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Absolutely For or Definitely Against. The Compatibility of Extreme Political and Pandemic Views of Social Media Users

Keywords: pandemic discourse, political discourse, social media users, COVID-19 pandemic, polarisation

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs pandemiczny, dyskurs polityczny, użytkownicy mediów społecznościowych, pandemia COVID-19, polaryzacja

Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, significant changes occurred worldwide due to the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. To slow the spread of the disease, a pandemic was announced and restrictions were introduced. This reorganised the overall functioning of societies in most countries (Stawasz and Sikora-Fernandez, 2021). One of the most important aspects of life during the pandemic crisis was media communication.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media provided the environment for constructing pandemic discourse. Politicians, journalists, celebrities, medics, and government bodies were important creators shaping the online public debate (Guo et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2021; Schillinger et al., 2020). Materials published on social media served as the basis for forming views and beliefs that created separate, often mutually exclusive narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic. These differences have led to divisions among Internet users in how they perceive many pandemic-related threads. Government actions, such as sanitary restrictions and medical measures, appeared to be the subject of contention. Social media users reacted in different ways, also depending on their political preferences.

The purpose of the present research was to examine the associations exist between the extreme political views and pandemic perspectives of the studied social media users. To verify this issue, the focus was on as the following aspects: 1) the order to cover mouths and noses in public spaces; 2) the legitimacy of introducing and maintaining lockdowns; 3) vaccination; and 4) maintaining social distance.

1. Elements of pandemic discourse: social media, anti-epidemic regulation, political communication

As with the earlier viral threats of 2003 SARS, 2009 H1N1 and 2012 MERS, the media had a role in intensifying infodemics (Anwar et al., 2020). Communication through social media provided an opportunity to shorten the time required to report on epidemiological developments and, consequently, to shorten the time required for emergency response (Lusińska and Miłoszewska-Podrażka, 2023). At the same time, the infrastructure of social networks facilitated the spread of disinformation (Paszek and Sitko, 2020). Social media created a communication environment with an excess of inaccurate and even contradictory messages that may be inadvertently or deliberately propagated by specific individuals and groups (Mirbabaie et al., 2020). At the same time, the decline in trust in mainstream media led to greater visibility and the proliferation of channels with antagonistic content. Alternative and opposition media are often considered "corrective" to the public media. They are described by their followers as "free" and, by virtue of their diversity, are better able to represent their worldview (Boberg et al., 2020).

In the pandemic reality, social media became one of the main channels of communication (Lusińska and Miłoszewska-Podrażka, 2023), but the information posted there did not always come from a credible and reliable source (Sikorski, 2021). The disinformation created space for various theories about the coronavirus to emerge, as well as the means to create and develop online communities focused on them (Chojnacka-Kuraś and Falkowska, 2023). One of the reasons for the reassertion of unscientific theories may be the filter bubbles that contribute to the polarisation of society (Gupta et al., 2023; Jafarinejad et al., 2021; Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021), intensifying mutual biases between different social groups, which may result in an even greater radicalisation of supporters of alternative information circulation. The progressive radicalisation does not stop at the development of informal discussion groups, but is also moving into public spaces (Jankowiak, 2021).

The prolonged health crisis and declining public trust in mainstream media led to increased searches for pandemic-related information on alternative media (Brylska, 2021). Social media played an important role in seeking opinions, offering membership in discussion groups (Boberg et al., 2020; Demczuk, 2022).

Declining trust in authorities and medical professionals has led to numerous protests and distrust of mainstream news coverage (Domosławska-Żylińska et al., 2022). In addition to debates over the efficacy and necessity of recommended precautions, such as social distancing and mask-wearing (Al-Ramahi et al., 2021), disputes over vaccination and the legitimacy of lockdowns continued in public spaces. The dividing lines ran particularly clearly between representatives of extreme political options, i.e., far right and far left.

