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# Adolescent Self-Esteem and Future Outlook: The Consequences of Experiencing Hate Speech

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**Abstract**

This study explores the impact of hate speech experienced and observed during adolescence on self-esteem and future outlook, in both school and online environments. It involved high school students aged 13 to 19 who participated in two online sessions, completing anonymous questionnaires assessing their experiences with hate speech, self-esteem, and future outlook. Participants reported their exposure to hate speech and completed validated scales, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Adolescent Time Inventory and Visions About Future Scale.

The results reveal that adolescents exposed to hate speech, whether as witnesses or victims, report significantly lower levels of self-esteem and a more pessimistic view of their personal, professional, and academic futures. Direct victims experienced the most severe negative effects, with boys showing greater impact than girls.

This study is the first in Italy to examine the effects of hate speech on self-esteem and future outlook across various contexts, highlighting its profound psychological consequences for adolescents. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and comprehensive strategies in both educational and online settings. Future research should explore additional variables, such as the impact of hate speech on academic performance and antisocial behavior, and examine the role that support networks might have in mitigating these effects. Expanding research in these areas can provide a more comprehensive understanding of this field and contribute to developing effective strategies to reduce the psychological consequences caused by hate speech in school populations.

**Keywords:** adolescent self-esteem, hate speech, future outlook, gender differences, psychological impact, online and school environments.

# INDEX

# THE DARK SIDE OF LANGUAGE

## 1.1 WHAT IS HATE SPEECH?

Language can be defined as a symbolic communication system, essentially a set of codes in which the information that passes between a sender and a receiver is encoded symbolically. It is a human faculty that enables humans to communicate and express themselves using articulated sounds, and it is an integral part of everyday life. Language also has a deeply ingrained symbolic framework that influences how we perceive, process, and conceptualize the world around us. (Deacon, 1997). We use language to express gratitude, to remind those closest to us that we love them, to ask for help, and to convey a wide range of emotions, including joy, sadness, and anger. Language is a form of communication we have relied upon daily since childhood. Who would have ever expected that this form of communicative behavior could have a dark side?

Unfortunately, language is often wielded by individuals to create expressions and phrases that convey derision, contempt, and hostility towards social groups, as well as towards individuals belonging to a particular group, giving rise to what is commonly known as hate speech.

The term "hate speech" is defined as any act that fosters, promotes, or encourages, in any form, the denigration, hatred, or defamation of a person or group (Parekh, 2017). This includes subjecting individuals or groups to bullying, insults, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, or threats, as outlined in Recommendation No. 15/2015 of the Council of Europe's Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

In general, hate speech tends to target specific categories based on various real or perceived social characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

Hate speech often disparages minorities, predominantly focusing on what is perceived as different. Even today, there persist misconceptions that deviations from the norm are inherently wrong, fueling the propagation of hate speech. Hate speech fails to acknowledge that differences in skin color, religion, or sexual orientation do not inherently define right or wrong; they simply represent individuals with diverse characteristics.

## 1.2 WHERE DOES HATE SPEECH COME FROM?

### *1.2.1 Stereotypes, prejudice, stigmatization*

To best define hate speech, it is essential to step back and examine its origins, attempting to understand the roots of this hatred. At the core of this relatively recent concept lie stereotypes and false representations. *Stereotypes* are rigid and simplified depictions of reality, often applied to individuals or groups. Social psychology defines stereotypes as beliefs in which individuals automatically attribute certain characteristics to others or specific groups to help categorize social information (Greenwald et al., 1998). Importantly, stereotypes are mental schemas, often employed unconsciously during reasoning. It is crucial to note that stereotypes, regardless of type, are not based on knowledge or scientifically proven data but rather on subjective assessments, often leading to inaccurate generalizations and resulting in prejudice and discrimination.

As previously mentioned, stereotypes are cognitive structures that shape individuals' perceptions and judgments, influencing behavior toward others, and they may be based on false myths and beliefs (Devine, 1989). Another related concept is *prejudice*, which shares similarities with stereotypes but represents opinions formed without sufficient data and based on preconceived notions without attempting to verify them (Saenger, 1953). Essentially, this means a judgment expressed in the absence of knowledge, which can lead individuals to judge without understanding, while stereotypes create simplified representations of reality. Prejudice

can also be defined as an attitude where individuals tend to form biases according to their social group, which modifies individual behavior when interfacing with someone they are prejudiced against.

According to Marx and Ko (2019), stereotypes reveal their lack of basis in scientific truth, relying instead on preconceived notions that hold for only a fraction of the population. Consequently, stereotypes and prejudices are unfounded when considered absolute truths.

Stereotypes and prejudices permeate various aspects of daily life, often targeting social groups based on ethnicity, nationality, religion, profession, sexual orientation, social status, or gender. For instance, societal stereotypes portray women primarily as homemakers, Jews as greedy, and migrants as job seekers, meaning that they steal jobs from Italians.

These attitudes fuel the use of derogatory labels and expressions that convey explicit negativity towards social groups or individuals. These labels, specific to recipients such as homosexuals, women, or Asians, carry homophobic, sexist, ethnic, or stigmatizing connotations. Unlike generic insults, disparaging labels target specific groups and stem from prejudice, often negatively impacting the individuals targeted.

Such labels contribute to a concept called *deindividuation*, a psychological phenomenon that occurs when the environment reduces self-consciousness in a person (Festinger et al., 1952), in which individuals are associated solely with group characteristics, neglecting their individuality. They also perpetuate stigmatization, leading individuals to focus on negative aspects and foster distance between groups, fueling dynamics of exclusion.

### *1.2.2 Discrimination*

Hate speech often emerges from underlying discriminatory attitudes, which are inherently unjust. Therefore, it is crucial to address another critical component upon which hate speech thrives discrimination. Fiske (1998) states, "Discrimination is not a viewpoint, feeling, or bias. It is a type of behavior, process, or policy that directly or indirectly disadvantages members of

specific categories compared to others just because they belong to that category" (p. 36). So, it is evident that prejudice serves as the starting point, and the transition from beliefs to discriminatory attitudes can manifest in various contexts and forms, including housing, employment, education, and social interactions (Esses et al., 2001). Discrimination occurs when negative attitudes or behaviors towards a particular group hinder or obstruct their rights. It is essential to say that often, discrimination can reach the legal atmosphere and be justified by the laws of a country For example, racial prejudices or other biases may have equally harmful repercussions for both the direct victims and society at large, as seen in events like apartheid in South Africa. Precisely, discrimination occurs when individuals receive unfairly unfavorable treatment compared to others in similar situations.

Recognizing stereotypes, prejudices, or discriminatory behavior is not always easy. Despite knowing that discrimination is wrong, we may inadvertently discriminate against others throughout the day simply because they are different from us. However, not all distinctions are unjustified and thus discriminatory, and most of them correspond to a cognitive structure of perception and saving of mental resources (Devine, 1989). Some distinctions, such as casting an actress for a female role, are based on objective factors relevant to the task and are therefore not discriminatory. On the other hand, discriminating based on factors like gender when they are not objectively relevant to job performance is deemed discriminatory.

Furthermore, discrimination can be categorized as direct or indirect. Direct discrimination occurs when actions intentionally disadvantage individuals or groups, whereas indirect discrimination arises when seemingly neutral criteria or policies inadvertently disadvantage a particular category of people and favor some individuals (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2006)

Moreover, discrimination can be further divided into structural and institutional discrimination. Structural discrimination occurs when unequal treatment is embedded in organizational structures, often perpetuated by patriarchal, religious, or homophobic customs or traditions.

This form of discrimination is considered 'normal' in many societies and may go unrecognized due to the unquestioned nature of existing structures. Institutional discrimination, on the other hand, occurs when internal rules, practices, and procedures systematically disadvantage individuals or groups.

#### *1.2.2.1 Different categories of discrimination.*

Although discrimination is not encapsulated in individual categories and quantifiable, four types of representation have been identified as the most common: gender discrimination, racial discrimination, sexual orientation discrimination, and religious discrimination (Varga et al., 2020).

Gender discrimination, more commonly known as sexism, is defined as the attitude of assessing people's ability or activity based on their gender, whether male or female. This discrimination has its origins in the stereotyped roles of both men and women and, over time, has become increasingly notorious as the cause of incidents of hate speech and hate crimes (Burgess et al.; 1999). According to data reported by Istat, incidents of gender-based violence show that 97% of such violence is perpetrated by men against women and 85.4% by men against other men (Istat data, 2019). These data should be considered a point of reflection, especially when examining who initiates acts of violence.

On the other hand, racial discrimination is any conduct that directly or indirectly results in distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, ancestry, or national origin. In addition to being objectively discriminatory, such conduct must have the purpose or effect of destroying, or at least impairing, the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, and cultural fields, as well as any other area of public life (Treccani).

Sexual orientation refers to the emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction of a person towards individuals of the opposite sex, the same sex, or both sexes. When people are penalized,

humiliated, or treated less favorably than another person in a similar situation because of their romantic preferences, this is known as discrimination based on sexual orientation. This discrimination is rooted in the general assumption that men only fall in love with women and vice versa. Heterosexuality is considered the norm; people who do not conform to this norm often experience exclusion and discrimination (Badgett et al., 2007).

Religious discrimination, defined as unfavorable treatment based on religious affiliation or belief, continues to be a significant challenge. In a context where different religious communities coexist, freedom of religion often encounters situations that challenge the principle of equality (Fox, J. 2007).

### *1.2.3 Verbal aggression*

The next step after discrimination is verbal aggression. Verbal violence or aggression refers to an intentionally harmful and offensive act of communication involving threatening, insulting, or humiliating words or tones. Contrary to common belief, verbal violence does not necessarily entail the use of vulgar or obscene language; it can also manifest through subtle insults or words intended to cause emotional harm.

Verbal aggression can be differentiated into two types: direct and indirect. Direct verbal aggression aligns with the commonly understood concept of psychological violence, considering its legal implications. In contrast, indirect verbal aggression involves the use of language without explicit aggression, often employing subtle forms of violence to impact the other person emotionally. It is important to note that both types of verbal aggression can significantly impact the individual (Dos Santos, 2014; Girard et al., 2014).

Verbal aggression is a widespread behavior that can emerge in various spheres of life, involving different people and contexts. Verbal aggression often occurs in intimate relationships, between partners or family members, but can also be perpetrated in the workplace, online interactions, and other everyday situations. It transcends specific gender or age groups; however, power and

control dynamics often fuel this behavior, with individuals attempting to dominate others through abusive words and attitudes. Verbal aggression constitutes genuine psychological violence. While physical or sexual aggression is often the first thought when considering violence within relationships, psychological violence, being less visible, is equally detrimental. It undermines a person's value, sense of identity, and self-esteem over time, using words as weapons. Unlike physical violence, psychological violence operates in the realm of subjectivity.

Moreover, stereotypes, discrimination and verbal aggression can escalate to hate crimes—acts of physical violence perpetrated against individuals based on characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, skin color, or religion.

## 1.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE HATE SPEECH

It is evident that incitement to hatred has historically been present and implicit in human nature. Throughout history, various interest groups, political movements, and religious factions have influenced masses and garnered consensus, often fueled by hatred towards what is perceived as different.

The term 'hate speech' emerged in the 1920s, coinciding with a socio-historical period marked by pseudo-scientific theories of racial superiority and the rise of nationalist and racist movements. However, it is worth noting that this period also saw the emergence of the first anti-racist theories that led to the expression 'hate speech.'

The first studies on online hate speech were published in the United States in 1999, highlighting the potential for users to circulate hate speech and incite violence via the Internet. With the advent of technology, defending against hate speech became increasingly challenging, if not impossible. Nowadays, hate speech can be defined as “the Public incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined based on race,

color, descent, religion or belief, or national or ethnic origin" (European Commission, 2008, 413).

