RESEARCH

# Unity Starts with U: A Case Study of a Counter-Hate Campaign Through the Use of Social Media Platforms

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Hate has been a growing concern with hate-groups and individuals using the Internet, or more specifically, social media platforms, to globalize hate. Since these social media platforms can connect users around the world, hate-organizations are using these connections as opportunities to recruit candidates and spread their propaganda. Without opposing views, these extreme viewpoints can establish themselves as legitimate and then be used to incite hate in individuals. Thus, these extreme viewpoints must be countered by similar messages to discourage this online hate, and one such way is to use the same platforms through grassroots movements. This paper presents a case study which was conducted on a class of Criminology students who implemented a grassroots community-based campaign called *Unity Starts with U* (*USwithU*) to counter-hate in a community by using social media platforms to spread messages of inclusion and share experiences. The results from the campaign showed improvements on people's attitude towards hate at the local community level. Based on literature and this campaign, policy recommendations are suggested for policymakers to consider when creating or making improvements on counter-narrative programs.

## Introduction

People use the Internet, and particularly social media platforms, as common communication tools. Social media is defined as users coming together in cyberspace to connect and generate content (Obar & Wildman, 2015) and social media platforms are websites or portals that enable this type of connection and interaction. Today, there are many social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, with Facebook (2018), for example, as of June 2018, having 2.23 billion individuals using the platform daily. In addition to using those platforms for communication, there are users who utilize the same platforms to promote hate. These individuals who spread hate see social media platforms as a potential place to recruit individuals from a wider audience (Awan, 2017; Bertram, 2016) and to amplify fear in the community (Bertram, 2016; Perry, 2014).

Although social media companies are actively removing hateful messages or suspending the associated accounts, they are soon recreated, and hate persist. While policing for hateful messages and accounts is one approach, another is trying to counter hateful messages themselves through an anti-hate grassroots community campaign. For instance, *Not in Our Town* (2018) is a project started by The Working Group, a non-profit media organization. They created a documentary about the story of Billings, Montana citizens working together to stand up against hate in their own community. Through the campaign's impact, the grassroots movement over the past 20 years has influenced other communities nationally and internationally to form their own *Not in Our Town* groups addressing the hate concerns in their neighbourhood (Not in Our Town, 2018). Another similar anti-hate grassroots campaign is the *Pink Shirt Day* (2018), a movement that started in Nova Scotia in 2007 by two local boys wearing a pink shirt to stand up against bullying. People around the world now support the movement by wearing a pink shirt and using their social media accounts with hashtags such as *#EndBullying*, all with the goal of raising awareness on cyberbullying (Pink Shirt Day, 2018).

These grassroots campaigns demonstrate that a movement, which may seem small, has the potential to impact the community directly, to counter a current local issue such as hate. This paper presents one such grassroots anti-hate strategy where a class of students at Simon Fraser University participated in EdVenture Partners' *Peer to Peer: Facebook Global Digital Challenge* to create a social media campaign to counter-hate in the local community. The students created *Unity Starts with U* in Vancouver, British Columbia, to help understand and counter-hate present locally.

First, the paper will examine the current challenges around hate and the purpose on creating this grassroots movement. Next, students of the campaign identified the types of hate in the community and used various hate management strategies to address the issue. Through the outcomes of *Unity Starts with U*, policy recommendations are discussed in order to provide insight for policymakers to create or improve their own local grassroots movement to counter-hate.

### Hate

The definition of hate is complex, as it has no universal meaning (Awan, 2014; Wong, Frank & Allsup, 2015). There are different types of hate, such as speech or crime, that have similar interpretations of the definition. Section 319 under the Criminal Code of Canada (2018) defines hate as "everyone who, by communicating statements in any public place, incites hatred against any identifiable group" (Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c C-46, s 319(1)). The Council of Europe (2013) defines hate, or more specifically hate-speech, as "all forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance" (para. 1). Organizations implement rules and regulations to prevent people from abusing the idea of freedom of speech, specifically targeting the use of hate-speech (Banks, 2010; Faulkner, 2007; Mchangama, 2016). Regardless of the different forms of hate, hate is a dynamic form of expression or behaviour that targets a specific group or an individual in the community. However, the medium to advocate hate can differ, that is, individuals can spread hate offline into the community or use the Internet to circulate the message across cyber space.

People are actively involved in bringing hate into the community. For instance, the alternate right (alt-right) movement is a group which believes that the white race is superior to others (Lyons, 2017). This group may include white supremacists, people who are anti-Semitic and consider Caucasians as the only race that should shape today's society (Mulholland, 2013). These hate-groups had led several attacks on the community, with a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia resulting in many casualties (Kalvapalle, 2017). Additionally, hate that happened offline can be spread across the community through the use of the Internet. A video depicting an individual acting out in a racist manner against a Muslim family in Toronto, Ontario, was recorded, uploaded, and went viral with over 350,000 views (Deonarain, 2018; Floody, 2018). It sparked discussion in the community which led to the National Council of Canadian Muslims becoming aware of situation (Floody, 2018). In Burnaby, British Columbia, Raul Miguel Rubio-Alabau, was recorded on transit as he was expressing his racist and sexist comments towards women (Boynton, 2019). The recorded video was circulated throughout social media platform which led to Rubio-Alabau facing charges from the police (Boynton, 2019). While these hate-groups or individuals are creating disturbance in real-life events, similar activities are happening in the cyber world.

