

# The Use and Exposure of Hate Speech Among Students: A Discourse Analysis Study

Shebli Younus Idham

College of Basic Education, University of Sumer, Iraq

Sarab Kadir Mugair

College of Basic Education, University of Diyala, Iraq

Samah Yaslam Saleh Baagbah

Al-Ahgaff University, Yemen

Haili Feng

Qiongtai Normal University, China

Fatima Al Husseiny

Lebanese International University, Lebanon

Jana Saab

Lebanese University, Lebanon

**Abstract**—Using biased, hostile, and malicious language towards an individual or group of individuals due to their perceived innate characteristics is known as hate speech. It can cause harm to individuals, communities, and societies. In order to gain a better understanding of the prevalence and characteristics of hate speech within academic environments, we conducted a detailed survey of 79 carefully selected students. The survey was designed to determine the most frequently occurring types of hate speech, identify where these incidents commonly occur, and show whether or not students have personally experienced such instances. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of hate speech in educational settings. The findings revealed that a vast majority of the respondents had been exposed to hate speech, albeit unknowingly. However, a small percentage of the participants had not encountered any form of hate speech. These results highlight students' need for better education and awareness regarding the various forms of hate speech and where they can manifest. It is important for students always to be aware and knowledgeable about how to handle hateful speech and promote a culture of acceptance and kindness. This way, everyone can feel secure and comfortable in their surroundings and have the opportunity to flourish.

**Index Terms**—hate speech, academic environments, students

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Recently, a concerning surge in hate speech has been disseminated through various media platforms and online channels. This has led to heightened consciousness and scholarly inquiry into the impact of such rhetoric on society (Tontodimamma et al., 2020). For example, significant funding has been directed towards research in multiple fields, including law, sociology, communication, and psychology, to understand the issue better and develop effective measures to address it (Paz et al., 2020). The gravity of this matter has even given rise to several international initiatives that aim to evaluate the extent of the problem and devise strategies to combat it (Tontodimamma et al., 2020). It is evident that hate speech is a significant issue that requires urgent attention and collaborative efforts from individuals of all backgrounds to combat it effectively.

One challenge in identifying hateful content is the need for a widely recognized definition of hate speech. This is primarily due to ambiguous and personal judgments regarding whether a statement is offensive or expresses hate (Strossen, 2016). However, it is an expression that aims to demean, humiliate, or incite hatred against a specific group or category of individuals based on their characteristics (Kpekoll, 2023). It is a tool used to hurt, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade, and victimize targeted groups. Furthermore, it promotes insensitivity and brutality towards them by displaying discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and prejudiced attitudes towards gender, race, religion, ethnicity, colour, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation (Cohen-Almagor, 2013).

Heller and Magid (2019) highlight the harmful effects of hate speech targeting race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Victims of such speech may suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, fear for their safety, and, in severe cases, self-harm or

suicide. It is worth mentioning that Delgado and Stefancic (2019) firmly back up these discoveries, pointing out that hate speech can have a detrimental impact on one's mental well-being, causing an escalation in anxiety, fear, insecurity, and sleeping disorders. Therefore, it is an indisputable fact that hate speech can have a harmful impact on the targeted individual's psychological health. Moreover, using stereotypes and scapegoating in hate speech can further impede efforts to address underlying social issues by creating obstacles for people to communicate and understand each other, ultimately damaging relationships (Heller & Magid, 2019). Individuals need to be aware of the impact of their words and actions and strive to foster an environment of empathy and respect for all.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Iraq has a rich and diverse history of different ethnic and religious groups coexisting peacefully (UNAMI, 2020). Although Iraq has a history that tells stories of various groups living side by side, the last years have given space to deepened social divisions (Wörmer & Haddad, 2018). It is disappointing that the country has experienced increased social divisions in recent years, especially related to hate speech. This issue has become a significant crisis threatening Iraq's political and social environments because its divisive and polarising content is frequently directed at specific groups, making them more vulnerable and inciting hatred and discrimination (Wilson, 2021). The potential consequences of such actions could result in destructive social and political conflicts, ultimately affecting the university communities negatively (Saha et al., 2019).

Consequently, the researchers will conduct a survey to address the utilization and exposure of hate speech amongst both male and female students at the University of Sumer. The survey's main objectives are determining whether these students have heard and observed hate speech, the most common types, and where they usually occur. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of this research as more exploration is necessary on the subject of hate speech among Iraqi students. The survey findings will be crucial in determining hate speech's widespread existence and negative effects. This will enable educational institutions to develop effective strategies to combat hate speech and create a more tolerant and inclusive society.

