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Hate Speech in Poland. Content Analysis and Case Study

The aim of our study was to analyse utterances about important groups and social phenomena in Poland in terms of the themes identified by Winiewski et al. (2017) as characteristic of hate speech. The face-to-face study involved 200 people (98 women and 102 men) who described seven selected photographs. Their utterances ($N = 1400$) were analysed using the method of competent judges. Although the content of hateful speech found in the study was low (56 cases), of the seven social groups that were described by the subjects, two appear to arouse more negative emotions and encourage a greater loss of restraint: people with obesity and Catholic clergy. In future research, it would be useful to pay particular attention to these two social groups in the context of their negative evaluation and its psychological determinants.

Key words: case study, content analysis, hate speech

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Contemporary social discourse promotes a negative image of reality, and the utterances of public figures normalise and legitimise the use of language marked with negative emotions. Writers refer in this context to “hateful narratives” (Jakubowska-Branicka, 2020), the “rhetoric of hate” (Głowiński, 2007), and even an “epidemic of hate” (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020), which is exacerbated by the general accessibility and anonymity of digital communication (Brown, 2018; Madriaza et al., 2025). Hateful language propagates a hateful image of the world, a consequence of which may be the exclusion of members of a group subject to discrimination from the domain of basic social norms, setting in motion a mechanism of dehumanisation and negative emotions, and legitimising violence and the establishment of a social hierarchy (Cervone et al., 2021).

Despite such important social consequences, precisely categorising a given utterance as hate speech is not straightforward. It is often difficult to recognise a given utterance as hateful because its hostility is not always expressed explicitly. Sometimes, it takes the form of sentences seemingly expressing goodwill but forcefully marking differences between the cultures or groups concerned. The appearing to be neutral sentence ‘We all know that Jews control the world economy’ is actually an expression of the belief in a Jewish conspiracy that exists in our culture, which is the most widespread form of antisemitism in Poland (Stefaniak et al., 2015). Furthermore, as Linde-Usiekniewicz (2019) notes, ‘hate speech’ is a prelocutionary activity (in the Austinian sense), so it can take very different linguistic forms. This means there is no closed catalogue of expressions whose presence in an utterance would allow us to unequivocally state that we are dealing with contempt and hate language. Determining which specific messages we can include in the definitional framework of the phenomenon described is, therefore, not straightforward (Guillén-Nieto, 2023).

With our article, we would like to contribute to the discussion on the definitional framework of hate speech by analysing the dominant themes according to the taxonomy of Winiewski et al. (2017) and by presenting a case study with typical examples of speech that was considered hateful by competent judges. The aim of the analyses was also to identify social groups that are the subject of hate speech in Polish society. We also wanted to check which content categories of hate speech would prove particularly relevant and what their specific characteristics would be in relation to different social groups.

Contempt and Hate Speech

In the domain of psychology, the concept of hate is understood through diverse theoretical frameworks. It has been conceptualised as a complex emotion, an internal disposition, or a lasting social attitude (see: literature review by Gawda, 2024). The term is most often defined as a persistent and pro-

foundly negative perception of another person, who is regarded as deserving of harm, destruction, or suffering. The structure of hate is composed of two components: affective and cognitive, relating to the negative evaluation (Gawda, 2024). The distinguishing features of hate from other emotions in the anger spectrum are higher emotional arousal, perception of personal threat, and the presence of attack-oriented behaviours. These findings are in line with a general pattern of increasing differentiation suggesting that hate is conceptually closer to disgust and contempt than to anger and dislike (Martínez et al., 2022).

Hate speech, an extreme form of derogatory language, is defined as verbal violence against minority groups (Cervone et al., 2021). As Martínez et al.'s (2022) research indicates, its emotional basis is contempt, which triggers anger and disgust; hence, it would appear justified to refer to “contempt and hate speech” as a spreading social phenomenon that leads, in effect, to a worsening of attitudes towards minorities (Winiewski et al., 2017).

Hate speech is not synonymous with verbal aggression, which refers to utterances imbued with any negative emotion, addressed to another person in response to an action performed or a secondary trait. Hate speech means utterances that attack another person – not necessarily directly – on account of certain primary traits, such as skin colour, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender, social background, or disability (Szczepaniak-Kozak & Lankiewicz, 2017).

The use of hate speech carries many negative consequences at various levels. At the individual level, it may lead to significant impairment of the psychosocial functioning of those belonging to a minority. Leets and Giles (1999) report that reactions to “harmful speech” are similar to those that occur after traumatic experiences. Hate speech not only causes a negative impact on the psychological well-being of its addressees but also changes how minority groups are perceived by the rest of society. Through exposure to linguistic aggression, previously tolerant people may change their attitude to the groups that suffer discrimination, assuming that if those groups are evaluated in that way by a majority, then they must be, in some way, responsible for the disapproval they arouse. Research by Fasoli et al. (2015) shows that mere exposure to hate speech can increase a person's tendency towards dehumanisation and can also cause them, after a certain time, to stop regarding it as offensive, shocking, or in violation of social standards. Similar conclusions can be drawn from research on desensitisation to violent images (Allen et al., 2018; Bartholow et al., 2006; Carnagey & Anderson, 2003). These studies have shown that people who frequently see scenes of violence come after a certain time to regard them as less harmful and may even become more inclined to use violence themselves. Similar findings were reported in a study by Soral et al. (2018): frequent and repeated exposure to hate speech leads to desensitisation to that form of verbal violence and subsequently to lowered

evaluation of the victims and a sense of greater distance, which in turn increases group prejudice.