According to the concept of I. Budge and D. Farlie (1977), understanding how political parties establish their programmatic identity in the public consciousness is essential for placing political groupings along the right-left axis. This shaping is done through leaders' statements that promote their party/election program. On this basis, a catalogue of programmatic issues is identified, and their relevance to programmatic distance is then assessed, i.e., the degree of divergence in programmatic views between the parties. The left side of the scale signifies the recurring ideas of support for state interventionism, the concept of social benefits, and the promotion of workers' rights. The right side is characterised by capitalist economics, freedom and civil rights (Sokół, 2005). The left-right conceptual diad, though somewhat vague, has a significant role in public discourse and in social consciousness. This gives the political dichotomy a useful research axis (Wojtasik, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parties spoke out in the public debate on various aspects of health and safety, as well as the economy. The most extreme stances in Poland were taken by two groups from opposite political directions, both opposition parties to the government: Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Freedom and Independence Confederation) and Lewica (Left) (Kołczyńska, 2022). Confederation politicians opposed pandemic restrictions and even questioned the legitimacy of imposing an epidemic state, claiming there was no real threat to justify such measures (CBOS, 2022). Left-wing politicians, on the other hand, believed the government's actions were not radical enough and proposed tightening restrictions and making vaccination universally mandatory (PAP, 2022). In this context, it is important to determine the relationship between stated views on key pandemic regulations and the political views of Polish social media users, as has been observed in other countries (Santamaria, 2021; Wang and Catalano, 2022).

2. Methods

2.1. Design of the study and participants

To answer the question posed, individual in-depth interviews were conducted to gather opinions from the cohort of respondents on messages related to the pandemic discourse. These messages were conveyed by opinion leaders, including

journalists, politicians, celebrities, medics, associations and medical organisations representing extreme political options. The research used an interview scenario enriched with materials posted on Facebook and YouTube about the sanitary regime during the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination against the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

The research group consisted of 12 Polish citizens (6 men and 6 women). The sample selection was purposive. Half of the respondents held far-left views, and half held far-right views. The respondents were between 18 and 26 years old. The choice of this age group was dictated by the particular exposure to the adverse effects of social media in this population (Tomczyk, 2018). Respondents with right-wing views were recruited on Facebook based on their activity in discussion groups sympathetic to politicians of the Freedom and Independence Confederation, such as Grzegorz Braun, Krzysztof Bosak, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, and Sławomir Mentzen. Respondents with left-wing views were recruited in discussion groups associated with politicians of the Left, such as Krzysztof Śmiszek, Robert Biedroń, Adrian Zandberg and Włodzimierz Czarzasty.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The research used a voluntary, anonymous, open-ended, individual, oral interview conducted online via communication platforms such as Discord, Skype and MS Teams, adapting to the diverse needs of respondents. The questionnaire was constructed based on separate thematic categories. It consisted of 34 open--ended questions and 16 illustrative materials, i.e., screenshots of Facebook posts and videos published on Facebook and YouTube between April 20, 2020 and February 21, 2022 (Fig. 1). These materials were shown to the respondents during the interview, moving from one question to the next. For each material, respondents were asked two questions about its content. The selection of materials was dictated by the topics relating to, in turn, 1) covering one's mouth and nose in public spaces, 2) keeping a social distance, 3) approaches to COVID-19 vaccination, and 4) the introduction of economic blockades called lockdowns. The selection of illustrative materials was guided by the principle of symmetry: both poles, for and against a given issue, were represented by one illustrative material each time. Among the communicators were right- and left-wing politicians from opposition parties, medics, journalists, social movements, public figures (celebrities), and state bodies. The study was conducted in Poland between July 20 and 27, 2022, during the ongoing epidemic. Interviews lasted 38 to 63 minutes, averaging 52 minutes. The entire interview was recorded and then transcribed.

Transcriptions were analysed using thematic coding. The coding was done manually, without any software. Each of the four thematic categories was coded for 1) respondents' opinions and arguments on a given pandemic issue, 2) opinions and arguments on a given illustrative material from social media, and 3) possible

