

## Article

# Fighting Hate and Hate Speech: Raising Anti-Hate Awareness through Critical Analysis of Popular Cultural Texts on an Undergraduate Course

Hyunju Woo \*  and Yoon Y. Cho \*

College of Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies, Kyonggi University, Suwon 16227, Republic of Korea

\* Correspondence: hj.woo@kyonggi.ac.kr (H.W.); yooncho@kyonggi.ac.kr (Y.Y.C.)

**Abstract:** Central to the understanding of hate is an apprehension of the complexities of various hate-motivated social attitudes, which include Othering and the production of social, economic, and political hierarchies of domination. While hate speech is endemic both online and offline in contemporary society, Korean youths have difficulties recognizing its structural forces. The present study aims to offer an instructional model of a college-level course for identifying and countering hate in everyday life. As participants in this course, students read popular cultural texts thematizing hate, wrote critical reviews, and held group discussions to develop anti-hate critical thinking and raise awareness about online hate speech and hate-motivated social behavior. They showed significant progress in the surveys, which measured anti-hate critical thinking, as well as during the course, as they proceeded from observing and identifying hate speech to formulating and articulating proactive strategies to challenge it. This study provided an opportunity for college students to develop good citizenship in reading hate speech and representations of hate in popular cultural texts with a critical eye, and to reflect on the problem of hate in society.

**Keywords:** hate; hate speech; anti-hate awareness; popular cultural texts; anti-hate critical thinking; anti-hate action; anti-hate resistance; citizenship



**Citation:** Woo, H.; Cho, Y.Y. Fighting Hate and Hate Speech: Raising Anti-Hate Awareness through Critical Analysis of Popular Cultural Texts on an Undergraduate Course. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 240. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13110240>

Academic Editors: Costas S Constantinou, Lisa Dikomitis and Eirini Kampriani

Received: 24 September 2023  
Revised: 1 November 2023  
Accepted: 8 November 2023  
Published: 13 November 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Korean youths are familiar with various hate-motivated attitudes and hate speech from exposure to media from early adolescence [1]. Despite their familiarity with a hate-motivated lexicon from adolescence, however, even in adulthood they tend to fail to recognize critically the concept of hate and various hate-motivated social phenomena, which include Othering and the production of various social, cultural, and political hierarchies of domination.

According to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea [2], over 70% among people above the age of 14 say they have experienced hate speech online or offline overall; among them, exposure to hate speech online (62%) was more frequent than offline (53.2%). Online hate speech was most frequently directed at women (80.4%), followed by groups of certain regional origins such as the Cholla province (76.9%) and feminists (76.9%), indicating backlash against feminism to be the main proponent of hate speech. Respondents experienced online hate speech in online news comments (71%), individual-run YouTube channels (53.5%), and online forums (47.3%), suggesting the significant role played by online media platforms [2]. The internet is easily accessible, given that smartphone ownership in South Korea reaching 92.8% of the population [1]. Furthermore, with the popularization of streaming platforms and the consequent expansion of available entertainment, hate speech is propagated and reproduced in reception among viewers at times.

What does it mean to educate college students about anti-hate in this kind of environment in which hate is endemic? The present study challenges the tendency among college students to view hate speech and hate-motivated behavior as mere interpersonal

conflicts by reframing the issue as a structural problem that requires collective education. The aim of educating college students about hate in contemporary Korea, then, is to enable self-reflective thinking that recognizes and prevents any conscious or subconscious spread of hateful utterances and attitudes. As leaders of the next generation, students can critique and confront with greater flexibility deep-seated discrimination today. Also, since students are still in college, it is logistically easy to provide anti-hate education and measure any progress made by it. The present study aims to offer an anti-hate instructional model that trains students to recognize and challenge hate speech and hate-motivated behavior in their everyday life. Attendees in this model were asked to read, discuss, and review cultural texts in which hate was a prominent theme with anti-hate critical thinking as part of a broader reflection on hate-motivated social phenomena.

Butler argues that the authority held by the speaker of injurious speech is not exclusive. The speaker of injurious speech is not the originator of said speech but a secondary author who is merely citing a particular discourse. If a particular speech act insults and injures the intend subject, the injury owes not solely to the speaker's particular speech act but also to the historical and authoritative tradition that, preceding the act, gives it authority via citationality. Rather than a legal sanction to limit hate speech at a national level, Butler prioritizes strategies of counter-speech, such as speaking back and speaking through. Butler emphasized that such strategies, when employed by the one to which hate speech is addressed, can occasion a certain breakaway from the injury, albeit limited [3]. In order to resist the language of power in and through the language of power, and to build solidarity across members of society as part of staging an intervention, we must train ourselves to recognize and resist injurious speech. As citizens are entities who can assume the positions of the speaker, purveyor, and at times, addressee of hate speech, education on how to embrace differences is fundamental to civic democratic life.

As many scholars argue, imagination is a key starting point for overcoming negative emotions such as hate. Admittedly, hate is also a product of negatively imagining the other. But affirmative imagination allows for a more expansive and comprehensive conceptualization of the other from various perspectives that go beyond repeating stereotypes. In particular, Nussbaum reviews various theorists and artists and offers play, identification, imagination, and love as possible ways to overcome hate. Among these, the cultivation of imagination using artistic play is integral to expanding and maintaining one's interest in others [4]. The present study offers education via the critical analysis of popular cultural texts and media literacy as a way of enabling affirmative imagination that can reverse hate as a product of negative imagination. Statistical data indicate that online media is the main arena in which college students encounter injurious speech and hateful behavior.

