

Chapter # 14

HATE, EQUALITY, OR NEUTRALITY? PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MORAL DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL SPEECH PREFERENCES

Medea Despotashvili

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Tbilisi State University, Georgia

ABSTRACT

This study examines voters' perception of hate language in political communication by investigating its psychological, moral, and demographic correlates. Using a sample of 706 participants from Georgia, the study explores how variables such as cognitive style, moral foundations, emotional reactivity, intellectual humility, and social comparison influence attitudes toward political speeches containing hate language, equality-oriented language, or neutral discourse. Results reveal that individuals with higher cognitive openness, intellectual humility, and individualizing moral foundations are less accepting of hate speech. Conversely, those with closed-mindedness, and binding moral foundations demonstrate greater tolerance for hate-based rhetoric. Evaluation patterns varied by gender, generation, and education, reflecting broader socio-cultural dynamics. The findings underscore the importance of cognitive, emotional, and moral dimensions in public receptivity to divisive political narratives and offer theoretical implications for mitigating hate language through education, critical thinking, and moral engagement.

Keywords: hate language, equality, perception, political behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of polarized politics, populist rhetoric, and mass communication, the use of hate language in political discourse has become a powerful and concerning tool. While some forms of political speech aim to mobilize, inspire, or unite, others exploit societal divisions by employing dehumanizing, discriminatory, or emotionally provocative language targeting groups based on identity—such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or age. The spread of such discourse, particularly in transitional democracies, poses a critical challenge to civic cohesion and democratic values (Ahmed, Madrid-Morales, & Tully, 2022). This study investigates how voters perceive and respond to hate language embedded in political communication, with a particular focus on the psychological, moral, and social mechanisms that shape this evaluation. Drawing on theories of cognitive style (Stanovich & West, 2007; Pennycook & Rand, 2019), moral foundations (Keefer, 2012), social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and intellectual humility (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016), the research explores not only who is more likely to tolerate hate speech—but more importantly, why.

With the growing body of literature on hate speech and political polarization, the present research addresses the intersections between cognition, morality, emotion, and social influence, through an interdisciplinary, empirically grounded study conducted in Georgia—a country with a unique socio-political landscape shaped by post-Soviet transition, democratic development, and intense political polarization. While, political science may focus on ideological affiliation, psychology emphasizes personality traits (Marcus, Neuman,

& MacKuen, 2000). Yet these approaches alone cannot fully account for the complex variations in public responses to hate-based rhetoric, particularly across different demographic or generational groups. By analyzing how voters react to three types of political speeches—hate-based, equality-oriented, and neutral—this study provides a dynamic, data-driven understanding of how and why individuals accept, reject, or remain ambivalent toward divisive language in political messaging.

In particular, the study focuses on a series of key psychological constructs: cognitive style, including actively open-minded thinking and preference for effortful thinking, as predictors of critical evaluation (Baron, 2008; Stanovich & West, 2007); moral foundations, distinguishing between binding (loyalty, authority, purity) and individualizing (care, fairness) values in shaping moral intuition (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Keefer, 2012); social comparison, especially the extent to which individuals seek normative alignment or evaluate their opinions through societal cues (Festinger, 1954; Ahmed et al., 2022); intellectual humility, which reflects openness to reconsidering views and recognizing limits to one's knowledge (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016); emotional reactivity, particularly the role of affect in amplifying or dampening the appeal of provocative speech (Frijda, 1986; Marcus et al., 2000). Furthermore, the study examines the role of demographic variables—age, gender, education, and generational cohort—to contextualize these psychological dynamics within broader sociocultural patterns. Of particular interest is the construct of reversed hate language (e.g., hostility toward dominant groups such as the elderly, heterosexuals, or men), a concept rarely studied yet relevant in discussions of identity politics and societal backlash. The main objectives of this research are therefore to assess the level of acceptance or rejection of political hate language among Georgian voters, to identify psychological and moral predictors of this evaluation, to examine how these patterns vary across demographic lines and over time. By integrating these layers of analysis, the study seeks to contribute to academic and practical conversations about the ethics of political communication, the psychological defense against manipulative rhetoric, and the resilience of democratic values in increasingly fragmented societies.