Grzegorz Braun, Member of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland for the ninth term. Live broadcast on Facebook, broadcast from Grzegorz Braun's official website on 06.11.2021. – 'Stop Sanitary Segregation' – Protest in front of the Sejm against the Niedzielski bill.	Robert Kubica, sportsman, Ambassador of the National Vaccination Programme 'The Last Straight'. Posted on Facebook on SzczepimySię profile on 17.05.2021.	Krzysztof Smiszek, Member of Parliament of the Republic of Poland of the ninth term. Posted on Krzysztof Smiszek's official Facebook profile on 17.10.2020.	It's Only a Theory, popular science journalist Lukasz Sakowski. Posted on To Tylko Teoria's official Facebook profile on 03.06.2020.
Ministry of Health, post made on the official Facebook profile of the Ministry of Health on 21.02.2022.	Grzegorz Braun, Member of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland for the ninth term. Post posted on Grzegorz Braun's official profile on 15.01.2022.	Appeal of Scientists and Doctors, an association of independent scientists and doctors. Posted on Facebook, on the official profile of the Appeal of Scientists and Doctors on 20.03.2021.	Robert Kubica, athlete, Ambassador of the National Vaccination Programme, 'The Last Straight'. Posted on Facebook on the official profile of Robert Kubica on 21.10.2020.
Wojciech Cejrowski, traveller. Video posted on YouTube on the official channel of Wojciech Cejrowski, 'What is to be done by the government 2021/11/24 Radio Press Review episode 1072' on 04.12.2021.	Ministry of Health, video posted on YouTube on the official channel of the Ministry of Health, 'Leaving the house? Cover your mouth and nose!' on 20.04.2020.	Marcin Rola, political journalist. Video published on YouTube on the official channel of the National Media, 'Masked Gestapo, plandemic, coronavirus, covid-19' on 05.08.2020.	Krzysztof Smiszek, Member of Parliament of the Republic of Poland for the ninth term. Posted on Krzysztof Smiszek's official Facebook profile on 05.12.2021.
This Only Theory, popular science journalist Lukasz Sakowski. Posted on To Tylko Teoria's Facebook profile on 14.10.2020.	Wojciech Cejrowski, traveller. Posted on The Wojciech Cejrowski official Facebook profile on 26.01.2021.	Marcin Rola, political journalist. Posted on Facebook on the official profile of Marcin Rola – MIKROBLOG on 27.12.2020.	Appeal of Scientists and Doctors, an Association of Independent Scientists and Doctors. Posted on Facebook, on the official profile of Appeal of Scientists and Doctors on 23.03.2021.

Fig. 1. Set of materials used during interviews with respondents

connections between the respondents' opinions on pandemic issues and political issues. The study was exploratory. With the assumption of four main categories, subcategories of opinions and arguments characteristic of each of the main strands of analysis were identified in the course of inductive coding. They were then synthesised into two meta-categories: for and against. Finally, they were juxtaposed with the respondents' declared political views.

3. Results

3.1. General findings

The study showed that the respondents' views on most issues discussed align with those of the extreme right and the extreme left, respectively. Respondents ideologically identified with the right most often identified the sanitary restrictions introduced as a restriction of their freedom. By this, they meant: violation of freedom of speech, restriction of freedom of movement, restriction of personal freedoms (order to cover mouth and nose with a protective mask, forced vaccination), restriction of consumer freedoms (temporary inability to use services and trade during the lockdown). They spoke unfavourably of state control over compliance with the restrictions.

Respondents who held left-wing beliefs most often supported state intervention in the COVID-19 pandemic, believing that government decisions were aimed at ensuring citizens' safety. They often stated that safety and health were greater values to them than individual freedom and believed that the government should take far more radical steps, similar to those implemented by countries that have enforced mandatory vaccination and total lockdown. They were willing to support the introduction of compulsory vaccination, that is, state-enforced regulations requiring citizens to be vaccinated.

3.2. Order to cover mouth and nose in public spaces

All respondents who expressed opposition to the injunction to cover their mouths and noses identified as right-wing. Among respondents in favour of the injunction, two respondents held right-wing views, and the other four held left--wing views.

Against

"[…] they didn't ask people if they had any respiratory problems, […] if they entered a bus or any building, a person who wasn't wearing a mask, well, they were still the so-called second category [of people], they were the inferior persons just because they weren't suffocating in a mask" (Respondent #8).

Respondents assessed that those who chose not to comply with the requirement to wear a protective mask were seen as criminals, and that the consequences of such behaviour included fines issued by the police. Some right-wing respondents also expressed the hope that someday the decision-makers of the pandemic restrictions would be investigated and prosecuted for their unlawful actions.

Right-wing respondents argued that the mask can only trap water vapour and carbon dioxide, but certainly not the virus. This is because the virus is smaller than water molecules, so it can pass through a mask. In their view, the Ministry of Health contradicted itself by first issuing an order requiring the use of masks

made of any fabric, and later announcing a ban on their use because they were found not to provide proper protection. They emphasised that the recommendation to wear a mask was not followed because it was not convincing, and "acquitted" those acting similarly: "[O]n the basis of some more legal-naturalism, philosophy of law, and not necessarily what as law was established, [individuals] had no such obligation […], so I don't think they are guilty" (Respondent #9).