Nussbaum claims that hate is projection enacted as a defense mechanism against animality and vulnerability, whose articulation may take various naturalized forms, including social education and tradition [5]. Conversely, this argument also suggests that hate is not merely an individual or subjective emotion and that it can be countered using various forms of education and training. By training college students to read hate speech and representations of hate in popular cultural texts with a critical eye, we hope to enable them to regard with an equally critical eye the various hate speech and hate-motivated attitudes in social reality.

## 2. Literature Reviews

### 2.1. Structured Emotions of Hate

Hate is a structural articulation of emotions. Ahmed introduces the concept of "affective economies" to describe how emotions enter the public life of society as objects that circulate and contribute to the construction and maintenance of the social order, particularly concerning gender, race, and sexuality [6,7]. "Hate does not reside in a given subject or object. Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" [6] (p. 119).

As Ahmed suggests, hate cannot be found in one figure, but instead works to create the outline of different figures or objects of hate. Misogyny in South Korea, for example, has a nationalist ideology in which the family constitutes the foundation of the masculinized nation. According to this narrative, a healthy, pure nation can only be built by preserving patriarchal gender roles because the breakdown of the family and blurring of gendered roles lead to an insecure nation. The abolition of *Hojuje* (known as the “head of the family” patrilineal system in which the male head of the household exercises exclusive rights over the dispensation of property and family marriages), the #MeToo movement, and anti-discrimination laws thus represent urgent and imminent national crises. Aggressive backlash against feminism and the LGBTQ community constitutes a “patriotic” act of righteousness because those who challenge the patriarchal, androcentric order must be eliminated in order to restore security to the nation-state.

Hate cannot be conceptualized as a simple good–evil binary. In Korean society today, hate takes place in conflicts and confrontations between various groups divided by age, gender, region, and nationality, the boundaries of which are solidified by the in-group members’ absolute identification with the group’s opinion. Our view is that the treatment of hate speech as unconditional and universal negativity without full consideration of its particular social political contexts is dangerous. There have recently been numerous cases in which minority groups’ counter-speech, memes, and extreme speech were categorized as hate speech, “feminine” speech, and radical feminism, and were subjected to collective ridicule, social exclusion, moderation of speech, and even legal restrictions. These cases were demonstrations of how conservative groups objectified minority groups as political instruments. In some cases, a minority’s speech against misogyny was labeled as “man-hating” by these groups to further galvanize their backlash against feminism.

Meanwhile, some Korean male university students consider themselves social minorities out of a sense of relative deprivation within affirmative action and welfare policies for the unemployed, the poor, the disabled, and women, as well as due to compulsory military service for all men. This misrecognition arises because they identify all groups that do not align with their own opinion as hate-speaking and hate-acting groups, whereby they are now the “true” minorities being discriminated against by these groups. In particular, some male university students justify their hateful attitudes based on this sense of relative deprivation, anger toward affirmative action policies, and diminishing opportunities for upward social mobility, misidentify themselves as the victims, and associate with the political far-right. We need a form of education that trains these students to recognize actual forms of discrimination and social exclusion and moreover to critically analyze those forms in their respective political and social contexts.

The prevalence of hate in contemporary society does not stem solely from the inequality of social authority to which Elias and Scotson [8] refer. Hate in contemporary society takes its form between groups that are neither the established nor the outsiders. Studies have focused on frustration and anger against inequity amid the unlimited competition that characterizes contemporary society [9,10]. In Korea, meritocracy discourse is a powerful mechanism by which hate speech materializes. Korean youths, for instance, tend to express their anger in a language of unequivocal and explicit discrimination against and exclusion of those who are in direct competition for what they view as limited social capital [10]. Despite the theoretical premise of equal opportunity, if they perceive they have not received their due reward for their endeavors, or if they deem that there has been a compromise in the equity of the competition, then hate toward perceived inequity can materialize as hate speech targeting other groups. The premise among youths that winning this competition on the basis of honest merit will guarantee success deems affirmative action policies favoring or supporting disadvantaged minorities to be unjust. In particular, hate speech targets less those who are perceived to “deserve” institutional support, such as the disabled, refugees, or foreigners, than those who apparently do not, such as the elderly, children, and especially women, in the name of “reverse discrimination”.

Lee and Park [9], who examine misogyny in the online game League of Legends, argue that the sphere of online games is a space within which male users in their twenties project their neoliberal desire for fairness and target women users as threats to what they believe to be a space of fair competition. By invariably calling the women users “Hyeji” (Hyeji is a common Korean female name that is symbolically used in the League of Legends online community to harass and disparage women users who supposedly do not make any effort to improve their “poor” gaming skills.) and then attacking these characters with exclusion or hate speech, male users recover the value of fairness in the game and consolidate their identity [9]. While affirmative action policies are intended to remedy gender inequality, Hyeji, now associated with affirmative action policies, embodies the perceived reverse discrimination against men for these male users. It must be noted that this is not a phenomenon unique to Korea but is in fact endemic around the world. Braithwaite [11] analyzes the construction of masculinity in the online public sphere via the Gamergate phenomenon in social media and online game communities. Gamergate was an online harassment campaign led by male gamers that used the hashtag “#Gamergate” to claim a collapse of fairness and morality in the game industry. As a backlash against feminism, Gamergate shares common ground with increasingly polarizing gender politics in Korea, where the anti-feminist movement collides with the feminist counter-speech of gender role reversal (commonly referred to as “mirroring” in Korea).

## 2.2. The Socio-Cultural Mechanisms of Hate Speech in South Korea

Hate speech is a structural articulation of negative emotions and affect that has socially accumulated [8]. Hate speech is an act in which the established claims that outsiders do not share in dignity as equal members of the community; hate speech acts as a continuous indulgence that legitimizes the social authority of the established [8]. Hate speech, in general, refers to communications that “emphatically deny the basic standing of individuals who belong to vulnerable social groups as free and equal citizens” [12] (p. 853).

