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Polish-language groups related to autism on Facebook – language analysis of the groups' descriptions

Polskojęzyczne grupy związane z autyzmem na Facebooku – analiza językowa opisu grup

Abstract

The aim of the study, grounded in semantics and language discourse, is to examine and describe Polish-language Facebook groups related to autism in terms of the key purposes and needs expressed in the descriptions and names of the groups. The pilot study made it possible to indicate the following categories communicated implicitly and explicitly by the creators of the group descriptions: support (emotional and informational), providing safety and acceptance, exchange of experiences, raising awareness (advocacy and development of parental competencies), socialization, therapy and treatment, advertising and offering services, organization of free time. Research on discourse concerning autism in social media is critical in enhancing the understanding of the social context in which autistic people and their relatives function.

Keywords: social media discourse, language of groups related to autism on Facebook, ASD, explicit and implicit communication, expression of purpose

Abstrakt

Celem badań, których fundament metodologiczny stanowi semantyka i lingwistyka dyskursu, jest opisanie polskojęzycznych grup na Facebooku na temat autyzmu pod kątem kluczowych celów i potrzeb wyrażonych w treści opisów i nazwach grup. Badanie pilotażowe, oparte na semantyce i lingwistyce dyskursu, pozwoliło wskazać następujące kategorie zakomunikowane wprost i pośrednio przez nadawców w opisach grup: wsparcie (emocjonalne, informacyjne), zapewnienie bezpieczeństwa i akceptacji, wymiana doświadczeń, poszerzanie świadomości (rzecznictwo, rozwój kompetencji rodzicielskich), socjalizacja, terapia i leczenie, reklama i oferowanie usług, organizacja czasu wolnego. Badania nad dyskursem na temat autyzmu w mediach społecznościowych mogą pozwolić na lepsze zrozumienie społecznego kontekstu, w którym funkcjonują osoby ze spektrum autyzmu oraz ich rodziny i bliscy.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs mediów społecznościowych, język grup związanych z autyzmem na Facebooku, ASD, komunikowanie wprost i pośrednio, wyrażanie celu

1. Introduction

Facebook has approximately 2.8 billion users worldwide, including 22 million in Poland (Gemius 2023). Among them is the autistic community – people with autism spectrum disorder¹ (ASD), their families and the wider support network (carers, therapists, associations).

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects how people communicate and interact with the world. ICD-11 characterizes autism spectrum disorder as:

persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests or activities...

Facebook enables a wide variety of online communities through its grouping features, which are used by over 1.8 billion users every month (Southern 2021). Facebook Groups can be defined as virtual communities within the social media platform where individuals can come together with their friends, acquaintances, or people with similar interests to engage in conversations and exchange information on a wide range of topics.

The objective of this study is to investigate and describe Polish-language Facebook groups (PLFG) related to autism, with specific attention to the key purposes and needs stated explicitly and implicitly by the creators in the groups' description. The sentences in Polish that comprise these descriptions will constitute the object of explication. This content can be found when you click on the name of the group under the "About" tab (in Polish the tab is called 'Informacje o grupie') above the photos of group members on the page of a specific group (see Fig. 1). Secondly, the study will attempt to answer the question: who is the creator (sender) and the target audience (recipient) of these groups? This pilot study was inspired by Abel et al. (2019) whose primary goal was to discover and describe the stated purposes behind the creation of the English-speaking Facebook groups related to autism.

The following study is based on broadly understood discourse linguistics (Czachur 2020; Van Dijk 2001; Fairclough 2005) as well as a semantic and content analysis. It focuses on linguistic behavior and communication encoded in the content of the groups' descriptions stated by the creators of groups related to autism in Poland. The analysis is grounded in the social and cultural context of the senders and recipients of the analyzed social

¹ The terminology describing autism has been a subject to dynamic changes for many years. For purposes of consistency, this article will use the ICD-11 term autism spectrum disorder (ASD). By this term, the author will also mean autism, Asperger syndrome (Version 01/2023 <https://icd.who.int>).

