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Lived experience of student activists immersed in hate speech on social media

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Abstract

Activism has never been an outlandish topic in society. Whenever unjust policies and laws arise, people tend to voice their opinions, asserting it as their freedom to speak. In institutions, the issue of activism is inevitable. However, even with noble intentions, proponents cannot escape criticisms, threats, and hate speech. This qualitative, phenomenologically based study aims to elucidate the influences of hate speech on social media on the psychological well-being of student activists. Participants were non-randomly selected. They underwent profiling of their psychological well-being status using the Standardized PERMA Profiler, followed by a semi-structured interview. Subsequently, eight clustered superordinate themes emerged in this study, revealing the overall influence of hate speech exposure on social media on student activists' psychological well-being.

Keywords: hate speech, psychological well-being, social media, student activism

1. Introduction

Entering a university or an institution marks a significant developmental milestone for young adults, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Beyond academic pursuits and extracurricular activities, students are expected to engage in social movements, recognizing their role as future leaders in effecting societal change. However, the journey of student activism is fraught with obstacles, including criticism, discrimination, and hate speech.

As society transitioned into the digital age, the emergence of the Internet and social media platforms reshaped the landscape of activism, providing a virtual arena for social discourse and political engagement. In the Philippines, social media platforms have become instrumental in democratizing the dissemination of information and organizing collective action, facilitating the transition of traditional protests into the digital realm (Marcaida, 2020) ^[4]. The pervasive influence of social media is evident, with a significant portion of the global population leveraging these platforms to share and engage with political content (Anderson *et al.*, 2018) ^[3].

In line with this, activist groups that is traditionally categorized as unions, organizations, or informal coalitions, aim to amplify voices, pool resources, and catalyze change collectively. Through rallies, sit-ins, and other public demonstrations, these groups endeavor to raise awareness and advocate for reforms, utilizing traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television to disseminate their messages. In the Philippines, the First Quarter Storm of 1970 represents a seminal moment in student activism, where thousands of students mobilized for social, economic, and political reforms, often facing confrontations with authorities and enduring casualties in the pursuit of their cause (Agoncillo & Guerrero, as cited in Reyes, 2020) ^[1].

Moreover, the prevalence of hate speech on social media platforms poses significant threats to individuals' psychological well-being, particularly among student activists. Studies have shown that exposure to digital harassment is inversely associated with youths' engagement in social and political activities, while positively correlated with psychological distress (Aguirre *et al.*, 2019) [2]. Understanding the lived experiences of student activists immersed in hate speech is crucial in addressing the multifaceted challenges they face, shedding light on the intricate interplay between online discourse, activism, and psychological well-being within the Philippine context. While social media offers a powerful platform for advocacy and mobilization, it also exposes individuals to the perils of hate speech and online harassment. This study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which hate speech impacts their psychological well-being, offering insights that can inform interventions and support mechanisms in the fight against online negativity. Understanding the dynamics of political movements originating from college campuses becomes imperative in comprehending the evolution of societal norms and values. However, these associations often face criticism, discrimination, and hate speech, underscoring the complexity of engaging in activism within contemporary contexts.

2. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative design to explore the lived experiences of student activism immersed in hate speech on social media and its influence on their psychological well-being. As explained the objective of qualitative research is to observe and describe commonalities among different ways individuals live and experience similar phenomena in particular contexts. Additionally, a phenomenologically based approach was used to describe the lived experiences of the student activists through one-on-one in-depth interviews. Moreover, in the procedure of data analysis, the study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), wherein the researchers underwent six systematic phases to understand participants' lived experiences and how they made sense of both their personal and social contexts results and discussions.

B. Research Locale

The research study carried out in the Province of Laguna. In the context of political history of Laguna, the province has a rich significant political background. When several advances in Laguna politics reflected, student-centered National Demographic Mass Organizations (NDMO) have also emerged, advocating for causes centered on Trabaho, Lupa, Edukason, Karapatang Pantao and Serbisyong Panlipunan (TLEKS). Among these are the organizations Anakbayan Laguna, Kabataan Partylist Laguna, Gabriela Youth Laguna, and Lakapati Laguna, which continue to be active presently and were the primary organizations that the researchers conducted their study. Living in the same geographical area, it is vital for the student researchers to unfold the current situation in this locale in terms of hate speech culture in social media and the experiences of student activists who are exposed to hate speech on social media.