An analysis of demographic variables carried out by the Centre of Prejudice Research at the University of Warsaw (Winiewski et al., 2017) identified the groups of people that most frequently use hate speech. It is used largely by men, young people, and people with a low level of education. The use of offensive rhetoric against minorities was also more frequently a characteristic of people with right-wing sympathies; this was particularly noticeable in the case of young people. No significant differences were observed between residents of larger and smaller towns, and the degree of religiousness was also an insignificant factor.

To identify the mechanism responsible for the differences among these groups, it is necessary to consider a variety of sociopsychological factors, which may be linked to emotional control and level of self-esteem, a person's formal belief structure and way of processing information, as well as variables referring to a person's opinions on the subject of social order (Cervone et al., 2021). In the view of Bandura (2007), it is most likely that aggression will be directly expressed when two phenomena appear in parallel: the experiencing of negative emotions (anger, sense of injustice, anxiety) that generate a tendency towards hostile and aggressive behaviours, and a certain system of beliefs about the social world that weakens moral and social restraints on the expression of that tendency. This system is a belief in a "threatening world", an ideological social anxiety – that is, the permanent conviction that the world order surrounding the person in question is under threat from someone.

A survey of the literature on psychological determinants of hate speech (Cervone et al., 2021; Gawda, 2024; Obrębska, 2020; Walters et al., 2016) justifies a multidimensional model, containing variables relating to motivation (self-esteem and emotional control), cognitive factors (need for cognitive closure, level of dogmatism, locus of control) and social factors (level of tolerance, social dominance orientation, views on the social world). Great importance also attaches to the social context, particularly a situation of threat triggering negative emotions (primarily anxiety) that intensify stereotyping and a tendency to favour "one's own" (Kossowska et al., 2018).

The multidimensionality of the construct of contempt and hate speech is also reflected in thematic analyses, which reveal the diverse content that makes up this concept. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In our analyses, we refer to a study by Winiewski et al. (2017), who used the concept mapping method to identify dominant themes in hate speech across eleven social groups. We would like to see if these themes can be applied to other social groups (e.g., people with obesity) and which of them are particularly relevant for characterising hate speech.

The Present Research

Method

Participants

The study group consisted of 200 persons: 98 women and 102 men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 78 years ($M = 37.28$, $SD = 14.91$). Three persons declared that they had completed only primary education, 106 were students or had completed high school education, and 91 were college graduates.

Materials

The method was to select six photographs depicting various social groups in the context of current social phenomena from different ideological perspectives. Research suggests (see: Jost et al., 2009) that ideological self-placement is strongly predictive of intergroup attitudes. More specifically, conservative and right-wing orientations are generally associated with stereotyping, prejudice, intolerance, and hostility toward a wide variety of outgroups, especially low-status or stigmatized outgroups. A review of the literature on hate speech (e.g. Winiewski et al., 2017) suggests that it has mainly been studied in relation to phenomena that trigger aversion in people with conservative ideological orientation (e.g., attitudes towards minorities), hence the strong correlation with these views in the studies. Conservatives exhibit heightened needs to avoid ambiguity, novelty, uncertainty, and complexity and to achieve order, structure, and closure, and this (in conjunction with a relative acceptance of inequality) may help to explain why stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes are more appealing to them than they are to liberals (Jost et al., 2009).

In our study, we also wanted to take into account intergroup social phenomena that could prompt hate speech among left-wing individuals, such as attitudes toward Catholic priests or opponents of abortion, as well as ideologically neutral phenomena. The list of social phenomena was compiled based on literature (e.g. Carney et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2009; Wojciszke, 2013). The photographs for the study were selected from a pool of 149 photographs by 15 competent judges, who were fourth- and fifth-year students of psychology at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. The criteria for the selection of a photograph were its representativeness for a particular world-view group (for liberals, for conservatives, and politically neutral), richness of content, and low level of drasticity. Six photographs were selected, two for each category, in accordance with the ranking list. For particular groups of views, the pictures depicted, for conservatives: (a) a black marathon runner holding the Polish national flag and (b) a pride parade; for liberals: (c) a bishop standing in a sport car, blessing believers and (d) an anti-abortion march; for politically neutral views: (e) a ferret farm and (f) people with obesity at a swimming pool. In view of the emerging pandemic, an additional seventh photograph was included in the set, showing a person of Asian origin wearing a face mask and coughing.