### **Study Objectives**

1. To investigate whether students hear and observe hate speech.
2. To identify what kinds of hate speech are most prominent.
3. To determine where hate speech is most common.

### **Significance of the Study**

Undoubtedly, the issue of hate speech within the student population is complex and multifaceted and warrants a more comprehensive analysis. The significance of this study lies in its ability to provide a deeper understanding of the prevalence and impact of hate speech. By conducting this survey, we can generate valuable insights into the scope and consequences of this type of speech, which can be used to develop effective strategies to combat it. The results of this study will be crucial in guiding future research endeavours and informing educational institutions on how best to address and tackle hate speech. Understanding the underlying causes and consequences of hate speech can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all students. This will help promote a culture of respect and understanding where diversity is celebrated and valued. Ultimately, this study serves as a reminder of the need for continued vigilance against hate speech and the importance of taking proactive steps to combat it.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The persistent presence of hate speech in our society is a matter of deep concern. According to Awan (2016), this type of speech can harm and threaten certain communities' lives. The targeting and threatening of individuals based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, colour, or gender is extremely disturbing (Gitari et al., 2015). Even more disturbing is that the internet and social media platforms have made it easier for this harmful speech to spread ((D'angelo, 2020; Thomas, 2011). It is essential to take a firm stance against hate speech, whether it occurs online or in real life. We are responsible for reporting any instances we encounter and aiming for a society free of hate speech. Together, we can strive towards establishing a society where individuals can exist without the persistent apprehension of being discriminated against due to their identity.

Academic interest in hate speech has increased significantly in recent years. This is evident from the rise in the number of Web of Science-indexed articles on the topic from 42 to 162 between 2013 and 2018. The rise of hate speech within social media platforms and the media has prompted extensive research and efforts to address this pressing issue. The detrimental impact of hate speech on society cannot be ignored, as recognized by professionals in various fields such as law, sociology, communication, education, and psychology. Therefore, conducting a comprehensive analysis of the present situation and advancements associated with hate speech is imperative (Paz A. et al., 2020).

It has been brought to attention that social media platforms considerably impact the perpetuation of "racist dynamics". Their various features, guidelines, algorithms, and business decisions contribute to spreading hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018). Recent examples of this include the release of filters on Snapchat and Instagram that allow white individuals to engage in "digital blackface" and automatically lighten non-white skin, which have been met with widespread criticism (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). The research and study of hate speech remain crucial in the battle against injustice and discrimination. Understanding the nature and consequences of hate speech is paramount in establishing a more equitable and just society for all.

Similarly, Facebook's past practice of allowing marketers to block individuals with an "ethnic affinity" for African Americans or Hispanics to monitor users' online activity has also raised concerns (Angwin & Parris, 2016). The previous examples demonstrate how systemic oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality, as well as how these factors intersect with one another, is changed by digital technologies, which make oppression digital (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Noble & Tynes, 2016). Significantly, the procedures and regulations used by social media platforms for content moderation are quite crucial. Companies like Facebook and Twitter have come under fire for allowing harassers to operate anonymously (Farkas et al., 2018) and for tolerating racist content disguised as humour because it increases engagement (Roberts, 2019; Shepherd et al., 2015). As a result of recent terrorist attacks and other acts of violence in the Middle East, including those in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, as well as the Arab upheavals of 2011 that led to a refugee crisis impacting several Arab and EU nations, there has been a rise in incidences of hatred throughout the region (D'angelo, 2020).

A recent study conducted across various cultures has revealed that the regulations and practices surrounding hate crimes and hate speech are significantly influenced by different countries' social, technical, historical, and cultural settings (Sheppard et al., 2021). Hate speech is a dangerous practice that seeks to dehumanize individuals based on their group identity while also amplifying the perpetrator's group identity by creating an adversarial relationship between "us" and "them" (Gelber, 2011; Heinze, 2017). Waldron (2012) compares hate speech to an environmental threat, a slow-acting poison that accumulates word by word, posing a significant risk to social peace. This indicates that in a community where the use of hateful language is prevalent, it can make it difficult for individuals with good intentions to ensure the well-being of the people effectively.