The language of discrimination and exclusion that coalesces as hate speech often tends to accompany negative language or abuse and incapacitates the target using rhetorical branding [10]. It entails an objectification of the other, denial of the equality of the self and the other as subjects, and the metaphor of contamination. The structural emotion that has received perhaps the most common attention in the literature regarding hate is disgust. For example, in *Parasite*, the director uses the metaphor of “smell” to differentiate and demarcate the class boundaries between the Parks and the Kims.

Institutional regulation of hate speech can sometimes be mobilized to flatten the complexities of reality with official language. “The pretense that an accusation of hate speech is not a political move but simply an attempt to protect society has not only allowed those in power to persecute their adversaries” [3,13] but also mobilized that very accusation to further target minoritized groups. In short, an abuse of the concept of hate speech renders hate speech an instrument of a repressive political power that purports to promote “a common good”. In *Digital Hate* [13], Sahana Udupa investigates how Hindu nationalism adopts the digitally savvy generation into the political domain to reconfigure politics as a domain of ideological reproduction, “fun”, and positive affirmation. More specifically, she argues that fun is a “metapractice” that frames various online activities among right-wing volunteers, enabling ideological voluntary work as a continuous presence in their digital lives.

Udupa contends that the cultural and political power of Hindu nationalism is derived from “fun” activities among online volunteers of Hindutva like trending hashtags and creating memes on social networking platforms such as WhatsApp and TikTok [13] (pp. 96–99). Such metapractice of fun is insidious because it ultimately serves as a method of achieving palpable political goals, driving collective identity pleasures, and shaping the new normal in right-wing movements.

In 2019, the Korean conservative party’s candidate included a meme in his campaign’s promise to reform the judiciary. The meme, called “ottok’e” (a neologist misogynist

variation of *ött'ökke*, or “what’s to be done?”), was created earlier that year to mock the supposed incompetence of women police after footage of a Seoul woman police officer handling two intoxicated and disorderly men in public was leaked. The police released the footage in its entirety in turn to counter the accusation that the woman police officer relied on nearby male citizens to handle the public intoxication. Yet, the news media’s doctoring of the footage and the police’s unclear explanation in the process further prompted online users to circulate the “öttok’e” meme as a “fun” and “cool” activity, directing hate not just to the police officer in question but to women officers collectively. As indicated by the conservative party’s use of this meme, the meme eventually entered mainstream politics as a symptomatic sign of misogynistic backlash among male voters in their 20s and 30s gaining public legitimation.

Korea, too, is witnessing an expansion of male-dominant anti-feminist groups. Alt-right groups like “New Men’s Solidarity”, most of them originating on social media, have come to prominence by mocking the media and political establishment’s recent attention on feminist movements as a move to “board the feminist bitcoin”, branding themselves as “anti-feminist bitcoin” in turn, and trolling feminist users as “man-haters”. The Korean political establishment seeks to adopt into the political domain these alt-right groups whose digital hate speech has proliferated in the name of entertainment, parody, and “coolness”. Udupa’s theorization of “fun” is a helpful tool in analyzing such global trends.

As we addressed the socio-cultural context of hate speech in contemporary Korean society with the relevant literature and theories, we examined how Korean college students perceived the meaning and structure of such hate speech in their everyday lives. This study examines the types of hate that are recognized by contemporary Korean youths. It furthermore offers a college-level instructional model that trains participants to identify latent hate in their daily life and enable reflection on social and psychological repercussions of hate speech from the perspective of the minoritized. With this aim in mind, the study poses three research questions:

Research question 1. What is the scale of students’ sensibilities to online hate speech?

Research question 2. Can students recognize the underlying structures of hate when analyzing cultural texts?

Research question 3. What are the ways in which university students react to and counter hate speech in their everyday encounters with hate speech?

### 3. Methods

This study aims to enable students at K University (anonymized for privacy) to recognize hate in everyday life on their own and proactively reflect to cultivate anti-hate awareness. We designed a course called Social Media and Digital Citizenry, in which participants were exposed to novels, films, and popular music as well as internet news articles, YouTubers’ channels, and various posts in online communities and asked to identify and analyze hate in the content.

Prior to the beginning of the course, we measured the participants’ anti-hate sensibilities in a pre-course survey. The items for the survey were consulted and amended by one expert and eight students. We itemized the criteria to measure anti-hate sensibilities using brainstorming and analysis of previous studies. The details were amended after a final round of discussion.

The course proceeded according to the following steps:

Step 1: Measuring Anti-Hate Sensibilities in a Pre-Course Survey

The survey took place twice in the fall of 2022. Of the students enrolled in the course, 101 participated in the survey at the beginning of the course and 96 in another at the end of the semester. The survey consisted of two sections: short-answer questions and long-answer questions. The short-answer questions asked about the individual’s prior experience of hate speech online and offline; objects of hate speech of which they were aware and the frequency with which they had encountered hate speech directed at each target; any effects of hate speech they had personally experienced; and thoughts on why

hate speech might circulate. For taxonomical purposes, it also asked about the participant's age, gender, and frequent usage of any online platforms. The open-ended questions asked participants to elaborate on the examples of hate speech that they had encountered; the hate-speakers and objects of hate speech they had identified; specific locations in which they had seen hate speech; and the reasons why they thought hate speech circulates.

#### Step 2: Explaining Theories on Hate and Providing Statistical Data from Korea's National Human Rights Commission

We designed the course according to a flipped learning model, whereby students would view video lecture recordings prior to class and discuss the concepts in groups when attending the class sessions. The flipped learning model is pedagogically useful, insofar as it enables the students to become proactive in learning and practicing anti-hate awareness. The group discussions in class reviewed the core concepts of theories on hate, focusing on the mechanism through which the established employ hate speech to exclude their target in political debate.