The present study focuses on critical thinking, social comparison, intellectual humility, and emotional reactivity as key psychological attributes influencing the acceptance or rejection of hate speech. These constructs were selected because they represent complementary dimensions of cognitive, social, and affective functioning that together shape how individuals interpret, evaluate, and emotionally respond to morally charged or divisive communication. While previous studies have often examined prejudice or aggression as outcomes of broad personality traits such as authoritarianism, openness to experience, or agreeableness (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), the current research emphasizes contextually responsive cognitive-affective mechanisms that are more sensitive to contemporary forms of hate expression—especially those encountered in online and political communication.

Critical Thinking and Related Cognitive Traits: Critical thinking involves the deliberate evaluation of arguments and evidence through reasoning and reflection (Facione & Facione, 2013). It differs from stable personality traits like openness to experience in that it reflects an intentional cognitive stance rather than a dispositional preference. Whereas openness captures curiosity and receptivity to new ideas, critical thinking entails effortful analysis, metacognition, and resistance to cognitive biases (Stanovich & West, 2000). Individuals who engage in critical thinking are better equipped to identify manipulative or fallacious content in hate-based messages, reducing the likelihood of uncritical acceptance or emotional contagion. The study employs measures of open-minded and effortful thinking to operationalize this active cognitive engagement.

Social Comparison as a Social-Cognitive Moderator: Social comparison processes shape how people align their attitudes with perceived group norms (Festinger, 1954). In the context of hate speech, individuals may compare their opinions to those dominant in their online communities, using such comparisons as cues for what is socially acceptable. In contrast, social comparison of abilities relates more to self-evaluative competitiveness and is less directly tied to moral or normative conformity. Thus, this study focuses primarily on opinion-based comparison as a potential normative buffer against hate language acceptance. Compared with other social constructs such as conformity or social desirability, social comparison reflects a more dynamic, bidirectional process that can both reinforce or challenge prejudiced discourse depending on contextual cues.

Intellectual Humility as a Meta-Cognitive Regulator: Intellectual humility refers to the awareness of the limits of one's knowledge and the willingness to revise beliefs when faced with new evidence (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016). It extends beyond traditional humility by emphasizing epistemic flexibility and open dialogue. Individuals high in intellectual humility are less likely to react defensively when confronted with opposing views and more capable of engaging respectfully in moral or political discussions (Porter & Schumann, 2018). Compared to general agreeableness or tolerance, intellectual humility represents a meta-cognitive virtue, enabling reflection on the quality of one's reasoning processes. It therefore serves as an important cognitive-moral safeguard against the internalization of hate language and rigid ideological thinking.

Emotional Reactivity and Affective Responses to Hate Language: Emotional reactivity captures how strongly and how quickly individuals experience emotions, as well as how long these responses persist (Preece, Becerra, Robinson, Dandy, & Allan, 2018). Affective sensitivity plays a dual role in responses to hate speech. Unlike the stable trait of neuroticism, which broadly reflects emotional instability, emotional reactivity emphasizes situational intensity and affective regulation, making it a more precise predictor of real-time reactions to hate content.

Together, these constructs represent a multidimensional framework encompassing cognitive evaluation (critical thinking), social alignment (social comparison), meta-cognitive flexibility (intellectual humility), and affective responsiveness (emotional reactivity). Examining them jointly provides a more holistic understanding of how individuals process and respond to hate language, capturing the interplay between cognition, emotion, and social context. This integrative approach allows for identifying not only individual differences in tolerance of hate speech but also potential psychological resources that can buffer against its normalization and spread.

The proliferation of hate speech represents not only a communication issue but also a systemic social threat, undermining the essence of democratic dialogue and mutual respect within societies. On a large scale, hate speech contributes to the normalization of prejudice, leading to desensitization, moral disengagement, and increased societal tolerance for discrimination and violence. The spread of hate language across digital platforms affects social cohesion by polarizing communities and fostering a climate of mistrust, resentment, and fear among marginalized groups. In political contexts, persistent exposure to hate rhetoric can distort public opinion, influence electoral behavior, and legitimize extremist ideologies, thereby threatening democratic pluralism and civic participation.