The issue of hate speech is a complex and multifaceted problem that can take many forms. While some may argue that certain types of hate speech are protected under the guise of free speech, the harm caused by such speech cannot be denied (Yong, 2011). Hate speech can be spread through various means of communication, including verbal or written messages, images, memes, gestures, and symbols. This problem is pervasive, occurring online and offline, and can devastate individuals and communities (United Nations, 2022). It is helpful to categorise the different types of hate speech to address the issue of hate speech and develop effective methods for combating it. For example, Yong (2011) has proposed four distinct categories that relate to specific interests in free speech: targeted vilification, pervasive vilification, organised political advocacy for laws that exclude or eliminate certain groups of people, and other assertions of fact or value that represent a negative evaluation of a particular ethnic or religious community (Sorial, 2015). Understanding the various types of hate speech is vital in our efforts to combat this widespread issue and create a secure and all-encompassing society.

Iraq has been plagued by numerous invasions and wars within and beyond its borders since 1980. Between 1991 and 2003, the government's failure to implement effective policies and economic sanctions led to a host of social issues, including hyperinflation, impoverishment, and starvation, among others (Mahmud, 2013). Iraq is a nation with a rich cultural heritage, which has made it a target for various factions with competing ideologies. These groups seek to advance their values and beliefs at the expense of others. One such group is ISIS, also known as Daesh. This historically diverse and multiethnic nation has been using the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage to demonstrate its commitment to its belief system and attract global attention. While it is true that historical necessity has sometimes required the world's condemnation to spur political action, the outrage that follows also plays into Daesh's hands. It provides them with additional motivation to destroy cultural heritage belonging to other people to build their own (Novacek et al., 2020).

Although it may seem like hate speech or anti-sectarian messages are of lesser importance compared to the growing number of terrorist attacks in Iraq, it is crucial to recognize the impact that divisive rhetoric has on society. The use of sectarian narratives by different groups, such as governing families, foreign occupiers, local politicians, religious leaders, and extremist groups, has often alienated potential rivals while gaining support (Siegel, 2015). Religious diversity is under threat in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Consequently, the area has seen a significant increase in hate speech. In just one week, from July 29 to August 5, the National Center for the Prevention of Hate Speech recorded 6,394 hate messages (Widagdo et al., 2021). One of the most crucial things we need to do is recognize the negative impact of hate speech on people. It is important to prioritize promoting inclusivity and respect for everyone, regardless of background or identity. Doing so can create a safer and more welcoming environment for all individuals.

According to reports, the terrorist group ISIS has been committing a heinous crime every hour, often using religion or political protection as a cover. These acts have, unfortunately, led to negative stereotypes and biases against certain religious minorities. The most worrisome aspect of these abuses is the lack of human rights protection, indicating a grave concern for the safety and well-being of the affected population (Widagdo et al., 2021). Moreover, previous studies have highlighted many challenges Iraq faces, including inadequate facilities, limited financial resources, restricted access to technology, and political instability. These factors have contributed to a lower quality of education, with only 42% of students in Iraq expressing satisfaction with their education in a 2016 survey conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem, 2011).

It is worth noting that Iraq has recently been embroiled in various conflicts, significantly deteriorating the country's infrastructure and essential social services. Unfortunately, higher education, in particular, has suffered immensely due to the destruction of many facilities through burning, looting, or demolition (Mahmud, 2013). Despite this, higher

education could play a vital role in bridging the increasing sectarian divides in the nation and promoting long-term peace and security. Furthermore, it may provide an institutional framework for addressing Iraq's political, social, and economic challenges while also promoting adherence to democratic values both on campus and within the wider community as a prominent member of Iraq's civil society (Harb, 2008).

Iraq's educational system has always been guided by the values and principles rooted in its cultural and religious heritage. Education is recognised as a social process that evolves with time and is influenced by various factors such as social ideology and available resources. However, with the political changes in Iraq, the need for educational reform has become more pressing, particularly in light of the move towards democracy. This reform must be based on a new educational philosophy that will positively impact students' lives and contribute to the growth and development of the country (Harb, 2008).

Hate speech is a significant issue in Iraq that stems from deeper societal inequalities. The ongoing conflict, media coverage, and the actions of political and religious leaders further exacerbate the problem. The emergence of hate speech can be attributed to various factors, including political upheavals, economic or humanitarian crises, civil unrest, and war (Al-Shakeri, 2022). Despite the valiant efforts of the Iraqi youth to advance human rights and their freedom of speech, it appears that the current minimal regulations in this area are either insufficient or improperly enforced. This sad reality is further evidenced by the absence of accountability and justice for the recent assassinations, highlighting a deep-seated issue within the country's legal system (Al-Shakeri, 2022).