### Hate on Social Media Platforms

Hate is globalized in cyber space through means such as videos (Awan, 2017) and websites (Perry & Olsson, 2009). There have been increasing movements for hate-oriented users moving towards social media platforms to publicizes their message of hate (Awan, 2017). With over two billion users on different social networking sites (Statista, 2018), hate-oriented individuals believe these platforms offer a better way to expose hate to the general public (Bertram, 2016; Briggs & Feve, 2013). Specifically, accounts on social media sites usually act as an extension to a centralized website because they are designed for people to access information instantly and communicate to a wider range of audience (Guiora & Park, 2017). As websites remain a place for like-minded individuals to discuss about hate, social media platforms provide effective means to spread their ideology for individuals who are unaware of the topic. Rather than having websites that are restricted for like-minded individuals, using a public social media platform can recruit new individuals and gain public attention (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Through the use of these networking sites, the hate message generates a stronger engagement level than a website.

Various social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are designed with a different purpose for its users. YouTube is used as a platform to upload or view videos, and Facebook is designed to create personalized profiles to connect friends and family around the world. Twitter allows users to post messages with a limited word count, and Instagram allows people to post photos online. Regardless of what platform individuals use, all sites are connected, enabling users to amplify their message by sharing links from one platform to another (Warrington, 2017). Aside from sharing links, hashtag (#) is another distinctive connecting feature in social media platforms. Whether the hashtag is used in one network or another, it can connect with people who included them in their message, allowing others to find similar conversations, or posts relating to it (Kuo, 2016; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). For instance, people include *#LiesToldByFemales* to make sexist remarks (Fox, Cruz & Lee, 2015), or *#Gaystapo* can be used for homophobic comments to identify themselves with their like-minded peers (International Network Against Cyber Hate, 2017). Using the features embedded in the platforms allows the content to circulate while staying interconnected.

Additionally, when more people are using these hashtags, it can create a trend on the platform. Facebook determines the trend based on the engagement level and number of individuals using the hashtag (Facebook, 2018). With Twitter (2018), the trends' visibility depends on the algorithm tailoring the contents that users usually search or view. While there are other social media pages that use hashtags, it should be noted that there are different ways to make the hashtag visible to its users. Because hashtags can create trends online, it works favourably for individuals with hateful intentions who are trying to create a viral hate movement (Perry, 2000).

A viral hate movement is formed when hate-oriented individuals come together to form a virtual community. A "virtual community" is defined as an interactive cyber space where people share a common ideology and goal (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). The mediums that are used in cyberspace not only act as tools to spread hate with others online, they also act as places where people come together to discuss hate. For instance, the websites used by alt-right groups can be seen as a "safe space" where their members are able to engage in hate-related topics (Guiora & Park, 2017). Trolls, who seeks enjoyment by provoking others for entertainment, may consider social media platforms as a "safe space" to find like-minded people who would chime in into the discussion (Bishop, 2014; Coles & West, 2016). Through this unity in the hate-based virtual community, hate-oriented individuals are able to solidify the perception of hate as there are supporters who agree with the values that the groups hold in their community. Having people with the same mindset creates a cybermob mentality where individuals who hold the same hateful attitude on a particular subject can discuss the issue at length and in detail (Awan & Zempi, 2017), reinforcing the message.

The virtual community is important for hate-oriented individuals and groups because they are able to find a sense of belonging when their thoughts and ideas are not acknowledged in their real-life community due to their deviated perspectives (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Gerstenfeld, Grant & Chiang, 2003). Once individuals become familiar with a community or network that they frequently engage with online, trust increases between them (Näsi, Räsänen, Hawdon, Holkeri & Oksanen, 2015). Through the constant exposure to specific websites or social media platforms that promote hate, these outlets may influence individuals and they may become part of the hateful narrative (Costello, Hawdon, Ratliff & Grantham, 2016).

### Hate in Various Countries

Hate happens in different places around the world, whether it is being conducted in a physical space or cyber space. Regardless, different countries have their own law and practices on countering hate. Even within countries, different states sometimes have their own regulations on the definition of hate. Nonetheless, local communities within different states have developed their own grassroots campaigns which are driven to address their concerns to counter-hate. More specifically, these campaigns are utilizing the Internet to raise awareness of their initiatives and using social media platforms to communicate with people online.

#### Hate in the United States

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2020) defines hate crime as "criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity" (para. 4). The hate crime statistics from 2018 conducted by the Department of Justice of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019) recorded a total of 7,120 hate crimes incidents in the United States. A grassroots campaign, *Take On Hate* (2020), created by the National Network for Arab American Communities, focuses on identifying and disputing the misconceptions against Arab and Muslim Americans. *Take On Hate* initiated the hashtag *#TakeonHate* so individuals can use it on their social media platforms to take a stance against the discrimination in the United States. Besides *Take On Hate*, *MoveON* (2020) is another grassroots organization that does not have a centralized issue but their focus is dependent on the current situation that is happening in America. The organization solely used digital tools such as emails and forums to communicate with their members, and provided guidelines on the digital impact for people who wish to develop their own grassroots campaigns online (Carty, 2011; MoveON, 2020). Through the Internet, *MoveON* was able successfully fundraise multiple times to support their campaigns (Carty, 2011). These grassroots campaigns demonstrate the ability of using digital tools as the main source of communication to deliver their message.

#### Hate in the United Kingdom

According to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2020), an independent organization that work closely with law enforcement and investigative agencies in England and Wales, define hates as "a range of criminal behaviour where the perpetrator is motivated by hostility or demonstrates hostility towards the victim's disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or transgender identity" (para. 1). The definition of hate by CPS is encompassed within the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Criminal Justice Act (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020). As of 2018, there were 11,1076 hate incidents that were recorded by the police (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2020). *Center for Countering Digital Hate* (CCDH) (2020), is a local organization in the United Kingdom, that provides guidance to policymakers on countering hate online.

Their recent report educates the public on the tactics that "trolls" use on the Internet to spread hate (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2019). The organization provides counter strategies for individuals and provide recommendations to social media platforms on diminishing the hate that the trolls caused (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2019). Also, there is *Prevent*, a countering violent extremism program in the United Kingdom (Lakhani, 2012), which had community activities that included education, debates, art, and leadership programs in the hope to counter extremism (HM Government, 2011). These grassroots campaigns in the United Kingdom are one of the many examples that taking a stance on hate.