2. BACKGROUND

Hate language, particularly in political contexts, has become a salient concern for democratic societies. Critical thinking, the ability to analyze and evaluate information systematically, plays a crucial role in countering the spread of hate speech. It enables individuals to identify logical fallacies, recognize bias, and challenge the underlying assumptions of harmful rhetoric (Facione & Facione, 2013). Educational interventions that foster critical thinking skills have shown promise in reducing susceptibility to hate speech and misinformation (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Media literacy programs that incorporate critical thinking principles have proven effective in equipping individuals to discern the intent and credibility of online content (Ennis, 2013). Such programs emphasize the importance of evaluating sources, understanding the influence of algorithms, and engaging in respectful dialogue. By promoting critical engagement, these interventions reduce the likelihood of individuals contributing to or passively endorsing hate speech. This study draws from dual-process theories of cognition, which distinguish between heuristic (System 1) and analytical (System 2) modes of thought (Stanovich & West, 2007). Individuals with an actively open-minded thinking style (AOMTS) are more likely to engage in deliberate, critical reflection and show resistance to manipulative rhetoric. In contrast, a closed-minded style tends to rely on cognitive shortcuts and exhibit lower tolerance for ambiguity—factors that increase susceptibility to ideological messaging (Baron, 2008). Preference for effortful thinking also serves as a cognitive buffer, as it reflects willingness to engage in cognitive taxing tasks such as evaluating ethical nuances in speech (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Social comparison theory, introduced by Festinger (1954), posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and attributes to those of others. In the digital age, social media platforms have intensified this phenomenon by curating idealized representations of others' lives. This intensified social comparison can influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors, including their engagement with hate speech. Research indicates that upward social comparisons, where individuals compare themselves to perceived superiors, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and resentment (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2015). Conversely, downward social comparisons, involving perceived inferiors, may reinforce biases and prejudices. In the context of hate speech, social comparison dynamics can either perpetuate hateful ideologies or provoke critical reflection, depending on individual and group factors.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) provides a framework for understanding individual differences in moral reasoning (Keefer, 2012). It categorizes moral intuitions into two broad types: individualizing foundations (care and fairness) and binding foundations (loyalty, authority, purity). Prior research shows that conservatives prioritize binding foundations, while liberals value individualizing ones (Graham et al., 2009). This study tests how these moral orientations shape acceptance of hate speech. Those who score high on care and fairness are expected to reject hate language, while high scores on authority and purity may predict acceptance due to loyalty to in-group norms or traditional values.

Intellectual humility is the recognition of one's cognitive limitations and openness to revising beliefs in light of new evidence (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016). It is closely associated with tolerance, empathy, and metacognition. People with high intellectual humility tend to resist dogmatic and polarizing rhetoric. The current study explores how this trait predicts preferences for political speech types, hypothesizing that high humility would align with greater endorsement of equality language and rejection of hate speech.

Affective responses to political content also shape speech evaluation. The Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus et al., 2000) posits that emotions such as fear, enthusiasm, and

anger influence political judgment. Emotional reactivity, especially high positive intensity, may amplify the allure of charismatic or provocative rhetoric. While some emotional engagement promotes civic participation, excessive reactivity can increase vulnerability to emotionally charged hate speech (Frijda, 1986).

Previous research suggests that women exhibit greater sensitivity to hate language and moral violation (You, Maeda, & Bebeau, 2011), possibly due to socialized empathy and perspective-taking. Educational attainment, particularly exposure to higher education, correlates with tolerance, media literacy, and critical thinking (McLaren, 2005). This study investigates whether such demographic factors modulate acceptance of political hate language.

3. INTERSECTION

The present study underscores the complex interplay between cognitive styles, moral foundations, social comparison, emotional reactivity, and intellectual humility in shaping voter perceptions of hate language within political discourse. By intersecting these psychological and social dimensions, the findings illuminate not only who tolerates or rejects hate speech, but also why such evaluations vary across demographic and cultural contexts.

Intersecting Cognitive and Moral Dimensions: A central contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how cognitive styles and moral intuitions jointly influence the acceptance or rejection of hate language. Specifically, individuals exhibiting a closed-minded thinking style tend to endorse hate language more readily, aligning with prior research indicating that cognitive rigidity correlates with ideological dogmatism and intolerance (Stanovich & West, 2007; Baron, 2008). Conversely, actively open-minded thinkers and those with a preference for effortful cognitive engagement show stronger resistance to hate speech, reflecting their capacity for nuanced ethical reasoning (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

These cognitive tendencies intersect meaningfully with moral foundations. The binding moral foundations—loyalty, authority, and purity—are positively associated with acceptance of hate language, consistent with findings that these foundations sustain group cohesion even at the expense of outgroup tolerance (Graham et al., 2009; Keefer, 2012). Meanwhile, individualizing foundations, particularly care and fairness, correlate with rejection of hateful rhetoric, highlighting the protective role of empathic moral reasoning in democratic deliberation.

