

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vernacular constructions of the relationship between freedom of speech and (potential) hate speech: The case of Finland

Katarina Petterson¹  | Ov Cristian Norocel² 

¹Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

²Department of Gender Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Correspondence

Katarina Petterson, University of Helsinki, Unioninkatu 37, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.

Email: katarina.petterson@helsinki.fi

Abstract

The blurred distinction between freedom of expression and hate speech in ever more polarised public debates across Europe and beyond has prompted research on hate speech, particularly focusing on right-wing populist politicians. Little is known, however, about how this distinction is construed by ordinary citizens. Deploying the concept of retrogressive mobilisation, this study examines how cases of (potential) political hate speech – one targeting racialised minorities, the other the LGBTQ+ community – are interpreted and negotiated by ordinary citizens through their comments on online news in Finland. Deploying a critical discursive psychological approach, we analyse the vernacular meanings that ordinary citizens attach to the notions of political hate speech, thereby highlighting the dynamic relationship between political and everyday discourse. We evidence three discursive constructions of the relationship between freedom of expression and (potential) hate speech. In these constructions, the same rhetorical resources, especially the liberal arguments of equality and freedom of expression, were deployed to service the opposite discursive functions – that is, for both ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ ends – to condemn and justify discrimination against minoritised groups. Our study contributes to the social psychological understanding of contemporary hate speech and builds a bridge between social psychology and the more recent field of anti-gender research.

KEYWORDS

Finland, freedom of expression, hate speech, LGBTQ+ community, racialised minorities, retrogressive mobilisation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The increased levels of hate speech in many countries in the context of politics, (social) media and society at large have been documented in social psychological research in recent years (e.g., Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Cervone et al., 2021; Winiewsky et al., 2017). Hate speech is a pressing societal issue; in the words of Michal Bilewicz and Wiktor Soral, it has become an ‘epidemic’ that ‘deteriorates living quality,

increases aggression, and affects mental health and well-being of minorities’ (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020, p. 7). The lack of unambiguous and unanimous understandings of hate speech and the polarising politicised debate around it, however, entails challenges for devising legal, political or other means of combatting these problems. The polarised character of societal debates around hate speech becomes particularly salient when politicians are accused of hate speech against minoritised groups, for example, on grounds of their race, religion or sexuality (e.g.,

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Authors. *European Journal of Social Psychology* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Pettersson, 2019). The present study critically examines such a situation in Finland, starting in 2019, when almost simultaneous cases of (potential) political hate speech – against racialised migrants on the one hand and LGBTQ+ people on the other – were under investigation by the Finnish prosecutor general¹ (Gustafsson, 2019) and were being widely discussed in the public domain by politicians, the media and ordinary citizens.

Whilst a significant body of research has focused on examining the hate speech of political elites (Pettersson, 2019; Pettersson & Augoustinos, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Verkuyten, 2013), there is a pressing need for critical analyses of its vernacular constructions, namely how hate speech is perceived and interpreted by ordinary citizens (Hauser, 2007). To fill this gap in existing social psychological research, in the present study, we aim first to examine how ordinary citizens attach meaning to political hate speech against different minoritised groups (i.e. racialised migrants and LGBTQ+ people). More specifically, our interest lies in the vernacular constructions of different forms of hate speech and the meanings that ordinary citizens attach to them (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013; Ferrucci, 2020; Pettersson & Sakki, 2023), rather than departing from existing definitions of hate speech and assessing whether the selected cases meet their criteria. Consequently, by deploying the concept of *retrogressive mobilisation* (Norocel & Băluță, 2023; Norocel & Pettersson, 2023) to examine how hate speech in its various iterations is discussed, interpreted and negotiated amongst ordinary citizens of a given polity, our ambition is to make a theoretical contribution to the social psychological understanding of contemporary hate speech. In doing so, we bring social psychology into a dialogue with the more recent research field examining anti-gender campaigns (Ayoub & Stöckl, 2024; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), to which social psychological research on hate speech could make significant contributions.

The second aim of this study is more methodological. We study the vernacular constructions of hate speech from a critical discursive psychology (CDP) perspective (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) that, in considering both micro- and macro-levels of discourse, provides the means to examine the dynamic relationship between political and everyday discourse around contested and polarised issues (Pettersson & Sakki, 2023). As such, we show the advantages of CDP as a methodological approach that enables precisely such an understanding, thus constituting a promising avenue for research on contemporary hate speech. Through our study, we thereby seek to shed light on the dynamics of discussions in the public domain pertaining to hate speech, which ultimately may present opportunities for dialogue.

¹ Our analysis concentrates only on two contemporary cases. A third one, pertained the derogatory social media entries from 2011/2012 targeting Jewish and LGTB+ people as well as Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and Somali by an MP from the Social Democratic Party, which was also pre-investigated by the police around the same time. Eventually, the prosecutor general dropped all charges, and the MP continued their parliamentary work. We have decided to exclude this case from the present study because of the complex nature of the cultural and ideological factors at work. This notwithstanding, it could be the subject of future studies, addressing the issue of antisemitic and homophobic hate speech in the multifaceted context of Sunni–Shiite relations in Europe.

The study is structured in five sections. The first section discusses the fraught relationship between freedom of expression and freedom from hate speech, focusing first on the legal interstices extant between them in Europe, especially in Finland, and second, on this thorny issue from the perspective of social psychology. The second section describes the study's composite theoretical framework, which we claim provides the necessary conceptual solidity for our present undertaking, connecting established scholarship on the multifaceted manifestations of hate speech with the rapidly expanding field of research on anti-gender campaigns. Furthermore, it presents the CDP conceptual framework and discusses its usefulness for studying the ways in which political expressions of hate and derogation are constructed at the vernacular level. The third section details our empirical material and means of data collection, evidencing the careful ethical considerations at work in the study. In addition to this, it describes the study's methodological and analytic approach. The fourth section presents our analysis, which is structured along the three distinct discursive constructions that we have identified in the data. The final section provides a concluding discussion, which situates the article's findings within the wider context of social psychological research on hate speech and studies on anti-gender campaigns.

2 | LEGAL AND ACADEMIC INTERSTICES BETWEEN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND HATE SPEECH

The relationship between freedom of expression – as a fundamental human right safeguarded in international documents, tracing back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) – and hate speech is fraught with contradictions. Some careful contextualisation is necessary here, both to evidence the legal interstices existing between the framework guaranteeing the freedom of expression and the attempts to prosecute hate speech and to shed light on the Finnish context against which we undertake our analysis. In the Western world, freedom of speech has been treated as an essential premise for democratic societies, providing the framework for open debate in the public domain, enabling the voicing of various interests and perspectives, and facilitating negotiation and compromise towards consensual policy decision-making. In some political contexts, like in the USA, freedom of expression has been interpreted in maximalist terms, wherein 'the prevailing forces have mostly sided with unrestricted freedom of expression and against legal regulation of hate speech, referring to the First Amendment of the Constitution (1791)' (Gorenc, 2022, p. 418).

In the European context, in turn, although the freedom of expression is guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (1953), it is not regarded as an absolute right, and, under several exceptional circumstances, the freedom of speech is restricted. Somewhat surprisingly, the European Court of Human Rights has not provided explicit definitions of hate speech, but from the court's casuistic approach one may infer that it pertains to political hate speech, racist hate speech, religious hate speech as well as hate speech based on sexual orientation (Lemmens, 2015, pp. 148–156).

This notwithstanding, these restricting circumstances are legislated differently from one country to another, reflecting both earlier historical developments across the continent – which aimed at banning incitement against the state authority or prohibiting blasphemous acts towards the (Christian) deity or sacred objects – as well as the horrific experiences of the WWII – which aimed at outlawing Holocaust denial and references to Nazi ideology. Indeed, while most modern legislation targeting hate speech aimed originally to ward off antisemitic and xenophobic propaganda associated with the Holocaust, nowadays hate speech laws are enforced across much of Europe on account that they enable the protection of minorities from speech promoting hate, signal disapproval to intolerance and promote inclusion and diversity in society. However, the court's rulings and the national legislation have not always been successful, particularly when deployed against individual politicians – such as Jussi Halla-aho in Finland – who have built their political careers on antagonism and polarisation by distracting public attention from pressing societal issues through pointing at 'convenient culprits' from minority groups (be them migrants, LGBTQ+ people, protesters, critical scholars, etc.), and by desensitising wide sections of society and eventually corroding social cohesion and the general sense of community (Askola, 2015; Gorenc, 2022).