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### **Design of the Study**

When conducting research, there are several factors to consider when choosing the appropriate method. These factors include the topic being studied, the research questions being asked, and the study's objectives. To make an informed decision, the researcher must analyze the research problem, review the literature, and determine whether a quantitative or qualitative approach is best suited for the study (Creswell, 2012). In our case, we will be conducting a survey to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on the prevalence of hate speech among students. The survey will aim to assess whether students have experienced hate speech, identify the most common types of hate speech, and determine where it occurs most frequently. This approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue and help to inform future efforts to address hate speech in educational settings.

#### **Participants**

In our efforts to investigate the prevalence and nature of hate speech within the academic setting, we conducted a survey among a carefully selected group of 79 students. Our aim was to gather data on their personal experiences or observations of hate speech and identify the most common forms of hate speech and the locations where it tends to occur. The selection of participants was a critical factor in ensuring the relevance and accuracy of our findings. Specifically, we recruited male and female students enrolled at the University of Sumer during the 2022-2023 academic year. By gathering this information, we hope to shed light on the complex issue of hate speech and its impact on individuals and communities within the academic environment.

#### **Collection of the Questionnaire Data**

In order to make informed decisions, judges and generals must have access to as many relevant facts as possible (SimpleLearn, 2023). This means that decisions should be based on accurate, reliable, and comprehensive information. When collecting data, it is important to use standardized methods to ensure that all respondents are on an equal footing when answering questions. This helps to avoid bias and ensure that the study's findings are as accurate and representative as possible (Ponto, 2015). One common method for collecting data is questionnaires, which can be adapted to elicit responses to specific topics or issues. In this case, the questionnaire will be focused on students' experiences with hate speech. The questionnaire will consist of 10 items, each designed to elicit a specific type of response from the respondent. Using a standardized questionnaire, the writer can ensure that the data collected is reliable, valid, and representative of the target population.

#### **Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire**

Before conducting any research, it is imperative to establish the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. This is to ensure everything is clear and clear between the researcher and the respondents. In addition, both parties must thoroughly understand the questions (Global, 2021). As such, we employed the content validity process, which involved expert evaluation to ensure the questionnaire's validity. To this end, we enlisted the services of three experts who hold PhDs in linguistics. These experts evaluated the questionnaire based on various criteria, including item congruence, content amplitude, writing quality, clarity, accuracy, and relevance.

To ensure the questionnaire's reliability, we used Cronbach's Alpha test. This test aimed to measure the internal consistency of questions that shared the same measurement scale. In carrying out this test, we followed the guidelines by George and Mallery (2003), which recommend a reliability score greater than 0.7. This approach ensured that our questionnaire would reliably produce consistent and accurate results.

#### **Analysis of Questionnaire Data**

The questionnaire for measuring hate speech is a comprehensive tool comprising ten items, each carefully designed to elicit specific information about the prevalence and impact of hate speech. One of these items is an open-ended

question encouraging respondents to share their experiences with hate speech. By allowing respondents to share their stories, we gain valuable insights into the real-life impact of hate speech on individuals and communities. The remaining nine items in the questionnaire are structured to offer a range of response options, each reflecting different attitudes or experiences related to hate speech. These responses allow us to understand better the frequency and distribution of the prevalence of hate speech and how individuals and communities are affected by it. To ensure the validity of our results, we subjected each item to statistical analysis. While the structured items in the questionnaire provide valuable quantitative data, we also recognize the importance of qualitative insights. Therefore, we took a qualitative approach to analyzing the open-ended question. By comparing and contrasting respondents' experiences, we identified common themes and trends related to the impact of hate speech on individuals and communities. This in-depth analysis gives us a deeper understanding of how hate speech affects people's lives.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The academic year of the students enrolled at the university has been identified as an important consideration after analysing the data collected from the survey respondents. The findings reveal that an enormous proportion of students, 97.2% of the total population, are presently in their second year of study. In contrast, a significantly smaller percentage of students, constituting only 2.8% of the entire cohort, are in their third year of study, as evidenced in Figure 1. This information could potentially impact the conclusions drawn from the survey and should be considered when analysing the results.