C. Respondents/Participants of the study

The researchers used purposive non-random sampling to select six student activists. All selected participants are

actively involved in any of the four active NDMOs in Laguna: three of which are active members of Anakbayan Laguna, two are from Gabriela Youth Laguna, and one member is from Lakapati Laguna.

D. Sampling design

A non-random sampling technique was implemented, where the researchers selected participants based on their eligibility with predetermined characteristics. This technique was appropriate when researchers wanted to access particular participants that fit specific characteristics. The researchers specified standards and considered student activists in Laguna province as the participants.

E. Instrumentation

The study utilized a semi-structured interview instrument. The foundation of the interview questions was developed based on the theoretical framework and the cited literature, formulating eight questions. Additionally, the aim was to ensure the central and corollary questions were addressed. The main objective of this approach was to gather information and observe the experiences of student activists who are immersed in hate speech on social media.

F. Data Gathering Procedure

Initially, the researchers sent a letter to each chairperson of the four active student-centered, political-based NDMOs in the province of Laguna to seek permission to carry out the study. Upon securing approval, Google Forms were disseminated to potential participants to determine their eligibility based on the study's standards. During the process, it was ensured that the identity and responses (data) of each participant were kept anonymous and confidential. Responses that did not align with the study's demands were deleted immediately upon verification. After confirming the eligibility of research participants, they completed a standardized PERMA Profiler.

Based on the profiler results, the researchers randomly selected participants with the three highest and lowest interpreted results each for in-depth interviews to understand their lived experiences. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Therefore, the in-depth interview sessions took place at the most convenient time and place for the participant and were conducted face-to-face to achieve a deep understanding of the phenomena being studied.

Moreover, the researchers prepared recording gadgets, notes, pens, and guide questions. After the interviews were conducted, the researchers transcribed the responses word-for-word, including the fillers and expressions of the participants during the interview. For the data privacy of the participants, the researchers deleted all data after transcription. During the qualitative research analysis, the transcribed verbatim responses were compiled into a Microsoft Word file and then analyzed through coding and categorizing the responses for convenient analysis. Field notes also played a vital role in noting important details and observations during the interview session.

G. Treatment or Data/Thematic Process

Subsequent to gathering the necessary data from the semi-structured interviews and obtaining verbatim transcriptions, similar responses from the interviewed student activists were extracted and categorized by themes, codes, and clusters using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Using IPA reinforced the idea that its main goal and focus was to examine the participants' lived experiences.

An approach referred to as theme-centered or category-based analysis was employed for the treatment of qualitative data. In this method, the researchers traversed several systematic phases: Phase 1: familiarization with collected data; Phase 2: generating initial codes; Phase 3: searching for themes; Phase 4: reviewing themes; Phase 5: defining and naming themes by clusters; Phase 6:

Presenting and discussing the analysis of data.

H. Ethical Consideration

The researchers followed the established ethical standards written in the research guidelines of the institution. Moreover, the participating student activists were asked to sign a consent form as proof that they agreed to take part in the research voluntarily, implying that they fully understood their rights to access their information and the right to withdraw at any point. The informed consent process can be seen as the contract between the researcher and the participants. This guideline is a crucial step in shielding the participants from potential harm.

Finally, to entirely ensure confidentiality in sensitive information, all extracted responses from the participants were safeguarded and stored in a secure system that was purposely used for this matter, with proper security measures that only the researchers have access to (e.g., flash drive, hard drive) to avoid the data from being accessed by outsiders. Lastly, complete deletion of soft copies of the data provided and disposal through burning of hard copies such as videos, audio, and any notes will be practiced by the researchers.

3. Results and Discussions

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered in this study. This phenomenological study intended to look into the lived experience of student activists immersed in hate speech on social media.