Zooming in on the Finnish context, the constitution does not explicitly identify hate speech as a criminal misdemeanour. Sections 11 and 12 of the fundamental law contain explicit guarantees concerning the freedom of thought and conscience, and safeguards for the freedom of expression, anchoring these into Finland's respect of the international treaties (in particular ECHR). This notwithstanding, Finland is one of the few countries in Europe in which incitement to racial hatred leading to the 'breach of the sanctity of religion' is both criminalised and actively prosecuted, resulting in either pecuniary sanctions or prison sentences (up to 2 years and 6 months) (Finnish Criminal Code Chapter 11, Sections 10–11) (Askola, 2015; Äystö, 2017; Pettersson, 2020). One of the high-profile cases is that of Jussi Halla-aho, former leader of the radical-right populist Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinländarna*, henceforth PS). Halla-aho built his political career on virulently anti-Islam and anti-immigration stances. Halla-aho was tried and eventually sentenced in 2012 for connecting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad to paedophilia in a criminal manner. This seemingly successful deployment of existing hate speech legislation in Finland proved to be somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory for the judicial system; Halla-aho managed to use the trial as a political trampoline into national and European politics and allowed him to attract a growing number of supporters and voters. In 2017, Halla-aho even succeeded in claiming the leadership position in the PS, inscribing the party on a clearly anti-immigration and openly xenophobic trajectory (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022; Saresma, et al., 2021).

Reflective on the legal conundrum around the delimitation between freedom of expression and hate speech, there is no academic consensus regarding how hate speech should be defined (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Maussen & Grillo, 2014). Within academia, some scholars have argued in favour of a perspective attuned to the targeted groups (Jacobs & Potter, 1998), while others have chosen to focus on the individual targets (Sedler, 1992). For example, Cervone and colleagues define hate

speech as 'an extreme form of derogatory language, which [...] involves the expression of hate and/or the encouragement of violence against others based on their real or assumed membership in a given category' (Cervone et al., 2021, p. 81). As the authors conclude, social psychology has traditionally focused on more subtle forms of discriminatory language, whereas blatantly derogatory and hateful expressions have received less attention. There is, however, a demand for social psychologists to shift their focus to the latter phenomena, as there are signs in many countries of the mainstreaming of, for instance, far-right and xenophobic talk in the political domain (Pettersson & Augoustinos, 2021), and as hate speech has also increased in everyday talk, especially in the online context (Cervone et al., 2021). In their recent overview of the forms, antecedents and consequences of derogatory language, researchers have, accordingly, called for cross-disciplinary and integrative research initiatives for studying (online) hate speech (Cervone et al., 2021).

As for the delicate issue of where to draw the line between freedom of expression and hate speech, social psychological research indicates that also this has become a fiercely polarising issue, fomenting boundaries between in- and out-groups in everyday discursive exchanges (Pettersson & Sakki, 2023). This phenomenon has been documented, for instance, in Pettersson and Sakki's (2023) study of how hateful comments directed at politicians are discussed among ordinary citizens. Conversely, radical-right populist politicians who have been prosecuted for hate speech may use these sentences to position themselves as martyrs, defending absolutist understandings of freedom of expression and the rights of their in-group, the typically narrowly defined as the '[the nation's] people', against various out-groups, such as racialised minorities (Pettersson, 2019), thus nurturing inter-group animosity and polarisation 'from above'. These findings suggest that increasing our understanding of how political and everyday dialogical constructions of hate speech versus freedom of expression mutually influence each other is a crucial starting point for tackling hate speech and its negative societal consequences.

However, while the hateful language of political elites, including the PS party leaders and its members, has been examined at length by scholars (Askola, 2015; Horsti, 2015; Norocel & Pettersson, 2022; Pettersson, 2019; 2020; Pettersson & Augoustinos, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016), the deployment of hate speech targeting members of the LGBTQ+ community by conservative Christian politicians, and their reception among the wider public has been only tentatively explored albeit not from the perspective of social psychology (Saarinen & Koskinen, 2022; however, several postgraduate theses had been examining the issue, see, Järvensivu, 2020; Setälä, 2021; Strandén, 2022). Furthermore, the ways in which elite expressions of hate speech are received and interpreted among ordinary citizens is an issue that remains under-researched, but that is important for our social psychological understanding of why and how political hate speech continues to rise and escalate intergroup animosity and polarisation in societies (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Cervone et al., 2021). Corroborating the information about the legal interstices between freedom of expression and hate speech with the advancements in the field of social psychological theory and research on anti-gender politics, the

present study endeavours to examine how ordinary citizens construct and give meaning to hate speech deployed by politicians against different minoritised groups (racialised migrants, respectively LGBTQ+ people), originated by Finnish MPs representing distinct ideological leanings, thus increasing our understanding of the dynamic relationship between political and everyday discourse. In the following section, we outline our theoretical and methodological approach in more detail.

3 | THEORETICAL JUXTAPOSITIONS

To respond to the call for interdisciplinarity in research on contemporary forms of (online) hate speech (Cervone et al., 2021), we have designed a syncretic theoretical framework, which provides the conceptual soundness for such an undertaking. To begin with, we anchor our study into the social psychological research tradition examining the language of prejudice around issues of race, ethnicity and religious difference (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Cervone et al., 2021; Jacobs & Potter, 1998; Pettersson & Augoustinos, 2021; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Furthermore, we expand our awareness to incorporate other minoritised groups that are negatively impacted by this derogatory and dehumanising language, in particular the LGBTQ+ community (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; Coyle & Wilkinson, 2002; Ellis, 2022; Fasoli et al., 2016; Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002). We connect these to the expanding field of research linking the rapidly changing socio-political landscape – marked by increased visibility of prejudiced and speech promoting hate in the public domain – to the growing impact of anti-gender campaigns (Ayoub & Stöckl, 2024; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), which collect a complex assemblage of political parties, conservative religious entities and far-right groups, entangled into opportunistic synergies of retrogressive mobilisation (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Norocel & Băluță, 2023; Norocel & Pettersson, 2023).

In this paper, we embrace the discursive research tradition around the language of race and prejudice (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) to address the challenge of demarcating between legitimate criticism and hate speech. Specifically, we consider the rhetorical concealment – deployed to meet the expectations of socio-political acceptability – of political statements, which target vulnerable minorities, and analyse how such statements are received and interpreted by ordinary citizens. Furthermore, we anchor our understanding of the contemporary tensions between freedom of expression and hate speech in the findings of previous research (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), which have demonstrated compellingly that contemporary racist language, including political discourse, relies on the appropriation of liberal democratic principles, such as equality, justice, fairness and civil and human rights defence, for what may be deemed ‘illiberal ends’, namely to justify discrimination against minoritised groups. Couched into such terminology, then, hate speech has the potential to go unchallenged, and eventually become accepted, and even deployed in vernacular forms by ordinary citizens in the public debate (Hauser, 2007; Martinsson & Ericson, 2023).

We expand this theoretical anchoring to encompass other minoritised groups, namely the LGBTQ+ community, which is also impacted negatively by hate speech. Previous research has persuasively argued that homophobic language and descriptions of aggression towards the LGBTQ+ community are deployed in both mundane and institutional settings as means to reify heterosexuality as the norm and perpetuate prejudice, which negates the humanity of members of said community (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007, p. 152; Clarke & Peel, 2007, p. 2; Coyle & Wilkinson, 2002, pp. 147–148; Ellis, 2022, p. 102; Fasoli et al., 2016, pp. 238–239; Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002, p. 1–29). Echoing the observation about the use of contemporary racist language for ‘illiberal ends’ (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), several researchers have noted how hateful language against the LGBTQ+ community in Europe and beyond is deployed for similar ends (Clarke & Peel, 2007). In the USA context, for example, this was ‘deemed necessary by some conservatives to regain the political and moral ground allegedly lost by conservatives since the late 1960s’ (Ellis, 2022, p. 103).