For

"[…] the most important thing is human life and safety, and of course it is known that a person needs freedom and so on, but the moment this freedom touches other people, you have to be able to put some limits […]. Yes, it was an intervention that was just to help, so I don't think it was segregation by any means" (Respondent #12).

According to leftist respondents, individual freedom is an important value, but when the welfare of the general public is taken care of, appropriate action must be taken. COVID-19 was believed to be a disease, so wearing masks was meant to save lives and health, and the order was followed by reasonable people who understood the need to comply. Any form of protecting oneself and others was good. Respondents even supported covering the mouth and nose with fabrics not designed for this, explaining that it was primarily important to reduce the extent of the suspension escaping the respiratory tract: "It's simply about reducing the pressure by a lot when you cough or sneeze, right? Getting the air out, spreading it all around. Also, I think there is some sense to it" (Respondent #3).

Some left-wing respondents tested various masks themselves for permeability and, in their opinion, did not deviate from the information presented on the substance's permeability. One respondent replied that any cystic fibrosis doctor would confirm that a medical mask has this expected effect.

The legitimacy of introducing and maintaining lockdowns

Five respondents supported temporarily shutting down the economy to reduce coronavirus transmission, while 7 people considered it a negative practice. All those who were opposed, described their views as right-wing. Respondents who favoured the introduction and maintenance of lockdown declared mainly leftist beliefs.

Against

According to right-wing respondents, the lockdown was an unnecessary and harmful measure. In the initial phase of anxiety and misunderstanding of the crisis, such steps could have been taken, but prolonging and even tightening the economic lockdown was unjustified. The example of other countries that approached the issue in a less radical way was cited, and as a result, they mastered the increase in unemployment caused by the lockdown.

It was emphasised how important it was to close catering establishments that had thrived before the pandemic but had to declare bankruptcy due to a lack

of income. The perspective of parents who could not work because they could not leave their children in educational institutions was also mentioned. Problems of various kinds arose on both the employee and employer sides. One of the consequences noted was the gradual rise in inflation.

Respondents objected to the restrictions on dining establishments, which introduced limited seating for customers and did not allow people without a vaccination certificate. They even used comparisons to incidents occurring during World War II, when certain national and ethnic groups were not allowed into restaurants. Lockdown was considered to be subjecting citizens to state control: "[…] further economic blockades and other guidelines…, it was unnecessary. Other countries began to loosen these restrictions over time, and it worked out well for them. Losses such as unemployment, illness and death […] were reduced. [In Poland] people couldn't leave their homes because they could be stopped by the police and asked where they were going and why. It was worse than under communism" (Respondent #7).

One respondent confessed that, over time, she became afraid to leave the house. The sight of police officers caused fear in her, and she experienced increased panic caused by the long restriction period, paradoxically, becoming less afraid of the virus and getting sick. According to the respondents, physical and mental health were overlooked when the lockdown was introduced. No solutions were proposed to improve people's overall well-being. Social ties were also neglected. Despite the lockdown, people with COVID-19 died, and patients who were in serious condition were not allowed to contact their families, and it was very common for people to die alone.

"[…] often these actions, well, not only were they not legally established, but they also took away a certain sense of dignity from people, […] also depriving them of work. They drove people into depression, all sorts of other illnesses. They were so illogical that in my opinion they were illegal" (Respondent #1).

Respondents remembered that people who criticised government actions were vilified in the media, and that journalistic campaigns were staged against them to discredit them in the public eye. They also mentioned associations with communism, when there was a curfew and security forces conducted patrols on the streets.

For

Left-wing respondents said that it was through civil indiscipline and people's tendency to deny the need to comply with pandemic recommendations that the government was forced to increase the severity of existing restrictions. The prolonged lockdown was therefore a reaction to people's behaviour, as their misbehaviour was rapidly contributing to increased infections.

According to those studied, the lockdown was the most drastic of the restrictions introduced, and thus convinced many that the coronavirus was a serious threat. Previously, the risk of contracting the disease and the possibility of loss of health or life had been downplayed. Awareness that this was not another

temporary media sensation but a real danger prompted some to comply with the sanitary restrictions.

