

**Democracy at McMaster University Project: Freedom of Expression, Hate Speech, and
Dissenting Views**

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Abstract

The goal of this research is to investigate how university students perceive and navigate the boundaries between hate speech and free speech on the McMaster University Campus and to understand the potential implications of their perceptions on the campus' democratic environment. Using the Q-Sort research method and by exploring students' attitudes, behaviors and experiences regarding speech freedoms and restrictions, this study aims to provide insights into the dynamics of free expression, tolerance, and democracy within the campus community. Ultimately, the research seeks to contribute to the steps on how to foster a more inclusive and democratic campus environment by addressing challenges associated with balancing free speech rights and protecting against harmful speech.

Introduction

Free speech is fundamental to democracy in Canada, especially within university campuses such as McMaster. The intersection and boundaries between free speech and hate speech manifests significantly among students, prompting our investigation into how students perceive these concepts and whether their political alignment affects their views. How do university students perceive and navigate the boundaries between hate and free speech on McMaster University Campus? How does that affect their understanding of democracy on campus?

McMaster University upholds academic freedom as a principle that is essential for the pursuit and sharing of knowledge. According to their 2011 Statement on Academic Freedom, this freedom grants faculty members the right to explore diverse avenues of inquiry, teach and learn without external constraints, and openly consider all opinions. This principle extends to all

participants in academic activities organized by faculty. All faculty members are expected to uphold and defend academic freedom, as any behavior hindering free scholarly pursuit jeopardizes the integrity of the university. McMaster University, according to their Statement on Academic Freedom, is committed to protecting its faculty from any attempts to suppress academic freedom. However, academic freedom also entails a responsibility to exercise it in a professional manner conducive to advancing knowledge.

In addition, McMaster's policy framework for Freedom of Expression published in 2018 further emphasizes the fundamental commitment to freedom of speech within the academic community. It recognizes the importance of critical inquiry, discussion, and debate in advancing knowledge. The university supports the exchange of ideas, respectful dialogue, and peaceful protest while promoting mutual respect and human dignity among community members. Harassment, discrimination, violence, or hate speech are unacceptable. The university administration also collaborates with student leaders from affiliated student unions and associations and has established policies for recognizing and supporting student groups. In cases where behavior violates university policies, complaint mechanisms and support services are available. McMaster University's policy framework for Freedom of Expression details that unresolved complaints can be referred to external bodies such as the Ontario Ombudsman and the Human Rights Commission.

On June 8, 2018, McMaster University published guidelines on Freedom of Expression, Protest and Dissent: Guidance for Event Organizers and Participants that are available on the Office of the President's website. These guidelines provide a framework to their commitment that is rooted in freedom of expression, inclusivity, and respectful debate. They provided this framework in order for event organizers and participants to facilitate diverse perspectives and

discussions while ensuring a safe and conducive environment for learning and expression. Some of the guidelines include that regular academic and administrative activities must be able to continue without disruption, and that audience members are expected to engage in peaceful protest and dissent without substantially interfering with the speaker's communication or the audience's ability to hear and see. In addition, it highlights the responsibility of event organizers to communicate guidelines to speakers, be aware of possible safety concerns, and to facilitate open dialogue.

The policies outlined by McMaster University exhibit some limitations and outdatedness in 2024. The reliance on a 2011 Statement on Academic Freedom may not fully address the evolving landscape of academic discourse and expression. The principles outlined in this statement do not fully address the new challenges and nuances that surround academic freedom, especially considering the current advancements in technology and communication platforms, which have deeply changed and expanded the methods of academic inquiry and expression. Similarly, while the policy framework for Freedom of Expression published in 2018 acknowledges the importance of critical inquiry and respectful debate, its emphasis on promoting mutual respect and human dignity may restrict certain forms of expression. The delineation of unacceptable behavior such as harassment, discrimination, violence or hate speech, while necessary and good in the grand scheme of things to maintain a safe environment, also suggest some ambiguity and subjective interpretation, potentially stifling legitimate academic discourse and dissent.