#### Step 3: Analyzing Hate Speech in Cultural Texts and Online Media, Including Identifying the Subject and Object of Hate Speech and Motives for Hate Speech

With a focus on Korean science-fiction short stories, class discussions examined the ways in which womanhood, race, unmarried motherhood, and disability become the criteria for abnormality and analyzed how hate discourse is shared, multiplied, and monopolized. These discussions worked toward encouraging the students to problematize these criteria of abnormality by asking who or what determined them and for what objectives; the underlying theme communicated to them was that anyone can become the speaker and the target of hate speech.

After discussing the Korean science-fiction short stories, which were relatively familiar to the college students, they watched the 2015 film *The Danish Girl* and were asked to submit a film review focusing on hate and the self's relation to the other. The film details a trans woman protagonist's journey of finding her sexual identity, focusing less on hate itself than imagining and empathizing with her perspective. Efforts to understand the life of the other instead of excluding the other in a state of coexistence are one of the fundamental solutions to the problem of hate.

#### Step 4: Writing Blog Posts on Strategies to Formulate Counter-Speech

Students were instructed to complete the Uncertain Discomfort Test. The test is a psychological experiment designed by Amnesty International Korea that measures discomfort in uncertain situations to reflect on existing discriminatory or prejudiced social attitudes. The test consists of a few video clips, which include the following: a politician declaring that homosexuality is a social evil; an able-bodied person expressing concern about the disabled giving birth to and raising children; white-collar workers gossiping that graduates of "SKY" (i.e., Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Korea University) would perform better than those from the provincial counterparts among the new recruits; a part-time advertisement looking for an interpreter with "neat features"; a student boasting that his basketball team would win because the new recruit was a black person who had newly transferred to the school; and a Korean suggesting that foreigners are pretending to be refugees in order to enter the country and earn money. By taking the test, students were to recognize various deep-seated biases and stereotypes they encountered in their everyday life and come up with strategies to counter them. They were separated into small groups to discuss these strategies, which included emphasizing objective facts that corrected the misinformation contained in hate speech; stressing common values and moral principles; contextualizing the hate-speaker's intention and sincerity; and formulating counter-speech using subversion, reclamation, and parody. Following the small group discussions, students were asked to write individual blog entries after further reflection.

#### Step 5: Evaluating Anti-Hate Awareness Among Students in Post-Course Survey

We administered a post-course survey to evaluate how much the students' awareness of existing social biases and hate had changed over the duration of the course. The survey aimed in particular at enabling the students to recognize themselves how much their



sensitivity to hate, ability to empathize with the target of hatred, and determination to resist hate had changed. The survey's short-answer questions remained the same as in the pre-course survey. The long-answer questions aimed at hearing about the students' transformation during the course in their own words.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of Hate in Cultural Texts in Group Discussions

The literary text chosen for education on hate was Kim Cho-yeop's science-fiction short story entitled *On My Space Heroes* (Na ūi uju yōngung e taehayō) in her short story collection *If We Can't Go at the Speed of Light* [14]. The protagonist of the story is a disabled middle-aged Asian woman and an unwed mother. Students were asked to assess critically existing criteria in evaluating her as a subject and, more fundamentally, the ways in which her subjectivity was in fact excluded in both characterizations, whether as an object of the public's hatred or as an icon of a hero.

"Both hate and expectation would have imposed a certain social frame on Jaekyung the protagonist as well as on groups such as unwed mothers, Asians, and middle-aged women more broadly. The message intended by the author appears to be that we should push aside those frames of interpretation and recognize one another as human to human". (Discussant 1)

"The text critiques the persistence of a hateful gaze toward social minorities despite the widening search for other universes that is enabled by science-technological advances. The denouement in which Gayun becomes the first space pilot to traverse the tunnel suggests that overcoming hate and discrimination is in fact a greater challenge than traveling to another universe beyond our own". (Discussant 2)

Students pointed out that even if hate begins from prejudice against an individual, the target of hate becomes a group as hate is shared and spread. A hate-speaker may slide into the position of the target of hate speech and vice versa at any moment. If the literary text remained relatively close to the everyday life of the students, the film allowed for an opportunity to reflect on the problem of hate more fundamentally. *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, T.G. (Director). *The Danish Girl*. Working Title Films; Artemis Productions; Amber Entertainment; Revision Pictures; Senator Global Productions; Pretty Pictures. 2015.) is based on the true story of a trans woman who underwent gender-affirming surgery. Watching the film aimed at facilitating the students to consider various minoritizing experiences they had not experienced firsthand and, by doing so, increase an awareness of situations, minoritized groups, or hate speech they had previously considered non-relevant to their life.

"The person called Einar was alive as a body but dead as an idea from that moment (at which she knew she was a woman assigned male at birth). Einar died as an idea ever since the protagonist chose the name Lili and rejected Einar. Lili already existed as a self-identity even before she was socially recognized. Therefore, no one can deny the existence of Lili. Lili existed even if Gerda ended up rejecting her". (Review 1)

"I think the director tried to dilute any discomfort the audience might feel by consciously excluding or restricting existing hate toward trans people and emphasizing elements of romance instead. If this was indeed the director's intent, I think it was successful. As I was watching *The Danish Girl*, I felt like I was watching a romance film more than a queer film. Perhaps the director wanted to show that trans people are neither aberrant nor mentally ill but ordinary people who love and date". (Review 2)

As students had little prior experience interacting with the LGBTQ community, the film proved an exercise in which they could practice empathy with the trans woman protagonist.

Review 1 made clear that regardless of others' opinions, the protagonist's self-identity is her very identity from the moment she chooses it. Acknowledging the other and respecting the other's choice is the basic premise for countering and overcoming hate. Furthermore, Review 2 suggests that trans people be viewed as ordinary individuals rather than exceptions to the norm. The author of Review 2 regards that the filmmaker did not highlight the protagonist's conflicts with those around her because he did not want to exclude trans people for diverging from the ordinary, normal, or the standard.