Respondents argued that the public should not have a say in decisions that would have negative repercussions for society as a whole. They stressed that many places could be opened, but only with a complete sanitation regime. One respondent expressed the belief that some part of the people would never adjust to the restrictions imposed voluntarily and would always resist: "[A]fter all, I think that certainly limiting all this human contact was a good step. And I think the drag [of the pandemic] is mainly the fault of the people" (Respondent #12).

Respondents spoke favourably of the government's financial support, noting that the government had pursued a policy of helping companies in a genuine attempt to mitigate the effects caused by the coronavirus outbreak: "[T]he government also tried to do a lot of things to keep this economy going, in the sense of these different companies. Companies could get subsidies. […]. It's hard to make decisions in difficult conditions so that they are good for everyone" (Respondent #5).

According to those representing leftist views, the introduction of lockdown was advisable, although certain solutions should have been much more thought out. They pointed out that the restrictions were not tailored to specific communities, and this was the main reason for their opposition. Respondents, based on their own experiences, claimed they did not face discrimination against people who did not wear masks or did not want to take advantage of the vaccination opportunity.

3.3. Vaccination against SARS-CoV-2

Five respondents said vaccination was a necessary and appropriate step in the fight against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, while 6 expressed opposition to vaccination. One person remained neutral. All voices opposing vaccination came from respondents who held right-wing views. The group of respondents in favour of vaccination was divided between 4 left-wing respondents and 1 right-wing respondent. The undecided person identified with leftist views.

Against

Right-wing respondents argued that the great unknown was the main reason for not vaccinating. Since the vaccine had not been sufficiently tested and was based on a new mechanism of action, it could take several years to detect possible side effects. Respondents also showed a lack of trust in the World Health Organization. They backed up their concerns by stating that pharmaceutical companies are reaping huge financial benefits from sick people, creating a business based on the sale of drugs and dietary supplements: "[…], using a vaccine, when there is no 100 percent certainty of its effectiveness, is unethical. And buying, as our government has done, in such a way that they have purchased so many vaccines that every Polish citizen could be vaccinated five times is another (vulgar) idea" (Respondent #6).

Respondents were sceptical of vaccination, stating that such a little-studied preparation administered to humans, with an incompletely known composition that could harm the body in the long run, should not be considered safe. It was considered that the vaccine could be more dangerous than contracting the coronavirus. Respondents mentioned post-vaccination complications that can begin to appear several years after receiving the vaccine. They also cited cases where people died a short time after receiving it.

Many numerical manipulations were perceived in the statistics. Respondents referred to COVID statistics sceptically, citing various aspects of infection diagnosis that were unclear. Respondents opposed to vaccination agreed with calls for an open public debate on the issue, which they said was absent in the mainstream media, barring isolated incidents, after which journalists even lost the right to broadcast their programs.

For

Proponents of vaccination expressed confidence in scientists and doctors, claiming that the vaccine had been thoroughly tested before it reached the market. They stressed that everyone should be vaccinated for the public good, to prevent excess coronavirus deaths and to help relieve the burden on overburdened health institutions. Hospitals and clinics were filled with patients infected with or suspected of having coronavirus. They had priority, so patients with other conditions had to wait longer for admission and treatment.

Respondents believed that, because of those who did not get vaccinated, hospitals were overcrowded and doctors could not help people in need. It was believed that unvaccinated individuals put a strain on the healthcare budget. The funds allocated for treating people with SARS-CoV-2 and post-COVID complications were so substantial that they could potentially cover surgeries or subsidised treatments for other patients. It was added that, even if the obligation to vaccinate faced social resistance, this should not be avoided, because there were higher values than individual freedom, and this must be followed to achieve improvements.

The respondents claimed that the vaccines were safe, and if it were otherwise, it would have been discovered very quickly by the scientists: "[I]nstead of the whole virus, they give only a fragment of this virus, only this spike protein, which is responsible for causing the disease with the omission of the whole process that this virus has to get into the blood and so on. They give it in an amount there of 1,000 or 10,000 times less to do any harm. The cells quickly eliminate this spike protein and are taught how to fight it in the future" (Respondent #9).