Internet hate encompasses various forms of violent communication, including words, images, memes, videos, comments, and posts aimed at devaluing, attacking, or inciting violence against a particular group or individual. Hate speech undermines human dignity, justifying inequalities by categorizing individuals as 'others' and deeming them inferior.

Several factors contribute to the prevalence of online hatred. Anonymity on the Internet lowers the inhibition threshold for hurling insults and reduces fear of consequences. The use of pseudonyms and false names makes people less aware of the impact of their words and more reckless, generating expectations of impunity and greater irresponsibility. Hence, people feel more legitimized to express hatred: the idea of acting without the danger of being identified often encourages the phenomenon.

At the same time, haters in real life often do not behave as they do on the Internet; online, they encourage each other. Moreover, hate comments often garner likes and visibility, contributing to the proliferation of extreme opinions and real-life violence. (Brown, 2018)

Online hate speech differs from offline hate speech in its permanence, transnational reach, and more significant impact. Unlike offline hate speech, online hate speech has a permanent character, remaining active on the web for long periods and in different formats; this content can be transferred between different platforms, with the possibility of being continuously attached to other content. In addition, there is what is called the unpredictable return; in other words, hate speech, even if removed, can reappear elsewhere, so nothing on the web is permanently deleted (Müller e Schwarz, 2021).

Finally, there is the phenomenon of transnationality, that is, the absence of borders and the possibility of spreading messages globally, which dramatically fuels the phenomenon of hate

speech and further aggravates the identification of legal frameworks to fight it (Weidmann, 2015).

After explaining the phenomenon of online hate speech, we turn our attention to those who create and perpetuate it, often referred to as 'haters'. Indeed, anyone who navigates the web and frequents social networks will come across these so-called 'haters' more than once. Hidden behind unlikely nicknames, these users poison discussions with comments marked by violent and unmotivated hatred. This is not just a matter of a few particularly aggressive posts but rather a constant attitude of contempt and provocation that pollutes online discussions. What distinguishes them is an aggressive, accusatory, and harassing attitude towards individuals or groups, intending to spread hatred and cause harm. They always aim to identify a detail or pretext that can be targeted and attacked.

However, it is essential to specify that hate speech can also occur outside the network. This can cause psychological suffering through insults, humiliation, and false accusations, leading to physical violence in real life. Thus, online hatred is, in essence, no different offline hatred. It is always an action aimed at subjugating and humiliating others and, as racism and hate speech, at denying a person's fundamental rights.

The main difference between online and offline hate speech is the more substantial impact the former can have (Pierskalla & Hollenbach, 2013). For example, as shown in Pierskalla and Hollenbach's study, the spread of mobile phones in Africa increased the likelihood of violent conflict, it is shown how social media can act as a propagation mechanism for violent crime, enabling the spread of extreme views.

Unlike offline hate speech, which can cause psychological and physical harm, online hate speech can spread rapidly and extensively, amplifying its influence.

In conclusion, the shift from offline to online hate speech has significantly increased its reach and impact, enabling discriminatory messages to spread rapidly and exert greater influence on a global scale.

## 1.4 HATE SPEECH OF FREE SPEECH: WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE?

Freedom of expression is, first and foremost, a concept that has undergone multiple transformations and historical evolutions. It has shifted from merely the ability to express one's opinions to what we now recognize as a fundamental right. In line with the world's evolution, it is essential to consider a definition that not only clarifies what freedom of expression entails but also its limits in modern society.

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." (Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

It is worth emphasizing that this human right has faced significant challenges in being claimed and considered fundamental, as it plays a crucial role in democratic societies. However, the exercise of freedom of expression also carries an intrinsic responsibility, which can be regulated by law and by the state with the aim of safeguarding all citizens (Voorhoof & Cannie, 2010).

Moreover, it is essential to understand that the situation might seem complex, particularly when it comes to establishing the boundary between permissible speech and what should be censored. However, the solution is straightforward and should be directly linked to the consequences or the nature of certain prejudicial opinions toward a group or individuals. This is where the concept of incitement to hatred comes into play. Although there is no universally accepted definition of incitement to hatred, it generally refers to any form of expression that seeks to

attack or discriminate against a person based on their identity, be it racial, national, or gender-based.

Freedom of expression must be limited when it promotes discrimination, hostility, or violence against a specific group. Nonetheless, not all expressions of hatred constitute incitement; to determine this, it is necessary to consider the context, the speaker's intentions, the influence exerted on others, and other factors. It is essential to remember that words can hurt and that one can express their opinions without resorting to violence.

It is important to note that free speech is an essential element of democracy, as it relies on citizens' ability to criticize the government and to actively participate in deliberations on issues affecting them (Schauer, 1982).

Furthermore, freedom of expression also has an impact on an individual level. An individual's thoughts, opinions, and beliefs represent a significant part of their identity. Therefore, preventing someone from expressing themselves means depriving them of a part of their essence, reducing their identity, and limiting the development of their relationships with others and themselves (Parekh, 2017).

# 2.SELF-ESTEEM

## 2.1 WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem refers to the subjective assessment of a person's worth (Donnellan et al., 2011). It can be defined as a sense of self-appreciation and confidence in one's abilities or as the perceived value individuals hold of themselves (MacDonald & Leary, 2012). Self-esteem is a subjective and enduring process that leads individuals to evaluate and appreciate themselves through self-approval of their personal value based on self-perceptions. The term “self-esteem” comes from "esteem," meaning the evaluation and appreciation of oneself and others. The self-evaluation underlying self-esteem can manifest as over- or under-appreciation depending on how one considers oneself in relation to others or specific situations (Enciclopedia Treccani online, 2018).

It is important to note that self-esteem does not necessarily reflect a person's objective talents and abilities, nor how others evaluate them. Moreover, self-esteem is commonly conceptualized as the 'feeling of being quite good,' and, as a result, individuals with high self-esteem do not necessarily believe they are superior to others (Rosenberg, 1965). Therefore, self-esteem implies feelings of acceptance and self-respect, contrasting with the excessive self-regard and complacency seen in narcissistic individuals (Ackerman et al., 2011).

Our self-esteem derives from cognitive elements, such as a person's background knowledge, self-knowledge, and experienced situations; affective elements that influence our sensitivity in feeling and receiving emotions, which can be stable, precise, and liberating; and social elements that condition our sense of belonging to a group and the possibility of influencing it, receiving approval or disapproval from its members (Pazzaglia et al., 2020).

Self-esteem is characterized by being a purely subjective perception and, as such, is not stable over time but dynamic and changing. The sense of self-esteem mainly derives from the relationships each person internalizes and reworks, both intrapersonal and interpersonal. Illuminating interpersonal relationships as any rapport between two individuals involving communication and significance for the participants (Guerrero, Anderson & Afifi, 2007), intrapersonal relationships encompass how a person relates to themselves, spanning from their self-concept to self-critique (Feist & Feist, 2008). Consequently, people continually influence their sense of self-worth and, in turn, are influenced by it.

When discussing self-esteem, we refer to the result of the combination of various elements, which may or may not be conscious, that characterize a person and fit into a system where they are constantly interacting. These elements, contributing to the construction of self-esteem, can be subdivided into (i) internal elements, such as the global judgment a person has of themselves, the adjectives used to describe themselves (both globally and in specific contexts), the thoughts (i.e., internal dialogue) in which these adjectives are embedded, and the emotions linked to these evaluative elements; and (ii) external elements, such as the judgments of others, external events (e.g., achieving or not achieving specific goals), and the emotions expressed by others in our presence (Pazzaglia et al., 2020).

Self-esteem can be implicit or explicit. Implicit self-esteem refers to a person's disposition to evaluate themselves positively or negatively spontaneously, automatically, or unconsciously. In contrast, explicit self-esteem implies a more conscious and reflective self-evaluation. Both explicit and implicit self-esteem are theoretically subtypes of true self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

In addition, a distinction is made between contingent (or conditional) and non-contingent (or unconditional) self-esteem. Contingent self-esteem comes from external sources, such as

others' opinions, success or failure, competence, or self-esteem contingent on relationships. Therefore, contingent self-esteem is characterized by instability, unreliability, and vulnerability. People lacking non-contingent self-esteem are predisposed to an unending pursuit of personal worth. However, since the pursuit of contingent self-esteem is based on gaining approval, it is destined to fail, as no one receives constant approval, and disapproval often leads to depression. Furthermore, the fear of disapproval inhibits activities where failure is possible (Nardone & Chiodini, 2019).

Non-contingent self-esteem is described as authentic, stable, and solid. It involves believing oneself to be 'ontologically acceptable,' meaning accepting oneself as inherently worthy without needing external validation. This is challenging because it must originate from within the individual. As Tillich states, "The courage to be is the courage to accept oneself while being unacceptable" (Tillich, 1952). That is, being able to strengthen this non-contingent self esteem will lead people to accept themselves without needing others' approval, even though, according to Tillich this is a courageous action and a difficult path to undertake because a man without faults, and therefore "ontologically acceptable", does not exist.

### *2.1.1 The concept of the self*

To fully grasp the concept of self-esteem, it is essential to start with a broader understanding of the self. The self, associated with identity, can be defined as a central structure that encompasses a range of personal components, allowing us to define ourselves. For these reasons, it appears central to the construction of self-esteem.

Both concepts are not independent, as each influences the other. When we talk about self-esteem, we refer to a judgment or evaluation, the perception an individual has of themselves, their abilities, and competencies measured in all life contexts. At the same time, it is a judgment

system that allows us to modulate the evaluation of past events and organize the planning of behaviors to follow in the present and future. The self, on the other hand, is the set of elements a person refers to in defining themselves. It is what the individual thinks of themselves, tied to their cognitive development and the different experiences they face throughout their life and in relation to others.

Focusing on the definition of the concept of the Self, Gordon Allport (1955) defines the self as "a more or less organized set of perceptions that an individual has of themselves; in essence, it encompasses everything related to the person in general." (p. 39). Acting as a bridge between an individual's internal psychic and mental realms and the external world, the self is a dynamic entity. It presents different and sometimes conflicting aspects depending on context, roles, time, and relationships. Thus, it is influenced by socialization, expectations from others, internal dialogues, and cognitive growth.

In 1987, Tory Higgins introduced the Self-Discrepancy Theory, which categorizes our self-concept into three distinct selves. The actual self represents our current attributes and how we perceive ourselves through others' eyes. In contrast, the ideal self embodies aspirations, dreams, and envisioned future accomplishments, including desired career paths, physical appearances, and lifestyles. Meanwhile, the ought self is shaped by societal expectations and pressures from significant figures such as parents, friends, and cultural norms, defining what we feel compelled to achieve to meet others' expectations. When discrepancies exist between these selves—such as "I am overweight but desire to be thinner," "I am shy but want to be sociable," or "I am lonely but should have more friends"—emotional responses vary from discouragement (dissatisfaction, disappointment, sadness) to agitation (restlessness, anxiety, fear), depending on the extent of the discrepancy. Addressing these discrepancies prompts individuals to strategize ways to align these self-perceptions.

William James (1983) provides further insights into the relationship between self-esteem and the concept of self, defining self-esteem as the relationship between the actual self—which reflects an individual's current attributes—and the ideal self, which embodies aspirational qualities and desired life models. Discrepancies between these selves can evoke feelings of dissatisfaction when the perceived self falls short of ideal expectations or empowerment when it exceeds ideal expectations (James, 1983).