These contemporary uses of hate speech against minoritised groups (racialised migrants and LGBTQ+ people) reflect the growing prominence of radical-right populist parties in the mainstream politics in many polities across the globe including Finland (Askola, 2015; Norocel & Pettersson, 2022; Pettersson, 2019, 2020; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) as well as the mounting impact of anti-gender campaigns manifest in different regions of the world mobilising against the rights of women and LGBTQ+ community (Norocel & Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). In this context, we pay particular attention to the latter, by bringing into our social psychological approach to hate speech the concept of ‘retrogressive mobilisation’ (Norocel & Băluță, 2023; Norocel & Pettersson, 2023). The concept synthesises the observations of a growing number of studies, which indicate that anti-gender campaigns engage in opportunistic synergies a complex assemblage of political parties (both conservative as well as radical-right populist parties); religious entities (various churches with either national jurisdiction like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland or international jurisdiction like the Catholic Church); conservative civil society organisations (militating against equal marriage rights, or women’s reproductive rights); and far-right entities (guided by the imperative to preserve the polity’s racial purity and enforce heterosexuality as the only acceptable norm) (cf. Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 24; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023, p. 124; Paternotte, 2023, pp. 92–93; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017, pp. 259–262). In the Finnish context, previous research has identified the contours of such retrogressive mobilisation taking shape in the Finnish Parliament (*Eduskunta*) – engaging both the radical-right populist PS, the conservative Christian-Democrats (*Suomen Kristillisdemokratia/ Kristdemokraterna*, KD) and the main conservative-liberal party – in the context of parliamentary deliberations on extending marriage rights to LGBTQ+ people (Norocel & Pettersson, 2023); however, to the best of our knowledge, its reception at the ‘grassroots level’ remains scientifically unexplored.

With these theoretical considerations in mind, then, it is of crucial importance to consider the socio-political context, particularly becoming aware of the existing power relations and socially shared views and

norms around hate speech. In this context, we approach hate speech as a *cultural practice* (Boromisza-Habashi, 2012; Pettersson & Sakki, 2023); rather than departing from pre-existing definitions, we explore hate speech as a form of talk, which is deeply intertwined with its historical, economic and socio-political context. This entails that also the vernacular ways in which derogatory and dehumanising talk targeting various minoritised groups is conceptualised, interpreted, defended or dismissed in everyday talk are inseparable from existing – potentially conflicting – political, cultural and moral systems and beliefs. As we demonstrate in our analysis below, a CDP approach is optimal for examining these vernacular receptions of political hate speech, as it allows the researcher to ‘move beyond’ the analysed material and to examine it as part and parcel of its surrounding social and political context (Edley, 2001; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Adopting such an approach to hate speech, the ambition of the present study is to add further nuance to our understanding of the discursive and interactional dynamics at play, whereby ordinary citizens negotiate and give meaning to this complex phenomenon. Focusing on two discreetly different, yet oftentimes entangled forms of (potential) hate speech against minoritised groups (racialised migrants and LGBTQ+ people), which are articulated from distinct ideological positions, we argue, allows us to develop and expand theoretical and methodological insights from both social psychological research and anti-gender studies and to bring these fields closer together. Examining these dynamics in a socio-political climate characterised by an increase in hateful speech and retrogressive mobilisation in the political and public arenas (see, ECRI, 2019) underscores the contemporary societal and applied relevance of our study.

4 | EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND METHOD

4.1 | Material

The empirical material for this study consists of readers’ comments on news articles about two cases of (potential) political hate speech in Finland, which have been published in the largest Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS). The first case concerns Juha Mäenpää, a member of parliament (MP) representing the radical-right populist PS. In a session of the *Eduskunta* on 12 June 2019, Mäenpää discussed the situation of asylum-seekers who had arrived in Finland in the context of the 2015 European refugee (reception) crisis. Drawing a parallel to the government’s ambition to protect the native environmental biodiversity from ‘invasive alien species’, he concluded that the phrase was ‘placed in the wrong section’. Mäenpää’s speech was condemned widely both in the political arena and the public domain and was framed as both dehumanising asylum-seekers and inciting racial hatred (Pettersson & Augoustinos, 2021). This notwithstanding, the Finnish constitution safeguards the freedom of expression of acting MPs; consequently, for the prosecutor general to raise charges against Mäenpää for this, it would have required a majority of the MPs (5/6) to vote in favour of it. Given the PS’s significant presence in the *Eduskunta* (39 MPs out of 200), the party determined the outcome of the vote on the matter on

26 June 2020; with only 121 MPs in favour of initiating a legal process,² no charges were raised against Mäenpää (Kervinen, 2020a).

The second case pertains to Päivi Räsänen, former party leader and acting MP from the conservative KD. Räsänen, who is part of a conservative branch of Finnish Lutheranism, takes a stance against women’s ordination as priests and against abortion laws in Finland and has aligned strategically with the PS on matters of sexual ethics and religion (Saarinen & Koskinen, 2022). In her case, the prosecutor general investigated three items (Gustafsson, 2022). First, a pamphlet³ published online in 2004, wherein she alleged that equal marriage rights advance the deterioration of societal values, and that ‘homosexuality is a scientifically proven psychosexual developmental disorder’. Second, a tweet from 2019, in which Räsänen criticised the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland for its official partnership with the LGBTQ+ community’s annual pride event, which she described as a ‘shame and a sin’. The third item constituted her comments in 2019 on the radio channel *Yle Puhe*, hosted by the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle, wherein Räsänen argued that homosexuality is a ‘genetic degeneration’. Charged in April 2021 by the prosecutor general with incitement to ‘prejudice, contempt and hate towards homosexuals’,⁴ Räsänen was eventually freed of all charges in March 2022. In her legal defence and media appearances, Räsänen adamantly referred to her right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion to cite from the Bible as an article of faith. Notably, Räsänen became the focus of both national and international interest, receiving legal support from anti-gender conservative religious entities such as the USA-based network Alliance for Defending Freedom (Mäki, 2020).

Our data collection and selection entailed the following steps. In the first step, we deployed the following criteria to identify suitable articles: (a) they had been published during the most intense media discussion and/or legal proceedings of the two cases, namely between 12 June 2019 – when Mäenpää delivered his speech in the *Eduskunta* – and 30 March 2022 – when the case concerning Räsänen was officially closed; and (b) that they contained the names of either of the two politicians. In the second step, we have identified the articles that received the most readers’ comments from ordinary citizens (see the [Appendix](#) for a detailed list and links to the articles in original Finnish). To put things in perspective, the article with the most comments concerning Mäenpää yielded 63 comments; in comparison, the most commented upon article about Räsänen received more than three times as many, namely 205 comments. To collect a comparable number of comments in each case, we have, therefore, expanded the collection of readers’ comments to the four most commented articles discussing Mäenpää, to a total of 244 comments. In the third and final step, we

² Among those MPs present (176), the PS MPs (39), the KD MPs (4), and Movement now (1), and the non-affiliated MP Ano Turtiainen (1) voted unanimously against raising charges. The Coalition Party and the Centre Party were divided: among the Coalition Party, four out of 25 MPs voted against a legal process, whereas for the Centre Party, the corresponding figures were six out of 27 MPs (Kervinen, 2020b).

³ https://www.lhpk.fi/julkaisut/aamuntahdet/29_mieheksijanaiseksi.pdf (accessed 4 January 2024).

⁴ <https://syyttajalaitos.fi/sv/-/paivi-rasanen-samt-lutherstiftelsens-juhana-pohjola-atalas-for-hets-mot-folkgrupp> (accessed 4 January 2024).

TABLE 1 Discursive constructions of the relationship between freedom of expression and hate speech, their content and rhetorical form.

Discourse	Discursive resources and rhetorical strategies and tools	Case of Juha Mäenpää	Case of Päivi Räsänen
Hate speech as a criminal offence, delimitation from freedom of expression (N = 148)	Liberal arguments Parallel to totalitarianism Factual language Metaphor Contrasting structures	N = 80	N = 68
Hate speech as an ambivalent manifestation of freedom of expression (N = 116)	Liberal arguments Language of rationality and reason Ideological dilemma Factual language Discursive minimisation Hyperbole Category entitlement	N = 59	N = 57
Dismissal of hate speech, maximalist construction of freedom of expression (N = 124)	Liberal arguments Language of rationality and reason Categorical generalisation Relativisation and mitigation Consensus warranting Parallel to totalitarianism Metaphor	N = 51	N = 73
Total N = 388		N = 190	N = 198

excluded unrelated comments to the cases (N = 61), resulting in a corpus totalling 388 readers' comments (see Table 1).

