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Use of hate speech and social evaluation of a politician's image

We investigated whether the use of hate speech by politicians impacts the social evaluation of their image, as measured by the semantic differential method developed by Cwalina et al. (2000). The participants (N = 105, Polish nationals) evaluated the profiles of three well-known Polish politicians from different parties – Krzysztof Bosak, Radosław Sikorski, and Włodzimierz Czarzasty – and a fictional politician named Jacek Wiśniewski. Participants made evaluations before and after reading hateful posts from each politician. The participants' political views and their alignment with the electoral programs of the politicians being evaluated, as well as demographic variables such as gender and age were also measured. The results showed that hate speech adversely affected the politician's image, as evaluated by the participants. As a consequence of the experimental manipulation, all of the politicians whose profiles were presented for evaluation were judged more negatively. In particular, the negative evaluations concerned the politicians' competences (unqualified and provincial), their emotionality (excitable and aggressive), and their attitude towards other people (insincere and unfriendly). Detailed analyses also showed that: (a) respondents who sympathized with the views of specific politicians tended to evaluate them more positively, (b) hate speech was more harmful to the image of politicians judged by women than by men, and (c) there was a relationship between age and evaluations on several dimensions of the semantic differential.

Key words: hate speech, Twitter, politician's image

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Hate speech, an extreme form of derogatory language, is defined as verbal violence against minority groups (Cervone et al., 2021). Its emotional basis is contempt, which triggers anger and revulsion. Hence, it seems justified to refer to “hate and contempt speech” as a growing social phenomenon, leading to a worsening of attitudes towards minorities (Winiewski et al., 2017). It plays an enormous role in present-day social life and is a tool in political struggle and in public debate, excluding the possibility of dialogue and understanding (Jakubowska & Szarota, 2020). Unfortunately, it is also encouraged by the current pandemic situation: The feeling of being in danger generates a need to find guilty parties, leads to a radicalization of attitudes, builds a social hierarchy, and lowers public trust (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Thus, a consequence of the pandemic may be a strong polarization of attitudes that increases tension and conflicts between groups, inflames public moods, and permanently damages efforts towards cooperation and people’s sense of solidarity (Kossowska et al., 2020). To stop this process, it is necessary to begin to present hate speech as a serious social problem whose determinants and consequences are already a subject of reflection and of academic study.

A major role in the propagation of hate speech is played by public figures, particularly politicians, whose statements on Twitter are read by millions of interested followers. In the current study, we aimed to determine whether a politician’s use of hate speech affects the public’s evaluation of their image. We investigated this by means of the semantic differential method developed by Cwalina et al. (2000). A sample of Polish participants evaluated the profiles of three well-known politicians from different parties – Krzysztof Bosak, Radosław Sikorski, and Włodzimierz Czarzasty – and a fictional politician given the name Jacek Wiśniewski. They made evaluations before and after reading hateful posts from each of the politicians. The results encourage reflection on the role of hate speech in public discourse and in perception of the images of those who use aggressive language.

Hate and Contempt Speech

Hate speech is commonly defined as intentional and deliberate verbal violence directed at minority groups (Adamczak-Krysztofowicz & Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2017; Cervone et al., 2021), including communication that humiliates, insults, derides, or offends a person or group of people on the basis of an assumed or actual characteristic (Jaszczyk-Grzyb, 2020). However, the term is not synonymous with linguistic aggression. According to Szczepaniak-Kozak and Lankiewicz (2017), linguistic aggression is a broader concept than hate speech, encompassing utterances imbued with any kind of negative emotion that are directed to another person in response to an action or a secondary characteristic. On the other hand, hate speech attacks another person – not necessarily directly – on the basis of certain primary characteristics such as skin color, race, nationality,

ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender, social background, or disability.

According to Cervone et al. (2021), hate speech has a special status among the different forms of language discrimination due to the following reasons: (a) it can incite, promote, or justify hatred and violence to larger audiences, (b) it is mainly propagated through social media, (c) it often has a broader scope than derogatory language used in interpersonal discourse, and (d) it relies on a wider range of rhetorical tools and arguments (e.g., by evoking conspiracy theories).

An analysis of demographic variables made by the Centre for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw (Winiewski et al., 2017) identified groups of people that most commonly use hate speech. It is used to a large extent by men, young people, and people with lower levels of education. Offensive rhetoric towards minorities was also found to come from people with right-wing views. This pattern was particularly visible among young people. No significant differences were observed between people living in smaller and larger cities, or between those who were more and less religious.

To identify the mechanism responsible for differences among these groups, it is necessary to look at various sociopsychological factors which may be connected with emotional control and level of self-evaluation, formal belief structure and information processing, and also with views on social order (Obrębska 2020; Obrębska & Dobrowolska, 2021). Negative emotions may also play the role of a priming stimulus for a particular way of thinking about outside groups (Niedenthal et al., 2006). According to Bandura (2007), the direct expression of aggression is most likely when two phenomena occur in parallel: the experiencing of negative emotions (anger, sense of injustice, or anxiety) that cause an inclination towards hostile and aggressive behaviors, and a certain system of beliefs about the social world that weakens the moral and social restraints on expressing that inclination. That system is a belief in a threatening world, an ideological social anxiety, namely, a permanent conviction that the order of the world surrounding the individual is threatened by someone. There is no place in this system for tolerance, since it makes a clear division into the good “us” and the hostile “you.” Therefore, the use of hate speech towards representatives of the outgroup is, within that system, fully justified and morally well-founded (Cervone et al., 2021).