Self-esteem, therefore, emerges from the comparison between our experiences and ideal expectations. For example, placing high value on professional success while facing career challenges can lower self-esteem in that domain. Conversely, satisfaction with physical appearance, communication skills, and relationships can elevate self-esteem in those areas (Swann, 1990). If areas of competence hold little personal importance while deficiencies in crucial domains persist, overall self-esteem may remain low. In fact, positive overall self-esteem often involves recognizing strengths and weaknesses without hypercriticism (Swann, 1996).

In summary, James argues that self-esteem results from the relationship between success and expectations, influencing personal perceptions and emotional responses to daily challenges. This relationship significantly impacts self-esteem, especially when individuals fear embodying their undesired selves.

Regarding the development of the concept of Self, Susan Harter (1999) emphasized the developmental aspects of the self, noting its emergence as children begin to recognize themselves as distinct physical entities with unique traits. In addition, autobiographical memory and attachment relationships with parents further contribute to self-development during childhood.

During adolescence, the self evolves as individuals evaluate themselves across different life domains, assuming varied roles in response to new challenges. This period marks a transition from primarily familial relationships to more complex social interactions, where peer interactions play a pivotal role in self-definition and evaluation over time (Harter, 1999). This developmental trajectory may lead to a fragmented self-perception, where individuals may feel more positively about certain roles (e.g., friend versus child or student), influencing their overall self-concept. Adolescents integrate these varied self-concepts into a cohesive structure through cognitive and social development.

Harter's multidimensional theory posits that self-evaluation across diverse life domains contributes to the formulation of self-worth and self-esteem. It underscores the personal significance of different domains in shaping one's overall self-concept, where self-esteem reflects a global evaluation of oneself across various contexts (Harter, 1993).

As a central construct encompassing multiple personal components, the self plays a pivotal role in constructing self-esteem. Despite being distinct constructs, the self and self-esteem are closely intertwined. Developmental challenges, marked by increasingly complex moral demands, can impact individuals' self-esteem if they feel they fall short of societal expectations (Harter, 1999).

### *2.1.2 How self-esteem develops*

Like most traits that constitute a person, the emergence and evolution of the self-esteem system result from continuous interactions between the individual and their environment, as well as between internal and external factors. The construction of self-esteem begins with the earliest experiences of life and continues to evolve and change alongside the elements that comprise our personality. Early life experiences play a decisive role in building self-esteem. Positive

experiences, such as a supportive family environment, positive school experiences, early relationships with peers, and the achievement of early life goals, can foster a functional and effective level of self-esteem. On the other hand, negative experiences can have a harmful effect on self-esteem, complicating the adjustment process and possibly resulting in decreased self-esteem. (Raboteg-Saric & Sakic, 2014).

However, self-esteem is not immutable; it continues to evolve throughout life, including adolescence and adulthood. During the school years, academic performance significantly contributes to the development of self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003). Consistently achieving success or experiencing failure profoundly affects students' individual self-esteem (Crocker et al., 2002). Students may also experience low self-esteem due to underperformance academically or living in a problematic environment outside school. Such issues may lead adolescents to doubt themselves. Social experiences are another crucial contributor to self-esteem. As children progress through school, they begin to understand and recognize differences between themselves and their classmates. Through social comparisons, children assess their performance relative to their peers in various activities. These comparisons play a significant role in shaping children's self-esteem and influence their positive or negative feelings about themselves. As children transition to adolescence, peer influence becomes increasingly important. Adolescents evaluate themselves based on their relationships with close friends. Successful friendships are vital for developing high self-esteem in children. Hence, social acceptance fosters confidence and high self-esteem, while peer rejection and loneliness cause self-doubt and low self-esteem (Grunebaum & Solomon, 1987).

Adolescence is marked by increased self-esteem, which continues to rise into young adulthood and middle age. A decline in self-esteem is observed from middle age to old age, with variable results regarding the extent of the decrease. This variability could be attributed to differences

in health, cognitive ability, and socio-economic status in old age. No significant differences were found between males and females in the development of self-esteem. Additionally, cohort studies indicate no difference in the trajectory of self-esteem across generations due to social changes such as grade inflation in education or the influence of social media (Orth & Robins, 2014).

High levels of mastery, low risk-taking, and better health are predictors of higher self-esteem. Regarding personality, emotionally stable, extroverted, and conscientious individuals tend to experience higher self-esteem. These predictors suggest that self-esteem possesses qualities similar to stable traits such as personality and intelligence. However, this does not imply that self-esteem cannot be modified. For instance, in Ruth Yasemin Erol and Ulrich Orth's study, the development of self-esteem in adolescence and young adulthood was examined. A sample of 7,100 people between the ages of 14 and 30 participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which includes 8 assessments over 14 years. Latent growth curve analyses indicated that in adolescence, Hispanics had lower self-esteem than Blacks and Whites. However, later on Hispanics' self-esteem increased more, so that by age 30, Blacks and Hispanics had higher self-esteem than Whites (Erol & Orth, 2011).

Furthermore, personality traits such as emotional stability, conscientiousness, and extraversion are associated with positive self-esteem development across the lifespan (Wagner, Lüdtke, et al., 2013). Conversely, highly contingent self-esteem, reliant on external validation, is considered less stable and adaptive. As individuals progress through adolescence and adulthood, their self-esteem tends to become less contingent, showing fewer fluctuations over time (Meier et al., 2011).

### *2.1.3 Dimensions of self-esteem*

As mentioned above, self-esteem refers to an individual's subjective assessment of their worth (Donnellan et al., 2011). It comprises global self-esteem, which represents an overall evaluation of personal worth, and specific self-esteem, which pertains to self-assessments in distinct domains of life (Rosenberg et al., 1995).

1. Family Dimension: This dimension of self-esteem is influenced by relationships with attachment figures and significant others within the family unit. Feelings of being valued, loved, and respected by family members contribute positively to one's self-esteem (Riggio et al., 1990).

2. Interpersonal or Social Dimension: Social self-esteem is shaped by interactions with others within social contexts, particularly peers. It encompasses assessments of one's ability to form relationships, interact effectively, and navigate social dynamics. Contrary to the belief that self-sufficiency alone fosters good self-esteem, interactions with others play a pivotal role in its development. According to Cooley and Mead's theory, self-esteem arises from interactions with others, created over the course of life as a reflected evaluation of what others think of us. A person's self-esteem does not exclusively originate from individual internal factors; comparisons that the individual makes, consciously or not, with their surrounding environment also have an influence. Low self-esteem in social contexts can lead to emotional dependency, fear of rejection, and insecurity in relationships (Sadovnikova, 2016).

3. Environmental Control Dimension: This dimension reflects an individual's perception of their influence and control over their social and life environments. High self-esteem in this dimension is characterized by a sense of agency, confidence in expressing opinions, and a proactive approach to effecting change. Individuals with strong environmental control self-

esteem are motivated to pursue goals and assert their beliefs, believing in their capacity to influence others and events (Rosenberg et al., 1995).

4. Emotional Dimension: Emotional self-esteem pertains to one's perceived ability to recognize, regulate, and express emotions effectively. Those with high emotional self-esteem perceive themselves as emotionally competent individuals capable of managing both positive and negative emotions. They maintain emotional balance, accept themselves fully, and exhibit self-irony, allowing them to acknowledge their imperfections humorously (Gomez et al., 2018).

5. Body Dimension: Body self-esteem relates to the acceptance and appreciation of one's physical appearance and abilities. Individuals with positive body self-esteem are satisfied with their body shape, weight, and overall appearance. They experience physical well-being, find joy in physical activities, and feel comfortable in various clothing styles, perceiving themselves as attractive and respected by others (Delignières et al., 2004).

6. Scholastic or Professional Dimension: This dimension concerns one's perception of competence and success in academic or professional pursuits. High self-esteem in this area is characterized by confidence in handling academic challenges, resilience in overcoming difficulties, and satisfaction with achievements. School or professional success contributes positively to self-esteem, although external recognition does not invariably determine its level; personal alignment with one's own ideals plays a crucial role (Marsh et al., 2013).

Global self-esteem influences specific self-esteem domains and vice versa. However, the aggregation of specific self-esteem dimensions does not always accurately reflect an individual's global self-esteem due to variations in the personal significance assigned to each domain. Specific self-esteem in a particular area may be high or low without substantially affecting global self-esteem, depending on its perceived importance to the individual (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018).

Gender and ethnicity influence the levels of self-esteem, with men generally report higher levels of self-esteem than women (Wagner, Gerstorf et al., 2013). Ethnic minority groups, such as African Americans, often exhibit distinct patterns of self-esteem development, with pronounced increases during adolescence and young adulthood followed by rapid declines in old age compared to European Americans (Erol & Orth, 2011; Orth et al., 2010).

## 2.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HATE SPEECH AND SELF ESTEEM

“Self-esteem can be considered a pillar, a base of support" (Juul, 2003, p. 65). Human beings need to feel good about themselves, to be seen, and to have confidence in themselves. Self-esteem is fundamental because it determines psychological well-being, attitude, and the way a person faces life. It influences the emotional, social, educational, and professional life of each person. It is a mechanism of existential immunity; if it is well developed, we are happier, less vulnerable, have more satisfying relationships, and a better quality of life (Juul, 2003, p. 74).

Given the importance of self-esteem, it is crucial to understand how various factors can weaken it, negatively impacting one's well-being. One such factor is hate speech; as demonstrated by the study of Polders and collaborators, being subjected to hate speech can be highly traumatic. This study considered 385 people in Gauteng (South Africa) who identified themselves as lesbian or gay. The questionnaires were administered in face-to-face interviews or distributed in person, by mail or via the Internet and it was found that these victims of hate speech were more vulnerable to depression and had lower self-esteem. This demonstrates how hate speech can have a direct or indirect impact on psychological well-being (Polders, 2008).

Like offline, hate speech has also spread online in recent years, having an even greater impact because it can reach more users in less time, and people feel protected by the anonymity of the Internet. In the study by Brendesha and her collaborators (2008), it was shown that online racial

discrimination was negatively associated with psychological functioning. This study was conducted on a sample of 264 high school students in the United States between the ages of 14 and 18. The results showed that 20% of white students, 29% of African Americans, and 42% of multiracial/others experienced individual discrimination. Additionally about 71% of African Americans and Whites and 67% of multiracials witnessed discrimination against peers of the same or other races. It was found that, consistent with offline discrimination, online racial discrimination was negatively associated with psychological well-being and self-esteem and positively with depressive symptoms. Vicarious discrimination, however, had no link with psychological functioning (Tynes et al., 2008).

If we consider self-esteem as the main factor, it can be a protective factor against the negative consequences of being subjected to hate speech; this was demonstrated in the study by Jędryczka, Sorokowski, and Dobrowolska, which considered a total of 60 public figures (politicians, athletes, and artists; 46.7% women) and 1128 ordinary Internet users (25.1% women). The participants completed the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith; et al, 2008), the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 2008), and the Internet Hate Concern Scale (It was created for this study) and determined the frequency with which they experienced online hate. The results showed that in both groups, high self-esteem and high resilience predicted less concern about the online hate received and thus fewer consequences on their well-being (Jędryczka, Sorokowski, & Dobrowolska, 2022).

In conclusion, self-esteem provides an emotional foundation that is crucial to a person's well-being, influencing how people face life's challenges in different social, educational and even professional fields. In relation to hate speech both online and offline, being exposed to it can become a traumatic event that generally produces psychological discomfort. However, high

self-esteem can serve as a protective factor by diminishing the impact that this discrimination has on a person's psychological state, happiness and life satisfaction.