### Hate in Canada

Canada is no exception when it comes to hate. According to Statistics Canada, hate-crime increased by 3% in 2016, especially on sexual orientation which rose by 25% or race/ethnicity which rose by 4%, when compared to the previous year (Gaudet, 2018). There are, however, some movements in Canada that are using a local level approach, arguably a better response than at a macro level, to address the hate-related problem (Macnair & Frank, 2017). Macnair and Frank (2017) argue that communities can identify their needs and methods to counter-hate at a local level that work specifically for their own neighbourhood(s). For example, Quebec participates in the *No Hate Speech Movement* (2017), an online youth campaign organized by the Council of Europe, in order to combat hate by raising awareness to counter hate-speech on Muslim people by holding workshops for Quebec citizens to attend. Recently, Canada initiated *Project SOMEONE* (SOcial Media EducatiON Every day) (2018), a digital media platform to prevent hate-speech online by providing resources encouraging users to think critically and build resilience against groups that may try to lead them towards violent extremism (Scrivens & Perry, 2017). Additionally, there are grassroots community-based campaigns such as *Voices Against Extremism*, an online campaign which focuses on humanization, education, respect, and empowerment on countering violent extremism at a micro-level (Macnair & Frank, 2017). However, there is still limited research on the topic, particularly on locally based initiatives to deter hate (Macnair & Frank, 2017; Scrivens & Perry, 2017). Thus, the following case study, *Unity Starts with U*, will also take on the initiative to create a community-based campaign that focuses on countering hate in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC).

## The Unity Starts with U campaign
### Sponsor

EdVenture Partners' *Peer to Peer: Facebook Global Digital Challenge* (P2P) is a global competition that challenges university students around the world to create a social media campaign to counter-hate and/or extremism (EdVenture Partners, 2017; Moffett & Sgro, 2016). As of 2017, EdVenture Partners (EVP) has over 500 universities across a span of 70 countries with 10,000 students who have participated in the challenge (EdVenture Partners, 2017). The organization works with Facebook and the United States Department of Homeland Security to provide funds for students to bring their campaign to fruition (EdVenture Partners, 2017; Moffett & Sgro, 2016). The program is designed so that students are able to create social or digital resources that would not only make an impact in their local community but also act as a catalyst to encourage other students to take part in the social movement in countering hate (Moffett & Sgro, 2016).

   As defined by EVP, students identify their target audience(s), which include *the uncommitted populations*, *silent majority*, *civic-minded*, and/or *at-risk youth*, during their campaign:

> *Uncommitted populations* have formed no opinion about the violent extremist narrative and therefore have not been involved in preventing or promoting it. The *silent majority* are those who oppose violent extremism but currently are not active in raising public awareness about it or broader prevention efforts. *Civic-minded individuals* are interested in the public good but not necessarily focused on preventing radicalization and/or engaging in grassroots [countering violent extremism] efforts. *At-risk youth* are those who are exposed to the violent extremist narrative and vulnerable to radicalization (Moffett & Sgro, 2016, p. 148).

Through preparation, launch, and implementation phases, students measure their success based on the results of their campaign. Upon completion of the competition, they are judged by EVP, the United States Department of Homeland Security, and Facebook, for a chance to receive recognitions for their university (Moffett & Sgro, 2016). Twenty-three undergraduate students in a Criminology course from Simon Fraser University took part in the *Peer to Peer: Facebook Global Digital Challenge* to design their own social media campaign for four months (September–December 2017) focusing on Vancouver, BC.

### Identifying Goals

During the initial stage, the students examined various forms of hate. Their research and discussions ranged from violent extremists to alt-right groups using social media platforms to spread their messages online, to specific extremists and hate groups. The students realized that, while violent extremism is prevalent, hate is more prominent in their community; thus, they decided that the focus of their campaign is going to be on countering hate.

The students created *Unity Starts with U* (*USwithU*), a grassroots campaign that was dedicated to countering hate by promoting positivity and unity through the use of social media platforms, with the goal of becoming a platform to help educate, raise awareness, and share people's stories regarding hateful attitudes. Including individuals with different perspectives fostered the campaign's slogan, "uniting doesn't mean agreeing on everything". The campaign members wanted to ensure that it was not about focusing on specific individuals who use hate against others, nor was it about countering hate with hate. It was not for the campaign to judge how people decide on what they believed was hate, rather *USwithU* focused on a positive approach on unifying individuals, regardless of their differences. Thus, the following research question is posed in the case study: examine the use of social media platforms to raise awareness and encourage silent majority on countering hate identified in Vancouver, BC through the grassroots campaign, *Unity Starts with U*.

## Methods
### Preliminary Survey
As the members of *USwithU* wanted to identify what types of hate were prominent in the community, a survey was created online and distributed to a wide range of participants in Vancouver, resulting in 434 responses. The survey contained questions related to hate and included questions such as: how often do you experience/witness hate, where do you experience/witness hate the most, and if any, what kind of hate do you experience/witness? **Figure 1(a)** showed that most of the respondents sometimes experienced/witnesses hate (42%) while other respondents rarely experienced/witnessed it (29%). The results from **Figure 1(b)** demonstrate that the respondents often experienced/witnessed hate online (65%) or in-person (23%). A small portion of the individuals experienced/witnessed hate both online and in-person (7%) or via other methods (5%). **Figure 1(c)** results allowed multiple responses from respondents on the different types of hate that Vancouver residents experienced/witnessed with the highest being racism (74.88%), sexism (53.40%), political-based hate (53%), and homophobia (45.80%).