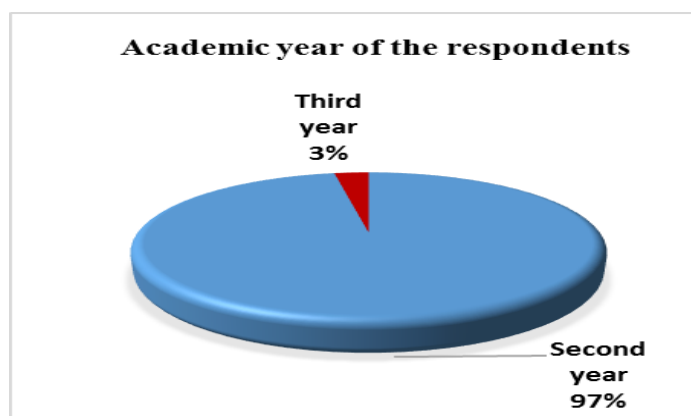


Figure 1. Academic Year of the Respondents

According to the survey conducted on hate speech with a total of 79 students participating, an alarming 76% (60 students) acknowledged that they had unknowingly encountered instances of hate speech in the past. This finding raises concerns about the prevalence of hate speech in our society and highlights the need for greater awareness and education on the issue. On the other hand, 24% (19 students) reported that they had not yet experienced or witnessed any form of hate speech, as illustrated in Figure 2. It is encouraging to note that a significant number of students have not been exposed to this negative phenomenon, but this also emphasizes the importance of actively working towards eliminating hateful speech from our communities.

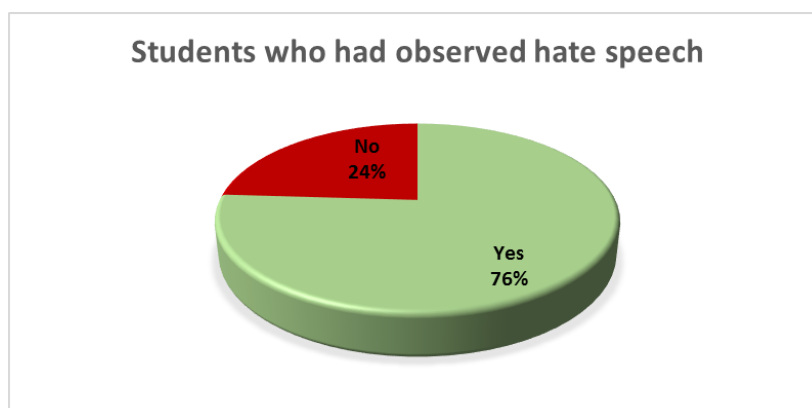


Figure 2. Pie Chart Depicting the Percentage of Students Who Had Observed Hate Speech

After analyzing the data that was gathered, it was discovered that a significant portion of the respondents, amounting to 76%, have witnessed occurrences of hate speech. Among these individuals, 57.4% have reported witnessing such instances only once, while 19.2% have stated that they have seen it multiple times. Furthermore, 10.6% of the

respondents have claimed that they observe hate speech on a daily basis, while 8.5% have reported monthly occurrences. Lastly, 4.3% have stated that they have seen it weekly. These findings have been presented in Figure 3, providing a clear visual representation of the results.

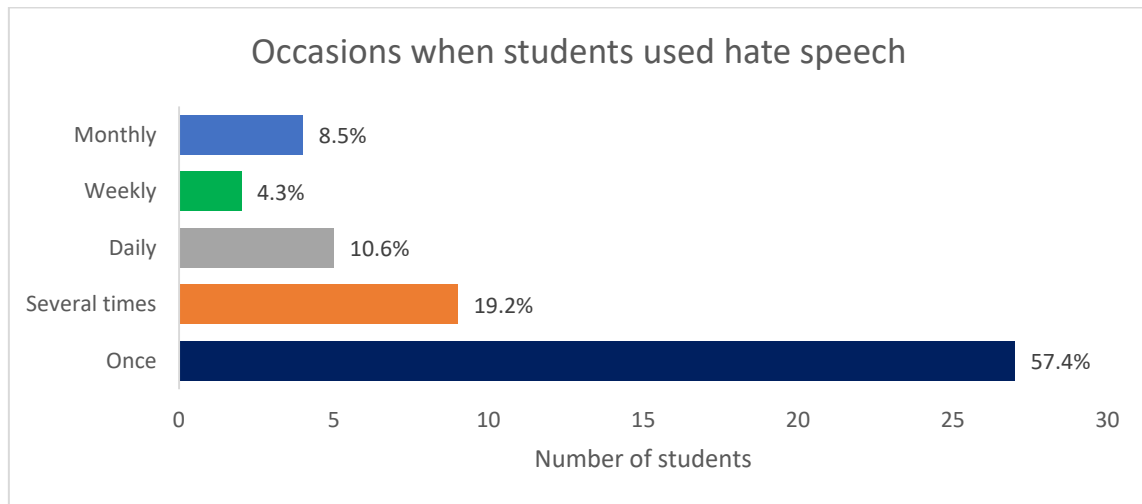


Figure 3. Moments of Hate Speech Among Students

Regarding the most common type of hate speech encountered by students, it is notable that religious beliefs appear to be the primary target, with 46.5% of respondents indicating that they have witnessed instances of hate speech directed towards students' religious affiliations. This finding underscores the importance of fostering greater understanding and respect for diverse religious beliefs and practices within academic environments.