While McMaster University's policies demonstrate a commitment to fostering an environment conducive to learning and expression, they fall short in directly addressing the complexities and challenges of contemporary academic discourse and expression. Given the

importance of free speech in a democratic society and its intersection with potential hate speech, this paper looks to delve deeper into how McMaster University students perceive and navigate these boundaries, given that our current policies remain ambiguous and dated for the changing political and academic landscape.

Previous Research

Chereminsky and Gillman (2016) discuss how today's university students prioritize protection against intolerant speech due to their upbringing, despite being detached from the historical link between free speech and safeguarding dissenters. They examine undergraduate university students' perceptions of free speech, particularly in academic settings. It reveals that the current generation, exposed to anti-bullying campaigns and heightened sensitivity to hate speech, is inclined to protect against intolerant or discriminatory speech. This protective instinct is rooted within their upbringing, where concepts of tolerance and the psychological impact of hate speech were emphasized.

Similarly, Hillman's (2022) survey indicates that a majority of students prioritize protection against discrimination over unbounded expression, reflecting a nuanced landscape on campus. This study highlights a trend towards increased regulation and consultation surrounding speech on campus, with a desire for a sensitive and inclusive environment. Other studies explore secondary factors influencing students' opinions on free speech, such as political alignment and personal experiences.

Garces et al. (2022) also discuss the challenges institutions such as universities face in responding to hate speech, especially when the hate speech is directed towards marginalized groups. It outlines how recent contemporary politics, particularly after the 2016 U.S Presidential

election, has led to a growth in anti-minority speech across various media platforms. It cites how institutional responses have often been perceived by the public as lackluster and color-evasive, neglecting the experiences of students of color on historically white campuses. This clouds trust between students and administrators, calling on institutions to prioritize a sense of belonging as well as inclusion on campus.

Furthermore, the article written by Susan Ramlo (2020) explores the subjective nature of hate speech and the challenge of differentiating between free speech and hate speech. Ramlo highlights the importance of understanding the intention behind speech as the divisive factor between the two. This study uses the Q-Sort method and considers factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity to categorize participants based on their attitudes towards free speech. In addition, another article by Revers Matthias et al. (2020) covers secondary factors that may influence students' opinions on free speech, finding that political orientation is not the sole determinant.

Wachs et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of classroom climate, empathy, and self-efficacy in combating hate speech on campuses, indicating the need for institutional and individual interventions. Roth (2019) discusses the challenge of balancing inclusivity and free speech on campuses amid an increasingly polarized political landscape. Gorenc's (2022) study on Slovenian youth shows varying perceptions of hate speech, influenced by factors like political ideology and statement context.

The collective findings from these studies suggest that university students perceive and navigate the boundaries between hate and free speech by prioritizing protection against intolerant speech, influenced by their upbringing and societal trends. This could potentially affect their understanding of democracy on campus by shaping the campus discourse on inclusivity, the balance between free speech and protection against discrimination, and the importance of

institutional and individual interventions to combat hate speech and foster a more inclusive campus environment.

The literature surrounding students' perceptions of free speech and hate speech reveals a relationship between protective instincts against intolerant speech and the desire for an inclusive campus environment. However, these findings overall suggest that a more nuanced and complex approach is needed in order to navigate the gray areas between hate speech and free speech on university campuses. While Chereminsky and Gillman (2016) and Hillman (2022) demonstrate a prevailing inclination among students towards protecting against intolerant or discriminatory speech, there exists ambiguity regarding the extent to which this prioritization should be upheld. This ambiguity is compounded by the challenges outlined by Garces et al. (2022), who discuss how institutions often struggle to effectively respond to hate speech, especially when directed towards marginalized groups. The perceived lackluster institutional responses further depict the issue, leading to a breakdown in trust between students and administrators, as highlighted by Garces et al. Additionally, Ramlo (2020) sheds light on the subjective nature of hate speech, emphasizing the challenge of differentiating between free speech and hate speech based on intent. This subjectivity introduces further complexity into determining appropriate boundaries for speech regulation on campus. Moreover, while Wachs et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of addressing hate speech through institutional and individual interventions, Roth (2019) discusses the broader challenge of balancing inclusivity with free speech amid polarized political landscapes, adding another layer of complexity to the discourse.

