

# Exploring the Effects of Hate Speech on Social Media on Mental Health Among Depressed College Students in Beijing: The Role of Social Interaction and Social Language

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## Abstract

With increased real-time interaction in social media platforms, hate speech has been identified as among the negative effects of this communication technological advancement. This article examines the relationship between hate speech on social media and the mental health of depressed Beijing university students. It aims to understand how hate speech's affects mental health and the consequences it brings. A simple random sample of 441 college students was surveyed. In addition, focus group interviews were conducted with 26 college students. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and semi-open-ended interviews. The factors of hate speech and changes in mental health were explored. The results show that hate speech has a very significant negative impact on mental health and that the negative impact is severe and persistent. Depressed college students who are attacked are left with complex emotions as a result, and the exact impact and extent of the impact is related to the individual who attacked themselves. This article contributes to the existing literature by focusing on hate speech on social media and depressed college students. In addition, the article provides insights into the complexities of college student mental health and social media in an academic context. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to support and assist the depressed population among college students.

**Keywords:** Hate Speech; Social Media; College Students; Depression; Mental Health

## Introduction

Thanks to the advent of the Internet, social media platforms that provide real-time interaction have gained numerous users in the 21st century (Dewing, 2010). At the same time, social media has facilitated the spread of hate speech, including violence and virtual threats (Guiora & Park, 2017). These hate speech attacks are so widespread that they have become a major concern in social media (Carlson, 2021). At the same time, they have also been recognized as a contributing factor to the prevalence of negative emotions among adolescents (Noori, Sayes & Anwari, 2023). Hate speech has been proven to have a serious negative impact on the individuals affected by it. Teenagers and young adults are particularly affected by such incidents on the Internet (Keipi, et al., 2016). In addition, a number of suicides have been recorded as a result of being targeted by hate speech. Among them, adolescents and young people from specific backgrounds are at a higher risk of being targeted by online hate speech (Magdalena & Schmuck, 2022).

Empirical research has repeatedly found that hate speech on social media has a negative impact on mental health. This negative impact suggests that hate speech on social media is not beneficial to mental health (Zimmer & Scheibe, 2020). However, these effects are not sustained. It is worth noting that this has a lot to do with the people being attacked themselves. It is therefore not enough to ask whether hate speech on social media has an impact. While research has explored the effects of hate speech on mental health, there is limited understanding of how these effects manifest specifically among depressed students in Beijing. Additionally, the role of social interaction and social language in moderating or exacerbating these effects is not well understood. To fully understand the impact of hate speech on mental health, we also focused on the individual attacked. For example, the attacked person's social media, or the level of mental health of the attacked person himself or herself. Examining the situation of the individual attacked can provide insights into the impact of hate speech and lead to conclusive practical recommendations. Additionally, this research is crucial in understanding how hate speech on social media affects the mental health of depressed college students in Beijing, with a focus on the role of social interaction and language. By examining how online toxicity exacerbates emotional distress, it sheds light on the psychological vulnerability of this group. The study also explores whether supportive digital interactions can mitigate these negative effects, offering culturally relevant insights into China's unique social media landscape. Its findings could inform mental health interventions, social

media policies, and digital literacy programs, ultimately contributing to safer online environments for vulnerable individuals.

In this paper, we first conducted a general survey using a questionnaire, and then screened out 26 Beijing University students who possessed depressive moods themselves. They were categorized into three groups according to their depressive moods: mild, moderate and severe, and focus group interviews were conducted. We show the types of hate speech on social media, the causes of mental health problems, and the consequences for depressed college students. Based on these three directions, we derived three hypotheses to guide future research. In the following, we will first by describing the emotional impact of hate speech and then describe the types of hate speech and its effect for mental health. Finally, we will discuss the challenges for future research.

## Research Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between exposure to hate speech on social media and mental health outcomes among depressed college students in Beijing;
2. To examine the role of social interaction and social language in the effects of hate speech on mental health among this population;
3. To provide recommendations for developing strategies or interventions that can reduce the mental health burden caused by online hate speech among vulnerable student populations.

## Research Hypothesis

**Hypothesis 1:** hate speech on social media has negative effects on mental health among depressed college students

**Hypothesis 2:** social interaction and social language plays a significant role in influencing how hate on mental health among depressed college students' speech on social media effects

## Literature Review

There has been increasing attention on the effect of hate speech on social platforms on the mental health of people (Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2018). Social media platforms, which are often seen as tools for social connection and communication, have increasingly become spaces where hate

speech proliferates (Espelage & Hong, 2020). Hate speech involves expressing an abusive language or threatening one, which has negative effects to the expressed person or group of people (Huang, Wang & Zhang, 2019; Mohr, et al., 2018).