# 3.FUTURE OUTLOOK

## 3.1 DEFINITION OF THE FUTURE

The future is a widely examined concept that takes on various dimensions under different academic disciplines, making it quite challenging to define accurately. In temporal linearity, however, “futurus” from Latin portrays the future as part of time yet to come, as opposed to its relativistic meaning, which encompasses all forthcoming events within the space-time continuum from a specific point of reference (Treccani, 2023). This dualism highlights the complexity and contextual dependency in understanding this concept. Different cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence how people view tomorrow. Some anthropological insights suggest interesting variations, such as how South American Indigenous communities think that an enigmatic force behind them brings about the future. In contrast, in Westernized cultures, it is just one linear progression (Kiderra, 2006). These opposing viewpoints demonstrate the importance of culture in shaping time perceptions, which affect societal planning behavior.

“Future” is no longer a plain temporal marking; it is laden with particular significance, fears, and hopes. Thus, negotiating through history becomes confusing, especially when differentiating between pre-war moments and post-war eras (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Consequently, this temporal stance structures individuals’ psychological landscape, creating divisions among their own experiences as pasts, present moments, or anticipated futures, thereby bringing a sense of coherence and meaning to life happenings.

The future serves a critical role across academic disciplines like philosophy, physics, and social sciences by providing different perspectives on its nature and implications. In physics, for example, based on the theory of relativity, the time to come is considered an indispensable part of spacetime where probable events unfold, illustrating an intricate interrelation between the sequence of such events and distances.

In summary, the future is still a fundamental concept that influences human mental processes, cultural dynamics, and plans for the future based on particular strategies. It represents an era of possibilities and uncertainties that can only be adapted or understood subtly since those involved are individuals or even societies who want to determine their path.

## 3.2 FRAMEWORK OF FUTURE OUTLOOK

Future outlook is a complex concept with profound implications for the well-being and development of individuals. It comprises the thoughts of an individual on future events resulting from expectations, cognitive processes, and past experiences. The emotional aspect remains crucial in determining perception, planning, and imagining the future. Therefore, understanding the intricate nature of future orientation is essential for personality development, as it is critical in shaping the human qualities and intellect necessary for self-actualization (Maslow, 1979).

Additionally, by investigating intentions as posited by influential theorists like Allport (1971), we can better understand them in relation to personality theories. Intentionality, as described by Allport, involves conscious planning or the formation of self-concept regarding one's competencies and wishes. This explains how individuals often establish coherent life philosophies emanating from these mind constructs that shape what they wish to achieve within a span of years.

Another point we should consider is prospection, as defined by Gilbert and Wilson (2007). This concept involves making mental simulations about events and experiences we have not yet encountered in our lives. This imaginative process is similar to how memory works with current behavior and emotional responses toward certain stimuli, rekindling our past memories. Furthermore, the interplay between "conceptual content and affective states" by Buckner & Carroll (2007) highlights the aspect of self-esteem and emotional viewpoints on future anticipation, which we explore in depth hereafter.

Cognitively speaking, people think about futures using words (inner speech) along with images (mental imagery); these must be combined when thinking about what does not exist yet. Some research studies indicate that verbal and visual thoughts are interrelated, whereby verbal imagery can invoke mental imagery, indicating the complexity that accompanies conceiving abstract future scenarios (Wordsworth et al., 2011). For instance, McFarland (2005) reported that people tend to use more abstraction for more distant future events but exhibit equal confidence in future events.

### *3.2.1 Six pillars theory*

At first glance, having a theory of the future is helpful due to the need to establish a conceptual framework for understanding it. Among the various approaches available, there is the Six Pillars theory (Inayatullah, 2008). As the name suggests, this theory presents six pillars. The first pillar is "mapping." In this pillar, the past, present, and future are mapped. Mapping time allows us to understand better where we come from and where we are going. The primary method of this pillar is the futures triangle; the basic idea is that three dimensions shape plausible futures: the weight of the past, the thrust of the present, and the pull of the future (see Figure 1). The tension and interaction between these three forces create a possible future space within the triangle (Inayatullah, 2002; 2007). The futures triangle helps us develop a plausible future by analyzing the interaction of these three forces.

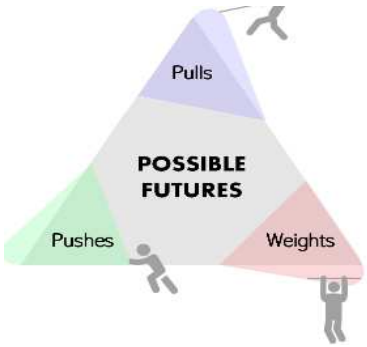


Figure 1. The Future Triangle (Fergnani,2020)

"Anticipation," the second pillar, employs two primary methods to map forthcoming circumstances. One method is emergent issue analysis (Molitor, 2003), which proactively identifies potential issues before they escalate into significant problems and financial burdens. It also seeks to capitalize on nascent opportunities rather than simply managing risks.

In contrast, the "wheel of the future" model extends beyond immediate impacts to consider long-term consequences and unintended outcomes, including second-order effects. By adopting a systemic viewpoint, this model highlights intricate connections among social, economic, and environmental systems, illustrating how different elements interact deeply with one another.

The third pillar, "Timing the Future," involves researching patterns of change at both macro and micro levels (Galtung & Inayatullah, 1997). According to Galtung and Inayatullah (1997), understanding temporal dynamics is rooted in fundamental principles such as the Linear Future, this perspective suggests continuous advancement over time. Foundational writers such as Auguste Comte (1875) and Herbert Spencer (1973) argued that rational thinking and diligent effort improve life outcomes. Then there is the cyclical Future that embraces periodic highs and lows, this model acknowledges that current success may not ensure future adaptability. It emphasizes the inevitability of change and the relevance of adaptability. Finally the Spiral Future that  Integrates linear progress with cyclical trends, this perspective advises against disregarding historical insights.  Sarkar (1987) suggested incorporating past wisdom to guide future advancements, fostering creativity and innovation to navigate emerging trends effectively.

These frameworks enable us to understand and respond to change better, prepare for challenges, seize future opportunities, and adapt to evolving social dynamics. "Timing the Future" equips societies with tools to adjust to unexpected changes and adversity.

In summary, the third pillar underscores the importance of understanding the diverse paths shaping our future—ascending linear progress, descending oscillations, and integrated spiral patterns. This approach improves preparedness by anticipating future developments effectively.

On a macroeconomic scale, genuine transformation emerges from within established institutions (Galtung & Inayatullah, 1997). It involves transforming internal perspectives rather than imposing external changes (Tolle, 2003). Institutional transformations reshape societal norms and behaviors, facilitating second-order changes that accommodate evolving paradigms.

Technological advancements drive substantial transformations, reshaping global paradigms. Understanding macro-level changes alongside micro-timing—individual life stages and behavioral shifts—provides a comprehensive view of future developments. This dual perspective ensures a balanced approach to anticipating societal shifts and personal futures.

The fourth pillar, “Enhanced Future Understanding”, employs methodologies like Casual Layered Analysis (CLA) and Four Quadrant Mapping to deepen insights into future scenarios. CLA categorizes understanding into layers—litany, social causes, worldview, and myth or metaphor—ensuring comprehensive analysis.

Similarly, Four Quadrant Mapping by Wilber and Slaughter (DATE) expands on CLA, encompassing inner and outer dimensions of individual and collective behaviors. This method enhances foresight capabilities by considering diverse perspectives.

"Creating alternatives," the fifth pillar, explores nuts-and-bolts and scenario techniques to envision different organizational approaches (Slaughter, 2005). Scenarios serve as crucial tools in future research, unraveling current trends, delineating uncertainties, and proposing strategic options for enhanced foresight.

"Transforming the future," the final pillar, embraces visioning, backcasting, and transcendence (Boulding, 1995) to shape preferred futures. Visioning encourages creative visualization to

envision desired futures, while backcasting analyzes past events to inform future strategies and prevent potential disasters.

By aligning past, present, and future insights, societies can navigate future challenges, recognize emerging trends, and foster adaptive strategies. This holistic approach empowers societies to proactively shape a resilient future, effectively addressing contemporary chaos and uncertainties.

## 3.3 FEAR OF THE FUTURE

Fear is an ancient psychological response that helps protect us, aligning with Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. Fear is a universal, essential emotion among all living things serving vital adaptive functions (Boerner, 2004). Therefore, it is natural and should be embraced despite its unpleasant nature. In case of an actual or perceived danger, it prompts appropriate measures to save and protect life (Adler, 2004).

Fear provides an important survival function for both humans and animals throughout their lifetimes. It incites broad alert responses in the face of danger, engaging the entire organism. This results in intricate situational decisions on how to handle fear and when it should be meaningfully confronted. "The mere presence of danger is what fear signifies," and this signal demands our attention most (Munger, 2015, p. 17).

During difficult moments or times of challenge, fear may be an advantageous tool, guiding us in preparing for the correct response when the time comes. However, perceived threats can lead to significant negative aspects due to complex human thought processes and schemas. Even if one is not physically endangered, one can still feel overwhelmed by fear, hindering one's life (Gruetter, 2011).

By contrast, unreal stimuli or exaggerated reactions to threats can form negative fears. These processes are often based on imagined scenarios and visualizations of likely negative

consequences that have not occurred in reality. These can be reinforced within the human subconscious by obsessive thoughts and behaviors such as avoidance or flight (Rachman, 2004).

This manifests in a system defined by two responses known together as the 'fight or flight' system. The two possible reactions within the nervous system for acute stress are fight and flight, which might be induced by adrenaline or fear, which are essential to this concept. Fear's biological and physiological bases deserve more attention than they currently receive. The primary agent responsible for fear is the amygdala, a group of nerve nuclei located in the brain's temporal lobes, acting like an alarm system. It activates physiological processes that enable you to overcome difficulties or flee from danger before things worsen (LeDoux, 2000).

The bodily changes set off by fear include increased heart and respiration rates, changes in blood pressure or flow, enhanced perspiration, muscle tension. slowed gut movement, and dry mouth syndrome, among others. Also, other parts of the brain, such as the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, work together to interpret sensory inputs to determine whether there is an actual threat. Damasio (1994) asserts that our rational brain communicates with the emotional one, distinguishing between truth and lie concerning threats. In anxiety disorders or post-traumatic stress disorders, threats might also be perceived with similar bias, even if they are not present in everyday life.

One of the negative forms of fear that is often classified as such is fear of the future because future events are abstract and, therefore, hypothetical. This type of fear is a form of anxiety stemming from our thoughts. It is worth noting that in everyday terms, fear and anxiety tend to get mixed up primarily due to how they both involve uncertainty about what lies ahead. However, while anxiety resembles worry or concern without a specific cause fear presents itself as an emotion that has also direct physical effects on us. As these thoughts become more

obsessive, so too does their reinforcement of the very remote possibility that they will happen (Beck et al., 2005).

Involving prolonged and unbroken concerns over potential problems in relation to health issues, family disputes, and employment troubles, among others, fear of the future is one of human psychology's normal aspects. It is expected to ask ourselves about tomorrow, worrying about issues related to our health, family matters, job prospects, and freedom from desire. These unpleasant feelings may motivate us to work hard every day, improve our lives, or accomplish life goals; they can also turn into self-sustaining anxieties if we focus on such thoughts alone for long (Freeston et al., 1994).

From worry comes fear, which can turn into obsessive thinking and eventually phobias—a mental disorder wherein an individual has extreme fear that is activated by specific situations, mental objects, or topics (APA, 2013). It is often viewed this way considering how uncertain and uncontrollable everything seems to be about the future, which causes people much distress, especially when thinking about personal prospects. A little apprehension of tomorrow is natural for everyone, though it turns into major life-threatening fear in some people, preventing them from living normal, happy lives. Various fears, such as those driven by assumed economic instability, hindrances in engaging in meaningful relationships, or losing existing relationships, can manifest as phobias (Barlow, 2002).

