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**TOO-MUCH-OF-A-GOOD-THING EFFECT OF CONSENT  
SILENCE ON VOICE IN CYBERBULLYING**

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*Abstract*

Current study investigates the effect of consent silence on voice in youth cyberbullying type incidents, based on the assumptions of “Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing” theory. Research concludes that there is a negative correlation between consent silence and voice in stressful events, meaning that the higher silence agreement is, the lesser the voice of the individuals, in organizational settings. Applying these concepts into online aggression domain, we assume the hypothesis that between consent silence and voice in cyberbullying there is a curvilinear relationship. Extreme aspects of consent silence may perversely have a positive effect on voice, conceptualized in any form of reporting the incident, raising the possibility that the relationship is curvilinear rather than linear. Using single item research, data from 140 high school students were collected. Regression analyses identified a significant curvilinear relationship between consent silence and voice in cyberbullying type incidents, implying that very low and very high levels of consent silence were associated with voice regarding reporting the incident. Conclusions and implications are discussed.

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**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, online freedom of speech, fake news, consent silence, curvilinear relationship.

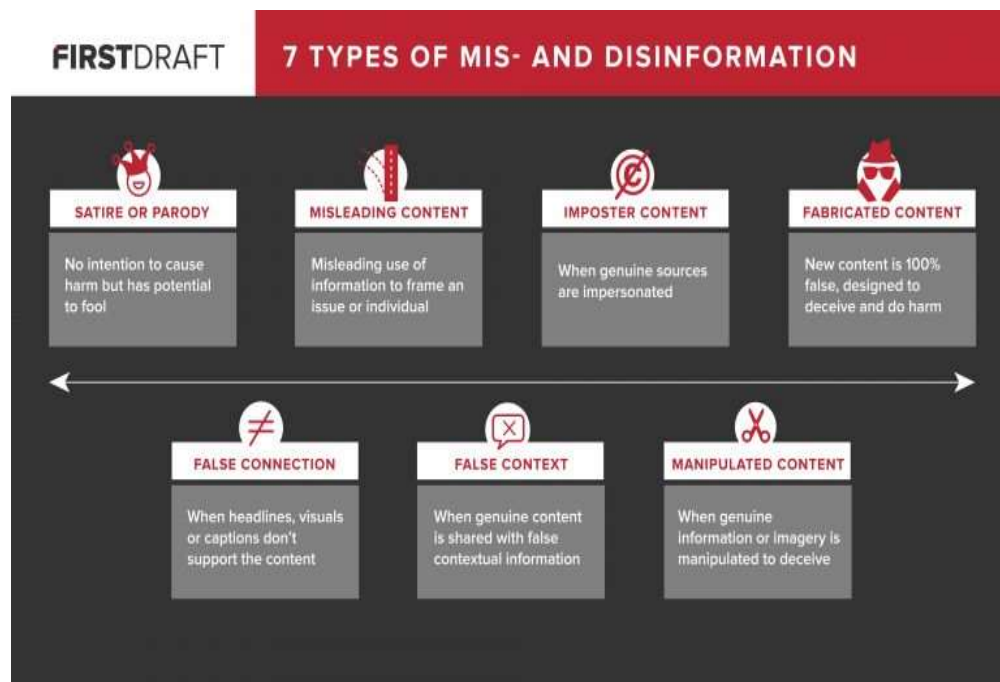


## 1. Introduction

Although the concept of fake news dates back several centuries, it is currently preferable at EU level to use the notion of dis- or mis- information as it better reflects the challenges that faces today's society. Thus, the notion of misinformation implies more than eminently false news, which is a mixture of false information, true facts, and digital practices of manipulation and misinformation. The magnitude of the fake news phenomenon is an integral part of the digitization process, including the media sector as well.

The concept of fake news refers to fabricated fake stories, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes, sometimes designed to mislead the readers, or to earn an economic advantage over the clickbait. Included into the family of fake news, there are stories that might be truth, but lack any contextualizing details, not including any verifiable facts or sources. There are other cases where stories may include basic verifiable facts, but are presented using deliberately inflammatory language, leaving out pertinent details or presenting only one viewpoint. Fake news emerged and survives within a larger ecosystem of mis- and disinformation.

If misinformation represents false or inaccurate information that is mistakenly or inadvertently created or spread with no intention to deceive, disinformation is false information that is deliberately created and spread in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth (Wardle, 2017).