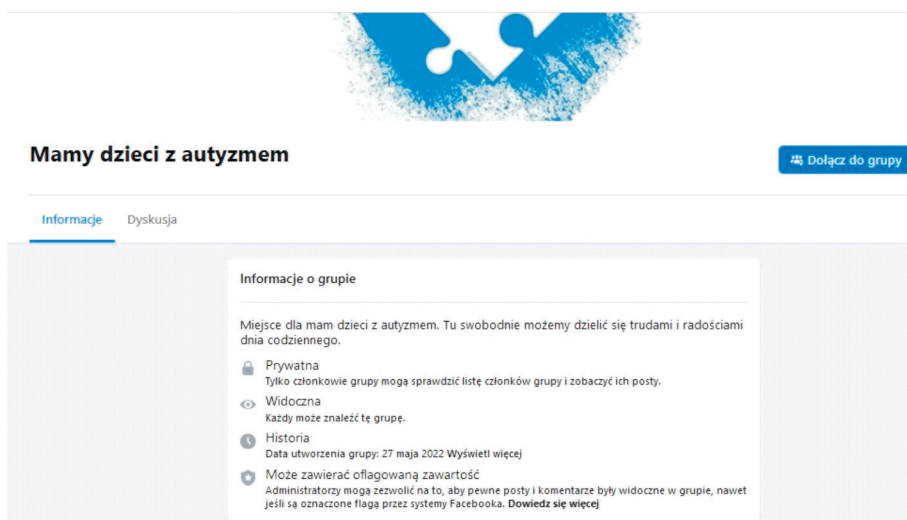


Fig. 1. Screenshot of the Facebook group “Mamy dzieci z autyzmem” (Mothers of children with autism’) and the description of the group in Polish

discourse. Discourse is understood as “a linguistically conditioned system of predicating about the reality and beliefs of a given community, which triggers the mechanism of creating collective meanings and senses” (Czachur 2020: 109). Recalling the words of Fairclough, Czech explains that for instance the critical approach to discourse describes the constructive impact of discourse on social identity, social relations and the system of knowledge and beliefs (Czech 2010: 46). Research on autism language discourse may assist in the process of understanding the social context in which people with ASD, their families and relatives function. Moreover, it may help with the identification of the needs and challenges of people ‘within autism’, as opposed to such people as specialists (doctors, therapists, researchers etc.) verbalizing what the autism community needs, and thus dominating the communicative scene. This project is also an attempt to contribute to the increasing awareness of autism.

2. Method and extraction of data

This linguistic analysis requires the selection of specific discussion groups – groups related to autism, which in a global dimension, will allow the examination and description of stated purposes of not only autistic people but also their families and carers in terms of speech functions and activities such as supporting, advising, informing or advocating. Abel et al.

(2019) investigated about 500 English-language Facebook groups. This current study covered about 120 Facebook groups in Poland. Due to the pilot stage of the study, manual search and coding was employed using the built-in Facebook search engine. The keywords constituting the axis of the search for Facebook groups of my interest were: autyzm (autism), spektrum autyzmu (autism spectrum), Asperger, Aspi, including – due to the declension nature of Polish nouns and adjectives – the genitive, i.e. autyzmu (autism), Aspergera (Asperger’s). All sensitive data has been anonymized.

An extensive coding scheme was used taking into account four types of data (i.e., group description, name, message sender and target recipient) which were placed in an Excel spreadsheet in the form of raw text. Sometimes, the coding process was not obvious as it was not always possible to extract the purpose from the group name. For example, *Grupa wsparcia dla Rodziców – Zespół Aspergera* (‘Support Group for Parents – Asperger’s Syndrome’) has a clearly defined goal and target group, which allowed indisputable coding. On the other hand, *Przystanek Autyzm* (‘Autism Station’) group is less informative in its title, thus making the coding challenging. In fact, information from the group’s description took prominent role in the process of providing data for the analysis.

Most of the coding difficulties involved assigning groups to more than one purpose category. It is worth noting that the process of delimiting separate categories is extremely important, as it often aids observation of certain patterns in science and society. At the same time, it is often a purely academic task for the purpose of organizing data and showing statistics. Language and communicated content, on the other hand, as the data shows, may represent two or more categories, which confirms their multipurposeness. For example, in the group *Rodzice dzieci z autyzmem z Poznania* (‘Parents of children with autism from Poznań’), the goal is dual: *exchange of information, providing support, and even tertiary development of parental competencies*. In such cases, all listed purposes were coded. The description reads: “The main goal of the established group is mutual informational assistance on all issues related to the subject of autism and support for parents in raising children with autism.”²

² All examples and quotations have been translated by the author of the article.