Table 1: Student Activism Experience

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Student Activism Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Challenging ▪ Charitable ▪ Revolutionary ▪ Hope ▪ Divided

The first superordinate theme of Student Activism Experience summarized the overall perspective of student activists in their hate speech on social media. The corresponding subordinate themes anchored the participants' responses in unfolding the essence of their lived experience. Additionally, the subordinate themes under the first superordinate themes are: (1) challenging reflected in participating in online activism, one can compromise his/her safety especially when people can access your personal information; (2) Charitable, activism, in a broader sense, has never been a selfish act. Student activists who engage in this deed hold in the possibility of imparting knowledge to other people; (3) Revolutionary focused on students who adhere to activism uphold the power of creating change; (4) Hope is the transformative power of hope asserts that it

prompts one to take initiative and find ways to make change; and (5) Divided indicates a perceived need to adapt or present different aspects of oneself by performing both the role.

Table 2: Motivations for Student Activism

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Motivations for Student Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Influence of Peers and Awareness ▪ Social Science Background and Reflection ▪ Social Media and Curiosity ▪ Awakening During the Pandemic ▪ Educational Discussions and Curiosity

The second superordinate theme of Motivation for Student Activism abridged the influence to partake in activism or to become a student activist. The correlating subordinate themes connected the participants' responses in relating to student activists describing their driving forces in participating in activism.

Furthermore, the subordinate themes under the second superordinate themes are (1) Influence of Peers and Awareness see that peers influence each other in many things. In activism, peers can be influenced by sharing the same sentiments and being aware; (2) Social Science Background and Reflection where people keep on learning, it changes or broadens one's perspective and views on issues; (3) Social Media and Curiosity, where as social media played a significant role in people's curiosity due to the myriad of information accessible in it; (4) Awakening During the Pandemic indicate that staying at home during a pandemic, opens a lot of doors to advocate change fed curiosity; (5) Educational Discussions and Curiosity defines young people tend to have curious minds that can fuel interest in something.

Table 3: Student Activism and Social Media Interaction

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate themes
Student Activism and Social Media Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive Engagement and Learning ▪ Fulfillment and Sacrifices ▪ Expression and Challenges ▪ Impact and Aggressiveness

The third superordinate theme of Student Activism and Social Media Interaction sum up the social media interactions of student activists. The correlating subordinate themes linked the participants' responses in relating to the interaction on social media of student activists.

Moreover, the subordinate themes under the third superordinate themes are: (1) Positive Engagement and Learning stating that people think of activism as angry people but never know the friendly hood inside; (2) Fulfillment and Sacrifices that being part of an organization comes with risks in health and safety; (3) Expression and Challenges defines that freedom of expression was utilized by the student activists; it helps them to spread awareness and promotes advocacies. But it seems like it can also become a challenge for those people that were unable to understand; (4) Impact and Aggressiveness, whereas most activists wanted to make an impact on society and its people, but sometimes they can be perceived as aggressiveness that results in more complicated situations.

Table 4: Social Media as a Platform for Activism

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Social Media as a Platform for Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Amplification of Voices ▪ Participation and Accessibility ▪ Connection and Influence ▪ Responsibility and Fact-Checking

The fourth superordinate theme of Social Media as a Platform for Activism summarizes the use of social media as a platform of student activists. The correlating subordinate themes connected the participants' responses in relating to the interaction on social media of student activists.

Additionally, the subordinate themes under the fourth superordinate themes are: (1) Amplification of Voices stating social media became a platform for expressing thoughts and opinions; (2) Participation and Accessibility that a participant must be physically present. In times of not being available, social media becomes an aid to still participate in the move; (3) Connection and Influence define that while being immersed in social media, the down side of it was the risk in security and negative criticism; (4) Responsibility and Fact-Checking, where as in order to avoid spreading misinformation, doing research is a must need. Key stated that spreading information comes with a responsibility to do research before sharing because misinformation can be widely spread.