Hate speech has many negative consequences on various levels. At the individual level, it may lead to impairment of psychosocial functioning of the minority members. Leets and Giles (1999) showed that reactions to “harmful speech” are similar to those that occur following traumatic experiences. Hate speech not only does psychological damage to those to whom it is addressed, but it also changes the way in which minority groups are perceived by the rest of society. Previously tolerant persons, on coming into contact with linguistic aggression, may change their attitude to groups subject to discrimination, on the assumption that if the majority views the minority group negatively, then they must be responsible for the disapproval that they encounter to some extent. Fasoli et al. (2015) showed that mere exposure to hate speech increases the propensity for

dehumanization. Alao, after some time, a person ceases to consider hate speech offensive, shocking, or in contravention of social standards. Similar findings come from research on desensitization to images of violence (Allen et al., 2018; Bartholow et al., 2006; Carnagey & Anderson, 2003). These studies show that frequent viewing of scenes of violence causes them to be considered less harmful after some time, and even increases the propensity to commit violence. Similar conclusions were reached by Soral et al. (2018): frequent and repeated exposure to hate speech leads to desensitization to that form of verbal violence, and then to lower evaluation of the victims and keeping of greater distance, which, in consequence, increases group prejudices.

A large role in the propagation of hate speech is played by public figures making statements in the media, particularly politicians (Brown, 2018). Although in a democratic society, debate between political rivals is considered a way of moving towards optimum solutions, in practice, it often transforms into acts of aggression between the disputing parties and fails to lead either to good solutions or to compromises (Skarżyńska, 2020). Bilewicz (2017) stated that actors in the Polish political arena have come to make widespread use of hate and contempt speech since 2015, when the European migration crisis began. Today, eight years after that event, we can fairly state that the level of verbal aggression among our politicians has decidedly increased, apparently to the detriment not only of the groups or persons being attacked, but also of the image of politicians themselves.

The Image of a Politician

According to Wattenberg (1991), we are living in an era of candidate-centered politics. This means that politicians' success is determined primarily by their image: "a particular type of depiction, created for a specific purpose, which by triggering associations can impart additional values to an object, and thus contribute to its emotional reception" (Cwalina & Falkowski, 2005, p. 153).

The reception of an image is affected both by its core features, the most significant ones for its evaluation, and by peripheral features related to the politician's additional activity, lifestyle, and manner of communicating with the public (Cwalina & Falkowski, 2005). The latter category may include, among others, the use of hate and contempt speech, which, unfortunately, is becoming more and more popular as a political tool. Language imbued with aggression is most commonly used as an element of negative electoral campaigns, based on personalized attacks on political opponents. Its use in this context serves primarily to discourage electors from voting for the target of the attacks, to encourage comparisons between the two candidates (I – good, they – bad), and to bring about a polarization of attitudes among the electorate. Interestingly, the effect of hostile statements on electoral preferences does not always accord with the intentions of the person making those statements. Indeed, they may lead to one of three consequences – increased support, reduced support, or no change –

and in relation to each of the candidates, both attacker and attacked. Despite this, contemporary election campaigns clearly demonstrate that political smear tactics, founded on hate and contempt speech, are becoming increasingly popular.

Our study aimed to determine whether social evaluation of a politician's image is affected by the use of hate speech by that person in political discourse on Twitter. As has been shown by research on negative forms of election campaigning (Biernat & Eidelman, 2007; Cwalina & Falkowski, 2005; Paladino et al., 2014), aggressive argumentation is not always positively received. On the other hand, research into desensitization implies that frequent and repeated exposure to hate speech leads to loss of sensitivity to that form of verbal violence (Soral et al., 2018). In the current study, we also included the participants' political views, their level of agreement with the electoral programs of the evaluated politicians, and demographic variables such as gender and age.

We assumed that the evaluations would be more favorable when respondents identified themselves with the politicians' views, even if they used hate speech, and that women and the elderly would be more sensitive to this form of communication since they use it less frequently (Winiewski et al., 2017). We formulated four main research problems:

1. Are there differences on each of the dimensions of the semantic differential in the evaluations of individual politicians before and after their use of hate speech?
2. Does the degree of compatibility of political views between the participants and the politicians differentiate the participants' evaluations of the politicians on the dimensions of the semantic differential before and after their use of hate speech?
3. Are there differences between men and women in their evaluations of politicians on different dimensions of the semantic differential before and after their use of hate speech?
4. Is there a relationship between age and the participants' evaluations of politicians on different dimensions of the semantic differential before and after their use of hate speech?

Method

In the current study, Polish participants gave evaluations of politicians considered by competent judges to be most representative of particular political groupings at the time of study design and data collection – Krzysztof Bosak (right-wing), Radosław Sikorski (center), and Włodzimierz Czarzasty (left-wing) – as well as a fictional politician given the name Jacek Wiśniewski, serving as a control to examine the reliability and credibility of the participants' answers and to detect any attempts to falsify the results. The politicians' images were evaluated using the semantic differential method, developed by Cwalina et al. (2000). It consists of 14 bipolar seven-point scales formed by pairs of opposite adjectives: “qualified–

unqualified,” “cosmopolitan–provincial,”¹ “honest–dishonest,” “believable–unbelievable,” “successful–unsuccessful,” “attractive–unattractive,” “sincere–insincere,” “calm–excitable,” “unaggressive–aggressive,” “strong–weak,” “active–inactive,” “believer–nonbeliever,” “sophisticated–unsophisticated,” and “friendly–unfriendly.”

The study was an experiment and was carried out online (due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic) in April 2021. After giving consent to participate in the study and completing a demographic data form, participants were shown screenshots of the politicians’ real Twitter accounts, with photographs and short descriptions, in the following order: Krzysztof Bosak, Radosław Sikorski, and Włodzimierz Czarzasty. This was followed by a similar display for the fictional account of Jacek Wiśniewski. Below each screenshot was a request to complete the semantic differential (pretest), preceded by two questions. The first asked whether the participants had knowledge of the politician in question – for example, from television, election posters, social media, or another source. The second asked the participants to estimate the level of agreement between their own views and those of the politician shown. In the next step, the respondents viewed a short film on the subject of minor everyday choices that affect a person’s life and replied to control questions concerning its content. This was a distractor, serving to prevent respondents from remembering the answers that they had given at the previous stage.