Moreover, in their opinion, the coronavirus vaccine was not an artificial preparation of any kind and had exactly the same effect as previous vaccines used for other infectious diseases. One respondent suggested calling the mRNA-based preparation something other than a "vaccine" if it provoked such dissatisfaction among some people, and made it easier for vaccine opponents to mount further arguments against vaccination.

3.4. Maintaining social distancing

Six people supported maintaining social distance, describing it as effective, while 5 considered the order unnecessary. One person abstained from giving an opinion on the issue. The 5 respondents who were against represented the right-wing option. Among those in favour of social distancing were 5 respondents with left-wing views and one with right-wing beliefs. The abstainer expressed right-wing views.

Against

Opponents of social distancing believed it made no sense. They gave the example of customers in a restaurant who sat at a distance from each other, but interacted with the same waiter, who could transmit the virus from one guest to another. They felt that the situation did not improve at all after the restrictions were put in place, and that the virus spread anyway, despite the public maintaining the required distance: "Another segregation and another impediment that was simply absurd" (Respondent #7).

According to opponents of social distancing, when the authorities were unable to present logical arguments to justify the actions they were imposing on the public, those in power resorted to threats in the form of financial penalties. The threat of fines effectively silenced the Polish people's opposition. This was described as "the training of society."

It was emphasised that the government was constantly issuing new orders. It withdrew earlier ones, only to reinstate them, and people had to obediently accept it all. An example was given of the Ministry of Health, which issued recommendations to wear visors, only to later ban their use. Reference was also made to the absurdity of closing state forests when the government believed these areas could serve as gathering places for people. In addition, manifestations of hypocrisy by politicians were recalled, such as supporting government action in front of the cameras or from the parliamentary rostrum, while not adhering to these strictures in private. Therefore, respondents said that the public blindly trusted politicians, but some individuals tried to broaden people's perspectives by resisting political pressure.

For

Proponents of social distancing believed this recommendation was beneficial. Despite incidents such as clubs or other venues operating illegally during lockdown, most of the public took the social distancing order seriously, which had a major impact on halting the spread of the virus. It made sense on a practical level: "[…], this is the principle that the virus mainly relies on, droplet transmission" (Respondent #12). It was argued that if such requirements had not been put in place, the pandemic crisis would have been much greater, and many other areas of life would have been negatively affected.

Supporters believed that the restrictions in place in Poland were not as radical as those in China, for example. They considered that it was only a matter of simple

civic obedience to the higher value of human health and life. Restrictions were only there to reduce the incidence of disease. It was also argued that in crowded places such as stores, it was necessary to maintain a certain distance from other shoppers, preferably 2 meters, to prevent people from pushing into each other. The idea of operating hair salons with one customer in the salon and one hairdresser at a distance of 4 meters from other customers was, in their opinion, a reasonable recommendation.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The research conducted provided a broader view of the polarisation of discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic and its relationship to extreme political views. Political parties manifested their views and proposed actions that respondents believed should be taken for the good of the nation. The far right argued that the sanitary restrictions being introduced were excessively extreme and detrimental to individual liberty, while the far left considered them not radical enough. Social media became a battleground between these opposing beliefs (Łotocki and Mikiński, 2022) and inspired the creation of two extreme narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic. Right-wing public activists portrayed the pandemic quite differently from left-wing activists. According to the former, the pandemic may have been planned, and any measures to combat it were an act against citizens' freedom. Left-wing activists, on the other hand, portrayed the pandemic as an unpredictable emergency that requires compliance with government recommendations and the implementation of increasingly radical solutions, which are the domain of civilisation-developed democratic states. The study's results show a strong association between respondents' extreme political views and their perceptions of messages in pandemic discourse. The critical and urgent nature of the recent phenomena, including those concerning the potential loss of health and even life, did not change the consistency of the respondents' views. Generally, these views remained aligned along the axes of extreme political and pandemic views.

In addition, respondents who identified with certain views showed aversion to messages published by authors holding opposing views. The results of the study indicate that social media play a significant role in polarising society's perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. They polarised over the issue of covering the mouth and nose in public spaces, the introduction and maintenance of lockdowns, vaccination and maintaining social distance. At the same time, they affirmed respondents' political views and information bubbles.