Table 5: Psychological Impact of Social Media Hate Speech on Student Activists

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Psychological Impact of Social Media Hate Speech on Student Activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stress and Frustration ▪ Anxiety and Negative Emotions ▪ Initial Impact and Coping Mechanisms ▪ Shift to Positive Resilience ▪ Alone and Distant Feeling

The fifth superordinate theme of Psychological Impact of Social Media Hate Speech on Student Activists summarizes the psychological impact of social media hate speech on student activists is a complex issue that involves various aspects of mental well-being, identity, and activism. The correlating subordinate themes connected the responses of student activists, who are often engaged in advocating for social and political change, can face a range of challenges when confronted with hate speech on social media platforms. Moreover, the subordinate themes under the fifth superordinate themes are: (1) Stress and Frustration stated that is can be acquired from being bombarded with negative comments and interaction in social media which can be seen as an indicator of the persistent struggles against prejudice and discrimination; (2) Anxiety and Negative Emotions can arise from the perceived threats to personal safety, concerns about the impact on mental well-being, and uncertainties about the future; (3) Initial Impact and Coping Mechanisms is an immediate reaction is to overcome a feeling, especially if the hate speech is particularly virulent or unexpected; (4) Shift to Positive Resilience is the feeling of depression is a result of being targeted by hate speech. The emotional toll of this negative encounter was significant; (5) Alone and Distant Feeling defines on loneliness and tendencies to become distant from friends and loved ones might indicate a significant emotional and psychological impact for people who experienced hate speech.

Table 6: Transformation and Motivation in Activism amidst Hate Speech

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Transformation and Motivation in Activism Amidst Hate Speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transformation and Character Development ▪ Increased Motivation and Vigilance ▪ Turning Hate into Inspiration ▪ Desire to Move Beyond Social Media

The sixth superordinate theme of Transformation and Motivation in Activism Amidst Hate Speech on Student Activists discusses the challenges and opportunities for change that arise in the context of activism when confronted with hate speech. The correlating subordinate themes connected that activism often operates in a landscape where hate speech poses a formidable challenge.

Furthermore, the subordinate themes under the sixth superordinate themes are: (1) Transformation and Character Development can be understood as the positive evolution and growth that occurs in response to adversity. Through these experiences, the activist emerges stronger, more compassionate, and better equipped to navigate the challenges of advocating for social change; (2) Increased Motivation and Vigilance suggests a heightened sense of purpose and awareness. Motivation acts as the driving force that propels them forward, while vigilance ensures a strategic and informed approach to addressing the challenges posed by hate speech; (3) Turning Hate into Inspiration where individuals or groups face opposition, criticism, or hostility; (4) Desire to Move Beyond Social Media is to engage in more direct, tangible forms of action is a significant step in the journey of an activist or anyone involved in social causes. This shift often reflects a deeper commitment to the cause and a recognition of the limitations of online platforms in effecting real-world change.

Table 7: Impact on Relationships and Personal Life

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Impact on Relationships and Personal Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strained Friendships and Family Relationships ▪ Shift in Family Perception ▪ Family Life Adjustments and Distancing ▪ Impact on Personal Confidence and Independence ▪ Transition and Fear of Social Media Usage

The seventh superordinate theme of Impact on Relationships and Personal Life discusses the exposure to hate speech on social media can have significant and far-reaching effects on individuals' relationships and personal lives. The correlating subordinate themes discussed the impact extends beyond the virtual realm, influencing real-world interactions and emotional well-being.

Moreover, the subordinate themes under the seventh superordinate themes are: (1) Strained Friendships and Family Relationships occurs when someone's kinship shows contradicting political views implying a noticeable change in the dynamics of the relationship.; (2) Shift in Family Perception is an initial disappointment with how their parents initially handled a situation is normal; (3) Impact on Personal Confidence and Independence, whereas student activists get

the right support system and tolerance, it can boost their personal confidence and independence; (4) Transition and Fear of Social Media Usage is the way of communication shifted from aggressive comments to civil communication.

Table 8: Coping with Hate Speech on Social Media

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Coping with Hate Speech on Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Realization of Ineffectiveness ▪ Potential Backlash ▪ Getting Used to Hate Speech ▪ Spreading Information Despite Hate ▪ Revisiting Purpose and Service ▪ Initial Absorption and Desensitization

The eighth superordinate theme of Coping with Hate Speech on Social Media addresses the pervasive issue of offensive, harmful, or discriminatory language within the digital realm. The correlating subordinate themes discussing hate speech on social media platforms has become a significant concern due to its potential to incite violence, spread misinformation, and foster a toxic online environment.