The collection and analysis of online data in social scientific research warrants specific ethical considerations (Ditchfield, 2021). Since 2019, HS requires all those interested in commenting on their articles (politicians, other journalists, and ordinary citizens alike) to create an account with the *Sanoma* publishing house; in addition, comments may only be made under one's real name – no pseudonyms are allowed. Under these circumstances, we assume that all registered users have a Finnish identification number to access this function and have knowledge of the Finnish language to comment; consequently, we describe them as *ordinary citizens*. In so doing we want to underline their democratic interest in discussing these matters and ability to pursue arguments (Martinson & Ericson, 2023, p. 2014), which 'are not necessarily isomorphic with published opinion but nonetheless are capable of exerting the gentle violence that resides in their power to legitimate state action' (Hauser, 2007, p. 336).

In addition to this, we consider that they are aware that their comments are posted under their own names, which are publicly visible and available without login. This notwithstanding, as it is less likely that they could have anticipated that their comments would become the subject of research interest, questions concerning issues of informed consent, personal integrity and anonymity arise (Pettersson & Sakki, 2023). After careful ethical consideration, we have chosen to actively not document or reproduce the names of the users and to remove the exact timestamps for their comments in the quotations presented in the Analysis section below. In addition to this, we deem that by providing the English translations of the original comments in Finnish, we further reduce the likelihood of connecting a certain

comment to a specific individual. In so doing, we have minimised any potential harm that could be done to the ordinary citizens commenting (who for the purpose of this study may be regarded as research participants). We deem that we have thus complied fully with the deontological guidelines of ethical research as stipulated by the national ethical bodies in the countries where we work (see detailed Ethics statement below) as well as the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020).

4.2 | Analytic procedure

Regarding our methodological approach, in our analysis of the collected comments, we have primarily relied on the methodological insights from CDP (Edley, 2001; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998), which we have supplemented with those from rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987). Such an approach brings together conversation analytical and poststructuralist perspectives (Wetherell, 1998), allowing us to examine critically the discourse of interest at two discreetly intertwined levels: both at the fine-grained 'micro' level of rhetorical content and form and as situated within a 'macro' socio-political context (Edley, 2001; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). As discussed above, such an approach is particularly well-suited to explore the discursive constructions of hate speech, and how such constructions are both the production of, as well as producers of broader societal discursive patterns (Edley, 2001).

The analysis entailed a series of steps, as proposed by Sakki and Pettersson (2016). We began our work with an inductive reading and re-reading of the entire corpus. This allowed us to identify categories

of comments, structured according to their *contents*, namely those that either (a) condemned, (b) dismissed, or (c) took a neutral or ambivalent stance towards the case as well as (d) were unrelated to the selected cases. Following this initial categorisation, we further explored the patterns of *consistency and variability* in the corpus (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). More clearly, we examined the different ways in which the two cases of (potential) political hate speech were discursively construed. At the following stage of our analysis, we paid particular attention to the rhetorical *form* of the discourse (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). As such, we identified the rhetorical resources (such as liberal arguments, reason and rationality) and tools (such as metaphors, hyperboles and so on) on which the discourse relies. Finally, we analysed the discourse in terms of its rhetorical *functions*; in other words, how the comments contribute to the broader societal debate around hate speech, and how they serve to (re)produce, affirm or contest broader, socially shared conceptions of hate speech. We conducted the analysis on the corpus in Finnish and translated the comments presented in the extracts below into English, striving to retain, as much as possible, the linguistic nuances and idiomatic expressions of the original.

5 | ANALYSIS

Through our critical discursive reading of the empirical material, we identified three distinct (albeit, at times, intertwined) discursive constructions of the dialogic relationship between freedom of expression and hate speech. The first delimits freedom of expression from hate speech, which is deemed a *criminal offence*. The second places hate speech as an *ambivalent, morally troublesome* manifestation of freedom of expression. The third approaches freedom of expression in maximalist terms (Gorenc, 2022) and thereby dismisses the conceptual validity of hate speech. As presented in the analysis below (and summarised in Table 1), these constructions were deployed in various ways in the two cases (Mäenpää; Räsänen) and relied on both shared as well as specific rhetorical resources and tools. Furthermore, within these discourses, the two MPs could be positioned in either a positive or negative light and be held accountable for their comments to varying degrees.

5.1 | Hate speech as a criminal offence

The first discursive pattern depicts the two cases as criminal hate speech. Through the deployment of liberal arguments (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), these constructions emphasised the need to enforce the existing legal sanctions against the two MPs and to combat the escalation of derogatory talk in the political arena and the public debate more widely. Such an approach underlines the importance of legal guardrails for the freedom of expression, which provide the necessary tools to successfully counter hate speech. These guardrails are often depicted as essential for both safeguarding the liberal democratic society and protecting minoritised groups. This is articulated, for example, in the

following comment in reaction to an article discussing Mäenpää's case: 'In my opinion, freedom of speech is such an important freedom that it is absolutely necessary to get a neutral interpretation by the judiciary as to where the right of other groups of people, for example, gays and asylum seekers, not to be subjected to unjustified defamation (hate speech) begins' (24 July 2020). This comment is also indicative of the retrogressive mobilisation engaging the PS and KD – as evidenced earlier by their common efforts to stop equal marriage legislation (Norocel & Pettersson, 2023) – and its articulation as potential hate speech against two minoritised groups (namely 'gays' and 'asylum seekers') was decoded by ordinary citizens to be targeting social cohesion in Finnish society (cf. Askola, 2015; Ellis, 2022). By the same measure, another common rhetorical tool identified in the construction of the two cases as criminal hate speech as an imperative for defending democracy, by contrasting contemporary Finnish society to historical or fictive totalitarian regimes, such as in Extract 1 below, which also addresses Mäenpää's case:

Extract 1 (24 June 2020), Mäenpää:

1	It's strange that in this case it is thought that dictatorships and
2	communism close the mouths of parliamentarians. It's actually the
3	other way around. Those in power in such countries give themselves
4	rights that the citizens do not have. In a dictatorship, the judiciary and
5	the press are restrained to act according to the will of the rulers. Why
6	can't the legal system be allowed to judge if a crime has been
7	committed or not?
8	I myself have understood that the social order is based on three
9	aspects: legislative, executive and judicial power. Each of these must
10	work independently. So it's about democracy. If parliament had
11	different freedoms, we would live in Orwell's world, where some have
	more rights because they are pigs (in Orwell's novel) or, as in this case:
	MPs.

This comment was written in response to a previous entry that had drawn parallels to communism and totalitarianism to warn against the consequences of encroaching on the MPs' freedom of expression. By contrast, in this entry, the same rhetorical strategy is deployed to argue the opposite: a democratic society rests on judiciary independence (and the freedom of the press) (lines 4–5). The argumentative power of this assertion is strengthened further by using factual language (Potter, 1996) in the preceding sentence: 'It's actually the other way around' (lines 2–3) and by rhetorical questions in its aftermath (lines 5–7). Referencing George Orwell's classical novel *1984*, the commentator aligns the book's privileged pigs to Mäenpää's position in Finnish society as an elected representative (lines 10–11). The metaphor serves as a hyperbole to manifest the commentator's point about the danger of bestowing elected MPs rights and freedoms that ordinary citizens do not enjoy (lines 11–13). As such, this extract relies upon drawing contrasting structures (Gill, 2000) between a democracy, wherein all citizens (even MPs) are equal before the law, and a dictatorship,

wherein a selected few are allowed to engage in hate speech without fear of punishment.

Extract 2 (24 January 2022), Räsänen:

1	Another question is whether invoking an article of faith protects in a
2	situation of aspersion compared to not invoking it. In other words, is it
3	possible to act in such a way that it is not a crime, even if it otherwise
4	would be, by referring to faith/articles of faith. Does a Muslim brother
5	get an acquittal if, according to sharia, he takes his sister's life when he
6	thinks she has dishonoured the family? Is a member of the KKK [Ku
7	Klux Klan] free to insult non-whites as long as he appeals to his own
8	opuses?
9	If articles of faith become a matter above the law in courtrooms, it
10	doesn't end well. In the halls of religion sure, but not outside of them,
11	since that will lead to war.
12	That's why it's quite curious if there will be no verdict in the end, the
13	can of worms would be completely open after that.