3. Results

The research question, whose aim was to analyze the semantic and discursive content of descriptions and names of PLFG related to autism in terms of the expressed purposes and objectives of individual groups, allowed the identification of the following categories and subcategories communicated by the senders of the created content (see Chart 1):

1. Support a) emotional, b) informational (60%)
2. Providing safety and acceptance (6%)
3. Exchange of experiences (10%)
4. Raising awareness a) advocacy b) development of parenting skills (23%)
5. Socialization (4%)
6. Therapy and treatment (12%)
7. Advertising and offering services (2.5%)
8. Organization of free time (2.5%)

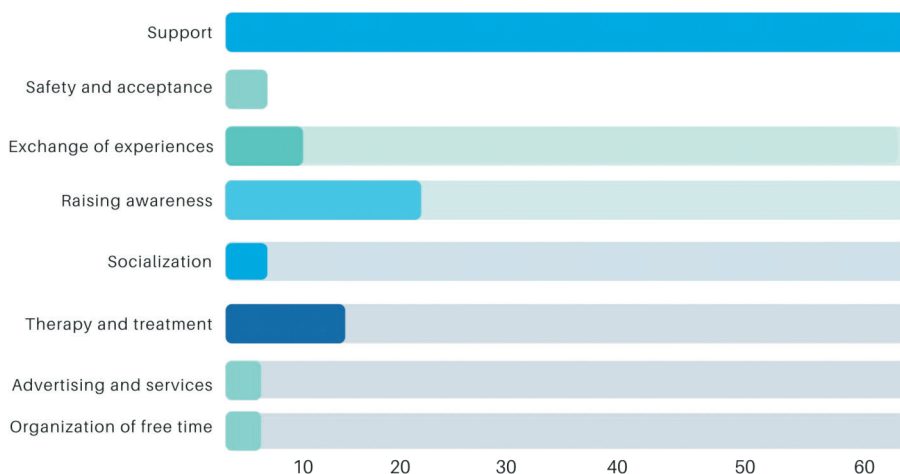


Chart 1. Percentage distribution of stated purposes in Polish-speaking Facebook groups related to autism

3.1. Support groups

Chuang and Yung (2010) state that support groups play a key role in 'trying to tame' the circumstances associated with autism. This research allows us to investigate the challenges of the Polish autism community verbalized online. Research shows that autism related support groups are based on 5 key aspects: a) an attempt to understand autism, b) searching for meaning, c) seeking support in adapting to the changes that have occurred,

d) providing mutual support, e) creating opportunities for narrative exchange of experiences (Huws et.al 2000).

Empirical analysis, comprising both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, investigating language discourse surrounding autism within PLFG, unequivocally demonstrates that the category of *support* stands out as the predominant aim in the hierarchy of objectives and needs within this social domain, accounting for 60% of the analyzed descriptions. Notably, these groups primarily cater to parents of children diagnosed with ASD. The primary purpose of these groups is to furnish parents with not only *emotional support* but also information and practical guidance in their journey of caring for a child with ASD. The platform facilitates the exchange of experiences, dispensation of advice and tips, and offers professional support and guidance to parents. Based on the data, a decision was made to discern multifaceted and intricately detailed aspects within the broad category of *support*, which have been extracted and profiled in the examined group descriptions – namely, *emotional support* and *informational support*.

3.1.1. Emotional support

Linguistic utterances are a component of broadly understood acts of linguistic communication, which consists of “the intentions of the senders, the conditions of use and the effects on the recipients” (Grzegorzczkova 2010: 62). For instance, critical discourse analysis assumes that language is a carrier of a system of beliefs and values held by individuals (Dobrołowicz 2016: 32). Thus, when analyzing sentences that describe a group, the focus was on the stated purposes,³ the so-called reasons for the creation of the group, and thus the needs and values of its broadcasters. The analysis of the very concept of the purpose and its ways of expressing it is a broad issue, which is why the semantic-discursive interpretation covered and coded the content of sentences “announced” by various straightforward (explicit, overt) and nuanced (implicit⁴) syntactic and semantic forms. For example: *the group aims to support parents of children on the autism spectrum...*, the group’s purpose is indeed explicit – support – however, there are more subtle utterances, e.g. *we can share our troubles here, or a group of parents giving*

³ Speaking of the concept of *aim* or *purpose*, I do not mean only the content contained in the specific shape of e.g. the word “aim” – the arrangement of three diacritic signs, but in all other shapes synonymous with the distinguished semantic unit.

⁴ “Language is multilayered and does not show one-to-one correspondence between messages and meaning” (Chaika 1989: 1)

cannabis oil to their children suffering from autism illness. The semantic study of the content of the examined messages showed that the main intention of the researched community is to provide support in raising children as well as assistance with problems and challenges of everyday life, mostly, but not exclusively, to parents. A smaller number of groups which targeted autistic people was also extracted in this study.