The results demonstrated that the respondents in Vancouver would be three times more likely to encounter sexism, racism, homophobia, and political-based hate on the Internet than in-person. Thus, the students established that their grassroots campaign, *Unity Starts with U*, will focus countering sexism, racism, homophobia, and political-based hate identified in their preliminary survey.

### Pre-Surveys
The students of the campaign created a pre-survey online that measured a range of questions that included the audience's overall connection to their community and the likelihood they would to speak out against the specific hates identified in the preliminary survey. The pre-survey link was randomly disturbed in-person by the members of the campaign to the public. The
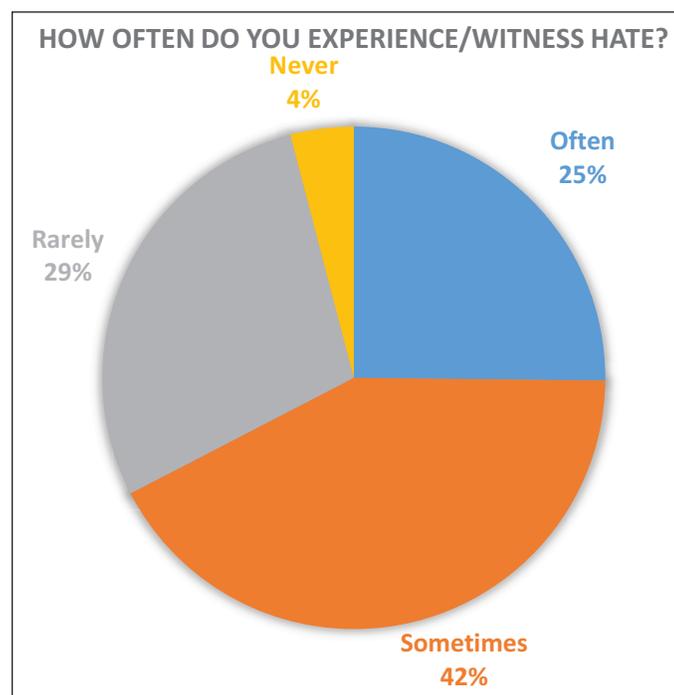


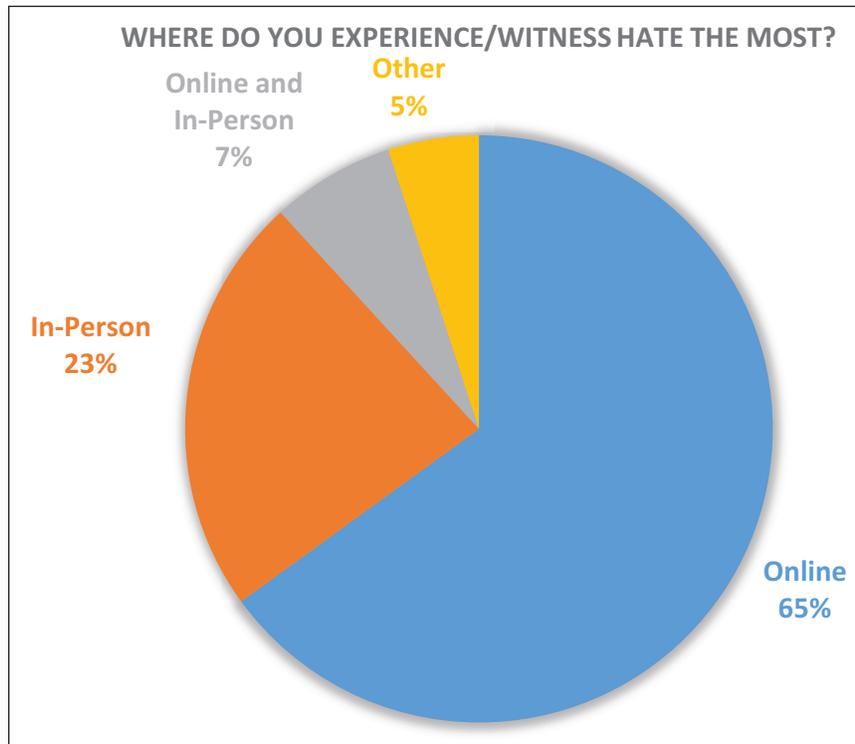**Figure 1(a):** Responses on "How Often Do You Experience/Witness Hate?".