Considering the impact of ~~the~~ hate speech on mental health, previous research has demonstrated that exposure to hate speech on social media can have detrimental effects on mental health (Pew Research Center. (2018; Primack, et al., 2017). This is more pronounced and to the vulnerable populations such as adolescents and college students. A study by (Rieger & Poels, 2017) found that individuals who frequently encounter hate speech online are more likely to experience negative psychological outcomes. The negative outcomes that affects mental well-being include anxiety, depression, and emotional distress (Rieger & Poels, 2017; Tynes, et al., 2019; Wright & Li, 2021). Individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions are more susceptible to the adverse effects of hostile online environments (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). From this analysis, the following hypothesis was proposed:

***Hypothesis 1: hate speech on social media has negative effects on mental health among depressed college students***

The role of social interaction and social language was also critical to consider in this research. As illustrated by (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014; De Choudhury, et al., 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014), social interaction and social language are critical factors in understanding the impact of hate speech on mental health. Social interaction, both online and offline, can either buffer or exacerbate the negative effects of hate speech (Levenson et al., 2016; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Another aspect is that social language in the social media entails the social cues within the platforms. These linguistic cues in social media communication can influence how hate speech is perceived and internalized (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015). Research shows that ~~shows that~~ exposure to hostile or aggressive language can lead to negative emotional outcomes, while positive, supportive language can alleviate the mental health burden (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). From this literature analysis, the following hypotheses were developed:

***Hypothesis 2: social interaction and social language play a significant role in influencing how hate on mental health among depressed college students' speech on social media effects***

From the review of literature, it was found that despite growing research on the impact of social media on mental health, limited studies specifically examine how hate speech affects depressed college

students, particularly in non–Western contexts like China. Most prior research highlights the negative effects of cyberbullying. However, there are fewer studies explore the role of social interaction and language in moderating these effects. The cultural and digital landscape of Beijing presents distinct challenges, including differing social norms, censorship policies, and attitudes toward mental health, which remain underexplored in current literature.

## Methodology

With regard to the research design of the study, the quantitative research design was adopted to examine the effects of hate speech on social media on the mental health of depressed college students in Beijing. The research focuses on gathering primary data through a structured survey distributed to university students.

The target population for this study consists of college students in Beijing who have self–reported symptoms of depression. Given the focus on mental health, the sample is drawn from students who are identified as experiencing depression, either through self–reporting or through university counseling services

A simple random sample of 441 college students was surveyed. In addition, focus group interviews were conducted with 26 college students. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and semi–open–ended interviews. The factors of hate speech and changes in mental health were explored.

The data analysis was conducted using various techniques. The first analysis was the descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and standard deviations were used to summarize the demographic information and the primary variables under investigation such as exposure to hate speech, social interaction, and mental health outcomes.

**Regression analysis** was also conducted to determine the predictive power of hate speech exposure and social interaction variables. The analysis evaluates the effect of negative role of social media on positive emotions and negative moods.

## Results and Discussions

This section presents the analysis of the results and their discussions.

### The emotional impact of hate speech

The analysis by SPSS shows that hate speech in social media hurts positive emotions (estimate= -0.256) and positively affects negative emotions ((estimate= 0.319). As shown in Table 1.

Factor			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Positive Emotions	<---	Negative role	-0.256	0.03	-4.806	***
Negative Mood	<---	Negative role	0.319	0.038	6.631	***

#### 1. A factor analysis of the persistent impact of social media

In addition, 83.90% of respondents indicated that they had encountered hate speech on social media that caused a negative emotional response. In addition, 48.75% of the respondents indicated that they had been angered by the hate speech they had encountered.

This indicates that hate speech is not uncommon on social media and can easily have a negative impact on the person being attacked. This is shown in Table 2.

Name	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Fairly	Agree	Strongly Agree
Hate speech from others in social media can make me feel angry	8.39%	17.23%	25.62%	32.88%	15.87%
I have received hate speech on social media that made me angry	0.68%	6.35%	9.07%	52.15%	31.75%

#### 2. Basic information on hate speech on social media

However, when asked in the focus group interviews, "Do you feel like your mood has changed from real life and does social media content affect your mood," the majority of respondents indicated that social media does affect their mood, albeit temporarily. Therefore, it is also inaccurate to assume that all college students who possess a depressive mood are affected by hate speech. College students with moderate depressive moods are more likely to be affected. Meanwhile, when asked, "Did it change real behavior," more respondents denied than agreed. It is important to note that there is no necessary

connection between emotional changes and self-change. Both may occur at the same time, or one side may change. As shown in Table 3.