Without doubt, we cannot be identical in every aspect and people choose to empathize with each other based on interpersonal similarities (Waal, 2010). Group discussions analyzing the short story and film trained students to acknowledge difference and channel it through positive, empathic imagination instead of finding recourse in hate.

#### 4.2. Writing Blog Posts and Counter-Speech

Students were asked to write self-reflective blog posts after completing the Uncertain Discomfort Test, which brought to the fore various everyday injurious expressions and attitudes. Students wrote that, while injurious expressions in the everyday begin with objectifying and caricaturing members of certain groups based on stereotypes and biases, they may further develop into hate speech that targets not only particular individuals but groups in their entirety. In particular, they expressed concern that even if an expression is meant as a self-deprecating joke about a group to which the speaker belongs, after sustained repetition, the expression may be mobilized as hate speech to target the group.

"King KU" was a word which, riffing on "king-raged" (enraged; k'ing-batta), appeared every time someone wanted to make sarcastic comments about the K University. In a flash, posts citing "King KU" turned all students enrolled at KU into King KU students. Before attending the course, I simply laughed along without realizing that it was injurious speech. This word mischaracterizes KU to be a subpar university and all KU students to be subpar students. It's a dangerous word". (Student I)

Hate speech spreads quickly online, so counter-speech that challenges hate speech can also spread quickly online. Student I highlights the necessity of efforts to make counter-speech just so by using hashtags.

"We should make use of Everytime (An online platform for college students created for the purpose of timetable creation and information-sharing. There are various bulletin boards created by students at each school and students can participate in the community only when go through the student ID verification process.) to correct what's been ruined by the word "King KU". While Everytime was the platform through which the word became popular, it is also a powerful platform that we can use to redirect the conversation. If someone writes a post entitled "Correcting King KU" to raise awareness among students, I think expressions such as these can be corrected". (Student I)

Students also raised the question of whether careless word choices and illustrations in elementary, middle, and high school textbooks might have contributed to naturalizing injurious expressions in daily life. They highlight the importance of critical thinking whenever we encounter expressions that seem natural.

"I witnessed a few situations in which families with a parent from Southeast Asia were considered "multicultural families" but not the ones with a white parent from Western Europe or America. In school textbooks, chapters on "multicultural families" listed examples of only the former, which I think was problematic. While it might have been unwitting, the bias in our textbooks made it natural in our subconscious to equate "multicultural families" with "families formed by Korean–Southeast Asian marriages". (Student D)



“As time progresses, the borders or types of hate speech appear to be getting increasingly ambiguous. I may not intend to but what I say might end up hurting the other person in a conversation. I should not accept words as they are but should form a habit of questioning them. Why are they offended? Why do I not think so? There is only one way out of this situation. I simply need to feel discomfort as well”. (Student D)

Students argued that subversion might be the most effective tactic in countering hate speech. That is, if the hate-speaker does not realize that their speech is injurious, or if the hate-speaker is not a party that can be persuaded using logic, then subversion is an appropriate tactic.

“When a term like “mom-roach”(mam-chung) (A new word that sarcastically implies women with children rob others of their interests by claiming the position of “mother” as a privilege, or cause direct or indirect damage to the people around them and society as a whole.) becomes common enough, it is easy to misjudge and think, “This degree of criticism is well warranted. It’s not incorrect either, since so many parents cannot control their own kids. I am making a fair and rational comment”. At least in earlier phases of usage, I think subversion is the most effective tactic that makes people recognize hate speech for what it is. Most people think that they are kind-hearted, so they do not even want to admit that what they are saying counts as hate speech. Consequently, it’s hard to convince them even when you refute it with logic. In this kind of situation, subversion is a bit extreme, but since it is an emotional rebuttal, it is also effective”. (Student K)

#### 4.3. Analysis of Pre-Course and Post-Course Surveys

The pre-course surveys took place prior to the commencement of the course. The demographic breakdown of the 101 students that participated is as follows:

In the pre-course survey, approximately 86% of participants responded they had encountered hate speech offline; 99% of them responded they had encountered it online. Only 1% of participants reported they had encountered hate speech neither offline nor online; their responses were not included in further analysis. The survey also asked to list the objects of hate speech they had encountered and how frequently on a four-point Likert scale from “rarely” (1) to “very often” (4). For hate speech offline targeting the LGBTQ community, 46% of participants said they encountered it “often” or “very often” (average score 2.40). The most frequent object of hate speech online was women. Indeed, 76% of participants responded they encountered hate speech targeting women “often” or “very often” (average score 3.05). Notably, women and the LGBTQ+ community were objects of hate speech offline and online while men were targeted comparatively rarely; only 15% of participants responded to have encountered hate speech against men “often” or “very often” offline (average score 1.88). Meanwhile, men were targets of hate speech more frequently online (average score 2.87). In contrast to women and conventional minority groups, men are not as readily targeted by hate-speakers offline where anonymity is not guaranteed. In contrast, hate speech targeting men takes place more frequently online than offline, suggesting the counter-speech strategy of gender role reversal (commonly referred to as “mirroring” in Korea) is associated with hate speech targeting men.

Given that an overwhelming majority of 99% responded they had encountered hate speech online, we also asked participants why there might be hate speech online. As a result, 88% (89 respondents) attributed it to anonymity. While anonymity might not be a catalyst for hate speech, it may provide an environment for hate speech that is generated for various reasons to spread more freely. Besides anonymity, 64% of participants also agreed to “because other people are expressing hatred” and 61% to “because people have become familiar with hate speech”. We hypothesize that online hate speech proliferates due to anonymity, social mimicry, and familiarity.