The Role of Social Comparison and Intellectual Humility: Social comparison of opinion emerges as a pivotal social mechanism affecting hate language perception. Individuals who strongly align their views with perceived community norms tend to reject direct hate speech, possibly as a response to evolving societal sanctions against overt discrimination (Ahmed et al., 2022). This finding suggests that social context and the desire for normative conformity can foster sensitivity to hate speech, particularly in increasingly connected digital and civic environments. Intellectual humility further moderates these dynamics by promoting openness to new perspectives and decreasing dogmatic certainty. Higher intellectual humility correlates with greater preference for equality-oriented speech and less tolerance of hate language, supporting its theorized role in fostering democratic dialogue and reducing polarization (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016).

Emotional Reactivity and Gendered Sensitivities: Emotional reactivity, specifically positive intensity, shows a nuanced relationship with political speech evaluation. While emotional engagement can enhance political participation, it may also amplify the appeal of provocative rhetoric, including hate speech (Frijda, 1986; Marcus et al., 2000). Gender differences indicate that women are generally less tolerant of hate language and more

sensitive to moral violations, likely reflecting socialization processes that encourage empathy and relational awareness (You et al, 2011).

Demographic and Generational Implications: The study's findings regarding age and education level offer important insights into how demographic factors shape political language evaluation. Older individuals and those with lower educational attainment show greater acceptance of hate language, which may reflect generational differences in social norms and critical media literacy (McLaren, 2005). This has implications for targeted civic education and engagement strategies that promote critical thinking and inclusivity across diverse voter segments.

Practical and Theoretical Implications: Theoretically, this research advances an integrative model of hate language perception that bridges cognition, morality, social influence, and emotion. Practically, it suggests multiple intervention points for reducing tolerance of hate speech: enhancing critical thinking skills, fostering intellectual humility, and cultivating individualizing moral values through education and public discourse.

Understanding individual-level moral and cognitive mechanisms underlying hate speech acceptance provides valuable guidance for designing targeted interventions and informed policy strategies. Traditional anti-hate approaches often emphasize legal regulation, content moderation, or mass awareness campaigns, which address societal-level manifestations but may overlook the psychological roots of prejudice and intolerance. By identifying factors such as critical thinking, moral foundations, emotional reactivity, and intellectual humility, this study highlights modifiable individual traits that can be strengthened through education and training. For instance, fostering open-minded thinking and intellectual humility in school and university programs could enhance citizens' resilience against manipulative rhetoric and online hostility. Similarly, emotion regulation interventions—such as mindfulness-based or cognitive-behavioral techniques—could reduce impulsive affective reactions that fuel hate expression. At the policy level, integrating psychological insights into media literacy, civic education, and community dialogue initiatives can create a more sustainable framework for combating hate language. Such evidence-based, person-centered strategies complement structural and technological solutions, offering a more holistic response to polarization and hostility in contemporary societies.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Participants

A total of 706 participants were recruited for this study, with 250 participating during the first stage and 456 during the second stage of data collection. The overall sample consisted of 64.7% female respondents. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 years, representing a wide span of developmental stages. In terms of educational background, 35% of participants held a bachelor's degree, while 25% were university students at the time of the study. Geographically, 40% of the sample were born in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, while the remaining participants originated from various regions across the country, reflecting diverse sociocultural backgrounds.

4.2. Measures

This study employed a correlational survey design using a set of standardized psychological measures aimed at assessing cognitive styles, moral reasoning, emotional reactivity, and openness to hate language. The following instruments were administered:

Comprehensive Thinking Style Questionnaire (CTSQ): The CTSQ contains 24 items where respondents rate statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale comprises four subscales, each demonstrating good reliability in the current sample: Actively Open-Minded Thinking ($\alpha = .812$; $M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.8$); Close-Minded Thinking ($\alpha = .826$; $M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.9$); Preference for Intuitive Thinking ($\alpha = .879$; $M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.8$); Preference for Effortful Thinking ($\alpha = .813$; $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.9$).

Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM): The INCOM measures social comparison using 11 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The scale differentiates between two dimensions of social comparison: Social Comparison of Abilities ($\alpha = .813$; $M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.9$); Social Comparison of Opinions ($\alpha = .753$; $M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.6$). Each dimension includes a reverse-coded item (Items 5 and 11) to control for acquiescence bias.

Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011): The MFQ assesses endorsement of five core moral domains: Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Sanctity/degradation. The Georgian version of the MFQ was used, previously adapted for cultural relevance and linguistic clarity ($\alpha = .884$; $M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.6$). Responses were rated on a 6-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of the corresponding moral foundation.

Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale (PERS; Becerra, Preece, Campitelli, & Scott-Pillow, 2017): The PERS measures emotional reactivity across three dimensions: Activation, Intensity, and Duration of emotional responses. The scale consists of 30 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The validated Georgian version was used in this study, which has shown good reliability in previous research (Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$).

Intellectual Humility Scale (Leary et al., 2017): This scale measures the tendency to acknowledge the limits of one's knowledge and openness to differing viewpoints. The 16-item version was used, scored on a 5-point Likert scale. Georgian adaptation of the scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency in the current study ($\alpha = .81$).

Hate Language Scale (adapted): A 32-item scale assessed attitudes toward hate language. The scale comprised four subscales addressing hate language directed toward different groups: elderly individuals, women, religious communities, and LGBTQ individuals. Each subscale included two types of items: Direct Hate Language; Reversed Hate Language. Respondents rated statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$).

4.3. Data Collection Procedure

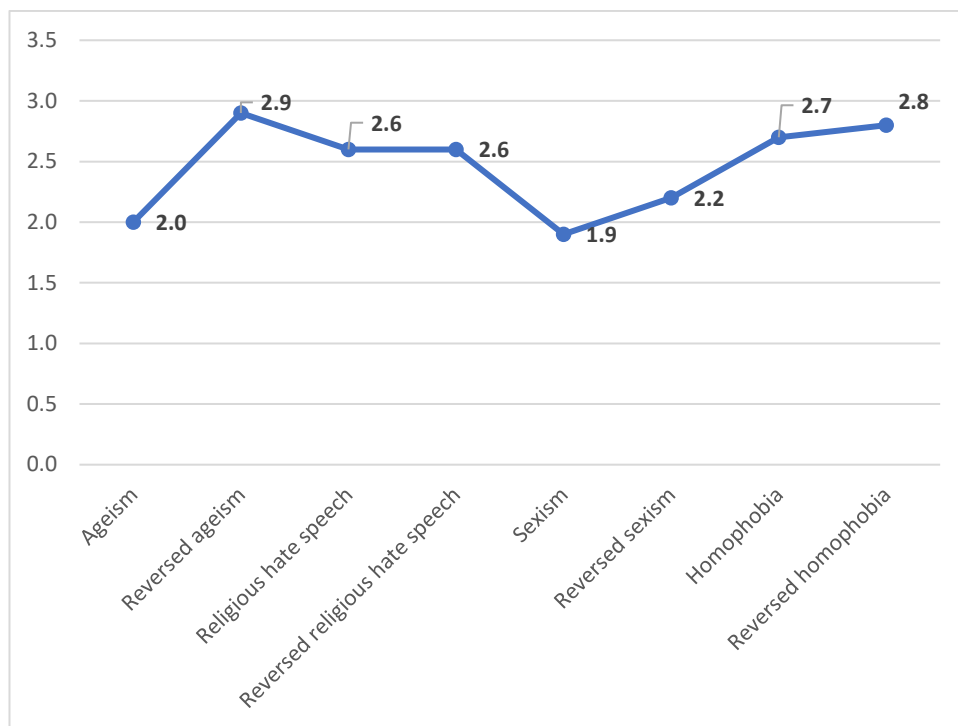
The research was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, respondents completed a hate language scale designed to assess how accurately they could identify hate expressions and how acceptable they found them when directed at different social groups. Their responses were analyzed in relation to social comparison orientation and comprehensive thinking style to explore cognitive and social factors influencing moral evaluation. In the second stage, participants evaluated three examples of political speeches representing hate-based, equality-oriented, and neutral discourse. They indicated which candidate they would vote for first, second, and third, and completed questionnaires on thinking style (CTSQ), social comparison (INCOM), moral foundations (MFQ), emotional reactivity (PERS), and intellectual humility. Data were collected through individual interviews across urban and regional areas of Georgia and analyzed using established statistical procedures suitable for testing relationships among psychological variables.