The respondents were next shown tweets containing hate speech, made by all of the politicians they had evaluated previously, and were asked to complete the semantic differential again (post-test). The tweets were selected by two competent judges from among 35 tweets found online as the most distinctive ones for politicians representing each part of the political spectrum.

The topics of the selected statements varied, but were always consistent with the narrative presented by the political grouping to which the given politician belonged. To maintain balance, two statements concerned public figures and two concerned social groups. In the case of the fictional politician, the subject of the tweet was selected on the basis of the political climate in Poland at the time of study design and data collection, in such a way that people with different views could identify themselves with its contents. The topics of the tweets were as follows: the LGBT community, the Minister of Education and Science Przemysław Czarnek, the Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro, and citizens infected with COVID-19 who had returned to Poland from the United Kingdom in the Christmas holiday period. The tweets are shown in the Appendix.

Emotional marking of the tweets was verified using the Sentemo Clarin-pl tool, an open-access online tool used to process and determine the sentiment of textual data in the Polish language in the form of a polarization distribution of

1 In their study, Cwalina et al. (2000) used the dimension “open to the world–closed to the world”. We agreed that the dimension “cosmopolitan–provincial” would be more accurate for the characterization of contemporary politicians and their attitude to the world.

emotional overtones. We checked both the level of intensity and the quality of expressed emotions. Negative emotions dominated all tweets:

1. Krzysztof Bosak – anger (1), fear (1) and sadness (1);
2. Radosław Sikorski – anger (4), disgust (2) and sadness (1);
3. Włodzimierz Czarzasty – anger (1), disgust (1) and sadness (1);
4. Jacek Wiśniewski – anger (2), disgust (2) and sadness (1).

Emotions of anger and disgust are characteristic of hate speech (Winiewski et al., 2017). Elements of incitement of hate and violence were present in all the tweets (Cervone et al., 2021), which made them good examples of hate speech.

Sikorski's tweet was the most negatively marked (+1, -4), while in the others, hatred was expressed in a less direct way. The similarity of the expressed emotions and the predominance of negative characterization of the analyzed tweets seems important, although in future research, care should be taken to ensure similarity both in terms of the quality as well as intensity of emotions.

Characteristics of the Study Group

A total of 105 Polish nationals took part in the study, including 56 men, 48 women, and one person who did not reply to the question concerning gender. All participants were legally adult, and the oldest was 74 years of age. The modal age was 24, and the mean was just over 36. A majority of subjects (63.8%) were graduates. There were also students (20%) and participants with high school education (14.3%), while the smallest group was those who had completed only junior high school (1.9%).

Of the politicians being evaluated, the most recognized among the respondents were Krzysztof Bosak (94.3%) and Radosław Sikorski (91.4%). Włodzimierz Czarzasty was somewhat less well known (77.1%). As expected, the fictional politician Jacek Wiśniewski was unknown to all participants. When evaluating the convergence of his views with their own, 98% of the participants chose the "hard to say" option. Declared levels of agreement between respondents' views and those of the politicians are given in Table 1.

Krzysztof Bosak had the fewest supporters among the participants ($n = 8$). However, it should be noted that the party he represents has relatively low support in Poland, at below 10%. Thus, it can be assumed the participants supporting his views – relative to the size of the entire group of respondents – reflect the political climate prevailing in Poland.

Results

To illustrate differences in the evaluations of the politicians' image before and after their use of hate speech, semantic profiles were constructed for all the politicians. The semantic profile for the dimensions of Krzysztof Bosak's image

Table 1. *Numbers of Respondents Declaring Particular Levels of Agreement with the Views of the Evaluated Politicians*

		<i>N</i> = 105		
		Supporters	Undecided	Opponents
Krzysztof Bosak	nF	2	10	36
	nM	6	11	39
	nX	-	1	-
	<i>n</i>	8	22	75
	%	8%	21%	71%
Radosław Sikorski	nF	16	24	8
	nM	26	21	9
	nX	-	1	-
	<i>n</i>	42	46	17
	%	40%	44%	16%
Włodzimierz Czarzasty	nF	19	21	8
	nM	16	18	22
	nX	-	1	-
	<i>n</i>	35	40	30
	%	33%	38%	29%

Note. *N* = total number of observations, nF = number of observations in the female group, nM = number of observations in the male group, nX = number of observations in the unknown gender group, *n* = number of observations in a given group.

is presented in Figure 1.

The profile shows that following exposure to his use of hate speech, respondents perceived Krzysztof Bosak more negatively. To test whether the visible differences between the particular dimensions of the semantic differential were statistically significant, a Wilcoxon test was performed. The results are given in Table 2.

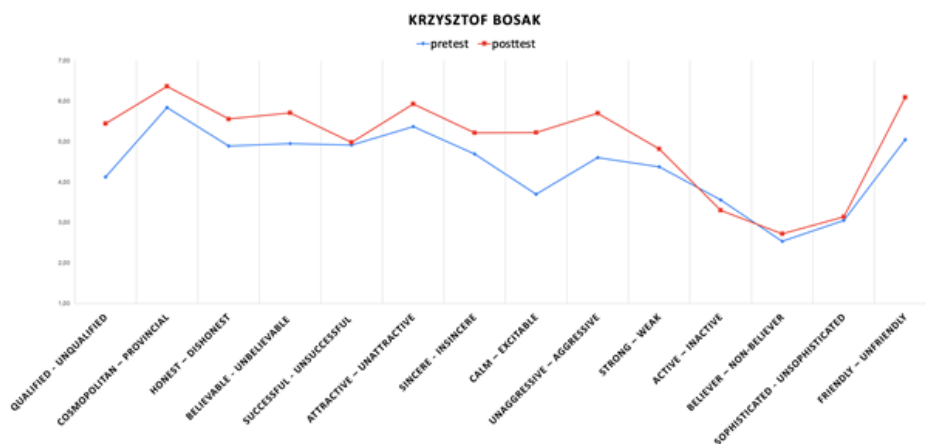
The differences were found to be statistically significant for 10 of the 14 dimensions. After reading the politician's tweet containing hate speech, respondents perceived him as more unqualified, provincial, dishonest, unbelievable, unattractive, insincere, excitable, aggressive, weak, and unfriendly.