After describing the photographs, the subjects completed questionnaires for the following: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scale, Webster and Kruglanski's Need for Closure Scale, the Wojciszke Political Beliefs Questionnaire, the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale, the CECS Emotional Control Scale, Rokeach's D Scale, Drwal's Delta Scale for Locus of Control, the State and Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), and the ISM Intolerance Scale. The results of quantitative analysis from questionnaire methods have been published in another article (Obrębska et al., in press).

A qualitative analysis of the collected utterances was carried out with the assistance of three competent judges, who were persons educated in psychology. The utterances were analysed for the presence of contempt and hate speech according to the categories distinguished by Winiewski et al. (2017). The proposed categories of contempt and hate speech include: (a) Lack of intelligence, savagery – utterances that dehumanise members of a given social group and impute lower intelligence to them; (b) Revulsion – utterances related to a feeling of disgust; (c) Deviation from norm – underlining the different nature of members of the group and their divergence from a norm; (d) Historical foundations of hate – utterances referring to historical conflicts between a given social group and Polish citizens; (e) Justification of hate speech – utterances related to the belief that the words spoken are not hate speech, but are a justified opinion about the group in question; (f) Criminality – references to assumed breaches of the law and social norms by members of the group; (g) Active aggression – calls for the elimination of members of a group (often alluding to the use of physical aggression) and highlighting of the use of violence by representatives of particular groups.

The competent judges were provided with training, during which they learned the definition of hate speech, became familiar with Winiewski's categories, and evaluated sample statements (which varied in content and severity of hate speech). The dubious points were discussed thoroughly during each training session. The outcome of the training sessions was satisfying, and the instructors acknowledged the judges' readiness for further work.

Procedure

The study was carried out in the form of face-to-face interviews between March 2020 and March 2023 by 30 fourth- and fifth-year students of psychology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland (study time was prolonged by the Covid-19 pandemic). Direct contact with the subjects made it possible to investigate spontaneous speech (previous studies had focused mainly on the analysis of speech samples found online or self-report measures, e.g., Solovev & Pröllochs, 2022; Soral et al., 2018) in the context of psychosocial determinants and linguistic indicators. The study was conducted in direct contact in order to standardize the research conditions. It took place in a separate, soundproofed, and well-lit room, without the participation of third parties or disruptive factors. Our prior research (Obrębska & Kleka, 2016; Obrębska et al., 2022) also showed

that subjects generated much longer and more complex utterances in the presence of a second person (particularly when that person was a woman) than when they performed a verbal task alone. Direct contact with the study subjects, therefore, provided the opportunity to obtain more representative and developed linguistic material.

Utterances about the social world were studied by analysing descriptions of photographs relating to current social topics, and psychological determinants of hate speech were examined using selected questionnaire-based methods. Each respondent described all seven photos. The photographs were presented in a fixed order before the questionnaire part since their description required greater concentration on the part of the subjects. The last photograph shown was one that, in the opinion of competent judges, would trigger the most positive emotions to leave the subject in a good mood. The topic of the study was under the procedure of masking, and the participants were not informed that the research focused on hate speech. Instead, they were given the information that “the purpose of the study is to analyse the attitudes of various people about the phenomena of the modern world.” Respondents answered three short questions: (a) What do you see in the picture? (b) What is your attitude towards the phenomenon presented? (c) What emotions does it evoke in you? Subjects’ utterances were recorded using a voice recorder (for which the subject had previously given informed consent), and were then transcribed and subjected to linguistic analysis. Subjects received a reward for their participation in the research in the form of a 25-zloty voucher that could be spent at the popular store chain. All utterances were transcribed and subjected to content analysis by three trained competent judges: a PhD student and fifth-year psychology students. The topic was qualified for analysis if it was indicated by at least two judges. The coefficient of concordance of competent judges, calculated using Fleiss's Kappa, showed moderate agreement: $\kappa = 0,45$.

The photographs and the whole of the study procedure received a positive recommendation from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland.

Results

Analysis of Content

In the study, 1400 statements were analysed. The most frequently occurring category of hate speech was revulsion. The other hateful utterances can be assigned to the following categories: (a) deviation from norm; (b) lack of intelligence, savagery; (c) active aggression; (d) justification of hate speech; and (e) criminality. Detailed results are given in Table 1.

The greatest numbers of hateful utterances were found to be directed at people with obesity (15 utterances) and Catholic clergy (13 utterances). All of the negative comments concerning people with obesity were assigned to the category of revulsion. The content of the statements referred mainly to the appearance of a

Table 1*Distribution of Categories of Hate Speech According to Winiewski et al. (2017)*

Winiewski's category name	Representation of category in the study	Social groups to which the utterance referred (number of utterances)
1) Lack of intelligence, savagery	6 utterances	opponents of abortion (4), fur industry workers (2)
2) Revulsion	27 utterances	people with obesity (15), Catholic clergy (8), fur industry workers (1) LGBT+ community (3)
3) Deviation from norm	12 utterances	black people (7) LGBT+ community (4) fur industry workers (1)
4) Historical foundations of hate	-	-
5) Justification of hate speech	3 utterance	person of Asian origin (2), fur industry workers (1)
6) Criminality	2 utterances	Catholic clergy (2)
7) Active aggression	6 utterances	Catholic clergy (3), person of Asian origin (2), LGBT+ community (1)

person in the photograph; there were also some objectifying (e.g., “iceberg”) and animalising (e.g., “whale”) comparisons, for example:

AW04 (M, 24)¹: *Oh, wonderful. Here we can obviously see a unicorn that (.) is carrying some kind of whale, I don't know by what miracle (.) the unicorn hasn't drowned yet, although it's a really disgusting picture, because the unicorn should have some pretty lady or child sitting on it (.) and not a woman that looks like the iceberg that sank the Titanic*².

The categories ascribed to hateful utterances concerning the Catholic clergy were revulsion (8), criminality (2), and active aggression (3). Subjects emphasised their feeling of revulsion in relation to the abuse of the power and privileges enjoyed by members of the clergy. However, there also occurred negative labels (e.g., “bootlickers”) about the crowd (presumably the believers) surrounding the clergyman:

KR01 (W, 54): *Well, this photo sparks very negative connotations. Some bishop surrounded by hordes of his bootlickers who are cheering him. He's repulsive, and they are so meek. Yuck*³.

The comments also contain accusations relating to beliefs about priests' involvement in paedophile acts or financial embezzlement, which classified the utterance as an example of criminality category:

KR05 (W, 45): *Ha! Hmm || great car, and a priest as well, I envy him. Ugh || negative emotions, because they should be helping the poor rather than cruising around in such expensive cars. Certainly a paedophile as well, it shows on his face. Definitely a no*⁴.

Utterances concerning persons taking part in the anti-abortion march belonged to the “lack of intelligence, savagery” category. They referred to beliefs that were, in the opinion of the respondents, outdated and therefore showed the lack of intelligence of the people in the picture. Although, there was only a small number of such utterances (four hateful comments):

1 Gender and age.

2 O. Cudownie. Tutaj widać ewidentnie jednoroźca, który (.) wiezie jakiegoś walenia no nie wiem jakim cudem (.) jednorożec jeszcze nie zatonął, aczkolwiek jest to bardzo obleśny obrazek, bo w tym jednorożu powinna siedzieć jakaś ładna pani albo jakieś dziecko (.) a nie zalegać kobita, która wygląda jak góra lodowa, która zatopiła Titanica.

3 No, bardzo negatywne konotacje to zdjęcie wywołuje. Jakiś biskup otoczony przez zgraje swoich przydupasów, którzy mu biją brawo. On jest obleśny a oni tacy jacyś pokorni. Fuj.

4 Ha! Hm || super auto, do tego ksiądz, zazdroszczę mu. Yy || negatywne emocje, dlatego, że oni powinni raczej pomagać biednym, niż rozbijać się takimi drogimi autami. Do tego to na pewno pedofil, to widać po twarzy. Całkowicie na nie.

KRR03 (M, 39): *You can see that this is a march by a pro-life organisation. || This is also total backwardness, just medieval. Oh, all of those, oh, banners saying "stop gender" or "sex education equals moral corruption", they're just, well, backward*⁵.

Utterances containing attempted justification for hate speech were found in the views expressed about people working on fur farms. Subjects excused the use of violence towards people who mistreat animals:

MJ01 (M, 24) *Oh no! But what for? I'll put it another way. Absolutely, what I see on the picture, no || this is something I don't want to see, that shouldn't happen, ugh || well I would shoot at the people who do that, can we move on please? Yes. I don't want to look at that picture at all*⁶.

Towards the LGBT+ community, four statements were assigned as deviation from the norm and one more as active aggression. The deviation from the norm sentence emphasized the harmfulness of exposing children to equality parade and abnormality of raising children by same-gender couples:

MOO02 (W, 61) *Oh, a gay couple at the march. Even worse, they have children with them. I wonder how they explain to those kids that there are two dads? It's all abnormal*⁷.

One utterance representing hate speech against LGBT+ people was assigned to the category of revulsion because of the label used and the reference to homosexual persons' "flaunting" their orientation:

KR05 (W, 45): *A demonstration, flags, a rainbow, LGTB. Children, two poofs, homosexuals, I'm sorry – with children. I'm against LGTB, I'm against flaunting homosexual relationships, and they absolutely should not have children*⁸.

The category "deviation from the norm" was observed seven times in the utterances concerning a black Polish sportsman. Subjects emphasised how his skin

5 Widać, że to jest jakiś marsz organizacji pro-life. || To jest też totalne zacofanie, wręcz średniowiecze. E, wszystkie te, e, transparenty "stop gender" czy "seksedukacja równa się deprawacja", to po prostu, no zacofanie.

6 O nie! A czemu? Znaczy inaczej. Absolutnie to co widzę na zdjęciu nie || to jest coś czego nie chcę widzieć, co nie powinno mieć miejsca, eeee || no strzelałbym do tych ludzi, którzy to praktykują, czy możemy iść dalej, proszę? No. Nie chcę patrzeć na to zdjęcie w ogóle.