### *3.3.1 Fear of the future among young people*

To begin with, adolescence (from the Latin adolescentia, derived from the verb adolescĕre, meaning "to grow," from alĕre, "to nourish") is the stage of development characterized by the transition from childhood to adulthood (Harper, n.d.). It is a particularly problematic period of existence, especially for the psychological resonances of the changed relationship between adolescents and their bodies. The development of primary and secondary sexual characteristics

produces new situations. The first menstruation is a fundamental psychological experience for women, while for men, the maturation of sexual characteristics constitutes a lesser source of anxiety (Blyth & Hill, 2018). Interest in the opposite sex can translate into seductive behaviors, but often, especially in males, it results in masturbatory activities in which the developing imaginative faculties are engaged. Characteristic anxieties of the adolescent then derive from the detachment from intra-familial emotional bonds, with an inversion of the emotional evaluation of the family world compared to the extra-family world. No longer a child and not yet an adult, the adolescent generally finds security in friendships with peers of the same sex or by joining a group. Linked to the growing emotional autonomy from the family are the processes of idealization of extra-family figures ("models") with whom the adolescent identifies (Steinberg, 2005). The adolescent is finally capable of a richer articulation of mental activity by virtue of a lesser dependence on perceptual data (Santrock, 2021). The adolescent is, therefore, characterized by the manifestation and action of a dynamic factor, the Ego, which is at the center of interest of almost all recent psychological currents, even if derived from psychoanalysis (Erikson, 1968). The Ego gives rise to productive and creative expressions, promoting a new dynamic that is also libidinal. Adolescence: a middle ground, rich in ambivalences and contradictions; the period par excellence of change, which best represents the total mystery of the life process. Our young people face reality – and the process of attributing meaning to it – according to the existential categories of uncertainty, transience, and reversibility (Erikson, 1968). Indeed, there are issues that are encountered for the first time precisely in adolescence: the need to make autonomous decisions, solve problems, think independently, establish new emotional bonds, and deal with unknown and unpredictable situations (Santrock, 2021).

Additionally, adolescence begins around the age of 11, when young people start thinking more abstractly and develop the ability to generate hypotheses and think more logically; however,

they often struggle to connect situations, thoughts, and emotions, thus having difficulty understanding and distinguishing the emotions they experience and tending to react to them impulsively. Understanding adolescents' emotional, mental, and relational functioning in different life contexts is essential to support them in their growth journey. For instance, in the 11-15 age range, typical problems include frequent mood swings influenced by biological changes, hyper-reactivity to stimuli, difficulties in relationships with parents, feelings of inadequacy compared to others, conformity to the peer group, guilt and embarrassment associated with sexuality, and substance use or abuse (Di Pietro & Bassi, 2013; Pierantoni, 2020).

Following this initial phase of adolescence comes what is called advanced adolescence: between the ages of 16 and 19 (though there is no strict age limit), it is characterized by greater stability compared to previous years. Young people begin to think more sophisticatedly, formulating complex hypotheses and considering future events and possible consequences. In this developmental stage, young people tend to strive for greater independence and begin experimenting with new roles and responsibilities, their interests may change, and they tend to ask existential questions. They face peer relationships with greater maturity, are more tolerant of diversity, and new challenges arise in romantic relationships and sexuality. Typical problems at this stage include anxiety about academic or career choices, anger associated with the desire for independence from the family, or feelings of loneliness due to changes in interpersonal relationships (Di Pietro & Bassi, 2013).

However, all these demands are not supported by a biological basis that allows young people to make such important choices: the brain areas that should handle these functions are not yet fully developed.

When considering youth, we tend to associate that specific period of life with positive emotions such as carefreeness, happiness, light-heartedness, and a sense of invincibility. Yet, today, reality may be far from these concepts: among many adolescents and young adults, doubts, worries, and fears about their future are predominant. (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). While some of these are entirely normal and physiological, related to age, others are caused by the profound instability and precariousness we are experiencing globally (Arnett, 2000).

In this context, focusing on the fear of the future during adolescence, Nuttin (1985) observes that the organization of a certain "life plan" occurs around goals that are partly dictated by individual needs and partly by the objectives that the social structure tends to prioritize. In his theorization, motivations represent the concrete and functional expression of needs, constituting the fundamental elements of human integration into the world. One of the characteristics of human behavior is its structuring into a "sequence of goals," meaning that each action gains its significance within a broader, more complex, and articulated project context.

Furthermore, the temporal perspective assumes crucial importance in Nuttin's theoretical framework, for whom the concepts of anticipation and expectation indicate a constant orientation of the individual toward the future. Anticipation is not only the result of past experience but also a dynamic orientation toward the future, which is correlated with motivation and connected with the cognitive elaboration of goals and projects.

In contemporary times, the way young people experience the present has substantially changed compared to the traditional representation of their temporal experience. The present time is shaped by the attitude towards the past on the one hand and the future on the other. For example, if thoughts about the future are characterized by uncertainty and anxiety, then daily life will also lose its meaning and value. Time will cease to appear as a precious resource and will not

be seen as a means to achieve future goals, but it may appear excessively long, uniform, and without quality.

Similarly, an optimistic attitude toward the future tends to depend on the positive or negative value of the projected and anticipated goals and the subjective probability of their realization. The perception of the three temporal directions (past, present, future) as interconnected or opposed is also essential.

It is an impression of temporal continuity or discontinuity and, especially, what Nuttin (1985) has defined as temporal integration, or "the consciousness of a future in active continuity with the present and the past and a disposition to internal attribution that recognizes the role of personal action in the results obtained."

Nevertheless, youth is that period of life that should be projected toward the future with optimism and should be fueled by great dreams and hopes. Nevertheless, the current landscape describes a very different situation: fears outweigh hopes, optimism has been replaced with pessimism, and adolescents and young adult Millennials and Gen Z are more worried, disillusioned, fragile, and fearful than their predecessors (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Particularly worrying are young people aged 18 to 30, a period of life in which fears and uncertainties increase: it is that age group in which one is no longer a child but still terrified of taking on the responsibilities, actual or presumed, that becoming an adult requires (Arnett, 2000).

Between late adolescence and the beginning of adulthood, the predominant fear is that of the future, which, however, stems from insecurity and instability that is entirely present. Young people now live in a condition of uncertainty caused by a society that no longer offers them any fixed points: for example, the main milestones that lead to "becoming adults" – such as economic autonomy, independence, buying a house, starting a family – have been pushed

further and further forward (Schwartz, 2000). This translates into a loss of energy, demoralization, disorientation, and distrust, but not only: among young people, there is an increase in real problems such as anxiety disorders, sleep disturbances, relational and eating disorders, and so on (Patton & Viner, 2007).

## 3.4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUTURE OUTLOOK AND SELF-ESTEEM

The image that everyone has of themselves is a mosaic that slowly takes shape based on the feedback we receive from others. Each person's self-awareness and self-evaluation are determined by how others judge us, or how we think they judge us (Tesser, 2001). Self-esteem, whether high, low, positive, or negative, belongs to us and begins developing in childhood, continuing to grow through life experiences (Harter, 2013).

Moreover, it is crucial to be aware that our self-esteem influences our behavior, social relationships, work efficiency, emotional life, and, therefore, our future and how we envision it. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to believe in themselves and set more challenging goals, thinking they can achieve them even with difficulties. Research in university settings has shown that the environment can influence expectations.It is possible to reinforce the aforementioned statement with existing literature, such as the study conducted by Mamani et al. (2023), titled The influence of self-esteem, depression, and life satisfaction on the future expectations of Peruvian university students. In this study, a total of 708 university students were assessed using various scales to measure their satisfaction and future expectations, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (EAR; Atienza et al., 2000a), the Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener et al., 1985), and the Adolescent Futures Expectations Scale (EEFA; Sánchez-Sandoval & Verdugo, 2016). The study concluded that there was a statistically significant influence regarding the role of self-esteem and self-concept as potential risk factors in the development of pathologies such as depression. It was found that increasing levels of self-

esteem would strengthen future expectations in university students within the studied sample. This conclusion is further supported by another study conducted with Spanish and Portuguese populations, which demonstrated the relationship between positive self-perceptions and future expectations (Verdugo et al., 2018). Additionally, Lobos et al. (2022) also found a strong positive influence among the young population in Peru. However other academic literature reviews such as Jackman and Macphee (2021) have demonstrated a more complex nature of this relationship, where the benefit or detriment depends on various factors. Believing in oneself helps to overcome difficult and discouraging moments; accepting oneself with strengths and weaknesses prevents demanding inadequate and exaggerated things from oneself. Failures will not be seen as unfavorable but as events from which to learn; every life experience contributes to inner growth and creates valuable references for the future. This leads to a more optimistic view of the future, with higher expectations for one's life and confidence in achieving the goals set.

Additionally, it is essential to highlight how current situations or contexts, such as an economic crisis, can affect people's self-esteem and their perception of their ability to achieve life goals. A study by Aucejo et al. (2020) demonstrated that the COVID-19 emergency led to a more negative outlook regarding their professional future, with 40% of college students in the United States believing they would not be able to secure a job or internship in the future. Conversely, fear of the future can condition our perception of our worth. The uncertainty of tomorrow could lead us to believe we are not up to it, causing a sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Harter, 1993).

Consequently, the future becomes not so frightening to escape from; by trusting oneself and believing in achieving set goals, the future is no longer so unknown but something that can be seen as reachable through small goals set occasionally.

The higher our self-esteem, the more confident we are in others, and the more they demonstrate their esteem for us. Conversely, if we have low self-esteem, we become pessimistic, very strict, and critical of ourselves, unable to face stressful situations and complain without achieving anything good, thereby concretely confirming our negative expectations towards life (Hewitt, 2002). There is strong evidence that self-esteem predicts a person's success and well-being in important areas of life, even after accounting for previous levels of self-esteem and success (Hattie & Fletcher, 2005). High self-esteem is a predictor, not a consequence, of life success and an optimistic view of the future (Trzesniewski et al, 2006). Studies cover a wide range of potential outcomes, including satisfaction in marriage and close relationships, social network size and social support, physical health, mental health, education, occupational status, work success and job satisfaction, and criminal behavior; all these elements create solid foundations for building hope for the future, enabling positive thinking and believing in achieving one's desires (Baumeister et al., 2003).

## 3.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUTURE OUTLOOK AND HATE SPEECH

Firstly, it is important to highlight that the existing literature on the direct relationship between future outlook and hate speech is limited. The academic articles available predominantly focus on related topics such as victimization or discrimination. For instance, studies have explored how future outlook impacts experiences of victimization and discriminatory attitudes, rather than addressing the direct correlation between future outlook and the propensity to engage in hate speech. Examples of such research include the study by Ahmed, Kia-Keating, and Tsai (2011), there exists a strong correlation between perceived discrimination, stress, and mental health among Arab-American adolescents. The more intensely discrimination is perceived, the more detrimental the psychological outcomes. This perception also affects how these adolescents view their future prospects; those with limited coping skills may internalize

discrimination, feeling inferior and believing they deserve less than what they are offered. Similarly, the research by Crockett et al. (2007) demonstrates that these findings extend to other marginalized populations in America, such as Mexican Americans. Individuals who perceive higher levels of discrimination often experience lower self-esteem and heightened depressive symptoms.