Data were collected using face-to-face self-report interviews, conducted in both urban and regional areas across Georgia. Interviews took approximately 45–60 minutes to complete. Participants were informed about the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Gender and education-level differences were assessed through one-way ANOVA, and associations between continuous variables were explored using Pearson’s correlation coefficients. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$, and all analyses were performed using SPSS (Version 23). The decision to use ANOVA and correlation analyses was based on their robust applicability for testing group differences and linear relationships among psychological constructs.

4.4. Perception of Hate Language

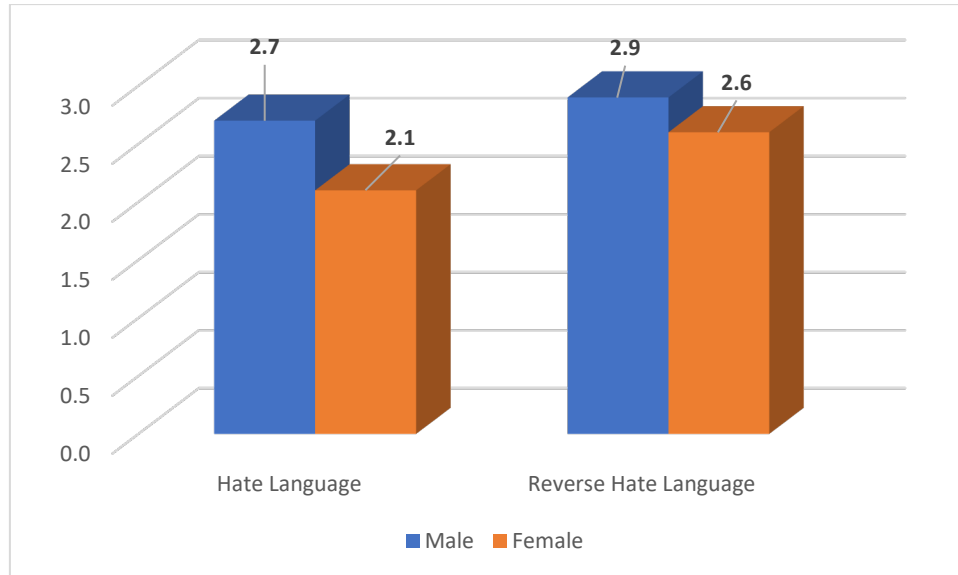
Across both stages, participants showed *low tolerance for hate language* and a clear preference for *neutral or equality-oriented political communication*. Only a small minority favored hate-based messages, reflecting growing societal awareness of their divisive nature.

Figure 1.
Attitudes towards different forms of hate language.



Women ($M = 2.9$; $F = 6.152$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$) and participants with higher education levels were less accepting of hate speech, suggesting that empathy and critical literacy contribute to moral sensitivity and resistance to discriminatory content.

Figure 2.
Attitudes towards different forms of hate language.



The ANOVA revealed that education level significantly influenced attitudes toward ageism ($F = 3.269$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$). Post hoc analysis using the Tukey HSD test indicated that respondents with higher education found hate speech less acceptable ($M = 1.9$) compared to those with secondary education ($M = 2.6$).

4.5. Comprehensive Thinking Style and Social Comparison

Cognitive style emerged as a strong predictor of hate language acceptance. Respondents who demonstrated actively open-minded and effortful thinking reported lower acceptance of both direct and reversed hate language, indicating that reflective and analytical thinking reduces susceptibility to manipulative or prejudiced communication. In contrast, closed-minded thinking was associated with higher tolerance for hate-based messages, highlighting that cognitive rigidity and reliance on intuitive reasoning promote uncritical acceptance of ideological rhetoric. Social comparison of opinions moderated this relationship: participants who valued alignment with community norms tended to reject explicit hate speech, suggesting that socially reinforced standards of tolerance can counteract divisive discourse.

Table 1.
Hate language and its correlation with age, social comparison and comprehensive thinking style.