The profile of results for Radosław Sikorski is shown in Figure 2. It was again found that the participants' post-test evaluations were more negative on most of the dimensions than their pretest evaluations. The results of the Wilcoxon test are shown in Table 3.

The differences were found to be statistically significant for 9 of 14 dimensions. After reading the tweet by Radosław Sikorski containing hate speech, participants perceived him as more unqualified, provincial, insincere, excitable, aggressive, unsophisticated, and unfriendly, but also – surprisingly – as more active.

Figure 3 shows the results for Włodzimierz Czarzasty. To determine the statistical significance of the differences between the mean results, a Wilcoxon test was performed. The results are given in Table 4.

Statistically significant differences between the evaluations were detected

Figure 1. *Profile of results obtained for dimensions of Krzysztof Bosak's image.*Table 2. *Results of Wilcoxon Test for Dimensions of Krzysztof Bosak's Image*

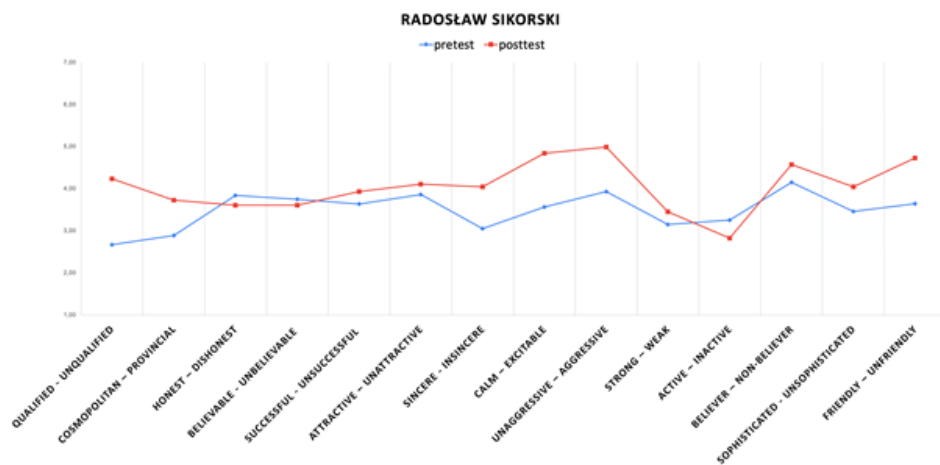
Dimensions of semantic differential	T
qualified – unqualified	–5.839***
cosmopolitan – provincial	–4.303***
honest – dishonest	–4.147***
believable – unbelievable	–4.917***
successful – unsuccessful	–0.774
attractive – unattractive	–3.176**
sincere – insincere	–2.946**
calm – excitable	–6.581***
unaggressive – aggressive	–6.014***
strong – weak	–2.331*
active – inactive	–1.740
believer – nonbeliever	–1.081
sophisticated – unsophisticated	–0.534
friendly – unfriendly	–6.403***

Note. T = result of Wilcoxon test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

for 6 of 14 dimensions. Włodzimierz Czarzasty was evaluated in the post-test as more unqualified, provincial, insincere, excitable, aggressive, and unfriendly compared to the pretest.

Figure 4 shows the profile obtained for the fictional politician Jacek Wiśniewski. The participants' initially neutral attitude changed for the worse in the post-test for most dimensions of the semantic differential. The results of the Wilcoxon test are given in Table 5. Statistically significant differences in evaluations of Jacek Wiśniewski's image were detected in 10 of 14 dimensions.

Figure 2. *Profile of results obtained for dimensions of Radosław Sikorski's image.*Table 3. *Results of Wilcoxon Test for Dimensions of Radosław Sikorski's Image*

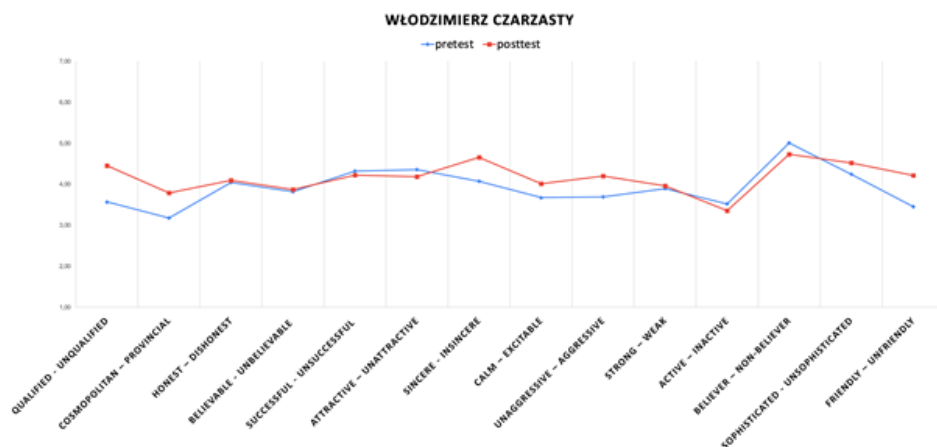
Dimensions of semantic differential	T
qualified – unqualified	–6.354***
cosmopolitan – provincial	–4.184***
honest – dishonest	–1.559
believable – unbelievable	–0.996
successful – unsuccessful	–1.406
attractive – unattractive	–1.816
sincere – insincere	–5.094***
calm – excitable	–6.021***
unaggressive – aggressive	–5.815***
strong – weak	–1.713
active – inactive	–2.778**
believer – nonbeliever	–3.522***
sophisticated – unsophisticated	–3.539***
friendly – unfriendly	–5.811***

Note. *T* = result of Wilcoxon test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

After reading the tweet containing hate speech, participants began to perceive him as more unqualified, provincial, dishonest, unsuccessful, unattractive, insincere, excitable, aggressive, weak, and unfriendly.