**Figure 01.** The different types of mis- and disinformation (Claire Wardle, 2017)

The analysis of the numerous proposed definitions leads to outlining three criteria for identifying fake news: 1. the starting point of a news item is displaying unrealistic information, in whole or in part, 2. the dissemination of this news to the public in bad faith, knowing its lack of veracity, and 3. the dissemination of the news in order to gain an advantage for itself or for a third party, or to cause harm to a third party.

When trying to identify what determines the appearance and propagation of fake news, like in the case of the definitions the identified causes are also multiple, among the most important being: the

phenomenon of digitization, the political factor interest in the dissemination of unrealistic information, the lack of professionalism of certain media players, but also the lack of media literacy and digital education of consuming individuals. The immediate consequence of this phenomenon is first and foremost affecting the right of each individual to be informed, as well as the harm to other fundamental rights, such as the right to private life and human dignity. In some cases, however, the consequences may result in incitement to violence, hate speech or discrimination.

Defining cyberbullying as a repeated, intentional act of aggression mediated through some form of electronic contact (Balas-Timar, 2018), we can easily trace a similarity line between the two phenomenon that shatter the online space. Going to individual, and looking at the effects of cyberbullying on the victim we can anticipate the side effects of fake news over the targeted person, group or situation.

Due to the overwhelming amount of online information, our brains already overwhelmed and functioning on the heuristic principle which ensures a shortcut to credibility, get easily fooled when encountering a consistent and repeated message. When individuals are faced with multiple messages, the majority being based on visuals, they are less likely to become critical to that information, thus exposing them to manipulation, misinformation and disinformation.

Each individual plays a crucial role in this ecosystem, where fake news seem to flourish. Whenever individuals passively accept information without double-checking, or share an information over the social media platforms before verifying, more noise and confusion are added in the ecosystem, which is becoming so polluted, that each of us need to assume responsibility to independently check the online content. In the same way, bystanders' consent silence, meaning choosing to deliberately staying silent when participating as whiteness to a cyberbullying situation affects the individual and collective online shared space.

As regarding the research literature on the topic of freedom and speech limits, the study developed by Penney (2017), found not only that online harassment and cyberbullying statutes had a statistically significant salutary impact on women's willingness to share personal content online. Looks like women are more aware of the laws that penalizes online harassment and bullying, feeling less likely to be attacked or harassed and being more secure and willing to share, speak, and engage online (Penney, 2017). This is a clear evidence of how legislation may actually lead to more speech, expression, and sharing online among adult women online, not less.

If in most cases research conclusions on the topic of limits of freedom of speech find different suggestions to avoid the spreading of hate speech, one of the few authors that are against censoring the online youth speech is Hayward, who's underlying the fact that anti-cyber bullying laws are the greatest threat to student free speech because they seek to censor it everywhere and anytime it occurs (Hayward, 2011). In other words, without understanding the cyberbullying phenomenon it is impossible to design efficient strategies that will not have unintended consequences and threaten basic liberties like freedom of speech, due to the fact that cyberbullying is a social problem, not a technological issue (Berg & Breheny, 2014).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The Erasmus project Keeping youth safe from Cyberbullying, ID 2016-3-TR01-KA205-036619, was developed by our research team, with the purpose of deeper understand the dynamics of cyberbullying

in online environments among youth. Among the first research questions purposed by our team was the identification of the existent relationship between consent silence and freedom of speech in cyberbullying. In this regard, we have designed an online questionnaire aiming to gather descriptive data, general perceptions about cyberbullying phenomenon and perceptions about the safety of the educational environment, bystander motives of keeping silent, perceived parental support, and an auto evaluation scale centred on self-efficacy perceptions.

This article's interest consists in analysing the relationship between consent silence and online freedom of speech in cyberbullying type incidents, due to the fact that between the two concepts there is a very thin line and the relationship between them is understudied by online behavioural theories.

### **3. Research Questions**

We assume the hypothesis that between consent silence and voice in cyberbullying there is a curvilinear relationship.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This article's interest consists in analysing the relationship between consent silence and online freedom of speech in cyberbullying type incidents, due to the fact that between the two concepts there is a very thin line and the relationship between them is understudied by online behavioural theories.

### **5. Research Methods**

We have chosen single item measures because it owns the same efficacy in identifying statistical trends like multiple items scales, regarding online measuring of youth perceptions. Single item scales are usually used to represent global constructs (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997) that are conceptualized as mono facet or dimensions, like the ones we have focused on, consent silence and online freedom of speech.