		Hate Language	Reversed Hate Language	Age	Social Comparison of Opinion	Close Minded Thinking Style	Actively Open Minded Thinking Style
Hate Language	Pearson Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
Reversed Hate Language	Pearson Correlation	.845**					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
Age	Pearson Correlation	.264**	.252**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.002				
Social Comparison of Opinion	Pearson Correlation	-.172*	.080	-.120			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.035	.329	.144			
Close Minded Thinking Style	Pearson Correlation	.414**	.383**	.330**	-.178*		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.030		
Actively Open Minded Thinking Style	Pearson Correlation	-.260**	-.273**	-.083	.073	-.402**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001	.315	.374	.000	
Preference for Effortful Thinking	Pearson Correlation	-.435**	-.370**	-.166*	.006	-.196*	.237**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.042	.943	.017	.004

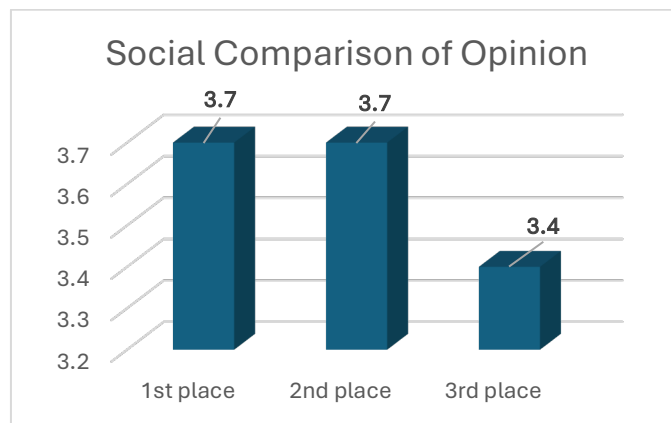
4.6. Moral Foundations and Speech Evaluation

Moral orientation provided additional explanatory insight ($t = 2.283, p < .05$). Participants who emphasized *binding moral values*—loyalty, authority, and purity—were more accepting of hate language, reflecting moral reasoning focused on in-group protection and traditional norms. Conversely, endorsement of *individualizing values*—care and fairness—predicted stronger preference for equality-oriented and inclusive discourse. This pattern confirms that moral intuitions play a central role in shaping attitudes toward political speech and in distinguishing empathic from exclusionary moral outlooks.

4.7. Social Comparison and Evaluative Behavior

Gender differences were again evident in social comparison tendencies: men scored higher on ability-based social comparison ($t = 2.929, p < .05$), though this dimension did not predict speech evaluations. In contrast, opinion-based social comparison significantly influenced responses to hate speech ($F = 5.8, p < .05$), with individuals scoring high on this scale more likely to rank hate speech either first or last—possibly indicating conflict between internal values and perceived social norms.

Figure 3.
Social comparison and evaluation of political discourse.



4.8. Intellectual Humility and Emotional Reactivity

Evaluation of neutral speech was positively correlated with overall intellectual humility ($\rho = .149, p < .05$), while acceptance of hate language was negatively associated with both openness to changing opinions and lower intellectual overconfidence. These results underscore the importance of metacognitive traits in resisting polarizing rhetoric (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016). Finally, preference for hate language was positively correlated with the positive intensity subscale of emotional reactivity ($\rho = .153, p < .05$), suggesting that individuals prone to intense emotional experiences may be more reactive to provocative language—though the direction of this relationship warrants further investigation.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The current study offers a multifaceted analysis of voters' perceptions of hate language in political communication by integrating psychological, moral, emotional, and demographic factors. While the findings contribute valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms of hate language acceptance, they also open numerous avenues for further inquiry. Future research can expand upon this foundation in the following key directions:

The present research provides a snapshot of attitudes toward hate language at a specific historical moment. However, political climates and social norms evolve over time, especially in transitional democracies. Longitudinal studies are needed to track changes in the perception, normalization, or rejection of hate speech across electoral cycles, public crises (e.g., war, pandemics), and generational shifts. Such studies could assess whether interventions in education, media literacy, or policy yield sustainable reductions in hate speech tolerance.

Given that social comparison and opinion alignment were significant predictors in this study, future research should directly examine the role of digital platforms in shaping attitudes toward political speech. Investigating the influence of algorithms, echo chambers, and online disinhibition could reveal how digital environments amplify or mitigate exposure to hate speech. Studies might also analyze the emotional contagion effects of hate language and the spread of related content across social networks.

The findings suggest that critical thinking, intellectual humility, and moral sensitivity buffer against hate speech acceptance. Future research should develop, implement, and evaluate educational interventions—especially within formal education settings—to foster these traits. Studies could compare the efficacy of different pedagogical strategies (e.g., debate-based learning, empathy training, media literacy workshops) in enhancing democratic resilience and resistance to divisive language.