- (1) *The main goal of the established group is... to support parents in raising children with autism.*
- (2) *A group for people with autism. We can support one another here.*

The issue of self-help and the principle of reciprocity function in almost all value systems. The analysis illustrates the problem of the lack of systemic, informational and emotional support of the autism community in Poland. This is observed in the great need for reciprocity noted by the high frequency of the adverbs *nawzajem*, *wzajemn-ie/-a* ('each other', 'one another', 'mutual') (over 60 examples).

- (3) *I think that no one is more affected by this than us – we can support one another and help in various situations that happen to us every day...*
- (4) *We can help each other, because the literature [has] its [own perspective] and 24/7 parenting practices already make up an entire encyclopedia.*
- (5) *We operate based on the idea of self-help.*

The broadcasters emphasize the dichotomy of the two worlds, the outside world with no in-depth access to the experiences of people who deal with a given dysfunction on a daily basis, the world of theories and tips that can be found in the reference books on the subject, and the everyday practice of parents. Clements (2019) reports that parents of children with severe autism often experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), similar to the stress of war veterans. It is therefore not surprising that these parents, who are both the senders and the main recipients of the analyzed messages, seek mutual support in a lonely world of misinformation and chaos.

3.1.2. Informational support

Szacki (2005: 95) states that “discourse was transformed into the *par excellence* epistemological category aimed at investigating not so much language systems per se, but the systems of knowledge”. Research shows that there is a need for parents to access information, e.g. about available sources of possible assistance, about doctors, professionals, and to express difficulties in accessing information and sources of support (Gilson et al. 2017). Initially, the category *information exchange* was delineated as a separate part,

which emerged as the most prevalent in statistical measure. Subsequently, an expanded conceptualization of support, including not only emotional but also *informational support*, was embraced, thus encompassing various forms of interaction and transactional exchanges among group members (Bender et al., 2011). A substantial number of sentences were identified that pertained to the exchange of information, e.g.:

- (6) *The main goal of the established group is mutual informational assistance on all issues related to the subject of autism...*
- (7) *I hope that [the group] will become a place of advice, discussion, information, exchange of experiences and we will all benefit from it.*

Research indicates PLFG related to autism wish to establish a platform for the information exchange characterized as “a place of advice, discussion and information”. These groups serve an influential role in shaping opinions, offering parents an opportunity to share insights with both fellow parents and professionals regarding training, therapists, doctors, and child-friendly facilities. The examined category encompasses several functions, such as discussion, mutual information assistance, advice, experience sharing, development, but also casual conversations, inquiries, announcements, warnings. Analyzing social media discourse related to autism may contribute to enhancing the quality of information on autism available to members of the autistic community. The analysis can also help in identifying false or detrimental content and may contribute to the dissemination of reliable and valuable information.

3.2. Ensuring safety and acceptance

The main task of semantics is to elucidate the structure of the content of linguistic expressions (Grochowski 1980: 7), while pragmatics pertains to how people interact with each other through language (Tabakowska 2001). Facebook provides an open environment through which many individuals have started expressing their thoughts or sharing their knowledge. This study reveals another important aspect, namely, specific conditions that need to be met for such exchanges to occur. Descriptions of many groups, as well as their posted netiquette guidelines, highlight the need for a sense of safety, both for parents of children with ASD and individuals on the autism spectrum (6%). Emphasis is placed on creating a friendly space that allows for free conversation and exchange of perspectives without criticism or prejudice. Interestingly, both parents as well as individuals with ASD seek a “haven” with similar-minded individuals, meaning those who share similar

experiences and perceive the world in a similar way. An important aspect of a group is the acceptance and respect for diverse opinions and approaches to the topic of autism. Group members are encouraged to share their own views and experiences without imposing *specific methods, therapeutic approaches* on others.

- (8) *The group is intended to be a friendly zone, free from criticism and prejudice.*
- (9) *We hope that everyone, who finds themselves here, will feel safe.*
- (10) *The group is friendly to all neurodiverse individuals, including LGBTQ...*
- (11) *I am looking for individuals affected by this problem...*
- (12) *...in this space, we should feel accepted even if our opinions differ, and we can maintain respect for differing viewpoints.*

3.3. Exchange of experiences

The sharing of knowledge and experiences within virtual communities has become the subject of extensive research (Shin-Ming Pi et al., 2013). This study demonstrates that the phenomenon of culture based on simultaneous giving and receiving is quite significant among the Polish autism community (10%). Based on the collected data, it can be inferred that the primary purpose and function of experience sharing within the studied groups is not only to provide parents and caregivers of individuals with ASD a space to share their experiences, observations, concerns, but also joys and coping strategies related to caring for an autistic child.