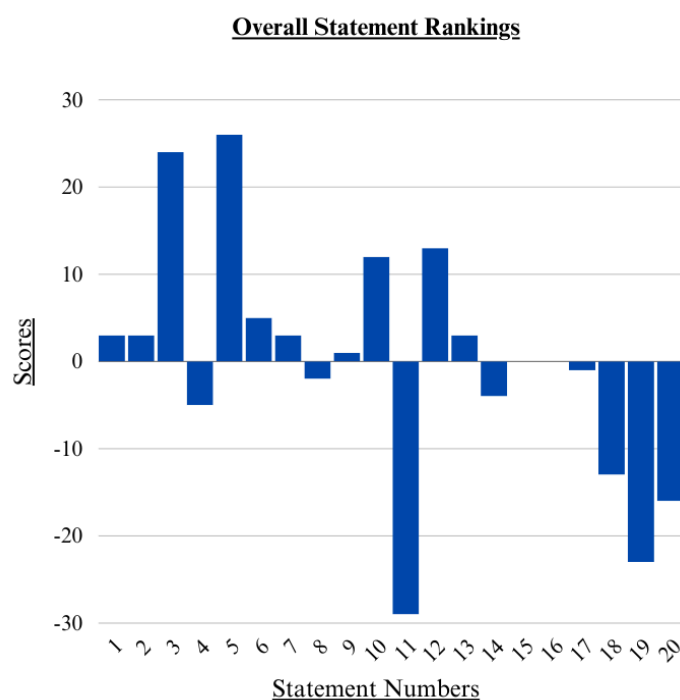
The Q-method allows for us to subjectively explore different viewpoints, opinions and preferences about a particular topic. The Q-sort method allows for nuanced and polarizing topics to be discussed subjectively without high risks of social desirability bias while allowing completely individual results for each participant. With the nature of the Q-sort grid, it gives participants the freedom to sort based on their own views, rather than other data collection methods which may include predetermined response options. The Q-sort method does not limit the participant in how they can respond, it allows for complete subjectivity when sorting. While participants are given the ability to be completely subjective, the Q-sort grid allows for data collection and analysis to be reliable and standard. For the subject of our study, this method allowed for participants to choose not only what they believe to be important about free speech on the McMaster Campus, but also what they agreed and disagreed with. The results from the study not only gave us insight into what McMaster students want for their campus, but also the issues that they feel most strongly about, positively or negatively.

For this study, we asked only current students of McMaster, who had all attended in person classes on campus. The Q-sort method does not rely on a large sample size, since it focuses on the complexity of individual perspectives rather than general statements from a larger group. While we hope that this study can be generalized to a large population on the McMaster campus, our focus was to understand the nuance of free speech on campus for students, rather than attempting to make generalized statements about every student on the McMaster campus. Our sample size was 18 students, including students in different programs of study, ages, years of study, and cultural and political background.

After we collected the data from all participants, a factor analysis was done on the data collected to show patterns and the most typical responses for certain statements depending on

those patterns using Q-sort software. Three factors were statistically significant and each participant weighted differently on each factor. The factors then went through a varimax rotation to reveal the number of participants that weighed significantly on each factor. After looking at the typical sorts for each factor grouping and the distinguishing statements for each, there are opinion patterns that can be seen.

