

Young people say online slurs common _ but not OK

By CONNIE CASS | Posted: Wednesday, November 20, 2013 3:55 pm

Most young people say they aren't very offended about the slurs and mean-spirited videos mocking overweight people or gays or blacks that they encounter on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.

"You can't let those things get to you," says 15-year-old Vito Calli, an immigrant from Argentina whose online friends tease him with jokes about Hispanics.

In a notable shift, however, young people are coming around to the idea that it's wrong to contribute to this ugly side of the Internet free-for-all, a poll released Wednesday shows.

A bare majority, 52 percent, of people ages 14 to 24 now say it's never OK to engage in discriminatory language, even when it's just among friends who don't really mean it. That's up from 44 percent in 2011.

A stronger majority _ nearly 6 in 10 _ say using slurs is wrong, even if you say you're "just kidding." Only about half were so disapproving two years ago.

Meanwhile, the share of young people who come across slurs online has held steady, according to the new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and MTV.

More than half of young users of YouTube, Facebook and gaming communities such as Xbox Live and Steam say they sometimes or often encounter biased messages.

Teens and twentysomethings say these slurs and taunting images they see online are mostly meant as jokes. The majority say they aren't very offended when they see foul words online for women or gays _ or even the N-word for African-Americans.

"Sometimes I make a couple of jokes that might be offensive to someone and I don't even realize it," said Calli of Reading, Pa. "You forget there's a person behind the computer with actual feelings."

Because a friend chastised him, the high school sophomore has tried to stop labeling anything uncool either "gay" or "retarded." He's finding that a difficult habit to break.

Young people say derogatory stuff is most often posted online or texted on cellphones to be funny or cool. Less than a third believe a major reason people use slurs is because they actually harbor hateful feelings toward the groups they are maligning.

Most do see hateful thoughts as at least a minor reason, however.

Some slurs are taken more seriously than others. Racial insults are not that likely to be seen as hurtful, yet a strong majority _ 6 in 10 _ felt comments and images targeting transgender people or Muslims are.

Almost as likely to be viewed as mean-spirited are slurs against gays, lesbians and bisexual people, and

those aimed at people who are overweight.

Maria Caprigno, who has struggled with obesity since childhood, said seeing mean images on Facebook stings. But she thinks the online world reflects the rest of U.S. society.

"It's still socially acceptable to comment on someone's weight and what someone is eating," said Caprigno, 18, of Norwood, Mass. "We need to change that about our culture before people realize posting stuff like that online is going to be offensive to someone."

Erick Fernandez of West New York, N.J., says what people share online reflects the influence of song lyrics and music videos and movies. He doesn't approve but feels resigned to it.

"I try to call some of my friends out on it, but it's really to no avail," said Fernandez, 22. "They brush it off and five minutes later something else will come out. Why even bother?"

In the poll, young people said they were less likely to ask someone to stop using hurtful language on a social networking site than face to face.

Alexandria Washington said she's accustomed to seeing men who wouldn't say offensive things to her in person post pictures of "half-naked women in sexual positions," followed by demeaning comments and slurs like "whore" and "ratchet."

"They'll post anything online, but in person it's a whole different story," said Washington, 22, a graduate student in Tallahassee, Fla.

There seems to be a desensitizing effect. Those who report more exposure to discriminatory images and words online are less likely to say it's wrong than those who rarely or never encounter it.

Context is crucial, too. Demeaned groups sometimes reclaim slurs as a way of stripping the words of their power _ like the feminist "Bitch" magazine or gay rights activists chanting "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!"

Washington, who is African-American, said on most days she doesn't come across racial slurs on social media. But she stumbles upon bigoted words when race is in the news, such as surrounding President Barack Obama's re-election, and finds them hurtful in that serious context.

Likewise, Calli, the high school student originally from Argentina, said he could stomach almost any name-calling but gets upset when someone uses a falsehood to denigrate immigrants.

Jeffrey Bakken, 23, a producer at a video game company in Chicago, said the bad stuff online, especially slurs posted anonymously, doesn't define today's young people. He says they actually are more committed to equal rights for minorities and gays than previous generations.

"Kids were horrible before the Internet existed," Bakken said. "It's just that now it's more accessible to the public eye."

The AP-NORC Center/MTV poll was conducted online Sept. 27-Oct. 7 among a random national sample of 1,297 people between the ages of 14 and 24. Results for the full sample have a margin of sampling

error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points. Funding for the study was provided by MTV as part of "A Thin Line" campaign to stop digital abuse.

The survey was conducted by GfK using KnowledgePanel, a probability-based online panel. Respondents are recruited randomly, using traditional telephone and mail sampling methods. People selected who had no Internet access were given it for free.

Associated Press Director of Polling Jennifer Agiesta and AP News Survey Specialist Dennis Junius contributed to this report.

Online:

<http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/the-digital-abuse-study-experiences-of-teens-and-young-adults.aspx>

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