Further studies have indicated that individuals who face discrimination can bolster their resilience through positive coping strategies. For instance, strengthening ethnic identity, religiosity, gender identity, social support, and social cohesion—factors known to mitigate the effects of discrimination (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015) can enhance self-esteem, foster a sense of belonging, promote stability, and define social roles. These factors are crucial in protecting individuals when confronted with discrimination (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Moreover, in the study by Noh and Kaspar focused on Southeast Asian refugees in Canada, it was observed that the negative effects of discrimination could be counteracted by positive coping strategies, such as setting future-oriented goals (Noh & Kaspar, 2003). This underscores how maintaining an optimistic outlook allows individuals to distance themselves from feeling undervalued and different in the present, thereby avoiding succumbing to negative emotions triggered by discrimination. By envisioning a positive future and setting achievable goals, individuals can enhance their belief in themselves and their capabilities, facilitating the pursuit of their aspirations while mitigating the impact of discrimination.

# 4.RESULTS

## 4.1 HYPOTHESIS

The present study aimed to evaluate the effect of experiencing hate speech during adolescence, given its increasing incidence in both physical and digital environments (United Nations, 2022). More specifically, the study's first aim was to assess how experiencing hate speech at school or online influences adolescents' self-esteem and their future outlook.

One of the central factors addressed is the impact on the self-esteem of individuals who have experienced hate speech. The study attempts to understand how experiences of hate speech can influence the self-perception and confidence in one's own abilities. It is important to note that, based on related literature, a decrease in the levels of self-esteem due to the psychological discomfort caused by these traumatic experiences has been identified (Polders, 2008). According to previous studies, they will have lower self-esteem and be more likely to develop depressive symptoms (Crockett et al., 2007)

In addition, the study examines whether there are differences in the impact of hate speech on self-esteem and future outlook based on the gender of the adolescents involved. Previous studies have shown that hate speech has a greater negative impact on girls' self-esteem than on boys, suggesting that gender is a significant factor influencing the relationship between hate speech and self-esteem (Wagner, Gerstorf et al., 2013).

The second factor considered in relation to hate speech is future outlook, exploring how hate speech influences adolescents' future perspectives on their academic, professional, and personal lives. The study seeks to understand whether hate speech can limit adolescents' aspirations and life goals. Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that there is an association between hate speech and future outlook. It is expected that individuals who experience hate speech are

more likely to have poorer future expectations, feel inferior and struggle to believe in the opportunities available to them (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011).

Finally, the study explores how levels of self-esteem differ between adolescents who have been direct victims of hate speech and those who have only observed it, anticipating that those who have directly experienced discrimination will have lower levels of self-esteem compared to those who have only witnessed it (Tynes et al., 2008). The study also investigates how their outlook on life and future prospects may be affected by being direct victims of this type of discrimination, potentially leading to greater difficulties in setting high goals and accepting secondary roles (Ahmed et al.,2011).

These research questions will guide the design and execution of the study, contributing to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social impacts of hate speech on adolescents' lives.

## 4.2 PARTICIPANTS

After the approval from the ethics committee was granted, directors of Italian high schools across Italy were contacted and invited to participate in the project. During the research, 1267 students in the second, third and fourth year of high school were contacted, and parental consent was obtained for 1,102 of them, representing 87%. Subsequently 283 students were excluded from the analyses due to absence on one of the administration days, missing data in the considered measures, or the inability to match codes. As a result, the data from 819 students were analyzed. Regarding sexual orientation, 63 students identified as non-straight (7,7%), 726 as straight (88,6%) and 30 preferred not to answer (3,7%).

The age of this sample ranged from 13 to 19 years, with an average age of almost 16 years and the standard deviation of 1 year. The biological sex distribution of this sample included 431

males (52,6%), 387 females (47,3%) and 1 individual who preferred to not answer (0.1%); 430 identified themselves as male (52,5%), 378 as female (46,2%), 3 as non-binary (0,4%), 2 as other (0,2%) and 6 preferred not to answer (0,7%).

## 4.3 PROCEDURE

The first step was to contact the schools and invite them to participate in the project. The school directors, teachers, and students were informed that the research aimed to understand how students' psychosocial well-being is related to certain individual and contextual variables (e.g. emotional regulation, quality of social relationships, sense of belonging to a peer group, identity, self-efficacy, future orientation).

Informed consent forms were distributed to the students, who were required to have them signed by at least one parent or legal guardian to participate in the project. This also served to inform the parents about the research. The consent form detailed the research objectives and the process by which the study would be conducted. The headteacher and teachers were verbally informed, and parents were notified through informed consent that the project would take place in two sessions of approximately 40 minutes each (one school lesson) on two different days, and that the questionnaires would be administered in the computer lab. Students without a signed informed consent were involved in alternative activities.

When the researchers entered the class, they gave a brief introduction to the project, explaining that the questionnaires were anonymous. To ensure anonymity, each school, class, and student was assigned a random number. Once everyone was seated in a place with a computer, each with a different number that would be the student's identification number for that session, the students had to copy the link to the questionnaire and from there they could start by entering the school, class and student number they were given. The initial page included personal

questions (age, gender, number of siblings, etc.), and students were asked to create a nickname to remember for the next session. Moreover a code was generated based on the initial information, ensuring complete privacy. After that students answered questions on bullying, cyberbullying, hate speech, vision of the future, tolerance of uncertainty, perception of time, self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional regulation difficulties, depression, anxiety, stress, social anxiety, malevolent creativity, jealousy phobia, class climate, quality of friendship, cognitive empathy, affective empathy and sympathy. A researcher was present throughout the session to ensure that students did not exchange personal information or help each other answer. Once finished, students closed their computers and waited quietly for everyone to finish the questionnaire.

As this study is part of a larger project, only a limited number of variables—hate speech, future outlook, and self-esteem—were selected to focus on the relationships between them.

## 4.4 MEASURES

One of the variables that was measured in this study is hate speech. The term "hate speech" is defined as any act that fosters, promotes, or encourages, in any form, the denigration, hatred, or defamation of a person or group (Parekh, 2017). We focused on hate speech victimization and hate speech bystanding, both offline (school) and online. In order to investigate this factor, high school students answer online a series of questions about offline hate speech in the first part and online hate speech in the second part.

We asked how many times in the last year they had observed and were victims of hate speech at school, by using a five-point scale (“not at all,” “1 or 2 times within the last 12 months,” “2 or 3 times per month,” “about once a week,” “several times a week.”). If they observed/were victims of hate speech was asked why it had been done, deciding between skin colour or origin

(e.g. dark-skinned people, foreigners), gender or gender identity (e.g. women, trans people), religious faith (e.g. Islam, Judaism), sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian, gay), other, and at the end who had done it: classmates, other students, other school staff (e.g. teachers, ATA staff), don't know (e.g. anonymous writing) or other (please specify).

Then we focused on online hate speech: the students were asked about how often they observed and were victims of online hate speech in the last 12 months by using the same five-point scale used for assessing offline hate speech, students who reported witnessing/victimization of online hate speech at least once were presented with the same questions and response options of offline hate speech.

Morris Rosenberg's scale (Rosenberg, M. 1965) was used to assess self-esteem. It is a questionnaire that collects 10 statements that revolve around how much one values oneself, as well as how satisfied one is with oneself. The first 5 statements are positive form (e.g.," I feel that I have a number of good qualities"), the remaining 5 in negative form (e.g., "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure").

Participants were asked to respond by indicating their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale. The responses to the negatively formulated items were reverse coded, and then the average of the 10 items was calculated for each participant, so that higher scores corresponded to higher levels of self-esteem ($\alpha$= .88).

Adolescent Time Inventory—Time Attitudes (ATI-TA) was used to assess time attitudes. The measure is part of the Adolescent Time Inventory (Mello & Worrell, 2007), developed to evaluate how adolescents think and feel about the past, present, and future. It consists of 5 components: time meaning (ATI-TM), that refers to individuals' definitions of the past, the present, and the future; time frequency (ATI-TF), that refers to how often adolescents think about the past, the present; time orientation (ATI-TO), that refers to the relative emphasis an

individual places on each time period; time relation (ATI-TR), that refers to the degree that individuals perceive the past, the present, and the future to be related; and the future time attitudes (ATI-TA), that refers to positive and negative attitudes toward the past, the present, and the future. In this research, we focused exclusively on four out of the six 5-item subscales comprising the ATI-TA: Present Positive (e.g., "I am happy with my current life"); Present Negative (e.g., "I am not satisfied with my life right now"); Future Positive (e.g., "My future makes me happy"); and Future Negative (e.g., "I doubt I will make something of myself"). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Subscale scores were generated by calculating the average responses to the five items comprising each subscale (Present Positive: α=.94; Present Negative: α=.88; Future Positive: α=.87; Future Negative: α=.67)

Visions about future Scale (VAFS) was developed by Ginevra et al. (2017) and was used to measure the vision of the future. The scale is three dimensional (19 ITEMS): it measures hope (7 items; e.g., "In the future I will do what I'm not able to do today"); optimism (6 items; e.g., "Usually, I am full of enthusiasm and optimism"); and pessimism**,** (6 items; e.g., "I will hardly find a job really suitable for me"**).** VAFS is a five point scale, the adolescents had to choose one of the follow five response on the computer: 1 = It does not describe me at all, 2 = It describes me a little, 3 = It describes me fairly well, 4= It describes me well, 5 = It describes me very well. Increasing scores in VAFS means that individuals have a positive view of the future. In our sample, Cronbach's alpha for optimism, pessimist and hope subscales were .891, .836 and .893, respectively.

## 4.5 RESULTS: Descriptive statistics and sex differences

### *4.5.1 Description of hate speech results*

As previously mentioned, this research focuses on understanding the relations between hate speech, self-esteem and future outlook. More specifically hate speech was considered in different contexts (at school and online) and a distinction was made between students who observed hate speech and those who were victims of it.

The first part of the paragraph addresses the variable of hate speech, describing the results obtained using an independent sample t-test and focusing on the influence of gender.

For the first time in Italy, hate speech was explored in different contexts (school and online), while considering gender differences. The descriptive statistics for observed and experienced hate speech at school and online are presented in Table 4.1. To examine gender differences, an independent sample t-test was conducted. As shown in the table, a statistically significant difference emerged only for hate speech victimization, with males scoring higher than females in both contexts (school and online).

***Table 4.1*** *Descriptive statistics for observed and experienced hate speech at school and online*

| | Total sample | | | | Boys (N=431) | | Girls (N=387) | | *t*(816) | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Min* | *Max* | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | |
| HS bystanding at school | 1 | 5 | 2.77 | 1.56 | 2.81 | 1.59 | 2.74 | 1.52 | .63 | .27 |
| HS victimization at school | 1 | 5 | 1.53 | .95 | 1.62 | 1.05 | 1.43 | .81 | 2.95 | .002 |
| HS bystanding online | 1 | 5 | 3.07 | 1.55 | 3.13 | 1.56 | 3.00 | 1.54 | 1.15 | .12 |
| HS victimization online | 1 | 5 | 1.28 | .71 | 1.36 | .82 | 1.17 | .55 | 3.83 | <.001 |

Note. HS = Hate speech

There are different topics regarding hate speech that can be observed by students in school on a daily basis. The most commonly observed form of hate speech among students is related to sexual orientation (N=277, 33.8%), the second most common is skin color/origin (N=251, 30.6%), gender or gender identity and other factors, such as physical appearance (N=186) and differences in opinion (N=165), are respectively 22.7% and 20.1%; religion was the least observed topic (N=74, 9.0%). The most common aggressors of hate speech observed in school are classmates (N=379, 46.3%) or other students (N=343, 41.9%). Anonymous perpetrators (N=129) make up a total of 15.8%. School personnel (N=76) and others (N=11) come in respectively at 9.3% and 1.3%.