When concentrating on the comments about the case of Räsänen, we discern similar parallels and metaphors as in the ones around Mäenpää albeit in somewhat different forms, as in Extract 2 above. Here, the commentator warns against treating discriminatory talk too leniently simply because it leans on 'an article of faith'. The seriousness of Räsänen's case is construed through parallels to shari'ah law (lines 4–6) and the Ku Klux Klan (lines 6–8). These forceful comparisons are put forward as rhetorical questions, which leave the reader with the task of drawing their own (right) conclusions (cf. Pettersson & Sakki, 2017, 2020). In the second part of the comment, then, the commentator maximises the warning by employing hyperboles, namely 'it doesn't end well', 'that will lead to war', and 'the can of worms would be completely open') juxtaposed to metaphor (the 'can of worms'). In this manner, the comment constructs Räsänen's statements as a case of criminal hate speech, which should not be excused on grounds of her appeals to freedom of religion.

5.2 | Hate speech as an ambivalent, morally troublesome manifestation

The following quotes illustrate in turn a discursive pattern wherein the two cases were construed through the language of argumentation, ambivalence and dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988). In it, typically, the statements of the two MPs were condemned as *moral* breaches of respectful (political) talk, albeit still within the remit of freedom of expression. In contrast to the discursive constructions of hate speech as a criminal offence described above, however, here the need for legal repercussions is either explicitly or implicitly dismissed. For example, a comment addressing Mäenpää's case:

Extract 3 (24 June 2020), Mäenpää:

1	(...) What is crazy about all of this is that, even at that level, you have
2	to tell a person through this kind of banter how to talk about other
3	people and to other people.
4	Sheikki Laakso [another PS MP] took the floor and was surprised that
5	time is spent on such a matter in parliament. I would hope that he (like
6	everyone else sitting there) would look in the mirror and think about
7	how to perform in the [parliamentary] hall. If everyone would
8	understand that, then there really is no need to have this discussion.
9	Shame on Mäenpää and PerusS [the PS], but no permission to
10	prosecute or any other sanctions should follow.

The extract above illustrates the commentator's condemnation of Mäenpää's statement and their bewilderment that a person in his position as an elected representative does not seem to be aware of the respectful manner to talk about other human beings (lines 2–3). The commentator deploys the language of rationality and reason (Augoustinos & Every, 2007) to contrast what should be 'common sense' and respectful conduct with Mäenpää's statement explained as 'banter' and resources that had been invested in the entire situation, labelling this as 'crazy' (lines 1–3). This argument is strengthened further through a category entitlement (Potter, 1996) by referring to another MP who agreed with the commentator (lines 4–5). The conclusion presented in this case is that Mäenpää and the PS have disgraced themselves, though counterweighting this with the firm argument that 'no permission to prosecute or any other sanctions should follow' (lines 9–10). As such, the commentator integrates potential hate speech into the notion of freedom of expression through negotiation: although condemning Mäenpää for his statement, the commentator argues that the threshold to criminal hate speech has not been crossed in this case. Reminiscent dilemmatic discursive negotiations were present in the comments regarding Räsänen, as in Extract 4 below:

Extract 4 (24 January 2022), Räsänen:

1	It is hard to imagine that this trial will end well in any way: if Räsänen
2	is found not guilty, then it will be thought that religions and -isms
3	enjoy special protection, which is problematic from the point of view
4	of equality. Then believers and 'unbelievers' are in a different position
5	in terms of freedom of speech. Unless the decision changes the attitude
6	towards hate speech in general. The question also arises if all religions
7	and -isms enjoy the same rights or does Christianity still have a special
8	status?
9	If Räsänen is found guilty, it is really quite dangerous from the point of
10	view of freedom of speech. As you said, a person has the right to do
11	stupid things (although it's wiser to keep them to yourself without
12	having to declare them) and unfortunately that's how it must be.
13	Legislation will not eradicate bad behaviour from the world. The
14	judiciary must be quite careful not to start guarding people's speech
15	more generally. It's a really bad road.

In this extract, the commentator debates the risks and problems associated with a potential trial, regardless of its outcome. Indeed, the commentator construes an ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) around the issue of such a potential prosecution. On the one hand, if were Räsänen to be found innocent, her case could entail a further escalation of discriminatory speech in the name of religion (lines 1–6). On the other hand, however, the commentator concludes that Räsänen's prosecution could have at least as severe consequences, in this case for the freedom of expression (lines 9–10). On line 13, then, Räsänen's statements are indirectly catalogued as 'bad behaviour', which serves to mitigate the potential harm caused by her statements (cf. Edwards & Potter, 1992). The commentator used factual language (lines 10–12) and rhetorical questions (lines 6–8) to construe their argument. The entire comment was concluded with a hyperbole 'It's a really bad road' (line 15), which allowed the latter part of the dilemma – the harmful consequences of prosecuting Räsänen – to draw the longest argumentative straw. As such, through factual language, the use of liberal arguments (appeals to equal treatment and freedom of expression), discursive minimisation and hyperbolic formulations, the commentator presented Räsänen's statements as condemnable, although simultaneously packaging them as 'necessary ills' in a democratic society like Finland. In this context, the commentators cataloguing both Mäenpää's and Räsänen's statements as shameful (Extract 3) and 'stupid' (Extract 4), thus in equal part as morally troublesome manifestations of the freedom of expression, emphasise the polarising purpose of these statements and decode them as part of a common retrogressive mobilisation endeavour (Norocel & Pettersson, 2023).

5.3 | Dismissal of hate speech

The final discursive pattern proclaims the absolute value of freedom of expression and dismisses the idea that the cases of Mäenpää and Räsänen would represent hate speech. Typically, these comments mobilised such rhetorical strategies as generalisation and relativisation (Potter, 1996), and the language of reason, rationality and 'common sense' (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Billig, 1987) in comments such as 'this talk represents the opinion of normal people' (24 January 2022). Some comments went even further in the depiction of laws prosecuting hate speech as outright harmful; they deployed hyperboles as a rhetorical strategy to foresee the Finnish society's collapse into totalitarianism – were it that such statements as those of the two MPs would be legally sanctioned. Indeed, yet another reference to the Orwellian universe was mobilised to serve the opposite function than what we have noted in Extract 1 above, namely, to construe both Mäenpää and Räsänen as innocent victims of a witch-hunt (cf. Pettersson, 2019), like for example in 'The witch hunt against Räsänen is like straight out of Orwell's 1984 world: the prosecutor is the thought police and Räsänen is being turned into a thought criminal' (24 January 2022). The comment echoes the remark of the former PS leader Halla-aho that the freedom of expression in Western Europe was under attack from the dogmatic interpretation of inclusive policies (promoting the non-

discrimination of women, immigrants or the LGBTQ+ community) by the 'left-liberal establishment' (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022). We have identified similar discursive manoeuvres in Extract 5 below, which discusses the case of Mäenpää:

Extract 5 (24 June 2020), Mäenpää:

1	Parliament speeches follow the extended protection of freedom of
2	speech in ALL civilized Western countries. And the language is much
3	harsher in other European countries.
4	Freedom of speech is absolute; it can't be just talking about nice
5	things. Because the prevailing political climate always defines what is
6	nice talk and what is not. This is why it is most important to allow
7	unpleasant-sounding talk. As long as it doesn't incite crime or
8	something similar.
9	Only in dictatorships and communist states are MPs' speech restricted.
10	Even though they officially have freedom of speech, for wrong speech
11	you can end up in a prison camp. This is what is wanted again in Finland as well.