Groups	Serial Number	Will it be negative affected?	Will it change behavior?	Focus Group Content Overview
Mild	Participant 1	No	No	<i>I will listen to what is right and ignore what is wrong.</i>
	Participant 6	Yes	No	<i>I will be influenced by temporarily.</i>
	Participant 7	No	No	<i>I stubborn personality.</i>
	Participant 8	Yes	No	<i>If it's really bad, I'll be sad for a while, but I'll won't change much.</i>
	Participant 9	Yes	No	<i>Learn from the good and ignore the bad.</i>
	Participant 11	No	No	<i>I am who I am.</i>
	Participant 13	Yes	No	<i>I won't change for others easily.</i>
	Participant 15	No	No	<i>Don't care what others say.</i>
	Participant 21	Yes	Yes	<i>Too intense, can't think about your own problems will listen it.</i>
	Participant 22	No	Yes	<i>Need friends and social interaction.</i>
Moderate	Participant 3	Yes	No	<i>The bad ones will be deleted.</i>
	Participant 10	Yes	Yes	<i>There will be some negative impact, but change a little.</i>
	Participant 12	Yes	Yes	<i>I will pretend not to see it, but I will be sad and want to satisfy them more.</i>
	Participant 14	No	No	<i>I'll only listen to the good, the bad is just nonsense.</i>
	Participant 16	Yes	Yes	<i>I will work hard for good reviews, and good reviews will make me happy.</i>
	Participant 18	No	No	<i>Don't pay attention to online comments.</i>

Groups	Serial Number	Will it be negative affected?	Will it change behavior?	Focus Group Content Overview
	Participant 20	Yes	Yes	<i>Change depends on whether I agree or not. But changes do get made as a result.</i>
	Participant 24	No	No	<i>Just for fun, don't care.</i>
	Participant 25	No	No	<i>I feel that the other person is unworthy and despises him/her</i>
	Participant 26	No	Yes	<i>I will change because of the mood or what I care about.</i>
	Participant 2	No	No	<i>It won't be there after the adjustment.</i>
	Participant 4	Yes	No	<i>Bad things will make me irritable, but I am who I am.</i>
	Participant 5	Yes	Yes	<i>Afraid of the Internet environment, will be anxious.</i>
Major	Participant 17	No	Yes	<i>Because of the pressure.</i>
	Participant 19	Yes	No	<i>It will, but it won't bother me if I don't go see it.</i>
	Participant 23	Yes	No	<i>Ignore the bad and be happy with the good.</i>

#### Focus group hate speech influence interview content

Most BJ college students who are depressed choose to ignore hate speech, especially those who suffer from severe or mild depression. In such cases, individuals block or delete the attacker, thereby eradicating the negative impact. Additionally, many interviewees indicated that the impact and changes brought about by hate speech varied depending on an individual's mood or time of day.

#### Types of hate speech and effects

All 26 respondents in the focus groups indicated that they had received negative comments about themselves on social media. Of these, 14 respondents indicated that they had been or were being affected by hate speech in a sustained and serious way. It is clear from the interviews that a number



of factors, including physical size, appearance, wealth, personality, family background, published content and opinions, can be points of attack for hate speech.

Meanwhile, in terms of emotional reactions, more than half of the college students surveyed said they get anxious. Others would become irritable and irritable. In terms of behavior, about one-third of college students would adopt an avoidant attitude, choosing to stop updating social media or terminate contact with the attacker. Another approximately one-third of respondents will pander to the attacker in order to gain favorable comments and recognition. About one-third of respondents would attack the attacker.

It is worth noting that emotional and behavioral responses to hate pressure do not depend exclusively on the level of depression. It was more closely related to the college students' own personalities and thoughts. Respondents who became irritable and aggressive were more aggressive and assertive in their tone of voice and choice of words. In contrast, respondents who chose to avoid or pander tended to be relatively mild and reserved. In addition, hate speech was not a direct cause of change for respondents, who were more concerned about their socialization and image. This is shown in Table 4.

Groups	Serial Number	Overview of hate speech received	Hate speech makes a difference
Mild	Participant 8	Pretending to know, show off	I'm going to fight back, get aggressive, and look at everything as wrong.
	Participant 9	False content, cognitive error	Can get very frustrated, thinking I'm not doing a good job. Can be depressed and irritable again.
	Participant 13	Bad looks, bad content	To get more recognition for keep learning from popular bloggers.
	Participant 21	Bad values, like to show off	It can be stressful and get cranky, and it's better when it's blocked out in the back.
Moderate	Participant 3	Unsociable, arrogant, indifferent	I feel like no one have no right to talk about myself. I get a little irritable.