- (13) *The purpose of our Group meetings is to provide each parent with the opportunity to share their observations, concerns, and joys with the group...*
- (14) *The meetings of our Support Group primarily focus on the exchange of experiences and observations...*
- (15) *I hope [the group] will become a space for advice... and the exchange of experiences, benefiting us all.*

A growing body of literature highlights elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among parents of children with autism and ASD (Curley et al., 2023). By being able to share their stories, *...the difficulties they encounter, the accompanying emotions, how they cope with stress, and the solutions they employ...* group members receive support and inspiration from fellow members who also face similar challenges and experience comparable levels of tension and stress on a daily basis.

3.4. Raising awareness

The research on English-speaking Facebook groups related to autism identified the category of *advocacy* as the third most frequently communicated among its senders (Abel et al., 2019: 15). However, studies conducted on Polish material did not distinctly capture this category. Advocacy, understood as public support for an idea, plan, or way of doing something (Cambridge Dictionary Online) is a term that is still emerging in the Polish consciousness. The reason for this is probably one Polish term *rzecznik* for several different titles: *spokesperson/commissioner/ombudsmen* and an *advocate*. It is thus, predominantly associated with constitutional ‘advocacy’, such as *Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich* (‘Commissioner for Human Rights’, ‘The Polish Ombudsmen’, lit. Advocate for Citizen’s Rights), *Rzecznik Praw Dziecka* (‘the Children’s Rights Ombudsman’), or advocates serving as legal representatives or social spokespersons employed by public offices (Necel 2021). Nevertheless, the nature of advocacy is more complex and ambiguous (Boshoff et al., 2016: 2). Moreover, in the context of disability it is of utmost importance and is dynamically evolving within the discourse on autism, something which can be explored in-depth in future research. In this article, *advocacy* is encompassed within the broader category of *raising awareness* (23%), which includes another subcategory – *the development of parenting competencies*.

3.4.1. Advocacy

At this point, we will focus on social advocacy as a grassroots activity of civil society (Necel 2021: 18) and the phenomenon of self-advocacy, and the role of advocates and self-advocates within the Polish autism community (Drzazga-Lech et al. 2021; Boshoff et al. al. 2016). These (self)advocates in the analyzed discourse are understood as all individuals who, by the content stated in their descriptions wish to empower people affected by autism and to protect their rights as well as raise awareness and knowledge about autism both in the autistic environment and amongst the general public, e.g. “A group dedicated for people with Asperger’s Syndrome or anyone who wishes to learn more about it”. It is pertinent to note the identification of the group “Autyzm w badaniach naukowych” (‘Autism in scientific research’) which exclusively focuses on the dissemination of information “about scientific research stricte or indirectly related to autism”.

Linguistic data shows that many creators of the groups anticipate that sharing their child’s diagnosis and providing their family and other group

members with reliable, factual information about the diagnosis, can help dispel myths or misconceptions. Moreover, there is a group of autistic adults whose aim is to be self-advocates among parents of children with ASD and assist in the understanding of their children's world.

- (16) *I would like us to share with one another how you learned about the AS [Asperger's Syndrome], what the process of diagnosis was...*
- (17) *This group is a place where parents of children with autism can ask adults with autism about: How...?*
- (18) *It is beneficial to... provide... information on newly established regional and national autism treatment and diagnostic centers.*
- (19) *"Autism is not cured!" – this is what is most often heard by a parent asking, immediately after diagnosis, whether he or she has a chance of his or her child being healthy... Hence the existence of this group!*

Furthermore, these advocacy efforts aim to foster public awareness by emphasizing that an autism diagnosis does not imply illness or the need for treatment, but rather signifies a distinctive mode of perceiving and responding to the world. The analysis presented above can serve as a valuable tool in identifying the most sought-after and necessary sources of information on autism, not only for those closely associated with autism, such as autistic people, their families, and professionals, but also for the broader public.

3.4.2. Development of parenting skills

Psychology reference books state that, as with typically developing children, parental behaviour can support the development of children with ASD and parents play an important role during many events and interventions⁵ (Cromwell 2019). It is evident through the empirical analysis that group members are motivated to establish a space for enhancing parenting skills and knowledge: "It is a place for those who want to develop their parenting and educational skills". Within these groups, parents express a desire to better manage the symptoms of autistic behavior and engage in discussions related to parenting strategies, supporting children's development, and their learning.