Through a categorical generalisation (Potter, 1996), the commentator in Extract 5 above depicts the extended right to freedom of expression of the MPs as an inherent part of 'ALL civilised Western countries' (line 2) and contrasts this with less propitious circumstances in 'dictatorships and communist states' (line 9). The claim that in other European countries the 'parliamentary language' is 'much harsher' (line 2-3) along with the expression 'unpleasant sounding talk' (line 7) serve to relativise and implicitly mitigate the severity of Mäenpää's statement (cf. Pettersson, 2019). Mentioning 'prison camps' in 'dictatorships and communist states' for people who dare to speak their minds (lines 9–10), the commentator construes a threatening image of what could happen in Finland if the freedom of expression of its MPs were restricted (lines 10–12). Although no particular actor responsible for such curtailment of rights is explicitly mentioned, we interpret the formulation 'prevailing political climate' that purportedly determines the limits of acceptable and 'nice talk' (lines 5–6) and the conclusion that 'this is what is wanted again in Finland as well' (line 11) to refer to Mäenpää's political opponents, particularly those of the progressive coalition then in government – consisting of social-democratic, left alliance, green, and centre-liberal parties – that typically are positioned as the absolute 'other' in the discourses of PS and its supporters (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

The last two examples we discuss here concern the case of Räsänen and illustrate the central features of the discourse negating that her statements were a case of hate speech. The comments defending her and mitigating the harmfulness of her statements about the LGBTQ+ community often resorted to the rhetorical strategy of consensus war-ranting (Potter, 1996), maintaining that LGBTQ+ people themselves see no reason for legal sanctions, such as 'And quite a lot of gays think it's silly and even harmful to gays that Räsänen is accused of this, even though they disagree with Räsänen on the issues' (24 January 2022). In

addition to this, the right to freedom of religion as a liberal argument was also frequently mobilised as a rhetorical resource in this discourse, such as in the extract below:

Extract 6 (24 January 2022), Räsänen:

1	I haven't been a member of the church for decades, but Räsänen, like
2	others, must have the right to quote their articles of faith, be they
3	Bibles, Korans, etc.
4	Or what would be the alternative – to use only state-defined 'facts' and
5	phrases?
6	It has been sad to notice that when Finns have finally started talking
7	about many things by their real names and directly, the limiters of
8	freedom of speech have started to pop up like mushrooms in the rain.
9	Everyone should have the right to say what they want, even sharply –
10	only completely unrestricted freedom of speech is the essence of
11	democracy.

The commentary is introduced with a concession, namely 'I haven't been a member of the church [the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland] for decades, but' (line 1), which then paves the way for arguing that Räsänen, like anyone else, should have the right to cite an article of faith, be it the Christian 'Bibles' or the Islamic 'Korans' (line 3). The importance of such a right is emphasised further in the following sentence, which through a rhetorical question presents an apocalyptic alternative scenario of complete state control (lines 4–5). The comment continues with a vague claim about Finns 'finally' have begun to speak more openly about 'many things', which is presented as factual (lines 6–7). The comment reflects the PS political line developed by Halla-aho of talking about what previously was 'unspeakable' (Norocel et al., 2020; Norocel & Pettersson, 2022), even with the risk of being taken to court for it (Askola, 2015). Indeed, warned the commentator, this has been accompanied by an increase in the numbers of those who wish to limit this freedom, a claim that is given rhetorical weight through the metaphor 'mushrooms in the rain' (lines 7–8). The comment was concluded with a forceful deployment of liberal arguments (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) concerning freedom of expression and democratic rule, with the claim that 'only completely unrestricted freedom of speech is the essence of democracy' (lines 10–11). Overall, this comment illustrates the purposeful focus only on mitigating the gravity of Räsänen's statements and on defending her right to exercise her freedom of expression and freedom of religion, without addressing the substantive content of her statement and those affected by these (the LGBTQ+ community). As such, Räsänen's case is presented not as an example of hate speech, but rather as an essential expression of a functioning democracy.

6 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This article has explored the vernacular constructions of hate speech, more precisely how ordinary citizens construe, negotiate and resist hate speech in their comments to media articles reporting on cases of

(potential) political hate speech. In our critical discursive psychological analysis of the comments – involving a corpus of 388 comments related to five articles published in the largest daily newspaper in Finland – we have discerned three distinct although at times overlapping discursive constructions of the relationship between freedom of expression and hate speech: hate speech as a *criminal offence*, falling outside the remit of freedom of expression; hate speech as an *ambivalent, morally troublesome* manifestation of the freedom of speech and the maximalist understanding of freedom of expression, which *dismisses* the conceptual validity of hate speech.

These findings shed new light on the rhetorical articulation of vernacular discursive constructions of (potential) hate speech. We have unveiled the way these discourses were imbued with rhetorical negotiations and balancing between ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) around moral, religious, as well as legal considerations. Although somewhat different in terms of their discursive content and functions, these constructions primarily mobilised similar discursive resources, such as warranting consensus (Potter, 1996), deploying the language of reason and rationality (Augoustinos & Every, 2007), as well as resorting to metaphors, and drawing historical and fictive parallels to totalitarian political systems (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Most notably, all discursive constructions relied on the use of liberal arguments (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), such as the democratic principles of freedom of expression and religion, equality before the law, and fair treatment of both ordinary citizens and elected representatives (MPs). These notions were used in the analysed material to both mitigate and emphasise the harm (potential) hate speech may cause to minoritised groups (racialised migrants and LGBTQ+ people); to put it differently, these were deployed to promote both liberal and illiberal ends (cf. Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Such a finding illuminates the flexibility and malleability of how liberal arguments may be put to work in everyday reasoning and argumentation around contested and polarising issues (cf. Billig, 1987).

Furthermore, our analysis shows that the discourses around the two cases were remarkably similar in terms of their discursive contents, form and focus. More clearly, we did not find evidence that the commentators were harsher in their condemnation (or mitigation) of either form of derogatory speech (targeting racialised migrants, or the LGBTQ+ community), regardless of the ideological leaning of the two MPs – from the radical-right populist PS or the conservative KD. The rhetorical construction of the comments that defended, contested or took an ambivalent stance towards the statement of either Mäenpää or Räsänen have drawn on the same discursive 'pool' of liberal arguments. They have also mobilised and construed similar dystopic scenarios of the potential dangers, from the perspective of democracy, related both to allowing (Extracts 1 and 2) and constraining or sanctioning (Extracts 4–6) derogatory speech against minoritised groups. It is worth noting, however, that the comments about the case of Räsänen were more narrowly focused on addressing the issue of freedom of religion and often discussed the case as a witch-hunt. These differences may, nonetheless, reflect the different legal nature of the two cases rather than their sources and the people involved.

In the present article, we have aimed to emphasise the importance of examining vernacular constructions of hate speech, by resorting to an interdisciplinary lens. Indeed, by adhering to a CDP perspective according to which discourse is action-orientated and constitutive (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987), we argue that such constructions are more than 'mere talk' about what does or does not constitute hate speech. We regard these discursive constructions as manifestations of the 'gentle violence' (Hauser, 2007, p. 336) that ordinary citizens exert whenever conveying through their comments what kind of a democratic society they are striving for, and by the same measure, what kind of society they are fearful of. In other words, through their participation in the public discourse around contested issues, such as political hate speech, ordinary citizens are exercising their democratic freedom to articulate how these matters should be understood and dealt with at the societal level. In our study of vernacular constructions of hate speech, we have shown that in such constructions, the individual, political and societal dimensions are intimately intertwined, and no single dimension can be fully understood without considering its dynamic interactions with the others.

This article is limited in terms of its scope and design: the commentators of news media articles around highly publicised (potential) hate speech cases are likely to represent only a limited segment of the ordinary citizens who engage actively in politics and societal debates (Hauser, 2007). In fact, it is rather difficult to assess the extent to which the discourses identified in the analysis represent the multitude of socio-political perspectives of the Finnish citizens at large. It is worth noting that a vast number of comments were focused more on constructing the notion of freedom of expression (rather than exclusively focusing on the meaning of hate speech), which we deem indicative of a complex interrelation between the two in everyday speech. A potential future avenue of research could then be to examine different types of data, such as interactions in social media, and deploy alternative analytical approaches to provide a richer understanding of the intricate ways in which ordinary citizens negotiate the boundaries between freedom of expression and hate speech in everyday interactions.