Lastly, the subordinate themes under the eighth superordinate themes are: (1) Realization in Ineffectiveness focuses on choosing a respectful and courteous approach plays a vital role in meaningful discussions rather than adding fuel to the fire; (2) Potential Backlash is an approach of responding in a confrontational way may backfire; (3) Getting Used to Hate Speech defines that when a challenge becomes accustomed to hate speech which implies a desensitization to the negative impact of hate speech; (4) Spreading Information Despite Hate is the importance of continuing to share information despite receiving hate comments; (5) Revisiting Purpose and Service is revisiting the core purpose of their work and service; and (6) Initial Absorption and Desensitization is the initial coping strategy of absorbing hate speech without active response and indicated a process of desensitization over time.

4. Discussions

In recent years, the proliferation of hate speech on social media platforms has raised significant concerns regarding its impact on the psychological well-being of individuals, particularly among student activists engaged in social and political discourse. This study aims to delve into the lived experiences of student activists immersed in hate speech on social media, shedding light on their perspectives, motivations, and coping mechanisms in navigating this challenging terrain.

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of student activists immersed in hate speech on social media and proposes recommendations for various stakeholders to address the challenges identified. The findings reveal diverse perspectives among student activists regarding their exposure to hate speech, with some perceiving it as a source of challenge and division, while others find it empowering and hopeful. Importantly, peers and friends play a significant role in motivating student activists to engage in activism, alongside their intrinsic interest in social and political discussions. Despite the positive impact of social media in amplifying political concerns, all participants experienced hate speech, primarily from family and friends, leading to strained personal relationships.

Moreover, the study highlights the detrimental effects of hate speech on the psychological well-being of student activists, including frustration, stress, anxiety, isolation, and depression. Coping mechanisms varied among participants, underscoring the need for tailored support programs. For student activists, interventions focusing on confidence-building, leadership skills, and youth-led projects are recommended, alongside workshops addressing activism and mental health to promote holistic well-being.

After analyzing the results of this study, the following emerging concepts have been designed to illustrate the experienced of the student activists immersed in hate speech on social media.



Fig 1: Thematic Map of Superordinate and Sub-themes

The first superordinate theme, "Student Activism Experience," revealed diverse perspectives among participants, ranging from feeling challenged and divided to embracing revolutionary ideals and fostering hope amidst adversity. These nuanced experiences underscore the complex interplay between activism and personal identity, highlighting the resilience and determination of student activists in confronting hate speech.

The subsequent themes, "Motivations for Student Activism" and "Social Media as a Platform for Activism," means the pivotal role of peer influence, social awareness, and the amplifying power of digital platforms in shaping activism among students. While peer support and social media enable connectivity and information dissemination, they also expose student activists to hate speech, challenging their resilience and psychological well-being.

The themes "Impact of Hate Speech on Student Activists" and "Psychological Impact of Social Media Hate Speech on Student Activists" shed light on the detrimental effects of online harassment, including stress, anxiety, and strained relationships. The psychological toll of hate speech underscores the urgent need for supportive interventions and coping mechanisms to mitigate its adverse effects on student activists' well-being.

Moreover, the themes "Transformation and Motivation in Activism Amidst Hate Speech" and "Impact on Relationship and Personal Life" highlight the resilience and transformative potential of student activists, who strive to turn adversity into inspiration and forge meaningful connections despite challenges. However, hate speech also exacts a toll on personal relationships and self-perception, necessitating comprehensive support systems and coping strategies.

Finally, the theme "Coping with Hate Speech on Social Media" underscores the importance of resilience-building and community support in navigating the online landscape. Recommendations for various stakeholders, including student activists, educators, parents, and legal practitioners, emphasize the need for holistic interventions that address both the individual and systemic dimensions of online harassment.

Furthermore, to this study, this highlights the complex interplay between online activism, hate speech, and psychological well-being among student activists. By proposing targeted interventions for various stakeholders, including student activists themselves, educators, parents, and legal practitioners, this research aims to foster a supportive environment that empowers youth engagement in social and political activism while safeguarding their mental health and well-being. Continued efforts to understand and address the challenges faced by student activists are crucial for nurturing a culture of empathy, resilience, and social responsibility in online and offline spaces.

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