7 Ach, gejowska para na manifie. Z dziećmi, co gorsza. Ciekawe jak tłumaczą dzieciom, że jest dwóch tatusiów? Nienormalne wszystko.

8 Manifestacja, flagi, tęcza, LGTB. Dzieci, dwóch pedałów, homoseksualistów przepraszam – z dziećmi. Jestem przeciw LGTB, jestem przeciwko emanowaniu związkami homoseksualnymi i absolutnie nie powinni mieć dzieci.

colour made him different and treated him as a member of an outside group:

KR05 (W, 45): *Ooh || a sportsman, negro, a Pole – in origin, no doubt. A white and red flag, ah! Even the word “Poland” on the shirt. Negative emotions, why is he wearing a “Poland” shirt and holding a white and red flag, if Poles are white and he’s black. I don’t like it⁹.*

MOO01 (M, 56): *Now this: I know I can’t say “Negro¹⁰,” because it’s not politically correct. But normally I would say: “A Negro with a Polish flag.” And everyone would immediately understand. You don’t have to say “Black,” “African American,” just “Negro,” and that’s it. But I know this is a study, so I’m saying: “a Black competitor with a Polish flag.” And that’s inconsistent, because Poles are not Black. And the photo is inconsistent, untrue, because there are no Poles like that. The end¹¹.*

Regarding people of Asian origin, single utterances were noted in the categories: Justification of hate speech and Active aggression. The following statement is classified into both categories:

MOO03 (M, 62): *Again a pandemic! I’ve had enough of this topic! A Chinese woman is crying because it started with them. She feels guilty. Or maybe she’s sick. She’s young, with long dark hair, wearing a mask, a blue sweatshirt, a mask, and there are blurred cars in the background. I don’t feel sorry for her at all. If they had kept the virus under control, nobody would have gotten sick. And now she has to deal with it¹².*

Considering the number of utterances (1400), contempt and hate speech occurred relatively infrequently (56 cases). Most of the utterances were neutral in terms of the attitudes expressed and presented mainly an external description of the figures, situation, or surroundings.

9 Uu || sportowiec, murzyn, Polak – widać z pochodzenia. Flaga bialo-czerwona, aaa! Nawet napis na koszulce „Polska”. Negatywne emocje, dlaczego on jest w koszulce „Polska” i dlaczego trzyma flagę bialo-czerwoną, jeśli Polacy są biali a on jest czarny. Nie podoba mi się.

10 Pejorative name for a Black person in Polish – “Murzyn” (Rada Języka Polskiego, 2020).

11 Wiem, że nie mogę powiedzieć, że jest to Murzyn, bo nie jest to poprawne politycznie. Ale normalnie powiedziałbym: Murzyn z polską flagą. I od razu wszystko wiadomo. Nie trzeba mówić: czarnoskóry, Afroamerykanin, Murzyn i już. Ale wiem, że jest to badanie i mówię: czarnoskóry zawodnik z polską flagą. I jest to niespójność, bo Polacy nie są czarnoskórzy. I to zdjęcie jest niespójne, nieprawdziwe, bo nie ma takich Polaków jak ten. Koniec.

12 Znowu pandemia! Mam już dość tego tematu! Chinka płacze, bo to od nich się zaczęło. Ma wyrzuty sumienia. A może jest chora. Młoda, długie ciemne włosy, maseczka, niebieska bluza, maseczka, z tyłu rozmyte samochody. Wcale mi jej nie jest żal. Pilnowaliby wirusa, nikt by nie zachorował. A tak to ma.

Case Analysis

In the course of the analysis, our attention was drawn particularly to one of the subjects, in whose case, both the content of the utterances and the intensity of specific characteristics appeared to be interesting in the context of the topic being analysed.

This respondent is a 54-year-old man, displaying a high level of characteristics that in the literature are often linked to the use of contempt and hate speech. This participant obtained high scores, deviating significantly from those of the other subjects, on the following scales: (a) social dominance orientation (70 points, compared with a mean for the whole group of 37.27); (b) political beliefs (strongly right-wing – 89 points, group mean = 44.69); (c) right-wing authoritarianism (79 points, group mean = 45.96); (d) dogmatism (81 points, group mean = 63.59); (e) intolerance (34 points, group mean = 7.70); and (f) a low score on the scale for control of anger (7 points, group mean = 16.34), which may imply some lack of restraint in the expression of that emotion. These results are illustrated in Figure 1.

This study participant was observed to use deprecating language towards three groups: black people, fur industry workers, and people with obesity. Fragments of his utterances are given below for purposes of illustration:

Oh, a gap-toothed Negro with a Polish flag, in a Polish shirt. The colours are sharper somehow. I don't know where he got hold of the glasses. Terribly thin, probably some Somalian. Well all right, let him have it, go ahead. Our little Negro¹³ with a Polish flag¹⁴.