This notwithstanding, our study makes two key contributions to research on hate speech in the field of social psychology more broadly. First, incorporating in the study's social and discursive psychological theoretical framework concepts and insights that have been developed in the adjacent research field examining anti-gender campaigns (Ayoub & Stöckl, 2024; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte, 2023; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), we have provided novel insights into the vernacular constructions of hate speech, which is a topic that to date has remained under-explored in social psychological research. In so doing, we have evidenced that ordinary citizens have decoded the retrogressive mobilisation engaging the PS and KD (Norocel & Pettersson, 2023), and its purpose to polarise and undermine the social cohesion in Finnish society. Based on our interdisciplinary theoretical perspective, we were able to discern the remarkable similarity of the discursive accusations and defences among ordinary citizens of both politicians, who represented different ideological leanings and whose words targeted different minoritised groups. This finding suggests that ordinary citizens are mindful of the opportunistic synergies

(Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) developed between these two parties, and as such the commentators have blended in their deployment of rhetorical strategies and tools that serve to justify the (ii)liberal ends of both the MPs under scrutiny. In this light, by showing the interconnectedness of political and vernacular constructions of hate speech against racialised minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, we hope that our theoretical lens and the findings it has yielded make a substantial contribution to the social psychological research tradition on hate speech. Furthermore, we hope that our study has bridged the gap between the field of social psychology and research on the rising anti-gender movements, thus encouraging such cross-disciplinary research initiatives in future studies on hate speech in other country contexts. Second, our study has sought to contribute to CDP research on hate speech more specifically. As such, we have shown that its methodological principles and analytic tools (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) equip the researcher with the means to study how articulations of derogatory and hateful speech by political leaders are negotiated by ordinary citizens. To this end, the key assets of this methodology are that it considers individual and societal dimensions of discourse and meaning-making as inseparable and that it focuses precisely on how these dimensions mutually influence and co-construct one another (Edley, 2001). Whereas hate speech, given its complex and multifaceted nature, should continue to be examined from multiple perspectives and through different methodologies, we encourage especially critical discursive psychologists to take on this task.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskaprådet*, VR) under grant 2020–04164 (Norocel).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study is available from the first author on request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study is part of a wider research project, which has been vetted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (*Etikprövningsmyndigheten*) (Dnr 2022-01923-01), and it has followed rigorously the ethical principles in human science research stipulated by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (*Tutkimuseettinen neuvottelukunta TENK*, 2019).

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The research reported in the article was conducted following the ethical principles in human science research stipulated by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (*Tutkimuseettinen neuvottelukunta TENK*) and the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (*Etikprövningsmyndigheten*). All results are reported honestly and the work is original.

ORCID

Katarina Pettersson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8336-9505>

Ov Cristian Norocel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7349-4000>

REFERENCES

- Äystö, T. (2017). Insulting the sacred in a multicultural society: The conviction of Jussi Halla-aho under the Finnish religious insult section. *Culture and Religion*, 18(3), 191–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2017.1365736>
- Askola, H. (2015). Taking the bait? Lessons from a hate speech prosecution. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society / La Revue Canadienne Droit et Société*, 30(1), 51–71. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cls.2014.15>
- Augoustinos, M., & Every, D. (2007). The language of 'race' and prejudice: A discourse of denial, reason, and liberal-practical politics. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 26(2), 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X07300075>
- Ayoub, P., & Stöckl, K. (2024). Global resistances to LGBTI rights: Actors, claims, and venues of contestation. *Journal of Democracy*, 35(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a915349>
- Bilewicz, M., & Soral, W. (2020). Hate speech epidemic. The dynamic effects of derogatory language on intergroup relations and political radicalization. *Political Psychology*, 41(S1), 3–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12670>
- Billig, M. (1987). *Arguing and thinking. A rhetorical approach to social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. Sage.
- Boromisza-Habashi, D. (2012). *Speaking hatefully: Culture, communication, and political action in Hungary* (Vol. 6). Penn State Press.
- Boromisza-Habashi, D. (2013). *Speaking hatefully: Culture, communication, and political action in Hungary*. Penn State University Press.
- Carnaghi, A., & Maass, A. (2007). In-group and out-group perspectives in the use of derogatory group labels: Gay versus fag. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 26(2), 142–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X07300077>
- Cervone, C., Augoustinos, M., & Maass, A. (2021). The language of derogation and hate: Functions, consequences, and reappropriation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 40(1), 80–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X20967394>
- (Clarke, V., & Peel, E. Eds.) (2007). *Out in psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470713099>
- Coyle, A., & Wilkinson, S. (2002). Social psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay issues in Europe: The state of the art. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 12, 147–152. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.668>
- Ditchfield, H. (2021). Ethical challenges in collecting and analysing online interactions. In J. Meredith, D. Giles, & W. Stommel (Eds.), *Analysing digital interaction. Palgrave studies in discursive psychology* (pp. 23–40). Palgrave Macmillan.
- ECRI. (2019). *ECRI report on Finland*. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-finland/1680972fa7>
- Edley, N. (2001). Analysing masculinity: Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, & S. J. Yates (Eds.), *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis* (pp. 189–228). Sage.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology*. Sage.
- Ellis, E. M. (2022). *"I Feel Very Hesitant about Who I Allow to Get Genetically Close to Me": Exploring the Impact of Discrimination and Psychological Trauma on Suicidality among LGBTQ+ Populations*. University of Georgia ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Fasoli, F., Paladino, M. P., Carnaghi, A., Jetten, J., Bastian, B., & Bain, P. G. (2016). Not 'just words': Exposure to homophobic epithets leads to dehumanizing and physical distancing from gay men. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(2), 237–248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2148>
- Ferrucci, F. (2020). For a bottom-up approach to the linguistic and legal definition of hate speech. A case study of offences against women. In G. Giusti & G. Iannàcaro (Eds.), *Language, gender and hate speech: A multidisciplinary approach* (pp. 167–180). Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
- Franzke, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Gill, R. (2000). Discourse analysis. In M. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative research with text, image and sound: A practical handbook* (pp. 172–190). Sage.
- Gorenc, N. (2022). Hate speech or free speech: an ethical dilemma? *International Review of Sociology – Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 32(3), 413–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2022.2133406>
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.
- Gustafsson, M. (2019). Poliisin pöydällä muhivat tutkinta-pyyntö kolmesta ansan-edustajasta: Sdp:n Hussein Al-Taeen kirjoitukset saattavat sittenkin päätyä rikos-prosessiin [The police have investigation requests of three MPs on their table: The writings of Hussein Al-Taeen may after all end up in a legal process]. Helsingin Sanomat. <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000006193627.html>
- Gustafsson, M. (2022). Syyttäjä vaatii Päivi Räsäselä 120:tä päiväsakkoa kiihottamisrikoksista – HS seurasi oikeudenkäyntiä hetki hetkeltä [The prosecutor demands 120 day-fines for Päivi Räsänen for criminal incitements – HS followed the minutes of the trial]. Helsingin Sanomat. Available at: <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000008545023.html> (Accessed 4th January 2024)
- Hauser, G. A. (2007). Vernacular discourse and the epistemic dimension of public opinion. *Communication Theory*, 17(4), 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00299.x>
- Horsti, K. (2015). Techno-cultural opportunities: Anti-immigration movement in the Finnish media environment. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(4), 343–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1074371>
- Jacobs, J. B., & Potter, K. (1998). *Hate crimes: Criminal law & identity politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Järvensivu, T. (2020). Oikeus puhua uskosta: uskonnollinen ilmaisu sanan- ja uskonnonvapauden sekä vihapuheen näkökulmasta [The right to speak about faith: religious expression from the perspective of freedom of speech, religion and hate speech]. Tampere University.
- Kervinen, E. (2020a). Eduskunta kielsi odotetusti Mäenpään syyttämisen – Tapaus on silti tärkeä kahdesta syystä [As expected, parliament forbid the criminal charging of Mäenpää – the case is nevertheless interesting for two reasons]. Helsingin Sanomat. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006552883.html>
- Kervinen, E. (2020b). Eduskunta ei antanut lupaa syyttää Juha Mäenpää – Näin kansan-edustajat äänestivät [Parliament did not permit to raise charges against Mäenpää – this is how the MPs voted]. Helsingin Sanomat. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006552992.html>
- Kitzinger, C., & Coyle, A. (2002). Introducing lesbian and gay psychology. In A. Coyle, & C., Kitzinger, C. (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: New perspectives* (pp. 1–29). Blackwell Publishing.
- Lemmens, K. (2015). Hate speech in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights – Good intentions make bad law? In A. Ellian & G. Molier (Eds.), *Freedom of speech under attack* (pp. 135–162). Eleven International Publishing.
- Martinsson, L., & Ericson, M. (2023). 'Fight pandemics with protective masks or gender?' Emerging collective identities and anti-gender movements on Twitter during the COVID-19 crisis in Sweden. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(5), 2011–2027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2009898>
- Maussen, M., & Grillo, R. (2014). Regulation of speech in multicultural societies: Introduction. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(2), 174–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2013.851470>
- Mäki, M. (2020). Kansanedustaja Päivi Räsänen saa apua huippujuristeilta, jotka edustavat kansainvälistä kristillistä oikeistoa [MP Päivi Räsänen receives support from top lawyers who represent the international right-