Hate speech observed online by students follows the same trend as hate speech observed in school; sexual orientation (N=387, 47.3%), skin color/origin (N=359, 43.8%), gender/gender identity are the most commonly observed. Religion (N=158) and other factors (N=128) remain

the least observed topics with a respective total of 19.3% and 15.6%. Unlike aggressors of hate speech observed in school, the most common aggressors of online hate speech, observed by students, are strangers (N=453, 55.3%) and anonymous accounts (N=338, 41.3%). Classmates (N=93) and other students (N=84) come in respectively at 11.4% and 10.3%. The least common aggressors are others (N=28, 3.4%).

If we consider the victims of hate speech, we can see that the most common topic for which the students were subjected to hate speech in school is other, such as physical appearance and differences in opinion (N=151, 18.4%), followed by skin color (N=50, 6.1%), gender/gender identity (N=44, 5.4%), sexual orientation (N=37, 4.5%) and religion (N=22, 2.7%). The most common aggressors of hate speech victimization in school are classmates (N=190, 23.2%) and other students (N=87, 10.6%). Anonymous aggressors (N=44) make up a total of 5.4%. School personnel (N=26) and others (N=18) come in respectively at 3.2% and 2.2%.

Hate speech bystanding online follows the same trend as the one observed in school; other, such as physical appearance and differences in opinion (N=61, 7.4%), followed by skin colour (N= 31, 3.8%), gender/gender identity (N=31, 3.8%), sexual orientation (N=29, 3.5%) and religion (N=17, 2.1%). The most common aggressor of online hate speech are strangers (N=59, 7.2%) and other students (N=44, 5.4%). Classmates (N=38) make up a total of 4.6%. Anonymous accounts (N=31) and others (N=19) come in respectively at 3.8% and 2.3%.

### *4.5.2 Factors correlated to hate speech*

The descriptive statistics and gender differences for variables considered as potential correlates of hate speech are presented in Table 4.2.

As shown, all differences are significant except for pessimism. Specifically, boys have higher self-esteem, optimism, hope, positive vision of the future and present compared to girls, while girls have higher negative views of the future and present.

***Table 4.2*** *Descriptive statistics and gender differences for variables considered as potential correlates of hate speech*

| | Total sample (N=819) | | | | Boys (N=431) | | Girls (N=387) | | *t*(816) | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Min* | *Max* | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | |
| Self-esteem | 1 | 5 | 3.50 | .78 | 3.73 | .72 | 3.25 | .76 | 9.36 | <.001 |
| Optimism | 1 | 5 | 3.13 | .85 | 3.25 | .85 | 3.00 | .83 | 4.40 | <.001 |
| Pessimism | 1 | 5 | 1.99 | .73 | 2.00 | .76 | 2.01 | .69 | -.65 | .513 |
| Hope | 1 | 5 | 3.32 | .78 | 3.39 | .81 | 3.23 | .75 | 2.89 | .004 |
| PosFuture | 1 | 5 | 3.06 | .90 | 3.21 | .92 | 2.88 | .85 | 5.25 | <.001 |
| NegFuture | 1 | 5 | 1.89 | .66 | 1.80 | .63 | 1.98 | .69 | -3.16 | <.001 |
| PosPresent | 1 | 5 | 3.32 | .96 | 3.48 | .98 | 3.14 | .90 | 5.16 | <.001 |
| NegPresent | 1 | 5 | 2.20 | .93 | 2.04 | .92 | 2.37 | .91 | -5.23 | <.001 |

*Note:* PosFuture= Positive Future, NegFuture= Negative Future, PosPresent= Positive Present, NegPresent=Negative Present

### *4.5.3 What is the impact of hate speech on adolescents' self esteem and on their future outlook?*

To answer these research questions, independent sample t-test was used, dividing the sample in two groups, those who never experienced or observed hate speech (0) and those who experienced or observed hate speech at least once in the past three months (1).

Focusing on students who observed hate speech, as it shown in the table 4.3, there are 208 students who never observed hate speech at school and 192 who never observed hate speech

online, 611 students who at least once time observed hate speech at school and 627 students who at least once observed hate speech online. An independent sample t-test revealed no statistically significant differences between adolescents who observed hate speech at school and those who did not, except for pessimism, which was higher among those who witnessed hate speech.

On the other hand, students who witnessed hate speech online had a more negative and less positive vision of the present compared to those who had not witnessed hate speech online in the past three months.

**Table 4.3** *Descriptive statistics for observed and not observed hate speech at school and online*

| | HS bystanding at school | | | | | | HS bystanding online | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No (N=208) | | Yes (N=611) | | *t*(817) | *p* | No (N=192) | | Yes (N=627) | | *t*(817) | *p* |
| | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | |
| Self-esteem | 3.53 | .74 | 3.50 | .79 | .51 | .30 | 3.54 | .78 | 3.50 | .77 | .62 | .27 |
| Optimism | 3.14 | .77 | 3.13 | .87 | .21 | .42 | 3.19 | .80 | 3.11 | .86 | 1.05 | .15 |
| Pessimism | 1.91 | .67 | 2.02 | .74 | -1.96 | .02 | 1.93 | .73 | 2.02 | .73 | -1.45 | .07 |
| Hope | 3.32 | .72 | 3.32 | .80 | -.02 | .49 | 3.33 | .74 | 3.31 | .79 | .29 | .39 |
| PosFuture | 3.00 | .85 | 3.07 | .92 | -.95 | .17 | 3.08 | .87 | 3.05 | .92 | .42 | .34 |
| NegFuture | 1.86 | .65 | 1.89 | .67 | -.56 | .29 | 1.85 | .66 | 1.90 | .66 | -.75 | .23 |
| PosPresent | 3.30 | .87 | 3.33 | .98 | -.47 | .32 | 3.46 | .95 | 3.28 | .96 | 2.24 | .01 |
| NegPresent | 2.11 | .86 | 2.22 | .95 | -1.54 | .06 | 2.09 | .86 | 2.23 | .94 | -1.85 | .03 |

*Note.* HS= Hate Speech, PosFuture= Positive Future, NegFuture= Negative Future, PosPresent= Positive Present, NegPresent=Negative Present

Focusing on students who were victims of hate speech at school and online, as it shown in the table 4, there are 557 students who weren't victims of hate speech at school, 678 weren't victims of hate speech online, 262 suffered hate speech at school and 141 students suffered hate speech online. In contrast to the students who observed hate speech, those who suffered hate speech at school had statistically significant differences between those who never were victims in self-esteem, optimism, hope, pessimism, negative views of future and present, the first three variables were higher among those who never suffered hate speech, the last three variables were higher among those who were victims of hate speech.

**Table 4.4** *Descriptive statistics for experienced and not experienced hate speech at school and online*

| | HS victimization at school | | | | | | HS victimization online | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No (N=557) | | Yes (N=262) | | *t*(817) | *p* | No (N=678) | | Yes (N=141 ) | | *t*(817) | *p* |
| | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | |
| Self-esteem | 3.5 | .75 | 3.41 | .81 | 2.41 | .01 | 3.52 | .76 | 3.45 | .84 | .98 | .16 |
| Optimism | 3.17 | .83 | 3.04 | .87 | 1.93 | -.03 | 3.17 | .82 | 2.94 | .95 | 3.05 | .001 |
| Pessimism | 1.93 | .69 | 2.12 | .78 | -3.48 | <.001 | 1.96 | .71 | 2.16 | .79 | -2.92 | .002 |
| Hope | 3.36 | .75 | 3.23 | .85 | 2.24 | .01 | 3.36 | .74 | 3.09 | .93 | 3.87 | <.001 |
| PosFuture | 3.06 | .88 | 3.04 | .94 | .26 | .40 | 3.05 | .88 | 3.06 | 1.01 | -.09 | .46 |
| NegFuture | 1.85 | .66 | 1.95 | .66 | -2.02 | .02 | 1.87 | .66 | 1.97 | .66 | -1.73 | .04 |
| PosPresent | 3.36 | .95 | 3.26 | .98 | 1.40 | .08 | 3.34 | .96 | 3.25 | .95 | 1.04 | .15 |
| NegPresent | 2.15 | .92 | 2.30 | .93 | -2.14 | .02 | 2.19 | .93 | 2.24 | .92 | -.64 | .26 |

*Note.* HS= Hate Speech, PosFuture= Positive Future, NegFuture= Negative Future, PosPresent= Positive Present, NegPresent=Negative Present

Focusing on the second part of Table 4.4, which addresses online hate speech victimization, we observe significant differences in optimism, pessimism, hope, and negative views of the future. Specifically, those who experienced hate speech online exhibited higher levels of pessimism and a more negative view of the future, along with lower levels of optimism and hope.

### *4.5.4 Are there gender differences in the impact of hate speech on self-esteem?*

The third hypothesis investigates the potential differences in the impact of hate speech on self-esteem and future outlook based on the gender of the adolescents involved will be examined. As the previous hypothesis, to answer these research questions an independent sample t-test was used separately for boys and girls, dividing the sample into two groups, those who had never experienced/observed hate speech (0) and those who had experienced/observed hate speech at least one time (1).

Focusing on hate speech victimization at school, as we can see in table 4.5, there were differences between female and male. First we look at males: in this sample there were 280 boys that were never subjected to hate speech at school, and 151 that were subjected to hate speech at school at least once last year. As shown in table 5, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups for all the factors that we considered. Males that were victims of hate speech at school had lower self-esteem, optimism, hope, positive view of future and present than those who have never been exposed to hate speech. On the other hand, men that were victims of hate speech had higher pessimism, negative view of future and Present than male students that never experienced hate speech.

Taking into consideration female students who were or were not subjected to hate speech at school, we can see in table 4.5 that the only factors that show a statistically significant difference between girls who experienced hate speech at school (N=110) and who never

experienced it (N=277) are pessimism and negative view of present, which were higher in girls that were victim of hate speech.

**Table 4. 5** *Descriptive statistics and gender differences for those who experienced hate speech at school*

| | HS male victimization at school | | | | | | HS female victimization at school | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No (N=280) | | Yes (N=151) | | *t*(429) | *p* | No (N=277) | | Yes (N=110) | | *t*(385) | *p* |
| | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | |
| Self-esteem | 3.82 | .67 | 3.58 | .79 | 3.33 | <.001 | 3.28 | .74 | 3.18 | .79 | 1.16 | .123 |
| Optimism | 3.35 | .81 | 3.08 | .88 | 3.21 | .001 | 2.99 | .81 | 3.01 | .86 | -.24 | .41 |
| Pessimism | 1.90 | .71 | 2.13 | .83 | -3.11 | .001 | 1.97 | .68 | 2.11 | .73 | -1.77 | .04 |
| Hope | 3.48 | .72 | 3.23 | .92 | 3.15 | .001 | 3.23 | .75 | 3.23 | .74 | .04 | .48 |
| PosFuture | 3.27 | .89 | 3.10 | .97 | 1.81 | .035 | 2.85 | .83 | 2.96 | .91 | -1.15 | .12 |
| NegFuture | 1.77 | .61 | 1.89 | .66 | -2.13 | .017 | 1.95 | .70 | 2.04 | .66 | -1.21 | .11 |
| PosPresent | 3.56 | .96 | 3.35 | 1.00 | 2.17 | .015 | 3.15 | .89 | 3.13 | .94 | .21 | .42 |
| NegPresent | 1.98 | .91 | 2.16 | .93 | -1.94 | .026 | 2.32 | .91 | 2.50 | .89 | -1.7 | .04 |

*Note.* HS= Hate Speech, PosFuture= Positive Future, NegFuture= Negative Future, PosPresent= Positive Present, NegPresent=Negative Present

Focusing on the differences in the impact of online hate speech on self-esteem and future outlook based on the gender of the adolescents, we can conclude that the results follow the same trend that the impact of offline hate speech (table 4.5), so the influence of hate speech was higher for boys than girls for the factors that we considered.