- (20) *This is a group for PARENTS who are looking for a better connection with their children and better ways to manage their ADHD and AS symptoms.*
- (21) *The group aims to support parents of children on the autism spectrum in their daily work for a better future for their children.*

⁵ The term *intervention* in the autism discourse refers to different, systematic therapies, strategies or programs designed to support and address the needs of individuals with ASD.

- (22) *A place where we will inspire one another to take action and make changes to our daily lives.*
- (23) *How to support [the child's] potential and use it for intellectual and cognitive development.*

Notably, there is a gender bias, as the majority who created and wrote the analyzed content revealing their aims are mothers who openly and courageously state that they are learning to be a ‘mum and therapist’ within their life circumstances. The statistical analysis has shown that 75% of administrators of the researched groups in Poland are women, 20% are women and men together and only 5% of groups were created by men. It can be concluded that Polish parents are conscious of their role and responsibility in facilitating their child’s development, encompassing the ideals of advocacy on both micro and macro scales. The senders and receivers are predominantly mothers who, by educating themselves, not only support their own children but also serve as educators to other parents, extending their influence and outreach to the wider community at large.

3.5. Socialization

Social groups, like support groups, are established with the intention of providing support, sharing experiences and creating a friendly place for conversation. Here, however, some groups go beyond the realm of online interactions, prioritizing social integration and facilitating in-person connections *over coffee*. These groups (4%) often have a geographic focus, targeting specific cities or regions to ensure that the objectives outlined in their descriptions can be fulfilled: *The group was set up for parents of children with Asperger’s Syndrome to make it possible to share experiences... and with time meet for coffee*. Research indicates that such groups tend to have a relatively small membership base and primarily cater to parents of children on the autism spectrum. Conversely, the study also identified groups targeted specifically at an audience on the autism spectrum, aiming to facilitate connections and relationships among people with similar deficits. The founders of one of these groups employ a linguistic calque, borrowing the English word “networking” and adapting it to Polish noun declension requirements, i.e. *Grupa powstała w szczególności z myślą o networkingowaniu ASPI* (‘The group was created specifically with networking ASPIs in mind’). Moreover, the name of that group *Atystawka* is noteworthy, as it is an example of a peculiar blending of words, formed by combining *autyzm* (‘autism’) and *ustawka* (‘hook up’), which in slang means arranging a group of people in order, for example, to go to a party (Online dictionary Slang.pl).

3.6. Therapy and treatment

A quantitative analysis allowed me to conclude that 25 per cent of PLFG about autism refer to therapy, treatment, etc. The founders of the groups profile several aspects in their descriptions and names, e.g. home therapy (*Autism – home therapy and support for parents*), children’s therapy (*Therapy/ treatment for children with autism*), therapeutic aids (*Therapeutic and teaching aids – therapy, revalidation, speech therapy*) and advertisements concerning therapy (*Autism – training, workshops, free and recommended therapies*). In such groups, therapists were most often the senders of the message: “I observe, learn, analyze and select methods, techniques, aids and resources tailored to each child.”

The descriptions provided more detailed data which revealed that the primary purpose of therapy and treatment groups is centered around the exchange of information, the sharing of ideas, support, counseling, as well as the exploration of self-help economic strategies.

(24) *Here, we share information about... forms of therapy, treatment and help that have been successful or unsuccessful in your case.*

(25) *How to use what we have at home or can buy for little money, in therapy.*

Several groups concentrating on the so-called “cures” were reported. Some promoted chemical-plant substances and focused on eliminating the “disease” by treating it with *CBD cannabinoid oil [given] to children with autism*. Others were devoted to homeopathy or diet. A group called “*autyzm*” – *BIOMEDYCZNIE* (‘Autism – Biomedical Treatment’) was recorded and whose purpose is to convince its audience of the biochemical and environmental causes of autism. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that within the majority of therapeutic-oriented groups, there is a notable absence of any particular therapy approach (e.g., behavioral therapy) dominating the discourse.

It is crucial to note two simultaneous processes, one demedicalizing, which can be identified within the domain of advocacy and raising awareness about autism, and the other, which in a way reproduces stereotypes and perpetuates strictly medical terminology, such as *choroba*, *leczenie*, *dzieci chore na autyzm*, *walka z autyzmem* (‘disease’, ‘treatment’, ‘children sick with autism’, ‘the fight against autism’) (see footnote 1).