For further qualitative analysis, we then gave each statement an individual score from each sort depending on where it was placed in the Q-sort grid. These scores were determined by using the Q-sort grid as the normal distribution curve, and having “Neutral” as the average. This meant that every statement was given a z-score from the mean, ranging from -3 to +3. The scores were as such: Strongly Agree = +3, Agree = +2, Somewhat Agree = +1, Neutral = 0, Somewhat Disagree = -1, Disagree = -2, Strongly Disagree = -3. After all participants had completed the study, the scores for each statement were added to create an overall score from the study. While the individual scores for each statement reveal interesting patterns and opinions, the overall scores allow for a general understanding of what are the most overwhelmingly disagreed with and agreed with statements.



Categories	Statement Number	Statements
Classroom Experience	1	Professors should support the communication of all opinions and suggestions given in class.
	2	Trigger warnings should be used for course materials that may be controversial.
	3	Classrooms should be a safe space to share opinions and differing political views.
	4	Each class discussion should have a “devil’s advocate” for the benefit of the learning process.
	5	No one should ever feel uncomfortable about speaking openly in opinion-based class discussion.
McMaster Community at Broad	6	Protests should be allowed on campus.
	7	Students should have a say in what constitutes hate speech.
	8	Open dialogue, including what some may find hate speech, is necessary for democracy to thrive on campus.
	9	Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech even if unintentional.
	10	It is healthy to have regular political or social debates with your peers.
Rules and Regulations	11	Expulsion for speech that offends me is an adequate penalty.
	12	Expressing diverse opinions contributes to a greater quality of education.
	13	As a place for political conversations, universities have an obligation to create clear guidelines of speech.
	14	Student Unions should monitor and access free speech violations.
	15	Universities should focus on educating students about the consequences of hate speech rather than giving out broad restrictions.
Personal Guidelines	16	There are very clear definitions and boundaries between hate speech and free speech.
	17	Political discourse on campus should not be taken personally.
	18	People that you surround yourself with should have similar political beliefs as you.
	19	The courses you enroll in should align with your current beliefs and opinions.
	20	Individuals should limit the communication of beliefs and opinions that they know may offend someone.

Results

Factor Analysis

The first-factor group seemed to be characterized by a strong belief that individuals should surround themselves with people who have different beliefs than themselves and seemed to disagree with most of the statements to limit exposure to potential ideological disagreements. One of the distinguishing statements was “People that you surround yourself with should have similar beliefs as you” which was most typically in the strongly disagree ranking. Statement 19, which deals with only enrolling in courses that are aligned with your beliefs, is also ranked in the disagree category, with statistical significance ($P < 0.05$). While this grouping has a strong belief that you should not isolate yourself from other’s opinions and beliefs, another distinguishing statement that they slightly disagreed with was whether protests should take place on campus. They believe that there is no need to stray away from other’s beliefs, but also that those beliefs should not manifest themselves on campus in the form of a protest. Another theme that was prevalent in this grouping was that many of the statements dealt with the limits of hate speech on campus. Three distinguishing statements were sorted into the neutral category, showing either a lack of a strong opinion on the topic, or an indecisiveness. These statements (#8, 9, 10) covered accountability for potentially unintentional hate speech, the effects of having political and social debates with peers, and whether open dialogue that may contain hate speech is needed for democracy to thrive. This shows that this factor did not believe that any type of isolation techniques would limit the amount of free speech on campus, but they strongly believed that hate speech should be limited in some capacity on campus. It seems that the solution that this factor had was to keep political and social discussions in classrooms rather than unmediated

discussions around campus. This factor had the most participants weighing on it, with nine participants fitting most significantly with this factor's typical sort.