**Figure 1(b):** Responses for "Where Do You Experience/Witness Hate the Most?"
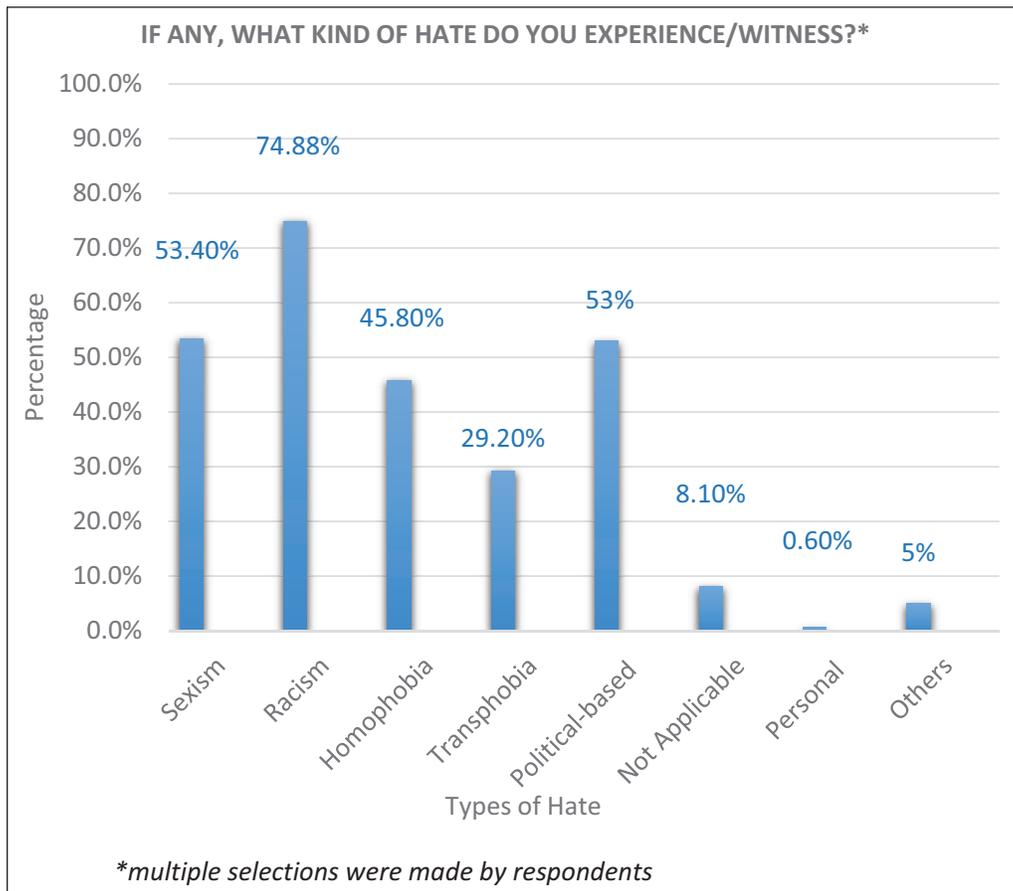


**Figure 1(c):** Responses for "If Any, What Kind of Hate Do You Experience/Witness?".

public ranges from various backgrounds and age groups to measure the impact of the campaign with the local community. Contact information was included in the survey in order to send a post-survey for participants that followed the campaign.

### Social Media Messaging

*Unity Starts with U* used several social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as communication tools to connect with their target audience, the silent majority. That is, individuals who were against, and/or have experienced, and/or witnessed hate, but for various reasons decided not to act. By positioning the campaign as a platform for the silent majority, the students hoped that the target audience would have the courage to speak up against hate. To engage with their audience, the members of *USwithU* organized various events and activities, both online and offline. All the activities were shared on the campaign's social media accounts using the hashtag #*uswithu*. Not only was the hashtag used to search the campaign's contents easily on social media platforms, but it was also created for the public to make a statement when they included it into their post. The use of #*uswithu* demonstrated solidarity and started a social movement to counteract hate. Therefore, through the #*uswithu* hashtag, the campaign could empower the target audience to do the same.

### Photo Challenge

The students initiated a photo challenge by incorporating the American Sign Language (ASL) letter "U", as it represents that "you" can make a difference in the community by taking part in this campaign and countering hate together. By having the photo challenge, the campaign was inviting the public to take the first step and use their platform to set an example that, through a collective effort, people can stand up against hate. Students from *USwithU* also set up a photo-booth on campus to engage with students on the concept of unity and solidarity to counter-hate. All photos from the photo-booth were shared on *USwithU*'s Instagram page with a black-and-white colour theme. The colour symbolized that hate was neither wrong nor right as people had different perspectives on how they see it since the campaign's message was to show the target audience that all perspectives were important to create unity.

### Interviews

As the goal of the campaign was to humanize the experience of unity, several video interviews were conducted with people from diverse backgrounds to engage them in an open discussion about hate and unity. Each interview had questions that included hate and unity, along with personal stories of their experience(s) with hate. Having these videos allowed the viewers to connect at a personal level and encouraged their target audience to not be afraid in speaking about their opinions or experience with hate. All the videos were shared throughout the campaign's social media platforms to target at least one of the mediums that were used by the silent majority. The members of *USwithU* wanted to show their target audience that, while people have different experiences with hate, the target audience could also come to an understanding that these differences could create unity while respecting the differences in opinion.

### Public Events

In addition to the previous activities, *USwithU* was invited to events to speak about their campaign. The campaign engaged and raised awareness about their counter-narrative message with various local organizations that included law enforcements (ex: New Westminster Police Department), university students (ex: Simon Fraser University Interfaith), youth (ex: Burnaby Youth Hub), and LGBTQ activists (ex: Sher and Vancouver Frontrunners), which expanded the campaign's unity movement at a local and online level. These events provided an opportunity for the *USwithU*'s members to not only interact with the community members, but also create an open discussion for the campaign and community to learn and gain new perspectives on ways to collectively address hate. *USwithU* hoped that it would inspire and motivate people and organizations, that, through the effort on taking an action to stop hate, positive changes could happen in Vancouver.

The campaign also held two public events showing inclusiveness to the community where the students wanted to let people who were affected by hate know that they are supported through this campaign both online and offline. To demonstrate this concept, a video game event, *Portal2Unity*, was organized on campus so that strangers would play together in a cooperative game. The objective was to apply unity in an offline setting because the participants needed to cooperate to complete each level in the game. Players who played the video game before were paired with others who have never played it, requiring team members to communicate with each other. The post-event interview demonstrated that most of the participants would stand up against hate for their partner who they just met before the gaming session. That is, even though players had a time frame of 30 minutes to complete as many levels as possible, the interaction and team building within the small amount of time between the players formed unity and trust between them. They relied on each other whether it was one player teaching their partner how to play the game or both individuals were learning at the same time to complete each round. The event demonstrated that when people share common experiences and are united, trust could be established without needing a large investment of time.

The final event, *Unity in the Community*, showcased the impact students had made in the community. In a gallery-style format, photos and quotes that were captured throughout the campaign were displayed. The video game in *Portal2Unity* was also set up for individuals to continue to play with strangers. A community board was used to allow individuals to write messages about what unity means to them. In addition, a colouring section was included which was designed to be a collective effort to complete a mural to represent unity. Each of these activities presented revolved around the campaign's message that "Unity Starts with U".