The interaction effect between the evaluations of the politicians and the participants' views was also found to be statistically significant. A Kruskal–Wallis test with Dunn's post hoc analysis showed that in the pretest, participants disagreeing Krzysztof Bosak (right-wing) perceived him as more unqualified ($H = 21.05$), provincial ($H = 32.44$), dishonest ($H = 28.78$), unbelievable ($H = 30.51$),

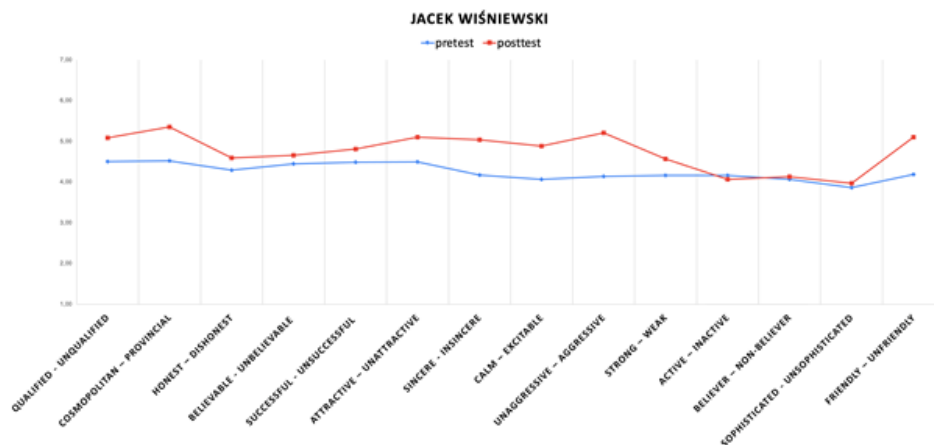
Figure 3. *Profile of Results Obtained for Dimensions of Włodzimierz Czarzasty's Image.*Table 4. *Results of Wilcoxon Test for Dimensions of Włodzimierz Czarzasty's Image.*

Dimensions of semantic differential	T
qualified – unqualified	–4.975***
cosmopolitan – provincial	–3.844***
honest – dishonest	–0.296
believable – unbelievable	–0.518
successful – unsuccessful	–0.560
attractive – unattractive	–0.901
sincere – insincere	–3.855***
calm – excitable	–2.177*
unaggressive – aggressive	–3.261**
strong – weak	–0.531
active – inactive	–0.967
believer – nonbeliever	–1.893
sophisticated – unsophisticated	–1.893
friendly – unfriendly	–4.573***

Note. T = result of Wilcoxon test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

unattractive ($H = 29.21$), insincere ($H = 24.85$), unfriendly ($H = 20.24$), and more aggressive ($H = 9.27$) than did undecided respondents. In turn, in the post-test – after reading Bosak's tweet containing hate speech – his opponents still considered him more provincial ($H = 21.84$), dishonest ($H = 21.61$), and unattractive ($H = 19.01$) than did the remaining respondents. They also found him more aggressive ($H = 8.14$), nonbelieving ($H = 6.06$) and unfriendly ($H = 13.25$) than did the undecided respondents. The evaluations made by Krzysztof Bosak's supporters were not included in the analyses due to insufficient sample size ($N = 8$).

Figure 4. *Profile of Results Obtained for Dimensions of Jacek Wiśniewski's Image.*Table 5. *Results of Wilcoxon Test for Dimensions of Jacek Wiśniewski's Image.*

Dimensions of semantic differential	T
qualified – unqualified	–3.315***
cosmopolitan – provincial	–4.431***
honest – dishonest	–1.980*
believable – unbelievable	–1.332
successful – unsuccessful	–2.393*
attractive – unattractive	–3.828***
sincere – insincere	–4.539***
calm – excitable	–4.639***
unaggressive – aggressive	–5.902***
strong – weak	–2.807**
active – inactive	–0.589
believer – nonbeliever	–0.767
sophisticated – unsophisticated	–0.688
friendly – unfriendly	–5.311***

Note. T = result of Wilcoxon test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Supporters of Radosław Sikorski (center) gave significantly different evaluations from those of his opponents and undecided respondents in 10 dimensions in the pretest: they viewed him as more cosmopolitan ($H = 32.45$), honest ($H = 36.87$), believable ($H = 44.03$), successful ($H = 20.71$), attractive ($H = 29.79$), sincere ($H = 24.83$), calm ($H = 21.28$), strong ($H = 33.17$), active ($H = 17.56$), and friendly ($H = 33.84$). Compared with his opponents, they also regarded him as less aggressive ($H = 6.89$). Compared with undecided respondents, they considered him more qualified ($H = 33.95$). There were also

statistically significant differences in the pretest between the evaluations given by Sikorski's opponents and by undecided respondents: the opponents viewed him as more dishonest ($H = 36.87$) and unbelievable ($H = 44.03$). Following the experimental manipulation, Sikorski's supporters still considered him statistically significantly more honest ($H = 18.53$), believable ($H = 28.82$), and attractive ($H = 19.25$) than did the other respondents. Compared with his opponents, they also considered him more cosmopolitan ($H = 8.14$), sincere ($H = 7.53$), calm ($H = 6.04$), strong ($H = 12.58$), and friendly ($H = 8.4$). There were two dimensions on which Sikorski's opponents gave statistically significantly more negative evaluations than the undecided respondents: believable-unbelievable ($H = 28.82$) and strong-weak ($H = 12.58$).