The utterance concerning the black sportsman presents a contemptuous attitude (for example, “Well all right, let him have it, go ahead”) and devaluing infantilisation (“Our little Negro with a Polish flag”).

A similar approach can be seen in a photo presenting people with obesity:

(...) So, a woman is lying on a little horse, well, may God give her health, let her get some rest. After all, it's not a fashion show, just a pool, so everyone can ride around as much as they want. But this thing is lardy, more and more fatties actually. Ha! (...) ¹⁵

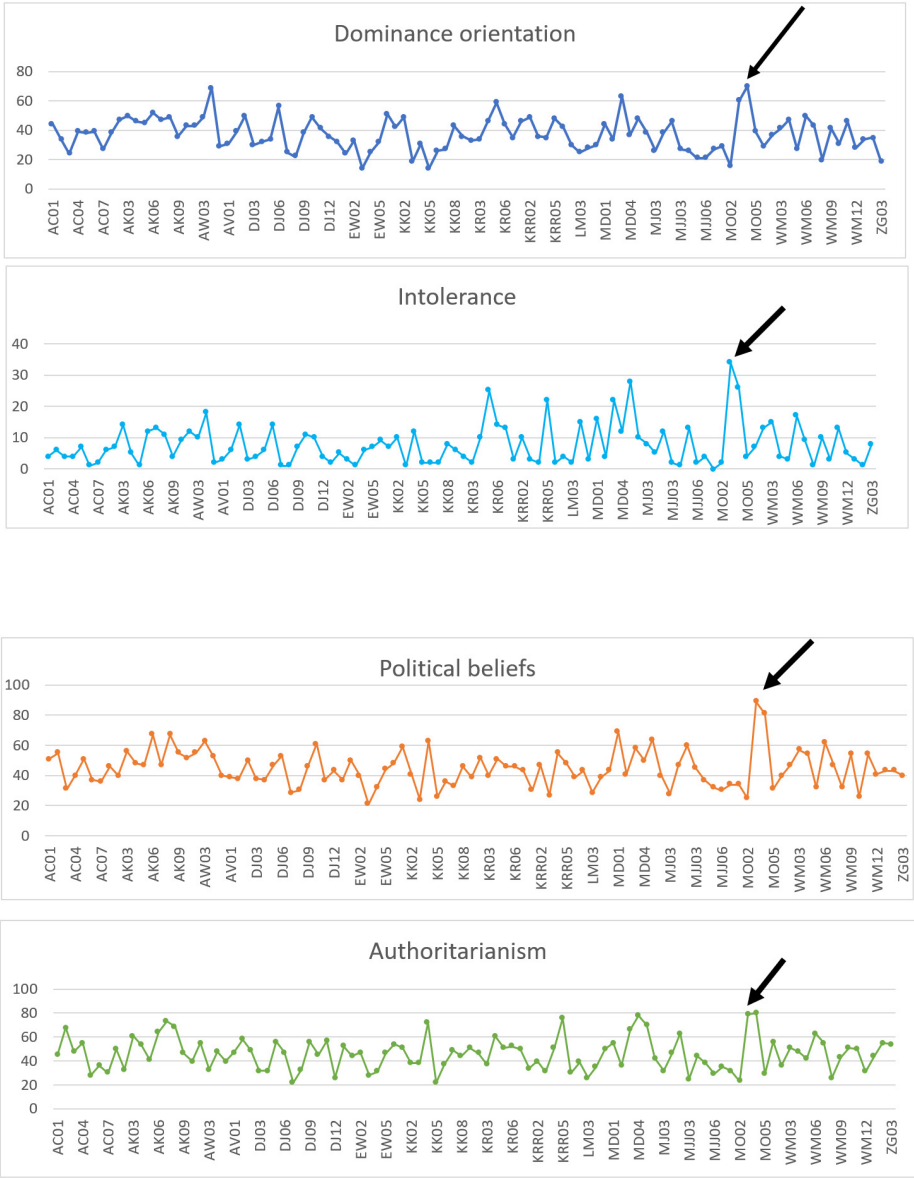
The first sentence suggests a contemptuous attitude by expressing false concern