- wing Christian movement]. Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle. <https://yle.fi/a/3-11239941>
- Norocel, O. C., & Băluță, I. (2023). Retrogressive mobilization in the 2018 'Referendum for Family' in Romania. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70(2), 153–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1987270>
- Norocel, O. C., & Paternotte, D. (2023). The dis/articulation of anti-gender politics in Eastern Europe: Introduction. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70(2), 123–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2176075>
- Norocel, O. C., & Pettersson, K. (2022). Imbrications of gender and religion in Nordic radical right populism. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 29(4), 429–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2021.1990542>
- Norocel, O. C., & Pettersson, K. (2023). Anti-gender politics in Finland and Romania. European Journal of Politics and Gender. Advance Online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16832281009645>
- Norocel, O. C., Saresma, T., Lähdesmäki, T., & Ruotsalainen, M. (2020). Discursive Constructions of White Nordic Masculinities in Right-wing Populist Media. *Men and Masculinities*, 23(3–4), 425–446. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x18780459>
- Paternotte, D. (2023). Victor Frankenstein and his creature: The many lives of 'gender ideology'. *International Review of Sociology*, 33(1), 80–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>
- Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2017). The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-Gender campaigns in Europe. Mobilizations against equality* (pp. 253–276). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pettersson, K. (2019). 'Freedom of speech requires actions': Exploring the discourse of politicians convicted of hate-speech against Muslims. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(5), 938–952. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2577>
- Pettersson, K. (2020). The discursive denial of racism by Finnish populist radical right politicians accused of anti-Muslim hate speech. In O. C. Norocel, A. Hellström, & M. B. Jørgensen (Eds.), *Nostalgia and hope: Intersections between politics of culture, welfare, and migration* (pp. 35–50). Springer.
- Pettersson, K., & Augoustinos, M. (2021). Elite political discourse on refugees and asylum seekers: The language of social exclusion. In C. Tileagă, K. Durrheim, & M. Augoustinos (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping* (pp. 261–272). Routledge.
- Pettersson, K., & Sakki, I. (2017). 'Pray for the Fatherland!' Discursive and digital strategies at play in nationalist political blogging. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 14(3), 315–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1290177>
- Pettersson, K., & Sakki, I. (2020). Analysing multimodal communication and persuasion in populist radical right political blogs. In M. Demasi, S. Burke, & C. Tileagă (Eds.), *Political communication. Palgrave studies in discursive psychology* (pp. 175–203). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Pettersson, K., & Sakki, I. (2023). 'You truly are the worst kind of racist!': Argumentation and polarization in online discussions around gender and radical-right populism. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 62, 119–135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12557>
- Pettersson, K., Martikainen, J., Hakoköngäs, E., & Sakki, I. (2023). Female Politicians as Climate Fools: Intertextual and Multimodal Constructions of Misogyny Disguised as Humor in Political Communication. *Political Psychology*, 44(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12814>
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality. Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. Sage.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. Sage.
- Saari, R., & Koskinen, H. J. (2022). Recognition, religious identity, and populism: Lessons from Finland. In P. Slotte, N. H. Gregersen, & H. Årsheim (Eds.), *Internationalization and re-confessionalization: Law and religion in the Nordic realm 1945–2017* (pp. 315–336). University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Sedler, R. A. (1992). The Unconstitutionality of Campus Bans on Racist Speech: The View from without and within. *53 University of Pittsburgh Law Review Journal*, 631, 684.
- Sakki, I., & Pettersson, K. (2016). Discursive constructions of otherness in populist radical right political blogs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(2), 156–170. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2142>
- Saresma, T., Karkulehto, S., & Varis, P. (2021). Gendered violence online: Hate speech as an intersection of misogyny and racism. In M. Husso, S. Karkulehto, T. Saresma, A. Laitila, J. Eilola, & H. Siltala (Eds.), *Violence, gender and affect: Interpersonal, institutional and ideological practices* (pp. 221–243). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Setälä, E. (2021). Sateenkaariperheet Suomessa: arki, kokemukset, oma ääni. Sateenkaariperheiden haastattelujen affektiivis-diskursiivinen analyysi [Rainbow families in Finland: everyday life, experiences, their own voice. Affective-discursive analysis of interviews with rainbow families]. University of Helsinki.
- Strandén, A. (2022). *Not every act motivated by religion is protected – The interrelations between freedom of religion, freedom of expression and hate speech based on sexual orientation in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights*. Åbo Akademi University.
- Verkuyten, M. (2013). Justifying discrimination against Muslim immigrants: Out-group ideology and the five-step social identity model. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 52(2), 345–360. Portico. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02081.x>
- Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and poststructuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & Society*, 9(3), 387–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926598009003005>
- Wetherell, M., & Potter, J. (1992). *Mapping the language of racism: Discourse and the legitimation of exploitation*. Columbia University Press.
- Winiewski, M., Hansen, K., Bilewicz, M., Soral, W., Świdarska, A., & Bulska, D. (2017). *Contempt speech, hate speech. Report from research on verbal violence against minority groups*. Stefan Batory Foundation. www.ngofund.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Contempt_Speech_Hate_Speech_Full_Report.pdf

How to cite this article: Pettersson, K., & Norocel, O. C. (2024). Vernacular constructions of the relationship between freedom of speech and (potential) hate speech: the case of Finland. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 54, 701–714. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3045>

APPENDIX: LINKS TO THE NEWS ARTICLES AND THE ANALYSED COMMENTS

Case of Juha Mäenpää

Kervinen, E. (2020). Eduskunta kielsi odotetusti Mäenpään syyttämisen – Tapaus on silti tärkeä kahdesta syystä [As expected, parliament forbid the criminal charging of Mäenpää – the case is nevertheless interesting for two reasons]. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available at <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-200006552883.html> (accessed 4 January 2024).

Kervinen, E. (2020). 'Elämme absurdeja aikoja', 'Meidänkin tekemme ovat rangaistavia' – Eduskunnassa keskusteltiin perus-suomalaisten Mäenpään syyttämisluvasta ['We live in absurd times', 'Also our actions are punishable' – Parliament discussed the permission to

charge Mäenpää of the Finns Party]. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available at <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006550570.html> (accessed 4 January 2024).

Kervinen, E. (2020). Perustuslakivaliokunta esittää, että eduskunta antaa suostumuksensa Juha Mäenpään syytteeseen asettamiselle [The constitutional assembly proposes that parliament agrees to go forward with criminal charges against Juha Mäenpää]. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available at <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006543863.html> (Accessed 4 January 2024).

Kervinen, E. (2020). Kokoomus luopui ryhmäkurista, myös keskustassa jokainen kansan-edustaja saa harkita itse, miten äänestää Juha Mäenpään syyttämislupa-asiassa [Coalition party abandons group-

discipline, also in the Centre party every MP may decide individually how to vote in the Juha Mäenpää case]. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available at <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006549813.html> (accessed 4 January 2024).

Case of Päivi Räsänen

Gustafsson, M. (2022). Syyttäjä vaatii Päivi Räsäselä 120:tä päiväsakkoa kiihottamisrikoksista – HS seurasi oikeudenkäyntiä hetki hetkeltä [The prosecutor demands 120 day-fines for Päivi Räsänen for criminal incitements – HS followed the minutes of the trial]. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available at: <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000008545023.html> (accessed 4 January 2024).