A subset of participants in the study exhibited ambivalence or neutral responses toward hate or reversed hate language. Understanding the psychological, cognitive, or sociocultural factors contributing to this neutrality is essential for addressing the silent normalization of prejudice. Future qualitative research could investigate the inner narratives, justifications, or disengagement strategies used by such individuals.

6. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

The present study offers a multifaceted analysis of attitudes toward hate language by examining its psychological, demographic, and moral correlates. The findings confirm that sociocognitive factors—including thinking style, social comparison tendencies, emotional reactivity, and intellectual humility—play critical roles in shaping individuals' susceptibility or resistance to hate speech. From a cognitive perspective, the results align with dual-process models of reasoning (Stanovich & West, 2007), which distinguish between automatic, heuristic-driven processing and deliberate, reflective thought. Closed-mindedness and a preference for cognitive ease were associated with greater tolerance for hate language, suggesting that more effortful, open-minded cognition serves as a buffer against prejudiced discourse. This supports the argument that critical thinking is an essential tool for recognizing and rejecting manipulative rhetoric. Given the dynamic nature of political communication, especially in post-Soviet societies undergoing rapid social transformation, these findings highlight the need for policies and media practices that encourage ethical political expression and mitigate the polarizing effects of hate language. Social media platforms and civic

organizations can leverage these psychological insights to design campaigns that promote empathy, reasoned debate, and awareness of the social costs of hate speech.

Moral Foundations Theory (Keefer, 2012) proved highly informative in explaining divergent moral sensitivities that underpin speech evaluation. Individuals endorsing binding moral foundations (loyalty, authority, and purity) were more prone to tolerate hate language, potentially reflecting in-group loyalty and aversion to perceived threats to social cohesion. In contrast, those guided by individualizing foundations (care and fairness) were more likely to support messages promoting equality. These patterns are consistent with prior research on the moral underpinnings of political ideology (Graham et al., 2009).

Social comparison, particularly of opinions, influenced respondents' evaluations, suggesting that public discourse and peer norms shape individual attitudes. High scorers on opinion-based comparison may be more attuned to socially acceptable viewpoints, explaining their rejection of overt hate speech. This finding intersects with theories of social identity and normative influence (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Moreover, intellectual humility emerged as a protective trait against hate language acceptance, with higher humility correlating with a preference for neutral and equality-based discourse. This reinforces the value of intellectual virtues in public reasoning and civic engagement (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016).

Lastly, emotional reactivity—particularly the experience of intense positive affect—was linked to increased tolerance for hate language, which may reflect the emotional appeal and mobilizing power of such rhetoric in political communication (Marcus et al., 2000).

This study underscores the complexity of attitudes toward hate speech by integrating cognitive, moral, and emotional dimensions. The results indicate that educational attainment, cognitive openness, moral sensitivity, and intellectual humility serve as protective factors against the normalization of hate language. Conversely, reliance on heuristic processing, emphasis on authority-based morality, and emotional reactivity may increase susceptibility. These findings have important implications for interventions aimed at reducing the acceptance of hate language. Promoting critical thinking, media literacy, and moral reflection—especially within educational contexts—may cultivate more resilient, empathetic, and democratically engaged citizens. Future research should explore longitudinal dynamics of hate speech tolerance and further investigate the psychological profiles of individuals who remain neutral or ambivalent toward disguised or reversed hate language, which may still perpetuate harmful ideologies under the guise of neutrality.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Full name: Medea Despotashvili

Institutional affiliation: Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Tbilisi State University
Associate Professor of the School of Political Sciences, University of Georgia

Institutional address: 240, 3 Chavchavadze ave, Tbilisi, Georgia

Email address: medea.despotashvili@tsu.ge

Short biographical sketch: Medea Despotashvili is an Assistant Professor of the Department of Psychology at Tbilisi State University. Her research field is ethnic stereotypes and their affect on social relationships, analysis of cultural dimensions and their dynamics, alternative dispute resolution approaches and their implementation in local context. She is an author of several scientific articles and co-author of books “Political Practice in Occupational Therapy” and “Psychological Aid for Survivors.” Since 2006 she teaches Psychology at Tbilisi State University. Along with scientific career she is a practitioner psychotherapist. She works with IDP and socially vulnerable population as a psychotherapist.