Lange, 2006) or on gender. Kayany (1998) found that flaming differs according to the topic of the newsgroups, and the conflicts and tensions within the country at the center of the newsgroup discussions tended to be reflected in the flames within the group. Moreover, flames or aggressive reactions are more often produced by men than by women (Aiken & Waller, 2000; Chen & Abedin, 2014; Herring & Stoerger, 2014).

Cyberbullying can be defined as an intentional and repeated act of online aggression toward a person (Mishna, Saini & Solomon, 2009). Unlike flames, the act of aggression is not isolated, but it is performed multiple times. The EU Kids Online study showed that European teenagers (9-16 years

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