When asked how participants reacted to online hate speech, 44% in the pre-course survey responded they “did not react”, and 33% responded they “avoided spaces with

hateful content". Diverse reasons were listed under "did not react", but the two most popular among them were "because it would be inadequate to make fundamental change" at 33% and "because no appropriate measures would be taken upon reporting" also at 33%.

Based on the two most popular reasons, we hypothesize that participants generally were averse to taking proactive action to fight hate speech and were skeptical that the system or institution would change regardless of any action taken by the participants.

Finally, the survey asked the participants to assess the severity of hate speech online and offline in a five-point Likert scale from "very severe" (1) to "not severe at all" (5).

The post-course survey was carried out after the anti-hate course outlined in steps 2, 3, and 4 of the course. This survey asked again how participants reacted to hate speech and recollected their assessments of the severity of hate speech online and offline. In total, 96 students took the survey, and the average age was 20.1 as in the pre-course survey. As indicated in Table 1, the gender ratio of respondents was 49% men and 51% women, like that of the pre-course counterpart.

**Table 1.** Demographic breakdown of participants of pre-course and post-course surveys.

Categories	Demographic Data	
Age	20.1	20.1
Gender (Missing Data: 2)	Male 49 (49.5%) Female 50 (50.5%)	Male 47 (49.0%) Female 49 (51.0%)
Average Number of Hours Spent on the Internet Excluding Study- and Work-Related Purposes	5.54 (approximately 6, SD = 2.77)	

As in the pre-course survey, the post-course survey asked how participants reacted to hate speech online. While the percentage of "avoided spaces with hateful content" increased, the percentage of "did not react" notably decreased. The percentage of "reported to web content manager(s) or police" also increased by 7% to 16%. Compared with the pre-course survey responses, these changes indicate a greater interest in fighting hate speech among the students.

To measure any changes in the awareness of hatred, both surveys asked participants to assess the severity of hate speech online and offline. As in the pre-course survey, participants were asked to assess the severity on a five-point Likert scale from "very severe" (1) to "not severe at all" (5).

To evaluate whether the differences between the two surveys were statistically significant, we used an independent sample *t*-test. Between the two surveys, participants responded hate speech was more severe in the post-course iteration ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) than in the pre-course counterpart ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ). They also responded online hate speech was more severe in the post-course survey ( $M = 1.27$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than in the pre-course counterpart ( $M = 1.46$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ). According to the Table 2, the results of the independent sample *t*-test indicate that students had greater awareness of the severity of online and offline hate speech after the course.

**Table 2.** Awareness of online and offline hate speech severity in pre- and post-course surveys.

	Pre-Course Survey		Post-Course Survey		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Awareness of Offline Hate Speech Severity	2.62	0.70	2.30	0.59	3.99 *
Awareness of Online Hate Speech Severity	1.46	0.58	1.27	0.45	22.05 ***

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## 5. Discussion

Based on a qualitative analysis of the responses to the two surveys, we argue the following: First, education clarifying the structures of hate speech is a matter of great urgency to prevent and intervene in the proliferation of hate speech. Several examples of hate speech appeared repeatedly in the post-course survey, including “jokey dwarf” (This is a word created on Twitch in 2019. It is a term used to narrowly refer to the concept of a younger age group that is a nuisance in many places, and to refer to all younger age groups in a broad sense.) (chaemmini), “juvenile-law kid” (ch’okpöp sonyŏn), and “20s men/20s women”. From “jokey dwarf”, which refers to a person with a diminutive figure or subdued disposition, to “20s men/20s women”, which is an abbreviation for men and women in their twenties, respectively, these terms have gained increasing currency as a self-deprecating description among youths. While terms like these have rapidly entered the everyday lexicon in recent years, many students regard them not to be hate speech because they themselves are using the expressions to describe themselves and for humorous effect rather than with exclusion or aversion as the intent.

We contend that these epithets are problematic even if they are “merely” uttered as self-deprecating humor for the following reasons. First, although “jokey dwarf” is used both in reference to oneself and to others due to its ostensible “cuteness” in pronunciation, the word is in fact a form of hate speech toward physically small and/or seemingly passive people. The linguistic “cuteness” of the epithet is all the more insidious because it obscures this underlying aggression. Second, “juvenile-law kid” is an epithet that exploits the current legal system in which juveniles are excused from facing legal consequences for their crimes. The epithet tacitly justifies that all immoral and potentially harmful actions can be forgiven if one faces no legal consequences. The result of this is a collective erasure of consciousness against and guilt over any criminal behavior. Lastly, “20s men/20s women” reflects the entrenched intergenerational conflict in contemporary Korean society. These two terms were previously used by the media to describe the social resentment among the younger generation in competing against their parents’ generation for a dwindling number of jobs and, relatedly, the difference in attitude toward corporate culture between the younger generation and the older generation. “20s men/20s women” are now more frequently used by those in their 20s to refer to themselves. Our study listed this as a case in which university students react strongly to socio-structural inequalities and intergenerational differences and adopt what were originally sociological words into self-referential hate speech.

Second, the hate-speakers’ intent and the reasons behind hate speech must be delineated. One student wrote, “people seem to need a target to discharge their frustration and anger. They seem to de-stress by objectifying and attacking various groups based on negative experiences with few individuals from them. They seem to speak hatred to justify their aggression toward other individuals”. Students also assessed that hate-speaking authorities with the power to mobilize the public were “some politicians, online personalities with large followings, or the upper echelons of finance, or military powers that require the subordination of others”. They critiqued that authority figures can use hate as an ideology to allure and mobilize the public; “to protect their own rights or power, they must deprive and disenfranchise others of rights or power”.