3.7. Advertising and offering services

Among the researched descriptions, a small number of purely commercial groups were identified whose purpose was to advertise, most often, the services offered by specific therapists, e.g. *I am a teacher educating a group of boys with autism*. There were also groups for individuals and companies, which created a space for commercial and non-profit organizations to be posted *both for parents and professionals*. Parents of children on the autism spectrum have also set up a group called *Wymiana, kupię/sprzedam, praca autyzm* ('Exchange, buy/sell, work autism'), the aim of which is to sell or donate used items, therapeutic aids which are redundant and which can still benefit others. Quite recently, a group called *Autyzm Praca* ('Autism Work') has been created, whose aim is to share sites related to employment and workshops for people on the autism spectrum.

3.8. Organization of free time

Reference sources report that people with ASD encounter more difficulties in social interactions compared to people with other disabilities (Houchaser & Engel-Yeger 2010). However, in order to thrive on a social and personal level, it is crucial for all individuals to actively participate in various social contexts. The present study highlights the difficulties faced by parents who have children with autism, particularly in organizing vacations. The findings reveal that within the Polish autistic community on Facebook, there are groups established for the purpose of exchanging information and assisting one another in planning leisure activities. Mothers, in particular, engage in the exchange of recommended venues that are accommodating to autistic children, and they are even encouraged to provide evaluations, as indicated by the verb "chwalić" ('praise'), in order to facilitate this process.

(26) *...it is good to recommend such places [friendly to children with autism] to each other.*

(27) *Praise here the organizers of holidays, the places you have visited...*

4. Who is the target audience of Polish-speaking Facebook groups related to autism

A textual analysis of media discourse that distinguishes the transmission of ideas through language in a socially situated situation should not ignore the sender and the receiver of the studied discourse. The research shows

that stakeholder groups in the autism community in Poland employ Facebook in various ways. The target audience was coded firstly from the group name, and then from the groups' descriptions. In some groups, the target audience was, so to speak, given "on the surface" and overtly specified by their name, e.g., *Support Group for Parents – Autism and Asperger Syndrome*. Some groups, e.g. *Parents of Children with Asperger's Syndrome*, despite indicating the target audience in the name allowed other members to join, indicating this in the group's description, e.g. "the group is specifically dedicated to parents who have a child or children on the autism spectrum. However it is also open to friends and acquaintances of such children". Other groups, on the other hand, such as *Women on the Autism Spectrum*, *Aspirls Poland*, *Aspirational*, made it clear in the description that it is a group for women on the autism spectrum, "not for their: families, friends, partners or people who just want to support Autism". The semantic content very explicitly, using hashtags and capital letters, communicated that it is not a group for men: "#### REQUESTS FOR ADMISSION SENT BY MEN WILL BE BANNED ####". As a result, a group with such description was included as a group which targeted 'women' as addressees. Similarly, when there was a group called *Therapists – Autism*, it was counted as a group for 'specialist', or when the description stated "Group is aimed at private individuals and companies who professionally help people with autism...", the targeted membership was coded as 'companies' (see Chart 2).

It merits reflection that, just as with (de)coding the studied sentences into separate semantic categories of purpose, coding the addressees stated in the descriptions and names of the groups posed similar challenges. For example, a group that targeted mothers of children with ASD was also counted as a group for "parents" and "women". Moreover, there were many groups opened to various addressees, for example *Życie z autyzmem* ('Life with autism') invited "people on the spectrum, parents and those interested in [autism]". Therefore, it needs to be noted that statistical data represents only addressees stated in the analysed texts, and there were groups e.g. *Autyzm Praca* ('Autism Work') which did not mention any target audience. We might infer that it is a group for autistic individuals, however it could also be addressed to parents who wish to help their adult children with ASD to find a job. Hence, such unstated 'guesses' were not included in the statistics. It can be concluded that – social media research of PLFG related to autism identifies the following social stakeholders: parents of individuals with ASD 90%, people interested in autism 30%, people on the autism spectrum 15%, women 6%, specialists 5%, companies 2% (see Chart 2).