Beyond religious beliefs, physical appearance was the second most frequently targeted aspect of an individual, with 14.2% of students reporting that they have experienced hate speech based on their looks. This type of hate speech can negatively impact students' self-esteem and body image, and it is crucial for educators and administrators to take proactive steps to create a culture of body positivity and acceptance.

Social and economic status also played a role in the incidence of hate speech, with 11.0% of students reporting instances where hate speech was directed towards their background. This finding highlights the need for greater awareness and sensitivity towards socioeconomic diversity and inequality issues and the importance of creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

It is worth noting that hate speech can also be directed towards other aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, ethnicity, physical ability, and mental health. Interestingly, none of the participants reported experiencing hate speech based on race. Out of the 58 students who reported experiencing hate speech, a majority (44) reported experiencing it on multiple occasions, 11 reported experiencing it only once, and 3 reported experiencing it daily. These findings underscore the pervasive nature of hate speech in academic environments and the urgent need for greater intervention and prevention efforts to address this issue.

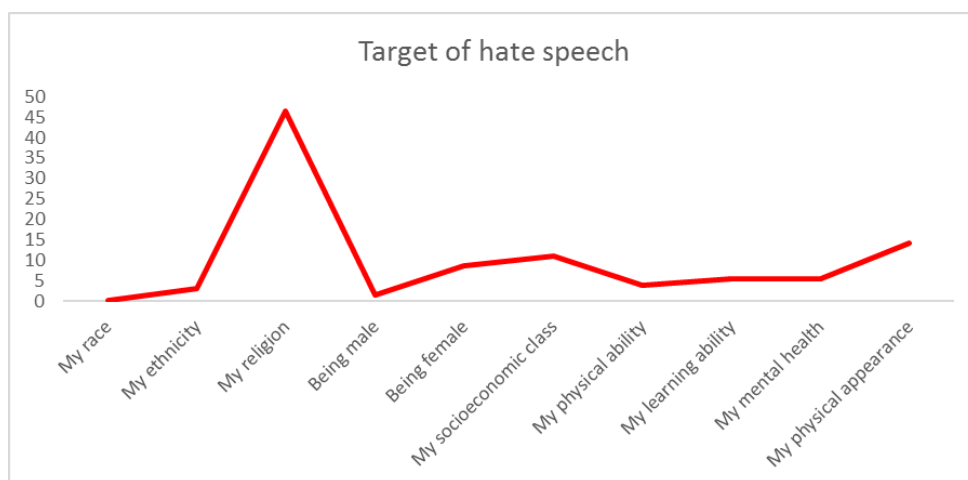


Figure 4. Target of the Hate Speech

When analyzing the locations where hate speech has been reported, it is notable that a high percentage of occurrences took place online (24.7%) and through other sources (28.2%). Additionally, classrooms (17.64%) and faculty grounds (17.64%) were also locations where hate speech was frequently reported. Faculty events (7.1%) were identified as

another location where hate speech occurred, albeit less frequently. Lastly, the cafeteria (4.7%) was identified as a location where hate speech incidents were reported, but with the lowest percentage of occurrences compared to other locations. These findings are illustrated in Figure 4.