Many students pointed to anonymity as a major contributing factor to the proliferation of online hate speech. Indeed, anonymity can be a powerful crutch that compensates for a lack of accurate or sufficient information about the objects of hate speech and, furthermore, intensifies the online bullying to give power to hate-speaker(s). The hate-speaking subject or group gains power when hate escalates from an interpersonal dispute into intergroup hostility. Another student reflected, “the saying that the most familiar is the most dangerous comes to mind. Familiarity should not blunt the cruelty of hate speech”. Education on hate must foreground that what is habitual and familiar language in fact might contribute to an environment that abets hate speech or be hate speech itself. To do so is the first step in preventing hate speech from further spreading.

Third, after group discussions on cultural texts and online contents thematizing hate, a student wrote that “showing no reaction is acquiescing to hate speech, so taking action is necessary to change the situation”. Another student wrote that “if one uses hate speech while knowing that it is, then they can create and spread hate even if they did not necessarily intend to”, indicating that they will aspire to observe their everyday language more critically and prevent themselves and others from unwittingly spreading hate speech.

Practicing how to imagine the perspectives of others, especially those subject to hate speech, via a critical interpretation of popular cultural texts compelled the students to empathize with the “emotions felt by the objects of hate speech” more than with the hate-speakers or witnesses. Indeed, as one student said, “hate speech, though its intent might just be humorous, must cease because any member of the group that is targeted would be hurt in reality as a result”. Many students avowed that they would report instances of hate speech or block hate-speakers. A more proactive member among them said, “when such instances occur, I would tell the hate-speakers, at least once, not to spread hate speech. Preventing hate speech starts with me”. Some went further to say, “I would retaliate so that they understand what it feels like” and “I would exclude the hate-speakers in turn”. Still others said, “I would respond and ask about the speaker’s intent, and demand they admit wrongdoing and correct themselves”. This last strategy is particularly notable as the person problematizing the act of hate speech resists the psychological fear of “retaliation upon problematizing it in public”.

Students were tasked to write reflections on their blogs on their past exposure to hate speech and the feelings of discomfort they entailed. Based on these experiences, they were asked to come up with their own strategies to resist it in the future. Students emphasized that language used “out of ignorance”, “without any thought”, “because it was funny”, or “because everyone else did” naturalizes and colludes with the hate embedded into their society. They asserted that whatever the intent might be, once it becomes naturalized, it has the potential to evolve into hate speech. Furthermore, they pointed out that hate speech did not always necessarily incorporate elements of filth or evoke discomfort; examples that were not projections as such in fact constituted the majority. In this regard, everyday vocabulary such as “jokey dwarf” (chaemmini), “explanatory roach” (Referring to somebody responding excessively seriously to words that are meant to be laughed at. An “explanatory roach” often makes the atmosphere distasteful by harshly replying or being excessively serious.) (chinji-ch’ung), “demented dentures” (t’ülttak), “roadway madwoman” (kim-yösa), and “decision disorder” (kyöljöng changae) would solidly count as hate speech. Students appreciated that the course made them realize they might have been complicit in spreading hate speech by using these words without thinking on social media. In the blog reflections, students emphasized the most important step in preventing hate speech is to think critically about their own positionality before speaking and “how [their remark] affects themselves and others”. Creating neologisms founded on biases would be especially dangerous. If a remark makes them uncomfortable or rejected when imagining themselves being subject to it, it must be immediately intervened in. Some also avowed to respond if they encountered hate speech in the future instead of escaping the situation.

Certainly, many were hesitant, saying they were “unsure whether the fundamental problem could be fixed upon intervening” and that they were “afraid of social stigma”. More specifically, many wrote they would “promptly intervene in future instances of witnessing hate speech” and “gently correct the [hate-speakers’] behavior” offline, while online, they would “acquiesce to the unspoken atmosphere that dismisses hate speech [even if they know it is hate speech]”. Still, others wrote that “because I was not the target, the situation did not matter; it was funny”. This kind of comment suggests that the students’ abeyance is strongly related to the fear that they might turn into the next objects of hate speech if they intervene, not despite anonymity but precisely because the anonymous nature of online discourse can work to encourage hate. The desire not to be the object of hate, fear of a witch-hunt, and an aversion to being seen as sanctimonious upon intervention

are contributing factors that render students to hesitate in openly confronting hate-speakers. These reasons make it difficult to judge college students as being self-interested or selfish when they avoid confrontation with hateful discourse even despite their knowledge of the problems of hate speech.

Those attempting to overcome these difficulties stressed that “conversations must revolve around objective facts, principles, and values” rather than emotions. That is, using objective data and statistics as the sole basis of conversation can prevent emotional reactions. Some others said they would “ignore [because] it cannot be fixed even after [individual] intervention”; they underlined the role of law and the collective by saying that “what we need is severe punishment and education directed toward raising awareness at national and societal levels”. While the last suggestion appears reasonable at first glance, the power held by the collective also runs the risk of standardizing diverse situations of hate, bringing the most powerless to a vulnerable position. We believe that while it is necessary to recognize the problem of hate as a collective one as well as an interpersonal one, it would be remiss to relegate individual responsibility to respond to these situations to the state or collective society in fear that “bringing attention to it might have an adverse effect”. This kind of nihilism that understands individual responses to hate speech as meaningless warrants caution more than the idea that the purposeful reversal of gender roles in counter-speech spreads hate. One respondent in our post-course survey wrote that “our society can become dangerous as an effect of hate speech, so we should adopt a more proactive approach”. As this respondent did, we locate the significance of our instruction model in enabling students to recognize that an aggregate of individual efforts has the potential to change a hateful community.