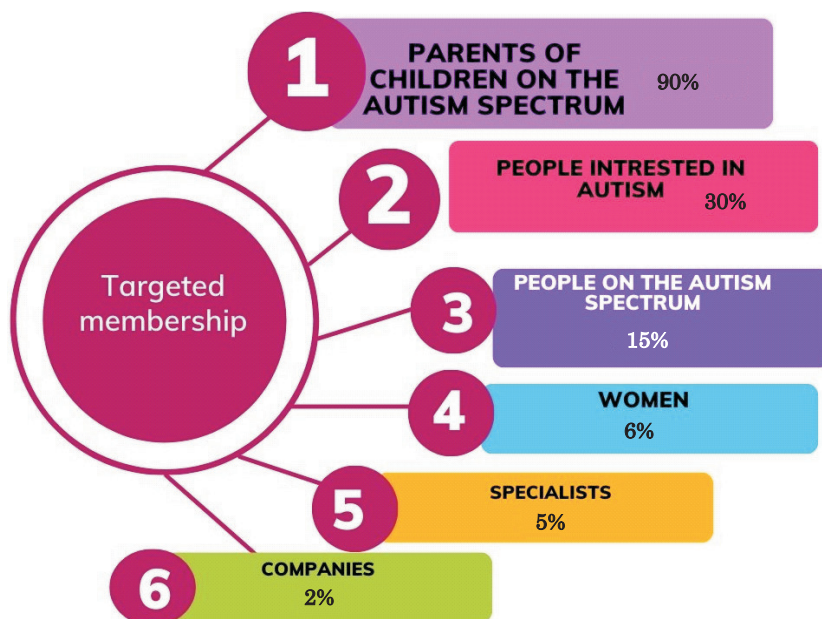


Chart 2. Targeted membership stated in the names and descriptions of Polish-speaking Facebook groups related to autism

Conclusions

Research into linguistic discourse in social media is a fundamental link to understanding human needs and relationships, even exerting influence over the transformation of reality itself (Grzymała-Kozłowska 2004). Focusing on autism research within the Polish community carries substantial implications for enhancing the well-being of individuals on the autism spectrum and their families in Poland. By identifying distinctive challenges encountered by the Polish autistic community, such as inadequate support, dearth of information, and pervasive stigma, and by concentrating on strategies and approaches tailored to the specific requirements of this community, research endeavors have the potential to influence support policies, practices, and interventions. Furthermore, the investigation yielded insights regarding Facebook’s customized search outcomes, wherein certain results are constrained by the geographical location of the user. Notably, the selection of keywords employed to find relevant Facebook groups encompassed diverse terminology for “autism” (e.g. Asperger’s syndrome), as well as different morphological forms of the term “autism” (e.g. autystyczny, autyzmu). Consequently, the strategic selection of keywords during Facebook

searches assumes a pivotal role in the data collection process for scientific research endeavors.

The study derived insights pertaining to the underlying key purposes and needs expressed overtly and implicitly in the descriptions and names of the groups under investigation. The first research inquiry revealed that Facebook groups related to autism highlight and indicate eight primary purposes: support (emotional and informational) (60%), providing safety and acceptance (6%), exchange of experiences (10%), raising awareness (advocacy and development of parental competencies) (23%), socialization (4%) therapy and treatment (12%) advertising and offering services (2.5%), organization of free time (2.5%). The second research question recognized the three most frequently targeted membership categories among autism-related Facebook groups in Poland: parents of individuals on the autism spectrum (90%), individuals with a vested interest in autism (30%), and individuals on the autism spectrum (15%).

One potential limitation of the study is the absence of information regarding whether the intended purposes and needs stated by the group founders and established through the research actually align with the issues and concerns raised by the members themselves. Future investigations could delve into the comments of parents and individuals with autism and explore prominent threads, themes, and topics within these groups, particularly in terms of emotional support, information sharing, social needs, therapy-seeking, and other relevant aspects.

The prominence of social media platforms in facilitating human interactions has witnessed a significant escalation in recent times. This study constitutes pioneering research aimed at comprehending the dynamics of media discourse by examining autism-related Facebook groups and their consequential influence on shaping the discourse surrounding autism in Poland. Grounded in the framework of semantics and discourse linguistics, this study operates under the assumption that the social reality is socially constructed and that discourse exerts a causal influence in social contexts (Fairclough 2005). The findings of this study hold the potential to contribute to critical deliberations concerning the engagement of the autistic community on social media platforms, thereby fostering a deeper comprehension of their needs. Notably, the substantial participation of parents within autism-focused groups on Facebook serves as compelling evidence that this platform can play a pivotal role in organizing support networks for families impacted by the disorder. Moreover, Facebook emerges as a significant tool for information dissemination, offering a secure space for communication and extending support to individuals on the autism spectrum.

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