The two items that measure consent silence and online freedom of speech are stated below:

Item 14 – Please rate your opinion regarding the following affirmation: What happens online must stay online.

1. Totally agree.
2. Agree.
3. Neutral.
4. Disagree.
5. Totally disagree.

Item A3 – Please rate your opinion regarding the following affirmation: I have the right to say online anything I want, even if my words hurt somebody.

1. Totally agree.
2. Agree.
3. Neutral.
4. Disagree.
5. Totally disagree.

Research's hypothesis states that the two variables: consent silence and online freedom of speech are in a curvilinear relationship. In order to test our curvilinear hypothesis, we have used SPSS' multiple linear regression analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, where online freedom of speech was the dependent variable.

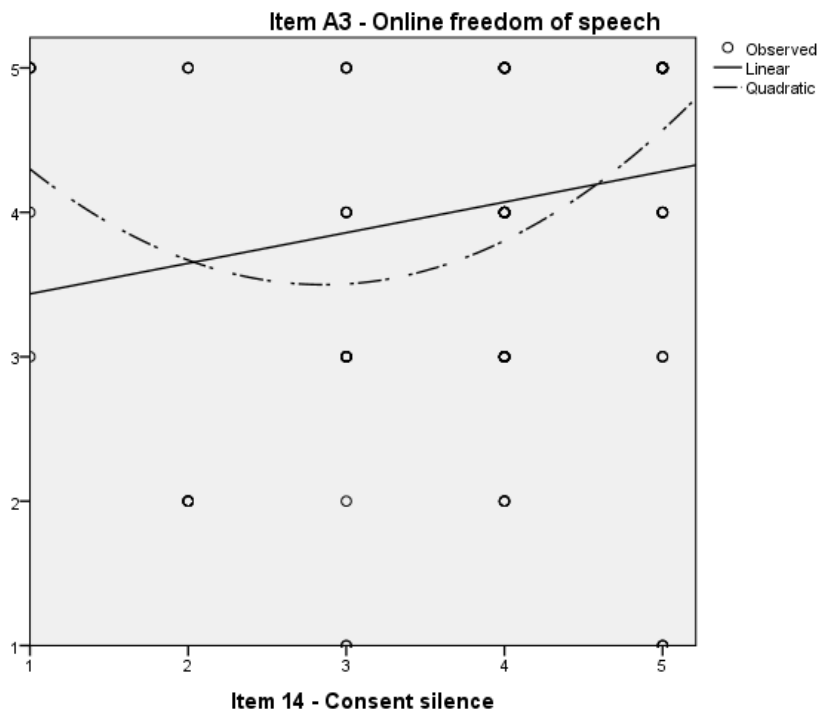
The study was conducted on a random sample of 140 high school students aged 17-19, of both sexes, 68 male (48.6%) and 72 female (51.4%), from both rural and urban environmental origins.

## 6. Findings

We have used a confirmatory factor analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, in order to test our hypothesis that states that between consent silence and online freedom of speech there is a curvilinear relationship.

A curvilinear relationship can be described as a relationship between two or more variables which can be graphically depicted by anything other than a straight line. A particular case of curvilinear relationships is the situation where two variables grow together until they reach a certain point (positive relationship) and then one of them increases while the other decreases (negative relationship) or vice-versa, the graphically representation of the function being an U or an inverted U shape.

The curvilinear relationship can be graphically identified in a Scatterplot, choosing additional two representations of the regression line: Linear and Quadratic model. The Scatterplot diagram presented in Fig. 2, indicates the curvilinear relationship between consent silence on the horizontal axis and online freedom of speech, represented on the vertical axis. The sample consists of 140 youth from Arad, Romania.



**Figure 02.** The curvilinear relationship between consent silence (Item 14) and online freedom of speech (Item A3)

There is a high correlation between consent silence – Item 14 (m=3.94, SD=1.11) and online freedom of speech – Item A3 (m=4.06, SD=1.13) of  $r=.209$  significant at a  $p<.05$  which methodologically allows us to proceed with multiple linear regression analysis.

For curvilinear relationship testing, the present study proposes a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable being online freedom of speech (Item A3), and the independent variable in step 1 consent silence (Item 14), and in step 2 consent silence (Item 14), and squared consent silence ( $\sqrt{\text{Item14}}$ ).

Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 present the fitting of the two models, linear – Model 1 and curvilinear/quadratic – Model 2. As we can see in Model 1 the model that supposes linear relationship, online freedom of speech perception accounts for 3% of the variance in consent silence with an  $F=6.284$  significant at a  $p<.01$ . In Model 2, the model that supposes curvilinear relationship, online freedom of speech perception accounts for 12% of the variance in consent silence with an  $F=10.774$  significant at a  $p<.001$ .

**Table 01.** Linear and curvilinear regression models for consent silence (Item 14) and online freedom of speech (Item A3)

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.209 <sup>a</sup>	.044	.037	1.109
2	.369 <sup>b</sup>	.136	.123	1.058

a. Predictors: (Constant), ItemA3.

b. Predictors: (Constant), ItemA3,  $\sqrt{\text{A3}}$

**Table 02.** Anova coefficients for consent silence (Item 14) and online freedom of speech (Item A3)

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	7.733	1	7.733	6.284	.013 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	169.810	138	1.231		
	Total	177.543	139			
2	Regression	24.130	2	12.065	10.774	.000 <sup>c</sup>
	Residual	153.413	137	1.120		
	Total	177.543	139			

a. Dependent Variable: Item14.

b. Predictors: (Constant), ItemA3.

c. Predictors: (Constant), ItemA3,  $\sqrt{\text{A3}}$

**Table 03.** Unstandardized and standardized coefficients for consent silence (Item 14) and online freedom of speech (Item A3)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.224	.345		9.332	.000
	ItemA3	.212	.084	.209		
2	(Constant)	5.395	.656		8.222	.000
	ItemA3	-1.328	.410	-1.309		
	$\sqrt{\text{A3}}$	.233	.061	1.548		

a. Dependent Variable: Item14.

All standardized coefficients of Beta ( $\beta = .209$ ;  $\beta = -.1.309$  and  $\beta = 1.548$ ) are significant at  $p < .01$  which gives a high consistency to our both models. Changing Beta coefficient's sign from + to - means that the effect is growing in the opposite direction, which demonstrates the curvilinear relationship between the two variables: consent silence (Item 14) and online freedom of speech (Item A3), more than that, the additional incremental predictive capacity of 9 percent, added by including the squared online freedom of speech variable which accounts for the band in the regression line, indicates that there is a curvilinear relationship between consent silence and online freedom of speech.

This curvilinear relationship demonstrates that extreme aspects, extremely reduced and extremely high levels of consent silence, significantly influences the perception of online freedom of speech, meaning that higher or lesser consent silence agreement towards a cyberbullying incident is, the more likely online freedom of speech consensus no matter the consequences is; while situating on the medium segment of consent silence triggers the appropriate online freedom of speech approach.

Until now, we are not aware of any research indicating a curvilinear relationship between consent silence and online freedom of speech, thus, this study may help expanding the current body of knowledge on psychological aspects of silence and voice in online aggressions.

## 7. Conclusion

As results have shown, when studying the causal relationship between consent silence and online freedom of speech in youth, in the model that supposes linear relationship, online freedom of speech perception accounts for 3% of the variance in consent silence and in the model that supposes curvilinear relationship, online freedom of speech perception accounts for 12% of the variance in consent silence.

If we have stopped at stage one, supposing the linear relationship between the two concepts, model 1, that has statistical significance would have presented us with a distorted reality, namely a positive correlation between consent silence and online freedom of speech; the higher the consent silence agreement is, the higher the freedom of speech consensus no matter consequences is. Searching for a meaningful explanation of this relationship we have proposed testing the curvilinear relationship hypothesis, which proved to explain in a more honourable manner the statistical reality between consent silence and online freedom of speech in youth.

The curvilinear relationship demonstrates that extremely reduced and extremely high levels of consent silence agreement, significantly influences the perception of online freedom of speech, meaning that higher or lesser consent silence agreement towards a cyberbullying incident is, the more likely online freedom of speech consensus no matter the consequences is; while situating on the medium segment of consent silence triggers the appropriate online freedom of speech approach.

The main conclusion of this research is that even online harassment of all forms causes the effect of silencing free speech, responding to censorship with more censorship will never be on the long run a viable solution. Instead of risking silencing even more speech, the strategies on stopping online bullying should approach the subject with creativity and should firstly address specific situation, looking for results and only then designing a general strategy.

Thus, none of the concept of freedom of speech or consent silence will ever be able to influence the non-perpetuation of hate speech over the internet, but the right amount of expressing voice and silence

regarding any social and personal aspect. Any online social phenomenon is prawned to radicalization and our only available educational strategy is to stop the violent extremism.

## **Acknowledgments**

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