## 6. Conclusions

The problem of hate in Korean society today is caused by the exclusive consideration of in-group cohesion when interacting with one another. That is, the boundaries of “we” and “others” are rigidly delineated by the perception that an affective state driven by hatred would taint “us” who are self-proclaimed as innocent and righteous. Hate that targets specific individuals objectifies the groups of which they are members, escalating hate to a societal problem. The present study began with an assumption that college-level education on hate would help students grow into citizens and working members of society that can counter hate speech as mature adults.

We utilized cultural texts both from online and offline as educational materials to enable students to imagine themselves as objects of hate speech to form solidarity with the minoritized, rather than as hate-speakers or third-party witnesses. To this end, our instructional model proceeded from observing hate, identifying hate speech, cultivating determination to resist hate speech, and finally discussing strategies to fight hate speech. We utilized group discussions, review-writing exercises, and blogging, as well as post-course surveys, so that students might proactively embrace the importance of fighting hate speech and formulate their own counter-speech. Students indicated that they would endeavor to recognize hate speech in their everyday life and step up to correct and resist if they saw their families or acquaintances speaking hatefully offline. Meanwhile, they were comparatively less motivated to do so online out of fear that, due to anonymity, they themselves might turn into objects of hate speech upon expressing resistance. Still, the majority of students expressed optimism that if individual actions were taken, such as reporting or preventing online hate speech, the online environment would gradually become safer for everyone. They also suggested making oppositional replies to hate speech, correcting hate speech, using gender role reversals, and signing legislative petitions to curb hate speech as strategies that can fight hate speech at various levels.

As all participants in the course were students enrolled at K University located in the Seoul metropolitan area, even with our use of national-level statistics and analyses, our study does not represent all Korean college students. We recognize that, in identifying and countering hate speech, it is difficult to draw a clear line between online and offline spaces.

Yet, because the recent proliferation of hate speech has demonstrated a blurring of this very line and our survey has shown that most students encounter hate speech more often and in a greater number online than offline, we have directed our attention to hate speech online accordingly. As mentioned in *Digital Hate*, online hate speech is characterized by accessibility, unrestrictedness, anonymity, and immediacy, all of which tend to magnify the aggression of hate speech. Still, clarifying the various relations between offline and online hate speech remains an avenue to be further investigated for our research. Given that the focus of our study operated at the level of students' consciousness, further research is needed to examine how our instructional model might generate concrete political, social, and/or cultural action. Still, we remain convinced that any concrete action cannot take place without change in education, which enables students to be aware of the problem of hate in the first place. In subsequent research, we will analyze the processes by which counter-speech by students against hate can lead to democratic citizenry.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, H.W. and Y.Y.C.; methodology, H.W. and Y.Y.C.; formal analysis, H.W. and Y.Y.C.; investigation, Y.Y.C.; writing—original draft preparation, H.W. and Y.Y.C.; writing—review and editing, H.W. and Y.Y.C.; visualization, H.W.; funding acquisition, Y.Y.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** IRB Approval for the study was not required in accordance with Article 23 of the Personal Information Protection Act (Personal information controllers are not likely to significantly infringe on the privacy of the data subject, including information on ideology and belief, union or political party membership or withdrawal, political opinion, health, and/or sexual orientation).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are contained within the article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Korean Statistical Information Service. Smartphone Ownership. Available online: [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=405&tblId=DT\\_405001\\_I182&vw\\_cd=MT\\_ZTITLE&list\\_id=N1\\_34\\_001\\_002\\_002\\_003&seqNo=&lang\\_mode=ko&language=kor&obj\\_var\\_id=&itm\\_id=&conn\\_path=MT\\_ZTITLE](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=405&tblId=DT_405001_I182&vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE&list_id=N1_34_001_002_002_003&seqNo=&lang_mode=ko&language=kor&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ZTITLE) (accessed on 6 August 2022).
2. National Human Rights Commission of Korea. Online Hate Speech Awareness Investigation. Available online: <https://www.humanrights.go.kr/site/program/board/basicboard/view?menuid=001003001004001&pagesize=10&boardtypeid=16&boardid=7607189> (accessed on 10 September 2022).
3. Butler, J. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 1st ed.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 1997.
4. Nussbaum, M.C. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2015.
5. Nussbaum, M.C. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2006.
6. Ahmed, S. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Edinburgh University Press Ltd.: Edinburgh, UK, 2014.
7. Ahmed, S. Affective Economies. *Soc. Text* **2004**, *2*, 117–139. Available online: <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/55780> (accessed on 26 October 2023). [CrossRef]
8. Elias, N.; Scotson, J.L. *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*, 2nd ed.; SAGE: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2004.
9. Lee, H.; Park, J. 'Hyeji' as a discourse of preferential treatment of women and reverse discrimination against men: How does young male online gamers' emphasis on fairness lead to misogyny? *Broadcast. Commun.* **2022**, *1*, 5–40. Available online: <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART002691667> (accessed on 2 November 2022).
10. Lee, H.; Park, J.; Lee, S. The birth of rage and hate speech in the youth generation: A critical study on 'hate and disgusting language' in the online community Everytime. *Broadcast. Commun.* **2021**, *22*, 5–37. Available online: <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART002723553> (accessed on 10 September 2022).
11. Miller Braithwaite, A. It's about ethics in games journalism? Gamergaters and geek masculinity. *Soc. Media Soc.* **2016**, *2*, 87–96. [CrossRef]
12. Lepoutre, M. Hate Speech in Public Discourse: A Pessimistic Defense of Counterspeech. *Soc. Theory Pract.* **2017**, *43*, 851–883. [CrossRef]



13. Udupa, S.; Gagliardone, I.; Hervik, P. *Digital Hate: The Global Conjuncture of Extreme Speech*; Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, USA, 2021.
14. Kim, C. *If We Can't Go at the Speed of Light*; Hōbūl: Seoul, Republic of Korea, 2019.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.