It is worth noting the limitations of this study. The first limitation is the small research sample. The research should be treated as exploratory in nature – serving as a starting point for more systematic, large-scale investigations. The study could have provided more detailed data if the research sample had been larger and included representatives of different age groups. Another limitation was the juxtaposition of too extreme views. To gain broader recognition of the issue,

it is necessary to take into account people with centrist views, shifting towards the centre-right and centre-left.

It is worth noting that technological factors, such as social media algorithms, may also have influenced the study's results, as content displayed to Facebook or YouTube users is based on information collected about the user. Searches, interactions, subscriptions or likes on pages, channels and profiles leave a digital footprint that is used to recommend similar content to the user. Respondents with certain views may have been stuck in their information bubbles for a long time, shaped by algorithmic processes. The findings suggest that staying in an information bubble and not being confronted with messages from different worldviews can lead to a gradual displacement of other perspectives and perpetuate the belief that one's own views are the only true ones that do not need correction (Popiołek and Sroka, 2019).

The phenomenon of aversion to people with different views may also have affected the results. Supporters of the left and right are the most polarised group of voters in Polish political discourse (Trudnowski, 2021). This is due to the greatest differences in worldviews and economic beliefs. Contentious issues create mutual resentment and deepen misunderstanding. Some respondents may have answered in a biased manner as a result. Evidence of this is the reference to the political party logos featured on content shown to respondents during interviews. Some respondents stressed that the signature content could not include valuable information. A clear bias toward opinions from the opposing ideological side may limit dialogue on joint problem-solving in crisis situations.

The study, therefore, leads to several practical conclusions. In order to reduce clear divisions and mitigate the resulting negative phenomena, such as prejudice, discrimination, hate speech, reluctance to dialogue and cooperation, the siege fortress syndrome, as well as limiting the broadening of perspectives and views, a number of different measures should be taken. An important element is media education, which would allow users of cyberspace to understand the complex system of new technologies and protect them from the dangers of algorithmic content selection. Education in social and behavioural psychology is also needed. Such knowledge would prepare users to function properly in diverse social groups composed of individuals with a wide range of views and needs.

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S u m m a r y

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period of intensified public discourse on health and politics. At the same time, due to the crucial importance of social media in communication during this health crisis, the risk of social polarisation and hampered communication between supporters of extremely opposing options increased. The purpose of the present research was to explore the relationships between the extreme political views and pandemic perspectives among the studied social media users. To verify this issue, the focus was on as the following: 1) the order to cover mouths and noses in public spaces; 2) the legitimacy of introducing and maintaining lockdowns; 3) vaccination; and 4) maintaining social distancing. The qualitative study was conducted in Poland in 2022. An individual semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted, drawing on an overview of social media material. Twelve participants (six females and six males) took part in the study. The results indicated that, within the surveyed cohort, extreme political views were associated with extreme pandemic views.

Absolutnie za lub zdecydowanie przeciw. Zgodność skrajnych poglądów politycznych i pandemicznych użytkowników mediów społecznościowych

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Okres pandemii COVID-19 był czasem intensyfikacji dyskursu publicznego zarówno w obszarze zdrowia, jak i polityki. Jednocześnie, ze względu na kluczowe znaczenie mediów społecznościowych w komunikacji podczas tego kryzysu zdrowotnego, wzrosło

ryzyko polaryzacji społecznej i utrudnionej komunikacji między zwolennikami skrajnie przeciwstawnych opcji. Celem niniejszego badania było określenie, czy i jakie korelacje istnieją między skrajnymi poglądami politycznymi i pandemicznymi badanych użytkowników mediów społecznościowych. Aby zweryfikować tę kwestię, skupiono się na takich zagadnieniach jak: 1) nakaz zakrywania ust i nosów w przestrzeni publicznej; 2) zasadność wprowadzania i utrzymywania lockdownów; 3) szczepienia; oraz 4) utrzymywanie dystansu społecznego. Badanie jakościowe zostało przeprowadzone w Polsce w 2022 roku. Zastosowano indywidualny, częściowo ustrukturyzowany wywiad pogłębiony z wykorzystaniem materiałów poglądowych pochodzących z mediów społecznościowych. W badaniu wzięło udział dwunastu uczestników (sześć kobiet i sześciu mężczyzn). Wyniki wskazują, że w badanej kohorcie skrajne poglądy polityczne pokrywają się ze skrajnymi poglądami na temat pandemii.