For Włodzimierz Czarzasty (left-wing), the pretest results showed that his supporters differed statistically significantly in their evaluations from the other respondents on 12 dimensions of the semantic differential. They judged him more positively than did his opponents and the undecided respondents in terms of almost all features, evaluating him as more qualified ($H = 46.79$), cosmopolitan ($H = 50.68$), honest ($H = 64.1$), believable ($H = 57.42$), successful ($H = 39.05$), attractive ($H = 42.45$), sincere ($H = 43.59$), calm ($H = 17.44$), unaggressive ($H = 22.51$), strong ($H = 38.42$), active ($H = 41.85$), and friendly ($H = 53.01$). After the experimental manipulations, similarly, the evaluations of Włodzimierz Czarzasty given by his supporters were statistically significantly different from those of the other respondents on the majority of dimensions. Despite having been shown an instance of his hate speech, Czarzasty's supporters evaluated him as more qualified ($H = 15.88$), cosmopolitan ($H = 27.11$), honest ($H = 27.81$), believable ($H = 22.88$), successful ($H = 17.37$), attractive ($H = 30.99$), calm ($H = 19.44$), unaggressive ($H = 14.49$), strong ($H = 21.73$), active ($H = 20.19$), and friendly ($H = 19.92$) than did his opponents and the undecided participants. No statistically significant differences were observed between the evaluations given by those disagreeing with Czarzasty's political views and those who were undecided.

The results also showed statistically significant differences between women's and men's evaluations of the politicians. In the case of Krzysztof Bosak (right-wing), before the experimental manipulations, women judged him as more successful, stronger, and more active than men did. After the experimental manipulations, men evaluated him as calmer. Detailed results are given in Table 6.

Statistically significant differences between women and men were also found in the case of evaluations of Radosław Sikorski's (center) image. Before the experimental manipulations, men evaluated him statistically significantly more positively than did women on two dimensions, finding him to be more cosmopolitan and more of a believer. After the experimental manipulations, women perceived Sikorski statistically significantly more negatively than men did on almost all the dimensions of the semantic differential. The difference was found to be not statistically significant in the case of only two dimensions, active-inactive and sophisticated-unsophisticated). Detailed results are given in Table 7.

Table 6. Results of Mann–Whitney test for evaluations of Krzysztof Bosak's image among women and men.

	Pretest			Post-test		
	F	M	U	F	M	U
	n = 48	n = 56		n = 48	n = 56	
qualified – unqualified	3.98	4.27	–0.711	5.81	5.11	–1.597
cosmopolitan – provincial	5.81	5.86	–0.394	6.37	6.36	–0.087
honest – dishonest	5.02	4.75	–0.794	5.71	5.41	–0.430
believable – unbelievable	4.90	4.96	–0.379	5.90	5.54	–0.903
successful – unsuccessful	4.54	5.20	–2.086*	5.04	4.89	–0.391
attractive – unattractive	5.31	5.39	–0.388	6.02	5.84	–0.774
sincere – insincere	4.52	4.80	–0.694	5.54	4.91	–1.506
calm – excitable	3.42	3.89	–1.452	5.60	4.88	–2.385*
unaggressive – aggressive	4.33	4.80	–1.413	5.92	5.50	–1.482
strong – weak	3.94	4.71	–2.477*	4.85	4.75	–0.348
active – inactive	3.08	3.91	–2.318*	3.27	3.27	–0.210
believer – nonbeliever	2.21	2.75	–1.871	2.69	2.68	–0.197
sophisticated – unsophisticated	2.94	3.09	–0.388	2.87	3.30	–1.390
friendly – unfriendly	5.06	5.00	–0.171	6.21	5.98	–1.003

Note. n = number of observations in a given group, U = result of Mann–Whitney's test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 7. Results of Mann–Whitney test for evaluations of Radosław Sikorski's image among women and men.

	Pretest			Post-test		
	F	M	U	F	M	U
	n = 48	n = 56		n = 48	n = 56	
qualified – unqualified	2.75	2.54	–0.874	4.94	3.61	–3.379***
cosmopolitan – provincial	3.17	2.59	–2.074*	4.29	3.21	–3.224**
honest – dishonest	4.08	3.59	–1.647	4.19	3.07	–3.354***
believable – unbelievable	3.90	3.57	–1.161	4.06	3.18	–2.704**
successful – unsuccessful	3.79	3.45	–1.412	4.35	3.54	–2.356*
attractive – unattractive	4.08	3.63	–1.531	4.50	3.75	–2.285*
sincere – insincere	2.96	3.09	–0.417	4.65	3.50	–3.070**
calm – excitable	3.65	3.46	–0.640	5.46	4.30	–3.284**
unaggressive – aggressive	3.94	3.89	–0.112	5.50	4.54	–2.816**
strong – weak	3.29	2.98	–0.903	3.85	3.07	–2.090*
active – inactive	3.40	3.09	–0.905	3.00	2.63	–1.401
believer – nonbeliever	4.40	3.91	–2.424*	4.94	4.25	–2.511*
sophisticated – unsophisticated	3.54	3.36	–0.745	4.25	3.84	–1.096
friendly – unfriendly	3.79	3.48	–1.220	5.19	4.32	–2.606**

Note. n = number of observations in a given group, U = result of Mann–Whitney's test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

For Włodzimierz Czarzasty (left-wing), there were no statistically significant differences between women and men's evaluations of him in the pretest. Statistically significant differences occurred only in the post-test,, as women evaluated him as more unqualified, unbelievable, insincere, and weak than did men. Detailed results are given in Table 8.