### Post-Survey

The post-survey was created online with the same questions as the pre-survey, but it included additional questions in order to identify if the respondents followed the campaign from the beginning. This was to analyze if the campaign showed promising results in changing people's perception on speaking out against hate through the use of social media platforms. The students of *USwithU* shared the post-survey link to pre-survey respondents and to new participants who followed the campaign later in the process. There were 47 respondents for the post-survey.

### Results

### Pre- and Post-Surveys

*Unity Starts with U* attempted to address hate by using their social media platforms to deliver positive messages and materials to counter the hateful attitude that may have promoted fear for their target audience. The results from **Figure 2(a)** demonstrated that during the pre-survey, respondents felt they were connected (23%) to the community in Vancouver. However, these respondents felt more connected (42%) once they have taken part in the campaign. Considering that connectivity is an integral part of the campaign's mission in order to counter-hate, *USwithU* wanted to step away from the *us versus them* mentality (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves & Martinez, 2015; Rohlfing & Sonnenberg, 2016) where people with aligned views see themselves as the "us" while those who contradict their perspectives are considered as "them". *USwithU* envisioned connecting people with different perspectives bridges their differences through understanding; thus, hate could be encountered through interconnection.

As mentioned previously, the campaign interacted with their target audience both online and offline through the use of the campaign's social media platforms and activities. The students analyzed the pre- and post-surveys result in order to examine if the campaign has changed people's perspectives to speak up against the types of hate identified in Vancouver. Appendix A and Appendix B indicated the full results in the pre- and post-surveys. **Table 1** compared the participants' likelihood on speaking up against racism, sexism, homophobia, and political-based hate when experienced in-person and online. Focusing on the results to speak up against the types of hate identified online, most respondents were very likely (9.8%) during the pre-survey and very likely (34%) during post-survey to speak out against racism. When countering sexism, participants were very likely (8.2%) in the pre-survey and very likely (31.9%) in post-survey to speak out against it.
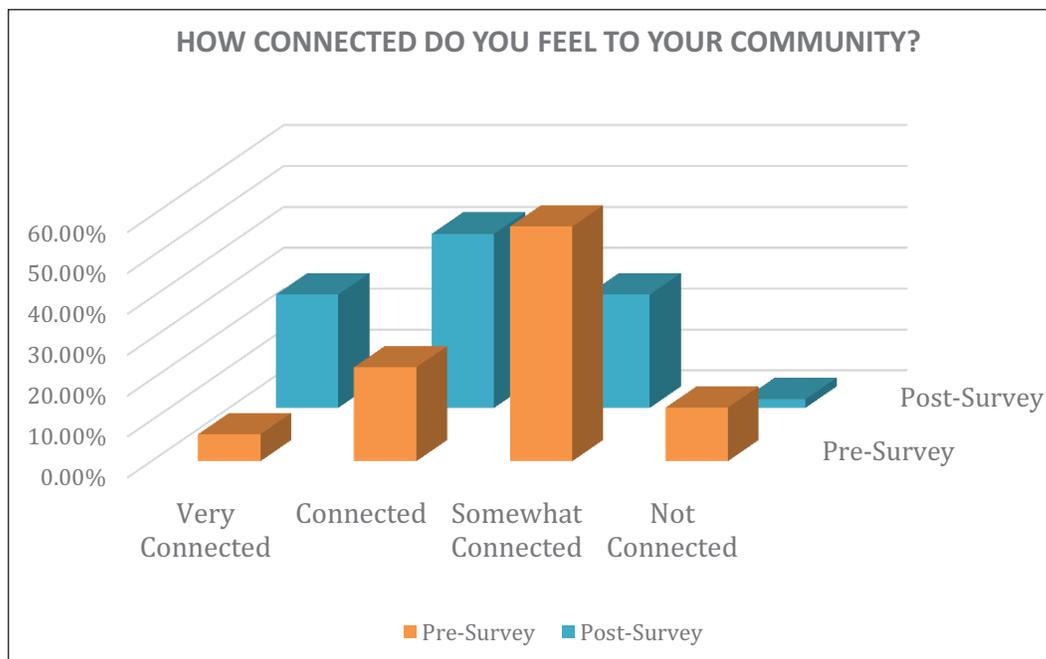


**Figure 2(a):** Responses for "How Connected Do You Feel to Your Community".

**Table 1:** Participants Perspectives on Speaking Up Against Hate.

| Categories of Hate | Participant Responses | Experience In-Person | | Experience Online | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Pre-Survey | Post-Survey | Pre-Survey | Post-Survey |
| Racism | Very Likely | 23% | 44.70% | 9.80% | 34% |
| | Likely | 45.90% | 44.70% | 14.80% | 38.30% |
| | Somewhat Likely | 26.20% | 10.60% | 34.40% | 21.30% |
| | Not Likely | 4.90% | 0% | 41% | 6.40% |
| Sexism | Very Likely | 23.0% | 40.4% | 8.2% | 31.9% |
| | Likely | 29.5% | 48.9% | 16.4% | 40.4% |
| | Somewhat Likely | 37.7% | 10.6% | 29.5% | 23.4% |
| | Not Likely | 9.8% | 0.0% | 45.9% | 4.3% |
| Homophobia | Very Likely | 23.0% | 31.9% | 11.5% | 27.7% |
| | Likely | 32.8% | 59.6% | 14.8% | 42.6% |
| | Somewhat Likely | 27.9% | 8.5% | 21.3% | 23.4% |
| | Not Likely | 16.4% | 0.0% | 52.5% | 6.4% |
| Political-based Hate | Very Likely | 13.1% | 19.1% | 1.6% | 17.0% |
| | Likely | 14.8% | 51.1% | 13.1% | 40.4% |
| | Somewhat Likely | 36.1% | 23.4% | 23.0% | 25.5% |
| | Not Likely | 36.1% | 6.4% | 62.3% | 17.0% |

Meanwhile, respondents were very likely (11.5%) to speak up against homophobia in the pre-survey results. In the post-survey results, respondents were very likely (27.7%) to counter homophobia. Finally, results indicated participants were very likely (1.6%) in pre-survey and very likely (17.0%) to speak up against political-based hate.