Groups	Serial Number	Overview of hate speech received	Hate speech makes a difference
	Participant 10	Too pretentious, too boring.	Anxiety about appearance and excessive introspection.
	Participant 12	Bad looks, bad body, bad content	Caught up in self-doubt and anxiety, afraid that others won't like it.
	Participant 16	Bad personality, bad looks	Start not updating social media as much and start avoiding it as well.
	Participant 20	It's not a good shape	I'll mock others and think too much.
Major	Participant 2	Bad character, flaunts wealth.	Sensitive at first, wanting to impress others.
	Participant 4	No sense of propriety, very rude, no money	Become cranky and depressed. Who are you to accuse me of anything?
	Participant 5	Flaunts, hypocritical	Will get angry because they are being attacked and want to retort.
	Participant 17	Differences in perception, moral abduction	Silently block and then be unhappy alone.
	Participant 23	Flaunts, fakes photos, arrogant, bad character.	Sensitive at first, wanting to impress others.

### 1.1 Focus Group Hate Speech Interview Content

In short, attackers will spread malicious speech from many directions, primarily directed at the victims themselves. Beijing college student students suffering from depression react to hate speech in a painful way, creating stress reactions due to their emotional state. These stress reactions can affect the victim from different angles depending on the victim's personality. However, regardless of the nature of the impact, it is harmful and substantial for the victim.

From these results, interesting findings are obtained. First, the findings reveal that hate speech on social media significantly affects the emotional well-being of depressed college students in Beijing, reducing positive emotions and increasing negative emotions. A majority of respondents reported

experiencing emotional distress due to hate speech. Among them, nearly half expressing anger as a primary reaction. However, focus group discussions indicated that not all students with depressive moods are equally affected. This echoes previous studies which suggest that individual differences and coping mechanisms influence the extent of impact (Sarfraz et al., 2022). It also implies that individuals with moderate depression may struggle with coping mechanisms, making them more susceptible to the psychological effects of online hostility.

Another interesting observation was that students with moderate depressive moods were more susceptible to hate speech compared to those with mild or severe depression. It implied that emotional resilience and detachment vary across depression severity levels. According to Wachs et al. (2022) this is a pattern that was noted in previous research on digital harassment and mental health.

It was also found that behavioral responses to hate speech varied significantly based on personality traits rather than just depression severity. One-third of respondents adopted avoidance strategies, another third sought approval by modifying their behavior, while the remaining group responded aggressively. Assertive individuals were more likely to retaliate, whereas reserved individuals tended to withdraw or conform to social expectations. These findings are inline with Liu et al (2021), who indicated that online aggression often elicits a mix of withdrawal, appeasement, and counter-aggression, depending on personality traits.

## Conclusion

In summary, the phenomenon of hate speech is ubiquitous on social media platforms and attacks all aspects of the attack, including but not limited to the attacks themselves and their published content. It has the potential to negatively impact the mental health of Beijing college students suffering from depression. These effects include, but are not limited to, feelings of anxiety, irritability, internalized pain, emotional closeness, sensitivity, avoidance, and engagement in backlash. For the purposes of this study, these effects were not related to changes or levels of depression. It is important to note that while these effects are pervasive and noticeable, they dissipate with the cessation of hate speech. Beijing college student students who suffer from depression choose to ignore or block out hate speech. This allows them to avoid seeing hate speech and prevent its effects and changes.

## Research Suggestions

Based on these findings, several practical suggestions were developed for policymakers, educators, mental health practitioners, and social media platforms. The first recommendation was the need for strengthening mental health support for college students. This study suggests that universities should implement targeted mental health initiatives, such as counseling services and digital well-being programs, to help students manage the psychological impact of online hate speech. Another suggestion is that there is a need to enhance digital literacy and online etiquette education. This means that educational institutions should incorporate digital literacy programs into curricula. They should emphasize ethical online behavior, recognize cyberbullying, and respond effectively to hate speech. Lastly, there is also the need to implement stronger social media regulations and platform policies. This is where social media companies should refine their content moderation strategies by enhancing AI-driven detection of hate speech. There should also more transparent reporting mechanisms. Platforms could introduce customizable filtering tools that allow users to control their exposure to harmful content.

### Challenges for future research

First, the time factor was not fully considered in this article and was only cursorily mentioned in conversations. Therefore, a more comprehensive longitudinal study of the time factor is crucial. In particular, it is crucial to observe the relationship between time and the disappearance of negative effects.

Second, since individual and cognitive biases may affect participants' responses, more accurate and objective data could be collected for subsequent research. For example, the impact of hate speech on college students with depression may be perceived, but only the college students themselves believe the impact is gone, when it is not. These need to be more fully argued and explored.

Finally, it is important to note that although this study achieved reliable empirical results, it was conducted only in Beijing, China. Given the possible differences in customs and practices in different geographic locations and social environments, it is crucial to conduct more comprehensive and targeted impact studies in the future. In addition, the study sample was limited to university students, thus further research on a wider population, especially secondary school students, is necessary.

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