In the case of the fictional politician, Jacek Wiśniewski, no statistically significant differences were observed between women and men's evaluations prior to the experimental manipulations. However, after the exposure to his tweet containing hate speech, women evaluated Jacek Wiśniewski less favorably than did men on six of the dimensions of the semantic differential: as more unqualified, provincial, unattractive, insincere, excitable, and aggressive. Detailed results are given in Table 9.

To gain an overall picture of the differences between women and men's evaluations of the politicians' images before and after contact with examples of their hate speech, a further analysis was performed using the averaged evaluations of all of the politicians. The results are given in Table 10.

Overall, women and men were generally in agreement in their reception of the politicians. However, this changed following the experimental manipulations, showing that the use of hate speech harmed the politicians' image in women's eyes more than it did in men's. After reading the hateful tweets, women began to perceive the politicians as more unqualified, provincial, dishonest, unbelievable, unsuccessful, unattractive, insincere, excitable, aggressive, weak, and unfriendly than did the male respondents.

Table 8. Results of Mann–Whitney test for evaluations of Włodzimierz Czarzasty's image among women and men.

	Pretest			Post-test		
	F <i>n</i> = 48	M <i>n</i> = 56	<i>U</i>	F <i>n</i> = 48	M <i>n</i> = 56	<i>U</i>
qualified – unqualified	3.65	3.45	–0.910	4.94	4.00	–2.453*
cosmopolitan – provincial	2.96	3.30	–0.932	4.13	3.45	–1.884
honest – dishonest	3.67	4.32	–1.636	4.29	3.88	–1.227
believable – unbelievable	3.52	4.02	–1.440	4.29	3.46	–2.477*
successful – unsuccessful	4.08	4.48	–1.495	4.58	3.88	–1.976*
attractive – unattractive	4.25	4.41	–0.443	4.44	3.93	–1.307
sincere – insincere	4.08	4.02	–0.374	5.10	4.23	–2.366*
calm – excitable	3.69	3.61	–0.405	4.29	3.73	–1.639
unaggressive – aggressive	3.48	3.82	–1.015	4.56	3.84	–2.115*
strong – weak	3.81	3.91	–0.131	4.38	3.55	–2.615**
active – inactive	3.29	3.66	–0.959	3.54	3.14	–1.280
believer – nonbeliever	4.85	5.11	–0.976	4.83	4.61	–0.811
sophisticated – unsophisticated	4.31	4.14	0.000	4.67	4.36	–0.846
friendly – unfriendly	3.29	3.54	–1.089	4.37	4.04	–1.154

Note. *n* = number of observations in a given group, *U* = result of Mann–Whitney's test.

* *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

Table 9. Results of Mann–Whitney test for evaluations of Jacek Wiśniewski's image among women and men.

	Pretest			Post-test		
	F <i>n</i> = 48	M <i>n</i> = 56	<i>U</i>	F <i>n</i> = 48	M <i>n</i> = 56	<i>U</i>
qualified – unqualified	4.69	4.30	–1.822	5.58	4.63	–2.611**
cosmopolitan – provincial	4.58	4.43	–1.216	5.71	5.02	–2.086*
honest – dishonest	4.38	4.18	–1.183	4.69	4.46	–0.787
believable – unbelievable	4.48	4.38	–0.881	4.94	4.38	–1.832
successful – unsuccessful	4.58	4.36	–1.115	4.92	4.68	–0.656
attractive – unattractive	4.58	4.38	–0.914	5.42	4.80	–2.434*
sincere – insincere	4.10	4.18	–0.317	5.40	4.70	–2.085*
calm – excitable	4.02	4.05	–0.561	5.31	4.48	–3.006**
unaggressive – aggressive	4.19	4.05	–0.854	5.48	4.95	–2.068*
strong – weak	4.00	4.25	–1.332	4.81	4.32	–1.937
active – inactive	4.02	4.23	–1.306	4.10	3.98	–0.533
believer – nonbeliever	3.92	4.14	–0.566	4.13	4.09	–0.391
sophisticated – unsophisticated	3.69	3.96	–1.850	4.06	3.84	–0.476
friendly – unfriendly	4.17	4.16	–0.176	5.40	4.82	–2.415

Note. *n* = number of observations in a given group, *U* = result of Mann–Whitney's test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 10. Results of Mann–Whitney test for groups of women and men.

	Pretest			Post-test		
	F <i>n</i> = 48	M <i>n</i> = 56	<i>U</i>	F <i>n</i> = 48	M <i>n</i> = 56	<i>U</i>
qualified – unqualified	3.77	3.64	–1.240	5.32	4.33	–3.905***
cosmopolitan – provincial	4.13	4.04	–0.938	5.13	4.51	–3.089**
honest – dishonest	4.29	4.21	–0.357	4.72	4.21	–2.540*
believable – unbelievable	4.20	4.23	–0.384	4.80	4.14	–3.035**
successful – unsuccessful	4.25	4.37	–0.728	4.72	4.25	–2.001*
attractive – unattractive	4.56	4.45	–0.554	5.09	4.58	–2.464*
sincere – insincere	3.92	4.02	–0.098	5.17	4.33	–3.802***
calm – excitable	3.69	3.75	–0.431	5.17	4.35	–4.134***
unaggressive – aggressive	3.98	4.14	–1.307	5.36	4.71	–3.132**
strong – weak	3.76	3.96	–1.190	4.47	3.92	–2.199*
active – inactive	3.45	3.72	–1.865	3.48	3.25	–0.828
believer – nonbeliever	3.84	3.98	–1.190	4.15	3.91	–1.329
sophisticated – unsophisticated	3.62	3.64	–0.293	3.96	3.83	–0.066
friendly – unfriendly	4.08	4.04	–0.161	5.29	4.79	–2.577*