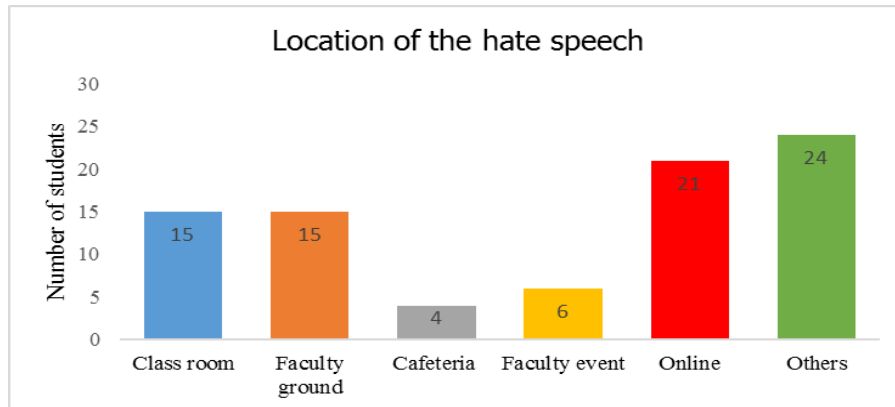


Figure 5. Location of the Hate Speech

According to the survey, a significant proportion of respondents who had experienced hate speech reported that the source of the hate speech was someone they knew but not very well, accounting for 26.3% of the cases. Additionally, 10.5% of respondents reported that the hate speech they encountered came from friends, while 14.0% of the cases were attributed to individuals whom they did not know. Surprisingly, nearly half of the respondents did not mention the source of the hate speech.

Regarding the motives behind the hate speech, the majority of the respondents (47.4%) reported that it was intentional, suggesting that the perpetrators deliberately engaged in hate speech with the intention of causing harm. Interestingly, 28.0% of the respondents reported that some individuals tried to be humorous but failed to realize that their words could be hurtful. Finally, 24.6% of the respondents reported that some individuals tried to hurt others in a humorous way, indicating that some people may use humour to mask their hateful intentions.

Bearing in mind the respondents' personality, which attracts hate speech, the respondent could identify themselves as shown in Figure 6. Most respondents could personalize themselves as someone with mental health and physical appearance. Among the two most common gender, being a female attracts hate speech more than being a male, and the respondents' socio-economic status attracts hate speech more than religion.

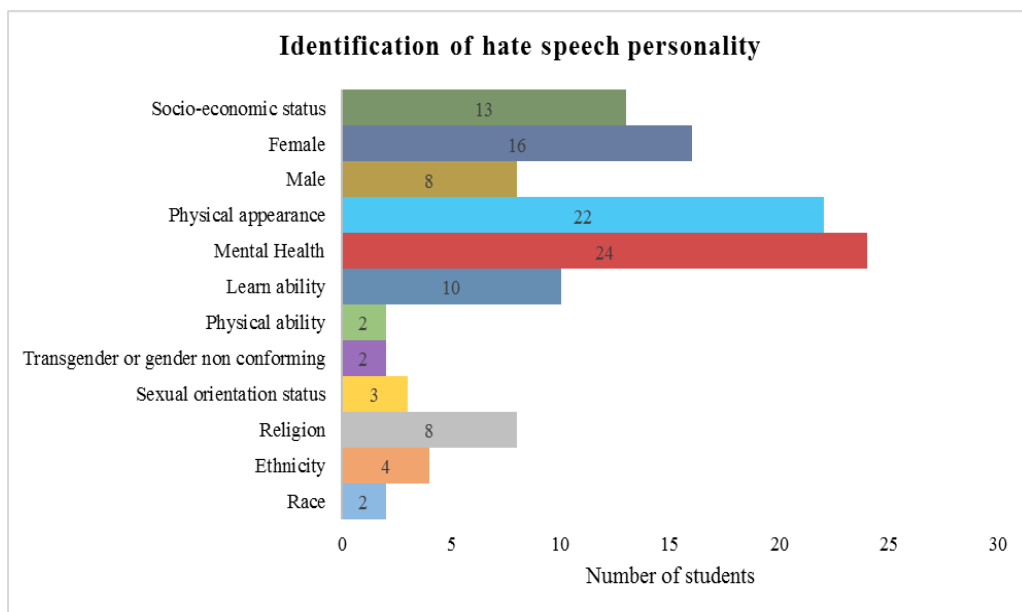


Figure 6. Identification of Personality Based on Target of Hate Speech

After analyzing the responses gathered, it was discovered that several individuals had been targeted with hate speech. One of the respondents recounted how their colleagues cast doubt on their capabilities and anticipated their failure, but they persevered and ultimately passed all their courses with flying colours. Meanwhile, another respondent shared a painful experience of being subjected to hate speech by someone they were close to, which had a detrimental effect on

their well-being. These instances of hate speech serve as a reminder that discrimination and prejudice can come from anyone and that we must work tirelessly to combat them in all their forms.

Several respondents expressed concern about how hate speech can lead to individuals harming one another, and some mentioned the negative impact it has had on their lives;

I was so depressed and wished that hate speech would vanish from society.