The second-factor group was distinguished by a strong belief that protests should be allowed on campus. Statement #6 which deals with this topic was a distinguishing statement that was sorted in the strongly disagree ranking in factor two's typical sort. This grouping seemed to be very inclined to agree with statements that ensured political conversations and debates on campus but were neutral about classrooms being the space to have those conversations in. Statements that dealt with political conversations in the classroom such as statement #3 were placed in the neutral ranking as a distinguishing statement for the factor. While this group believes that political discussions should happen on campus, they do not agree with giving leniency about the boundary between hate and free speech. This factor disagreed with the statement "Political discourse on campus should not be taken personally and slightly disagreed with "Open dialogue, including what some may consider hate speech is necessary for democracy to thrive on campus", both as distinguishing statements. They also agreed that "There are very clear definitions and boundaries between hate speech and free speech" and slightly agreed that "Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech even if unintentional" as distinguishing statements as well. This shows that while this factor group believed that political and social debates and protests are allowed to happen on campus, they were unsure if the correct space for these debates was classrooms, while also having a strong belief that hate speech is a line that is difficult to cross accidentally, and we should all be held accountable for potential free speech. This factor had the second most participants weighing most heavily on it, with six participants.

The third-factor group had the most relaxed opinions when it came to limiting hate speech on campus. As distinguishing factors, this group agreed that “Open dialogue, including what some may consider hate speech, is necessary for democracy to thrive on campus” and disagreed with “Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech even if unintentional” and “Individuals should limit the communication of beliefs and opinions that they know may offend someone”. Each of these sorts shows a leniency for potential hate speech to grow democracy on campus. Most of the statements suggesting stronger boundaries against hate speech such as statements #14 and #11 were disagreed with in the typical sort for this factor. The statements that promoted choosing to surround yourself with things that align with current political beliefs were placed in the neutral ranking including the distinguishing statement “The courses you enroll in should all align with your current beliefs and opinions”. That being said, this group slightly agreed that protests should be allowed on campus as a distinguishing statement, which shows that while they may not have a strong opinion about whether it is best practice to remove yourself from social and educational situations that may not share your opinions, they do believe in political and social demonstrations. This factor group has a typical sort that shows a preference for a thriving democracy rather than potentially limiting free speech to lower the risk of hate speech on campus. They also show indifference to potentially isolating techniques of choosing peers and courses but believe that McMaster’s campus should be a place for political and social discussions and demonstrations. This factor had the least amount of participants weighing on it, with three participants having opinions that were best shown by the factor three typical sort.

Classroom Experience

The statements in this category were designed to gauge not only how students feel about their current education, but also what they believe would create the most beneficial learning experience. While university is an experience for much more than only gaining an academic education, the classroom is the most direct interaction between the school and students. The classroom also provides ample opportunity to have meaningful discussions about social, economic, political, and academic opinions. While this is expected in a university course, we wanted to examine what McMaster students felt were the boundaries and necessities to ensure that the boundaries of free speech and hate speech are respected.

Overall, this category was the most agreed with, with an overall score of +51, and it contained the two most agreed with statements. The first was “No one should ever feel uncomfortable about speaking openly in opinion-based class discussion,” and the second was “Classrooms should be a safe space to share opinions and differing political views.” Both of these statements make clear that above all else, McMaster students believe that the classroom is a space for free speech and important discussion. Statement #1 and #3 were mostly neutral in opinions, but they do lead to a belief that McMaster students may not be sure what they want from professors in the classroom setting when facilitating conversation. While Statement #3 was widely agreed with to make classrooms a safe space for discussion, the neutrality of Statement #1 which provides that professors should actively support the communication of all opinions in class, seems to be slightly at odds. In this relationship between Statement #3 and Statement #1, participants are insinuating that it is the professors’ job to ensure that the line between hate speech and free speech is not breached. It does suggest that creating the safe space for communication is a team effort of every student, while controlling the line between hate speech

and free speech is specifically a professors' role. The only statement that ranked as an overall disagreement from the participants was Statement #4 dealing with the prevalence of a 'devil's advocate' in classroom discussions. Clearly, the wording of 'devil's advocate' insinuates that the individual will be arguing against the moral argument, but it also lends itself to questioning whether McMaster students see their own opinions as the moral opinions, and anyone who has a differing opinion is therefore a 'devil's advocate'. The only process that creates a 'devil's advocate' is when an individual voices their opinion and it goes against the opinions of the larger classroom discussion. This can lead to the silencing of the minority political voices on campus, which may be what McMaster students want as they believe the minority political trends they have seen lend themselves to hate speech, but silencing an entire political identity can be limiting to free speech as well.