   *Unity Starts with U* attempted to address hate by using their social media platforms to deliver positive messages and materials to counter the hateful attitude that may have promoted fear for their target audience. The results measured that campaign has changed the majority of respondents' perspectives positively. The overall trend demonstrated promising results that social media platforms used by the grassroots campaign raised awareness on the silent majority to speak out against sexism, homophobia, and political-based hate identified in Vancouver.

### Reflections on Unity Starts with U

*Unity Starts with U* showed promising results that a grassroots campaign would be an essential component on addressing local hate issues. Particularly, the social media platforms were fundamental digital tools to empower the silent majority as they felt they were able to speak up against hate online. Näsi et al. (2015) explained that the level of trust would decrease through constant exposure with online hate materials. Especially when the audience may be fearful from past experience (Perry & Alvi, 2012), speaking against hate can be difficult. However, *USwithU* applied the concept as their counter-strategy by utilizing their social media platform to increase the trust with their target audience through providing empowering materials to speak up against hate. As a grassroots campaign, the students focused on hate issues that were relevant to their audience. The idea behind social media platforms was the usage to post information that connects and educate the local community in real time. The campaign provided a place where the audience felt safe to follow and participate through the series of offline and online activities. *USwithU* established a connection with their target audience who may have been fearful once to speak up against hate, but change their perspectives towards the end of the competition. The next section includes recommendations to policymakers that the usage of social media platforms can be a resourceful tool in grassroots campaigns to raise awareness and address hate concerns in the community.

### Policy Recommendations

Hate-based organizations and individuals use their social media platforms to gain attention in cyberspace by making the community be fearful of them (Bertram, 2016; Perry, 2014). Hate-materials such as hashtags, messages, and videos posted online stay online unless there are people who alert the social networking sites to delete such information.

While hate-groups and individuals' social media accounts can be suspended, it is only temporary as they can continue to create new accounts or move to a different social networking site (Greenberg, 2016). Countering this type of hate is difficult. As mentioned previously, the definition of hate is complex (Awan, 2014; Wong et al., 2015). The discretion to remove the content is up to the private companies who own the social networking sites as the decision is subjective (Allan, 2017), which may make some content difficult to determine as hate. Not all media have enough context that allows Facebook to judge if the message is hate. Often, social media platforms want to balance the ability to freely express themselves, yet maintain their guidelines when removing hateful materials (Faulkner, 2007).

While there are challenges that arise from hate in social media platforms, the strategies that were used in *USwithU* could act as a guide for policymakers on future counter-narrative programs or improve current grassroots campaigns. The following policies are proposed: using social media platforms as counter-narrative tools, creating a safe space for the target audience, educating and providing resources, and using metric is essential for campaigns. It is not to say that the policies recommended would eliminate all types of hate, rather, the recommendations could help improve the situation for the people that are affected by hate at a local level.

### Using Social Media Platforms as Counter-Narrative Tools
Social media platform is a powerful tool to change people's attitude without needing to physically meet the individuals. The members of the campaign used each of their social networking sites effectively by creating content, sharing posts, and engaging with the public regularly. The unique ability on social media accounts, or the Internet in general, would be campaign materials posted online were documented so new users could still view and participate in the movement years later. For instance, the campaign used the *#uswithu* hashtag to counter hashtags that were used negatively in the cyberspace. While the *#uswithu* did not initiate a global trend, results demonstrate that positive hashtags can create awareness and unite people together. For example, the recent *#metoo* movement created a community that stands with individuals who experienced various forms of sexual assault (Me Too, 2017). Through the members of *USwithU*'s efforts, *Unity Starts with U*'s Facebook page accumulated in the first few weeks 386 followers with a total of 23,100 individuals who viewed the contents that were posted.

In addition, a new social media platform may arise in the future that may be even more popular than the one currently used by the grassroots campaign. The Internet and the community are not static, so the tactics and campaign's message that works currently may not be applicable in the future (Greenberg, 2016). That is, the community may have a different view of the local hate issue overtime, and the campaign would need to adjust addressing the situation. As such, grassroots campaigns should change their social media platform when needed so that they can better reach their target audience and continue to have a strong social media platform presence to counter the local hate issue. Constant improvement would need to be made in order to continue the success of the campaigns.

### Creating a Safe Space for the Target Audience
Many home grown hate-individuals are inspired to join hate-organizations because they see a community that supports their views on social media (Awan, 2017; Bertram, 2016), specifically they tend to see it as a place where they feel "safe" (Guiora & Park, 2017). However, people who have experienced hate directly are fearful that they will re-live it (Perry, 2014), while individuals who may not have experienced hate are fearful that they could be attacked in the future (Perry, 2014). Similar to how hate-oriented individuals want to feel a sense of belong in a community, individuals who are fearful of hate also want to find a community where they feel safe (Perry, 2014). Often times, programs focus on countering this problem but exclude those who are affected by it. For example, Canada's *Building Resilience Against Terrorism* program focuses on four initiatives to counter terrorism: prevent, detect, deny, and respond (Public Safety Canada, 2018). Yet, the program does not specify how this would support those who may be impacted by terrorism, be it through a personal experience or witnessing the aftermath of a terrorist attack. Thus, policymakers could create a safe space for their audience in the future to counter-hate by empowering their audience and ensuring inclusion. Having a platform where the target audience feels safe to speak about their experience and receive encouragements could help the participants build confidence against hate.