13 Pejorative diminutive for a Black person in Polish (Rada Języka Polskiego, 2020).

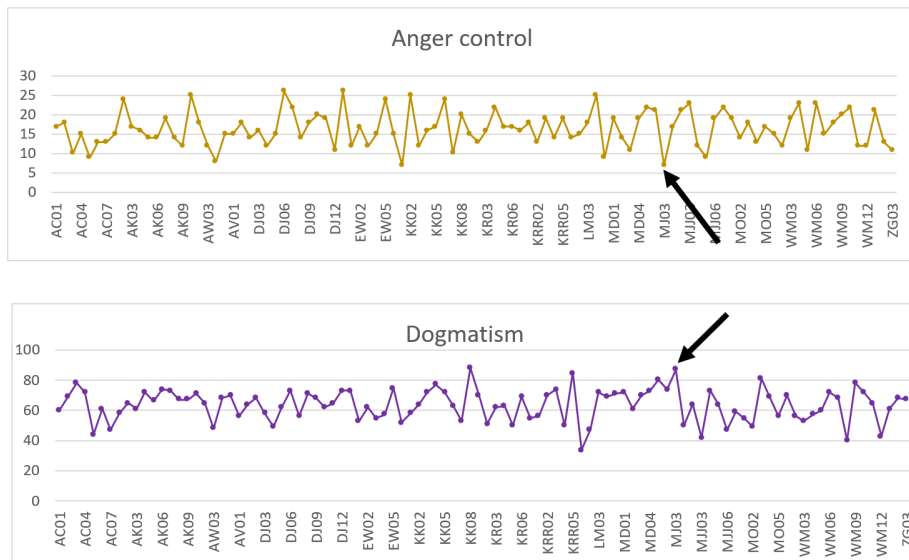
14 Ooo, szczerbaty Murzyn z polską flagą, z polską koszulką. Kolory jakieś takie ostrzejsze. Okulary nie wiem skąd wytrzasnął. Strasznie chudy, chyba jakiś Somalijczyk. No i dobrze, niech ma, proszę. Nasz Murzynek z polską flagą.

15 (...) No leży sobie kobita na koniku, no daj jej Panie Boże zdrowie, niech sobie odpoczywa. W końcu to nie pokaz mody tylko basen, więc każdy może sobie jeździć, niech tego. Ale tłuste to to, coraz więcej tłustych akurat. Acha! (...)

Figure 1
Psychological Characteristics of the Analysed Case



Note. The arrow shows the result of the analyzed case compared to the results of other people.

Figure 1*Psychological Characteristics of the Analysed Case (Continued)*

Note. The arrow shows the result of the analyzed case compared to the results of other people.

(“may God give her health, let her get some rest.”) but also the use of diminutives (“little horse”) and colloquialisms (“kobita”—a colloquial term for a woman in Polish). The choice of words may indicate a deliberate emphasis on the “size difference” between the person shown in the photo and the inflatable unicorn. It also appears that, for purposes of deprecation, the respondent makes use of objectification, using neuter pronouns (“this thing is”) and negative epithets (“lardy”).

In the case of the photograph of the fur farm, the participant refuses to accept that it shows real events, at the same time engaging in devaluation through categories related to highlighting of the lack of intelligence of the workers shown in the picture:

What’s this? Ah, ferrets. (...) No doubt some propaganda picture about cruelty to ferrets. But a fur animal has to be well kept so that it has nice fur, so this is all nonsense. Nothing else, the view is not very interesting from behind. And dumb peasants nearby, to highlight it. Less intelligent faces than next to the bishop [note: refers to the clergyman in an earlier photo]”¹⁶.

16 Co to? Aaa, fretki. (...) Także pewno jakieś zdjęcie propagandowe na temat okru-

Discussion

When analysing the content of hate speech against different groups, it is worth noting their main similarities and differences. People with obesity, the Catholic clergy, fur industry workers, and the LGBT+ community are the groups that evoke the most revulsion from respondents. Deviation from norms links black people, the LGBT+ community, and fur industry workers, demand for active aggression is triggered by the Catholic clergy, person of Asian origin, and the LGBT+ community. Opponents of abortions are attributed to a lack of intelligence and savagery, while criminality is attributed to Catholic clergy. Person of Asian origin and fur industry workers evoke a tendency to justify hate speech. The category ‘Historical foundations of hate’, which in Winiewski et al. (2017) study mainly concerned Jews and Ukrainians, did not turn out to be relevant for either group. The different ways of expressing dislike towards the groups under study reflect the dynamics of intergroup processes and the situation of the groups at risk of discrimination in Polish society. Hate-speech users more often target their attacks at groups that are perceived to be inferior and disrespected, and thus – potentially – more dehumanized and less empathized with (Soral et al., 2025).

Although the content of hateful utterances found in the study was low (56 cases), attention should be drawn to a certain tendency that becomes visible in the course of the qualitative analysis of the content. Of the seven social groups that were described by the subjects, two appear to arouse more negative emotions and encourage greater loss of restraint. These are people with obesity and Catholic clergy. In the case of the first group, we can observe a phenomenon related to negative attitudes towards people with obesity (fatphobia), reinforced by Western social norms of appearance (Campbell, 2021) that affects psychophysical well-being and even hinders people from receiving proper medical support (Brewis et al., 2018; Rubino et al., 2020). Hate speech used against individuals with excessive weight, especially that shared online, has been studied in detail by many researchers (e.g., Brooker et al., 2018; Wanniarachchi et al., 2023). Harmful narratives towards people with obesity are associated with negative characteristics that can be understood as disadvantageous to society (e.g., indolence), and they place the responsibility for their condition on those individuals experiencing obesity (Brewis et al., 2018). It can be concluded that subjects in our study were less sensitised to the inappropriateness of applying offensive and hateful labels to that minority group than to other groups (such as people of different skin colour or sexual orientation), which may suggest a broader permission to use offensive language against people with obesity. On the other hand, the increased number of hateful utterances directed towards Catholic clergy may be a reaction to the ongoing debate in Poland over the role of the Church in politics and its current problems. According to a 2024 survey by the Center for Public Opinion Research

cieństwa wobec fretek. A stwórz futerkowy żeby miał ładne futro, to musi być porządnie trzymany, więc to jakaś bzdura. Nic więcej, widok jakiś nieciekawny z tyłu. I ciemne chłopstwo w okolicy, żeby podkreślić. Mniej inteligentne twarze niż przy biskupie.

(Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS), 88.8% of Poles declare they identify as members of the Catholic faith. However, an increase in non-believers is observed (by six percentage points as of 2019). In addition, the percentage of people declaring participation in religious practices every week is decreasing (in 2024, the number reached 34% (CBOS, 2024). In the 2022 CBOS survey, the five most frequent answers to the question regarding the reasons for abandoning religious practices were: lack of need, criticism of the Church, lack of faith, criticism of priests, and politics (CBOS, 2022). The ongoing changes in the religiosity of Polish society and the indicated motives show that the current state of the Catholic Church in Poland, in some cases, arouses negative sentiments that can lead to the use of hate speech. In future research, it would be useful to pay particular attention to these two social groups in the context of their negative evaluation and its psychological determinants. It is worth noting that in our study, hate speech utterances appeared on every topic, regardless of the worldview to which the photo was assigned by the competent judges. This seems particularly important for future research in terms of not limiting research samples and analyzing topics regarding worldviews.

The relatively low level of hate speech in our survey may have been partly a result of the limitations of the research procedure. The study was carried out in the form of face-to-face interviews to enable analysis of the spontaneous utterances of the subjects. The researcher was physically present throughout the whole of the session; this was intended, following the subject literature (Obrębska & Kleka, 2016; Obrębska et al., 2022), to favour the production of longer and more complex utterances. No account was taken here of the specific nature of hate speech as a form of verbal aggression, the propagation of which is favoured by a feeling of anonymity and absence of control, as found in the digital space. This is most often explained by a process of shedding of restraints on reactions in online media: the relative anonymity and single-channel nature of communication, lack of oversight, and invisibility of the commenter increase people's readiness to share thoughts that in other contexts they would probably have suppressed (Suler, 2004). This is no doubt a reason for the proportionally greater presence of hateful utterances online in comparison with traditional media and face-to-face interaction (Winiewski et al., 2017). The presence of the researcher in the course of the interview session probably acted as a buffer, preventing the lowering of restraint and the display of negative emotional states. Moreover, due to the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, which had an impact on parts of the study, the researchers were known to the subjects, often being close family or friends. This may have been an additional factor that blocked the expression of negative opinions and emotions relating to matters concerning the social world. In addition, due to the pandemic, the research had to be extended over time until 2023, so respondents' narratives on particular topics could also be influenced by the changing socio-political context (e.g., end of COVID-19 pandemic). There is also a limitation related to the images presented to the respondents - the selected

photo of the ferret farm does not illustrate a group at risk of hate speech based on primal traits but rather a profession (which can be changed relatively easily) and is likely to arouse anger related to animal abuse. However, due to the presence of utterances that illustrated the particular categories of hate speech well, the picture was included in the analysis in the paper.

The competent judges' method used in the study also has its limitations and is susceptible to distortion and subjectivity in assessments. The analyzed material was characterized by a relatively low intensity of hate speech. Because of this, the judges may have, in contrast to neutral or positive statements, more often identified statements with moderate negative overtones as manifestations of hate speech. Despite the training and the selection of competent judges (psychology students and doctoral students), it seems that the characteristics of the competent judges (all judges were young adults with rather liberal views and psychological knowledge) may have influenced the heightened sensitivity in judging which statements are offensive to the groups presented in the photos.

Although negative emotions were only a marginal feature of the utterances, research shows that even occasional cases of the use of such rhetoric, on the scale of society as a whole, may lead to hostility towards minority groups (Schelling, 1971). The above case analysis aligns with existing literature, showing that hate speech use may be favored by a high level of social dominance orientation, right-wing views, high levels of authoritarianism and dogmatism, and low tolerance and control of anger. However, further quantitative research on a more extensive research sample is necessary to analyse the indicated determinants better. Hate speech use may be prevented, on the other hand, by the empathic presence of another person, confronting the speaker with their emotions and the words that express them. This is a positive aspect of our study, showing the restraining effect of the immediate presence of a listener, who may play the role of a shock absorber for verbal aggression.

Authorship Details

Monika Obrębska: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, and writing the article.

Klaudia Rodziejczak: collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation.

Jan Odyniec: collection and/or assembly of data, critical revision of the article

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Research Ethics Statement

The study procedure received a positive recommendation from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Adam Mickiewicz University. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study and to have their statements recorded.

Data Availability Statement

Data associated with the current study will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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