The "Classroom Experience" category was the most agreed with, which does stress the importance of protecting that space as a place for free speech and opinion-based discussion. That being said, McMaster students seem to be unsure of their role in creating this space, and what professors should do to protect its role. The university classroom is a place for learning not only from professors, but also each other, and while we look towards each other for new ideas, and beliefs, there does seem to be a bias against those who may have a differing opinion from those in the majority. Professors and McMaster University must ensure that the classroom is protected as a space for vital opinion and belief based conversation, but must also ensure that it does not become a space for students who want only to hear opinions that align and expand their own.

McMaster Community At Broad - Peers

The provided Q-Sort statements within this section were designed to probe university student's perceptions and attitudes towards free speech and hate speech with regards to their relationship with their peers, McMaster faculty, and the political events that occur on campus. Students' attitudes towards topics such as allowing protests can reflect their understanding of boundaries between hate speech and legitimate forms of expression. The statements within this category briefly touch on the topic of student involvement in setting policies or guidelines relating to speech freedoms versus restrictions. The statements also address concepts of open dialogue, even if it involves contentious or potentially offensive speech, in fostering a democratic environment on campus. Using statements that probe these thoughts assess students' willingness to engage in discussions that might challenge their beliefs or values. Furthermore, this section in particular discusses the topic of accountability for speech, regardless of intent, while evaluating students' attitudes towards engaging in political or social debates with their peers, which can involve discussing topics that may border on hate speech.

The scores in this section reflect a relatively neutral stance on various aspects for fostering democratic engagement among McMaster students and how they navigate the boundaries between hate speech and free speech. Statement #6 prompts the student to rank whether protests should be allowed on campus, while statement #8 highlights the necessity of open dialogue, and statement #9 questions the accountability individuals should hold for the impact of their speech, irrespective of intent. All three of these statements shared a commonality in which they communicatively scored neutral scores, with mixed and varied responses for each statement on agreeability. However, it is important to note that statement #6 within this section showed itself as the statement that most of the people strongly disagreed with. Additionally,

Statement #7 and statement #10 stand out as particularly intriguing. Statement #7 asks whether students should have a say in defining hate speech, while statement #10 suggests the healthiness of regular political or social debates among peers. Interestingly, both of these statements garnered the highest number of neutral responses, indicating a degree of uncertainty or complexity surrounding these issues within the student body.

Rules and Regulations

While the first two questions revolved around more of a personalized experience, the Rules and Regulations section aimed at providing a wider view upon structural factors largely outside the control of the student; the focus shifts from student experiences while still retaining their ideals, to a more institutional side of free speech/hate speech principles. McMaster University as an institution was examined to a greater extent through the perceptions of the student, here there was a greater emphasis on limitations, guidelines, punishments, and who bears the responsibility of setting the parameters. For example, some questions related to expulsion as an adequate penalty, while another asks if Universities have an obligation to create clear guidelines, and whether students Unions should monitor such development, all of which are largely outside the control of the student to the appropriate subjective response to such incidents.

The purpose of this area is to provide a greater insight into students' perceptions about possible limitations and consequences and who should separate the two realms of speech. This is a difficult, but important, distinction to create as many Universities possess a multitude of students, faculty, student/University-led clubs are affected with free/hate speech. This section held a wide range of scoring, mainly due to Statement #11 heavily weighs down the average score, however, the score would be tailored toward a more neutral tone.