The objective of *Unity Starts with U* was always to form a safe environment, specifically, a virtual community, in the hopes that it would empower the target audience to speak against hate. The members of *USwithU* created content for their audience so that they would feel connected and supported by their people in the community. For example, a video series depicting personal stories about the meaning of unity to represent inclusiveness is an essential element in counter-narrative initiatives (Macnair & Frank, 2017). *Unity Starts with U* wanted to create an interpersonal relationship with their viewers as the videos are based on personal experiences and comments that the individuals went through. Delivering content that is relatable to the viewers can help develop a stronger connection in the community.

### Educating and Providing Resources

Often, children and youth may be more influenced by hate-materials than adults (Morris, 2016). Considering that hate-materials could be encountered even by children on their social media account(s), educating children to think critically about information presented from digital media could prevent them from hateful thinking in the future (Ghosh, Chan, Manuel & Dilimulati, 2017). For example, schools could educate students on critical thinking techniques that could be applied to information received from the Internet. Knowing a website's information source allows readers to ascertain the material's credibility (Foxman & Wolf, 2013). Questioning where content is coming from may instill critical thinking in students, and deter the development of radical views.

Teachers could also incorporate an open discussion in class for students who are possibly impacted by the content they access online (Oksanen, Hawdon, Holkeri, Näsi & Räsänen, 2014). Often, parents want to help their children but require the assistance of a third party (van San, Sieckelinck & de Winter, 2013). By having an open discussion in school, the children could be encouraged to share their concerns on what they see on the Internet or how they feel about it. Establishing safe spaces for these conversations, where the school and classmates act as support groups, prevents students from turning to the Internet for answers that lead to hateful acts.

Gagliardone et al. (2015) suggested various educational methods on raising awareness through the use of the Internet. Individuals can take advantage of social media platforms to educate their audience. As people use their platforms to communicate and connect with others, information to create awareness on countering hate can be spread across them. By having more people knowing and educating about the pressing issue on hate, it can influence others to create their own campaign or activities offline in order to join in the movement to make changes in their community. The social media platforms not only act as a powerful tool, but an educational resource that people can use as reference.

### Essentials for Campaigns: Metrics

The implementation of metrics should be considered in policy in order to measure the effectiveness in the campaigns. When campaigns are implemented, it is essential to measure how the strategies impacted the target audience and the success it has in the community (Greenberg, 2016; Moffett & Sgro, 2016). For example, the strategies that were used in *Prevent* had negative feedback from the locals, specifically, the Muslim community (Lakhani, 2012). If metrics were used, *Prevent* would have been able to identify how well the strategies were being received and made adjustment.

There are several ways programs can obtain metrics such as the statistic following the social media platforms, the number of participants joining the events, or the number of people creating their own organization to counter-hate (Moffett & Sgro, 2016). Since *Unity Starts with U* used social media platforms as their main communication tools, they used the statistics that were given to them by the platforms themselves. When members of the campaign saw that their Facebook's engagement level with the public was not going well, *USwithU* members strategized ways to improve the campaign by, for example, identifying which posts had better reach on Facebook and trying to mimic those. Greenberg (2016) also suggested that besides statistics, people could also include how social behaviour is changed over time. *USwithU* implemented the use of surveys to obtain results on the attitude change from the public when they participated in the campaign.

### Limitations

There were some limitations to the campaign. The longevity of grassroots campaign is difficult to determine due to the lack of funding. *Unity Starts with U* was funded and supported by EVP and Facebook to promote the campaign only while they took part in the *Peer to Peer: Facebook Global Digital Challenge*. After the P2P ended, some students of *USwithU* decided to continue with the campaign by starting a club at Simon Fraser University. However, students would need to secure resources that could help continue the campaign's initiative after the competition ends. Policymakers and future counter-narrative campaigns would need to ensure they have sufficient financial support to continue a long term program. Since not all future counter-narrative programs would be participating with EVP, a careful budget plan is needed to smoothly run the campaigns. Some suggestions would be to consider grants that are offered by government and organizational partners such as the social media companies and local charities (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2015; Tuck & Silverman, 2016).

Additionally, the campaign focused on sexism, racism, homophobia, and political-based hate as the types of hate to counter. Yet the structure of the campaign made it appear they were countering hate in general. Although countering hate in general would still be relevant, having specific activities regarding the different forms of hate would have made the campaign's goal clearer (Macnair & Frank, 2017). As well, *USwithU* started on the campus of Simon Fraser University, mostly students were interviewed. It would have had been beneficial to include different age groups, professional backgrounds, or even former radical individuals to examine if there are variations on the answers to the interview questions. That said, it was still useful information that provided insight as to how the respondents thought and felt about hate and unity.

## Conclusion

Social media platforms provide an alternative method for individuals to communicate. Some people use it to connect with friends and family while others use it for a different purpose. Hate-organizations see social networking sites as yet another place for them to recruit more supporters in order to promote their messages. *Unity Starts with U* attempted to combat hate through the same methods. As a grassroots community-based anti-hate campaign, the members of *USwithU* focused their initiatives at a local level; by working at a micro-level, they could work with their community directly allowing the campaign to measure the difference made in the city. Using popular social media mediums such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, *Unity Starts with U* was able to connect with individuals in the community as the students delivered content that resonated with their audience. Having their audience feel connected generated responses online; thus, the campaign had a greater impact for people to speak up against hate.

The policy recommendations are suggestions for policymakers that are considering using social media platforms to promote their messages online on their current or future counter-narrative campaigns. By having more campaigns that start at grassroots levels, it may help determine what relevant issues, are and thus catering specific activities to their own community. *Unity Starts with U* would be one such example. The campaign became the voice for the voiceless, and organized activities that aimed to empower their target audience to stand up against hate.

## Additional Files

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Table A.** Pre-Survey Results. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.146.s1
- **Table B.** Post-Survey Results. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.146.s2

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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