As it is shown in table 4.6 there are statistically significant differences between male students that experienced hate speech online (N=96) and those who have never experienced it (N=335) for self-esteem, optimism, pessimism, hope, positive view of present which were higher for male that never suffered hate speech; and negative view of future and pessimism which were higher for those who experienced hate speech online

Considering the female students who have or have not been victims of hate speech online, we can see in table 6 how the only factors that are statistically significant difference between girls that experienced hate speech at school (N=44) and those who have never experienced it (N=343) are self-esteem and optimism, that were lower in girls that were victim of hate speech.

**Table 4.6** *Descriptive statistics and gender differences for those who experienced hate speech online*

| | HS male victimization online | | | | | | HS female victimization online | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No (N=335) | | Yes (N=96) | | *t*(429) | *p* | No (N=343) | | Yes (N=44) | | *t*(385) | *p* |
| | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | | *M* | *DS* | *M* | *DS* | | |
| Self-esteem | 3.77 | .70 | 3.63 | .78 | 1.70 | .047 | 3.27 | .74 | 3.06 | .85 | 1.79 | .04 |
| Optimism | 3.32 | .80 | 3.01 | .96 | 3.26 | .001 | 3.02 | .81 | 2.78 | .94 | 1.83 | .03 |
| Pessimism | 1.92 | .74 | 2.18 | .80 | -2.90 | .002 | 2.00 | .68 | 2.12 | .77 | -1.10 | .14 |
| Hope | 3.47 | .72 | 3.13 | 1.00 | 3.64 | <.001 | 3.26 | .74 | 2.99 | .77 | 2.29 | .01 |
| PosFuture | 3.23 | .88 | 3.14 | 1.07 | .87 | .19 | 2.88 | .85 | 2.89 | .86 | -.05 | .48 |
| NegFuture | 1.77 | .62 | 1.92 | .67 | -2.04 | .02 | 1.96 | .69 | 2.10 | .63 | -1.31 | .09 |
| PosPresent | 3.53 | .98 | 3.34 | .95 | 1.68 | .046 | 3.16 | .90 | 3.04 | .95 | .77 | .22 |
| NegPresent | 2.02 | .93 | 2.11 | .88 | -.89 | .19 | 2.35 | .90 | 2.54 | .96 | -1.29 | .10 |

*Note.* HS= Hate Speech, PosFuture= Positive Future, NegFuture= Negative Future, PosPresent= Positive Present, NegPresent=Negative Present

### *4.5.5 Is there a difference in the effects on self-esteem and future outlook between adolescents who have experienced hate speech and those who have only observed it?*

The final hypothesis aims to examine differences in self-esteem levels between adolescents who have only experienced hate speech as victims and those who have only observed such incidents. It is hypothesized that adolescents who have directly experienced discrimination will exhibit lower self-esteem compared to those who have merely witnessed it (Tynes et al., 2008). Additionally, the study aims to explore the impact of direct victimization on their outlook on life and future prospects, potentially leading to greater difficulties in setting high goals and a tendency to accept secondary roles (Ahmed et al., 2011).

To address these research questions, we divided the sample into two groups: those who had only observed hate speech and those who had only been victims of hate speech.

However, due to the small number of students who had only experienced hate speech online (N = 7) or at school (N = 12), we were unable to make meaningful comparisons between these two groups and those who had only witnessed it at school (N = 361) or online (N = 493).

# 5. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to evaluate the impact of experiencing hate speech during adolescence, considering its increasing prevalence in both physical and digital environments (United Nations, 2022). Specifically, the first objective was to examine how exposure to hate speech at school or online affects adolescents' self-esteem and their outlook on the future. To this end, two hypotheses were developed separately but analyzed comprehensively to enable comparison and gain a deeper understanding.

The first factor analyzed was the effect on the self-esteem of individuals who have encountered hate speech. The research sought to explore how such experiences influence self-perception and confidence in one's abilities. It is important to note that related literature suggests a decrease in self-esteem levels as a result of the psychological distress caused by these traumatic experiences (Polders, 2008). Additionally, previous studies indicate that individuals exposed to hate speech are more likely to experience lower self-esteem and an increased risk of developing depressive symptoms (Crockett et al., 2007).

The second factor examined in relation to hate speech was future outlook Based on prior research, it was hypothesized that there is a correlation between exposure to hate speech and an individual’s outlook on the future. It was anticipated that those subjected to hate speech would have lower future expectations, experience feelings of inferiority, and face challenges in believing in the opportunities available to them (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011).

In this study, the above-mentioned factors were evaluated by administering questionnaires to high school students. Through an independent sample t-test, the results were found to be consistent with existing literature.

Focusing on students who witnessed hate speech, the findings suggest that pessimism is higher among those who observed hate speech at school. For those who witnessed hate speech online,

the research indicates that they tend to have a more negative and less positive view of the present. Considering the other variables -self-esteem, optimism, hope, positive view of future, negative view of future- the differences between those who observed hate speech online and offline and those who never observed it were not statistically significant. The lack of statistically significant differences in terms of self-esteem, optimism, hope, and views of the future, may be attributed to the possibility that merely observing hate speech might not have as profound an impact on psychological outcomes as directly experiencing it. The effects of witnessing hate speech may be less severe compared to being a direct target.

In contrast, students who experienced hate speech at school showed statistically significant differences compared to those who were never victims. Specifically, self-esteem, optimism, and hope were higher among students who had never been subjected to hate speech, while pessimism, and negative views of both the future and present were more pronounced among those who had been victims. Similarly, focusing on students who were victims of online hate speech compared to those who were not, there were significant differences in optimism, pessimism, hope, and negative views of the future. Specifically, those who experienced online hate speech displayed higher levels of pessimism and a more negative outlook on the future, along with lower levels of optimism and hope.

In both online and offline contexts, the differences between those who have been subjected to hate speech and those who have not are significant, with more negative consequences for those who have experienced hate speech. This could be because individuals who have been subjected to hate speech often feel weaker and less capable of taking control of their lives. Hate speech attacks an individual's identity, values, or self-worth, causing emotional distress and feelings of inadequacy. This emotional impact can lead to a diminished sense of self-esteem and greater pessimism about their future and potential achievements.

In this study, we investigated whether the impact of hate speech on self-esteem and future outlook varies based on the gender of the adolescents involved. Previous research has indicated that hate speech has a more pronounced negative effect on girls' self-esteem compared to boys, suggesting that gender plays a significant role in the relationship between hate speech and self-esteem (Wagner, Gerstorf et al., 2013).

However, contrary to previous research, our study revealed that hate speech has a stronger impact on boys than on girls, both in the online and offline context. Specifically, male students who were victims of hate speech at school had lower levels of self-esteem, optimism, hope, and positive views of both the future and present compared to those who had never been exposed to hate speech. Conversely, these male victims showed higher levels of pessimism and more negative views of both the future and the present than their peers who had not experienced hate speech. In contrast, among female students, the only factors that showed a statistically significant difference between girls who experienced hate speech at school and those who had not were pessimism and negative view of the present, both of which were higher in girls that were victims of hate speech. Therefore, based on the factors we considered, it can be concluded that hate speech has a stronger impact on self-esteem and future outlook in boys than in girls. One possible explanation for this finding is that males may feel a stronger need than females to prove themselves as strong and to avoid showing any weaknesses. This need to appear strong could make it more challenging for males to cope with situations where they feel attacked or humiliated, such as experiencing hate speech. Consequently, being victims of hate speech might make them feel weaker and more vulnerable, undermining their self-esteem and leading to a more pessimistic outlook on the future. In contrast, females, due to cultural factors and gender expectations, might be more accustomed to expressing and managing their emotions without necessarily feeling less strong. This could explain why males, in this context, have faced more negative consequences compared to females.

Finally, the study explored how much self-esteem and future outlook differ between adolescents who have been direct victims of hate speech and those who have only observed it, anticipating that those who have directly experienced discrimination will have lower levels of self-esteem and more difficult in setting high goals and accepting secondary roles compared to those who have only witnessed it (Tynes et al., 2008) (Ahmed et al.,2011). However, we were unable to address this question meaningfully due to the small number of students who had only experienced hate speech online (N = 7) or at school (N = 12). This limited sample size prevented us from making meaningful comparisons between these groups and those who had only witnessed hate speech at school (N = 361) or online (N = 493).

## 5.1 LIMITATIONS

The study is subject to various limitations. Firstly, the research relied solely on self-reporting, which means responses may be influenced by participants' reluctance to disclose private details. In addition, this method is prone to different biases, such as social desirability bias, where respondents may provide answers they believe will be viewed favorably by others rather than providing truthful or accurate responses. To address this limitation, future research should employ multiple data collection methods, including interviews and evaluations that involve other key actors (peers, teachers and parents).

Another significant limitation was the loss of a substantial portion of the sample. Initially, 1,267 students were contacted, and parental consent was obtained for 1,102 of them, which represents 87% of the total. Afterward, 283 students were excluded from the analyses due to absence on one of the administration days, missing data in the measures considered, or the inability to match codes. As a result, data from 819 students were analyzed. The loss of nearly a third of the participants may reduce the representativeness of the results.This could be addressed with the use of a diverse platform to summit the surveys. This would allow each student to register

anonymously employing a transitory username and password. the use of this type of technological approach would permit for more precise control over individual participation while maintaining participant privacy and anonymity. Furthermore, it would facilitate any possible password recovery and, subsequently, user access in an efficient way, essentially reducing data loss and improving the integrity of the collected data. This methodology aims to optimize the administration and tracking of responses, ensuring the quality and completeness of the information required for analysis.

A further limitation is the small sample size of students who had only experienced hate speech either online (N = 7) or at school (N = 12). Which indicates that victims of hate speech have also witnessed it, as it's a common experience. This small number of participants makes it impossible to perform meaningful statistical comparisons between these groups and those who had only witnessed hate speech at school (N = 361) or online (N = 493). As a result, the study could not adequately explore how self-esteem and future outlook differ between adolescents who were direct victims of hate speech and those who only observed it. To address the limitation of the small sample size, it would be beneficial to increase the number of participants; this could be done by extending the data collection period, recruiting participants from additional schools or regions, or using online surveys to reach a broader audience. Additionally, where possible, groups could be redefined to include participants with similar but slightly broader experiences (e.g., merging "only online" with "primarily online") to form larger and more analyzable groups.

## 5.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE AND CONCLUSION

Considering the limitations of the current work, there are important implications for improving future research. In this study, for the first time in Italy, hate speech was explored across different contexts (school and online) in relation to self-esteem and future outlook. According to our

research, those who have witnessed or experienced hate speech are more likely to be more pessimistic, have lower self-esteem, and have a more negative outlook on the present and future. This study underscores the profound impact that hate speech can have on the psychological well-being of young people and provides an initial framework for better understanding how these experiences affect young people, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in both educational and digital settings. Ultimately, this would lead to more robust and reliable results that could better inform interventions and policies aimed at mitigating the negative effects of hate speech on adolescents. Its primary goal is to generate interest within the scientific community and encourage further investigation into this phenomenon.

This work serves as an initial foundation for future research in an area that significantly impacts a broad population of students who are at a critical stage of development. It is important to emphasize that future research should consider a range of variables that would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the aforementioned issues. For instance, it would be relevant to investigate the potential impact of hate speech on the academic performance of victims, particularly in relation to their self-esteem and motivation regarding their own abilities. Moreover, understanding how being a victim or witness of such aggression influences antisocial behavior could be highly beneficial for the development of preventive measures. Finally, a more rigorous analysis of the impact of a support network on the consequences of these aggressions could be crucial for prevention efforts.

By identifying and analyzing the ways in which hate speech influences young people, the study not only enhances understanding of its effects but also contributes to the development of more effective strategies and interventions to mitigate its impact.

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