Personal Guidelines

The final set of Q-sort statements concerns the participant's preferences and biases regarding Free Speech around the McMaster campus. They are important because they measure the participants' morals and values that guide them. Moreover, the purpose of this section is not to draw answers to their various experiences with the facilities on campus but rather to understand personal principles and rules that participants abide by within the campus grounds. The first statement aims to probe the participants' understanding of how transparent the boundaries between free and hate speech are. By gaining a more profound knowledge of this, our research group can determine McMaster students' current free speech perspective. The following statements focus on the participant's personal opinions regarding their behaviour and activities around the campus. This can range from whether the participant believes they should engage in political discourse with their peers on campus, befriending individuals who share similar political beliefs, and the courses they choose to enroll in. It is important to note that these statements are based on the morals and values that guide them.

Interestingly, the scores in this section overwhelmingly leaned towards the 'disagree' side of the Q-sort, except for statements 16 and 17. The final score of statement 16 suggests that McMaster students need help to easily determine the boundaries between free and hate speech around campus. This blurring of the line indicates the need to re-solidify the current rules and regulations of free speech at McMaster. Statement 17 slightly disagreed with the idea that political discourse should not be taken personally on campus. This would mean that students should take political discourse around campus personally more often than not. The last three statements were most often disagreed with due to the unnecessary restrictions, such as enrolling in a specific course or surrounding yourself with certain people, which are placed on the

participants. Overall, the "personal guidelines "section allowed us to thoroughly understand participants' morals and values regarding other miscellaneous activities around campus.

Post-Sort Interview Questions

After each of the participants were finished sorting the statements accordingly, each was asked several follow-up questions. These questions were aimed at providing more insight into the thought process and some potential reasoning behind the reason for their particular sorting. Only four questions were asked revolving around the participants' thought process, statements placed at the extremities, personal confictions, as well as some challenges faced during sorting.

At the forefront of many of the statements was context. Context played a significant role in many of the participants' sorting decisions as some statements varied greatly on the level of interpretation. The idea of understanding the circumstance surrounding each statement was particularly important, especially those that considered severity and potential consequences of the speech. With regard to statement #11, many students stated "speech that offends me may not offend someone else," and thus gave it an overwhelming "strongly disagree" because of the difficulty of assigning a definitive and strict punishment.

Furthermore, personal beliefs and biases were noted by several participants which shaped their sorting. Some stated they prioritized the principles of free speech and openness, while others stated they focused more on the harm aspect and consequences, especially in settings such as places one could feel vulnerable like the classroom. Few stated how they tried connecting the statements to the broader audience at McMaster University instead of focusing the statements entirely to themselves. Some even go as far as stating, "if speech were to be punishable, it could

be manipulated to serve particular interests,” really tying in the individual good versus collective good.

The sorting itself also produced some challenges that contributed to the variability and cohesion among participants. The subjectivity of some statements required participants to carefully consider their options. Also, the structure of the Q-sort method changed the participants' perceptions of these statements by not simply agreeing/disagreeing, but instead ranking them which was a new experience for the vast majority. Taken all together, the post-sort interview questions shed a greater light on why some decisions were made in the way they were.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research project was done to understand better how McMaster students perceive and navigate the complicated boundaries of hate and free speech around the campus. Using the Q-sort method, students provided an in-depth analysis of how they engage with the interconnectedness of hate and free speech on campus. Through their spectrum of answers, they have shown an awareness of the delicate balance between upholding free speech and the interest of democracy. The implication of these findings suggests the absence of student unions and students in contributions to policies and regulations surrounding free speech. This leaves the administrators of McMaster to develop clear, comprehensive rules for future students engaging on campus. Ultimately, fostering a more inclusive and democratic campus environment demands a responsive and proactive approach to education and policy-making on free and hate speech. Universities should provide platforms for open dialogue and debate and ensure that such environments are not conducive to hate speech.

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