I viewed hate speech as normal and treated it accordingly.

I eliminated my issues with hate speech over time.

I endured too much psychological suffering.

Because they targeted me as a liar, I endured excessive suffering.

I suffered psychologically, but I was able to overcome the issues.

I suffer excessively because I cannot tolerate hate speech.

I lacked self-assurance and lost trust in others.

I wanted to commit suicide because of hateful speech.

## V. CONCLUSION

Students must have a good understanding of hate speech to combat it in the future effectively. They may become targets of this harmful language without proper knowledge about hate speech. Recently, a group of Sumer University students participated in a hate speech survey to gather information about the prevalence of hate speech among students. The questionnaire included questions about the students' awareness of hate speech, the various types of hate speech they encountered or engaged in, and the locations where it was most prevalent. The survey results indicated that most respondents had heard and observed hate speech in the past without realizing it was hate speech. However, a small percentage had neither heard nor observed hate speech. These findings suggest a need for more education and awareness about hate speech among students. In the future, students need to be more conscious of hate speech and its various forms, as it can occur in different locations such as online, faculty grounds, classrooms, faculty events, and the cafeteria. By being informed and aware, students can play an important role in combating hate speech and promoting a more inclusive and respectful environment for everyone.

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**Shebli Younus Idham** is a linguist currently working at the University of Sumer. With an M.A. in linguistics from Osmania University (OU) in India and ongoing PhD studies in Applied Linguistics at University Sains Malaysia (USM) in Malaysia, Shebli's impressive expertise spans a range of fascinating fields, including Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Computational Linguistics, and Applied Linguistics.



**Sarab Kadir Mugair**, PhD., has a remarkable academic background. She obtained her BA from Diyala University and continued to study at the same university for her MA in Linguistics, which she completed in 2003. She completed her PhD at USM, Malaysia, in 2015. With her extensive experience, she has become a professor at Basic Education College, Diyala University, teaching for 20 years. Her areas of interest include Applied Linguistics, Stylistics, Comparative Study, Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, Semantics, Morphology, and Syntax. She has published 30 papers and is a member and reviewer in many journals, including Scopus-indexed journals.



**Samah Yaslam** is a doctoral candidate pursuing a PhD in Applied Linguistics at the University Sains Malaysia (USM). Her scholarly pursuits revolve around the fascinating fields of Discourse analysis, Applied linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and Psycholinguistics - all of which she finds incredibly intriguing and rewarding. Additionally, she is keenly interested in Phonetics and Phonology, as she is passionate about helping ESL/EFL learners bolster their English pronunciation skills.



**Haili Feng** is a lecturer at Qiongtai Normal University in China. She is pursuing a PhD in applied linguistics at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Her research interests span various areas of linguistics, including Applied linguistics, Discourse analysis, Language Acquisition, Psycholinguistics, and Sociolinguistics. Haili's work in these fields has garnered considerable attention and acclaim, solidifying her position as a prominent figure in linguistics.



**Fatima** is a researcher, LinkedIn content creator, academic reviewer, and editor. She holds a Master's degree in Educational Management from the Lebanese International University and a BA in English Language and Literature from the Lebanese University. She is part of the LinkedIn for Journalists Premium Program 2022-2023. Fatima's professional goals are related to developing academic research in Education, Educational Technology, AI, and Social Media. She has been awarded two achievement awards for her contributions to Wikipedia and has various certifications from Google, Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, and Udemy. Fatima contributes to academic research through her active reviewing with several academic publishers and journals such as IGI Global. Fatima enriches her social responsibility by contributing to writing educational blogs for reputable media outlets (e.g. Annahar Media Group Website), collaborating with influencers to feature their success stories, and editing content in an international context, such as The International Girls Academy, NJ, USA.



**Jana** is a Ph.D. student in Applied Linguistics and an English coordinator and instructor at the Islamic University of Lebanon. She is an English instructor at USJ. She was also a research assistant where she worked as an editor, proofreader, transcriber, as well as translator. Indeed, Jana has various published blogs in Annahar News and published book chapters about artificial intelligence in search engines and digital literacy with IGI Global. Moreover, she is currently working on other publications that are an added value to the field of research. Being interested in research, she is looking to explore several research methodologies and techniques, such as qualitative and quantitative research methods, mixed methods research, and discourse analysis. The ambitious girl, Jana, always attends seminars, workshops, and conferences in her domain and receives certificates of attendance. Furthermore, Jana is interested in artificial intelligence, natural language processing, educational technology, and writing.