Note. *n* = number of observations in a given group, *U* = result of Mann–Whitney's test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 11. *Results for correlation between age and dimensions of the semantic differential.*

	Pretest		Post-test	
	r_s	p	r_s	p
qualified – unqualified	–0.073	.462	–0.432***	< .001
cosmopolitan – provincial	–0.133	.175	–0.213*	.029
honest – dishonest	–0.061	.538	–0.180	.066
believable – unbelievable	0.049	.617	–0.194*	.047
successful – unsuccessful	0.074	.455	–0.104	.291
attractive – unattractive	–0.150	.126	–0.244*	.012
sincere – insincere	0.056	.571	–0.340***	< .001
calm – excitable	0.131	.182	–0.205*	.036
unaggressive – aggressive	0.149	.128	–0.197*	.044
strong – weak	0.083	.399	–0.157	.109
active – inactive	0.112	.254	0.088	.370
believer – nonbeliever	0.366***	< .001	0.208*	.033
sophisticated – unsophisticated	0.167	.088	0.204*	.037
friendly – unfriendly	0.022	.825	–0.179	.068

Note. n = number of observations, r_s = Spearman's correlation coefficient

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The final hypothesis concerned the relationship of participant age with their evaluations of the politicians. The correlations are shown in Table 11.

At the pretest stage, there was a weak positive correlation between age and the dimension of describing the politicians as believers or nonbelievers: the higher the participants' age, the more likely they were to judge the evaluated politicians as nonbelievers. On the other hand, after exposure to the hate speech, the younger the participants, the more unqualified, provincial, unbelievable, insincere, and excitable they judged the politicians to be. In turn, also after exposure to the hate speech, the older the participants, the more they perceived the politicians to be nonbelievers or to be unsophisticated.

Discussion

The results of the current study show clearly that hate speech has an impact on the image of those who use it. As a consequence of the experimental manipulation, all of the politicians whose profiles were presented for evaluation were judged more negatively. The negative evaluations concerned the politicians' competences politicians (unqualified and provincial), their emotionality (excitable and aggressive), and their attitude towards other people (insincere and unfriendly). It can be assumed that these are areas subject to particular social criticism in the case of people who use hateful language. The dimensions of "believer–nonbeliever" and "sophisticated–unsophisticated" proved to be the least important, showing a weak influence of hate speech on the perceived level

of faith of a given politician and the complexity of their image.

However, in general, the results demonstrate the negative effects that using hate speech can have on a person's image, as well as public sensitivity to that type of communication. These results are optimistic, especially in the context of research on the phenomenon of desensitization to hate speech (Soral et al., 2018) or broken windows theory (Welsh et al., 2015), which show a decrease in sensitivity to this form of violence, and even a tendency to escalate and normalize it in a situation of frequent contact with it. In our study, the participants were not only exposed to hate speech, but also had to evaluate the person who used it. Perhaps, in accordance with the literature on the subject (Rezayi et al., 2020), the requirement to perform a moral judgment was a factor that sensitized them to linguistic violence. Testing this hypothesis would require further research in this area.

It was also confirmed that participants who agreed with a given politician usually perceived them better than did their opponents and undecided participants, even when the politician used hateful language. That assumption was confirmed for three features that are important for the evaluation of any politician: honesty, believability, and attractiveness. Only in the case of Krzysztof Bosak (right-wing) was a similar pattern not observed. There may be two reasons for this. First, the group of Bosak's supporters was the least numerous among all of the groups being compared. Second, it did not include any participants declaring full agreement with his extreme right-wing views.

The analyses also showed interesting differences between women and men. In the pretest, women evaluated the politicians' displayed profiles similarly as did men, but following exposure to their hateful statements, women's evaluations became more negative. They perceived the politicians as more unqualified, provincial, dishonest, unbelievable, unsuccessful, unattractive, insincere, excitable, aggressive, weak, and unfriendly. This result indicates that women are more sensitive to hate speech and that such communication has a stronger impact on their political choices. This is in agreement with other studies (Winiewski et al., 2017) confirming that hate speech is more often used by men, who, for that reason, are less sensitive to it.

The final analyses concerned the possible existence of a relationship between age and responses to hate speech. The results were not as expected, as young respondents reacted more strongly to the politicians' statements than did older respondents, giving more negative evaluations in the post-test. A probable reason for this seems to be that younger participants had less well-established opinions concerning the presented politicians, and their views were thus more susceptible to the effect of the experimental manipulation. Moreover, the older respondents may have become accustomed in the course of their lives to the contemptuous and insulting language that accompanies political debate.

Certainly, the current study has a number of limitations. The sample was small, the tweets used differed in the level of sentiment, and the order of presentation was not rotated. However, the results encourage further research

in this area. It would be interesting and important, from a political marketing point of view, to examine whether the changes in evaluations of politicians that occur as a result of their hateful communication have a tendency to persist over time. It would also be interesting to make more detailed comparisons between the images of politicians representing different political options and to analyze more complex interaction effects between variables. It would also be profitable to analyze participants' reactions to hate speech that appears more and more often in other media, such as television, radio, and the press. It will be difficult to halt the escalation of hate without demonstrating the negative consequences that it has, not only for the victims of the aggression, but also for the aggressors themselves.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

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Research Ethics Statement

The survey was conducted online. All subjects were informed of the purpose of the study and gave informed consent to participate. The subjects were adults, from the general population.

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Appendix

Politicians' tweets used in the post-test.

