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## Israeli-Palestinian conflict according to Polish YouTube comments: first month since the 7th October 2023

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The aim of this article is to outline main axes of sentiment about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emerging from Polish YouTube comments, following an escalation in the fall of 2023. The methodological aim of the study is to provide a contribution to the social media literature by presenting sentiment and overview of often used means of expression of support or criticism.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The research problem concerns the attitudes of YouTube users towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular in the light of the intensification of military activities in October 2023. A qualitative sentiment analysis was conducted on a sample of Polish YouTube comments, revealing the support and criticism of Internet users towards entities involved in the conflict.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The introduction of the article outlines the challenges of the mediatization of war, including the mediatization of public opinion. A description of methodology precedes the presentation of the results of scientific analysis. The article ends with conclusion on research results and discussion about limitations and directions for further research.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** Main entities involved in the conflict were identified and sentiment towards them was assessed. Results show axes of criticism and approval for both sides of the conflict. Criticism may be driven by prejudice and hatred towards Jews or Muslims. Jewish/Israeli is much often a target of the sentiment, which is usually negative. Sentiment towards Muslim/Palestinian side is not so unequivocal. YouTube users use specific forms of expression, clustered in the article into categories.

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### CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The outline of Israeli-Palestinian conflict according to YouTube users was depicted, taking into account the sentiment of provided narratives. Article presents a number of recommendations of an applied nature. Internet users use different ways of sentiment expression, either verbal or pictorial, discussed in the study. Computer-assisted analyses need to consider those means to ensure credibility.

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### KEYWORDS:

Keywords: comment analysis, sentiment analysis,  
Israeli-Palestinian conflict, qualitative study

(Trigger warning: This article aims to study statement of internet users. Citations and symbols provided in the article are uncensored research material which is often offensive and harmful.)

## INTRODUCTION

Modern media landscape allows for mediatization of war on a scale previously unattainable. Both professional journalists and non-professional (sometimes random) witnesses may provide media content, even live broadcasts. Fundamental division between sender and receiver no longer applies (Kaempf, 2013).

Approaching the war and media ecology from historical perspective, Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015) differ three mediatization phases, calling the warfare since 2010's an *arrested war*. One of key media challenges in *arrested war* is a shift from creating to verifying content for news. Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) call modern information warfare "crowdsourced". This phenomenon results from the ubiquity of social media. Studies have proven that news media use social media as sources on the everyday basis (Humeira & Ramadhan, 2022; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Moreover, the perspective of media audience is today also mediatized thanks to the social media. Thus, social media reflect not only what used to be "sender's perspective" but also how empowered audience react to such content.

YouTube is the second most popular social media platform (Jo Dixon, 2023) and the second most popular website worldwide by total visits (Bianchi, 2023). Similar to Facebook (Cyrek et al., 2022), YouTube may become the only news source, as it suggests videos, shorts

and posts even from unsubscribed channels. Nonetheless, YouTube studies are still underrepresented in the social media research, in comparison to, for example, Twitter (Inwood & Zappavigna, 2023). YouTube provides insight into almost all spheres of mediatization of the contemporary warfare: professional journalism; experts' opinion; point of view of politics, social commentators and celebrities; video documentation from the battlefield; and compilations of them all. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, it allows access to user comments on all of these materials.

Globalization comes with risk that even war which broke out on the other side of the world may soon escalate into a global conflict. Thus, mediated reality, biased towards bad news (Weiner, 2022), is soaked with information about ongoing military operations. On the October 7th 2023 news about escalation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict spread around the world. Palestinian Sunniv Islamist group Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza Strip. The assault, led by land, sea and air, came on a Jewish holiday. In response, Israel formally declared war on Hamas (Zanotti & Sharp, 2023). Since the Hamas attack on 7th October, the lasting for decades Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated. The war is being reported by news agencies, both at national and international level. The military actions are also reported on social media. YouTube political commentary channels do not avoid commenting on the conflict. The Polish YouTube scene also undertook this topic.

The essential aim of this study is to outline main axes of sentiment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emerging from Polish YouTube comments, following an escalation in the fall of 2023. The methodological aim of the study is to provide a methodological contribution to the social media literature by presenting qualitative overview of often used means of expression of support or criticism. In particular, the article aims to answer following research questions:

- RQ1. What type of sentiment (positive or negative) derives from comments posted by YouTube users and who are the target entities about which opinions are being issued?
- RQ2. What are the main forms of verbal expression of support or criticism?
- RQ3. What are the main forms of visual expression of support or criticism?

The study covers comments on videos published by Polish YouTube channels, within the first month since the attack on Israel on 7th October 2023. Considering users' discussions in comment section as new dimension of mediatization, this article aims to meet the two challenges of mediatization research: fill the important yet unexplored gap, and provide non Anglo-American perspective (Kopecka-Piech & Bolin, 2023). The first challenge is taken up with research material (YouTube comments) and methodology (sentiment analysis). The second one is taken up with Polish context of the research.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Ethical aspects

To provide highest ethical standards and credibility of the study, following rules have been applied:

- Only publicly available YouTube videos have been included in the study.
- All users' names have been pseudonymized.
- To provide comparability, all comments included in the study are published due to the same day (11 Dec 2023) to ensure that all the comments are published in the same time span of the conflict.

### Sampling process

#### *Channels selection*

Only Polish channels, publishing videos in Polish language, have been selected for the study. The sampling process was based on qualitative search on YouTube. Author searched for political commentary channels who have posted videos about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the attack on October 7th 2023. From several channels proposed by YouTube's browser, three were randomly chosen: ORB, Polityka Zagraniczna and OSW – Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich.

### *Videos and comments selection*

First step of video sampling was to select materials about Palestine and/or Israel (even from historical perspective) posted by chosen channels from 7th October to 7st November. This study does not include archived livestreams, posts on “community” tab, and shorts. The first step of sampling resulted in 2 videos posted on ORB channel, 7 videos posted on OSW channel and 1 video posted on Polityka Zagraniczna channel. At this point, the material consisted of 10 videos and 6016 comments. Second step was narrowing the sample in order to conduct manual coding for sentiment. The final sample consisted of 2 videos posted on ORB channel, 1 video posted on Polityka Zagraniczna channel and 2 videos posted on OSW channel, randomly chosen from the seven videos extracted in step 1. Overall, 5 videos accompanied with 2615 comments have been included in the study. All studied videos are listed in the references.

All 2615 comments published on the studied videos have been qualitatively analyzed. Sometimes the comments’ meaning derived not from the sentence itself, but from the context, given either by the (a) video title, (b) video content or (c) the discussion between users. Such cases were possible to identify thanks to qualitative verification.

For example video by ORB (2023a), was entitled “Israel Is Burning Again – And There Are Still Elections In Poland” (pol. *Izrael Znowu Płonie – A w Polsce Dalej Wybory*). Comments such as “It should burn” only carried unambiguous meaning in the context of video title.

In the following article all comments are translated to English by author. Quotations keep any original lowercase spelling of states, nations or organizations. Sometimes meaning is hard to grasp, either due to translation to English or taking a comment out of context, so the author puts annotations in brackets.

### Sentiment analysis

This study employs qualitative approach, as qualitative research is case-oriented, inductive, reflexive, situational and naturalistic (Schreier, 2012). Social media comments are research material gathered within users natural environment. YouTube does not require

users to give their real names, hence the sense of anonymity may encourage greater honesty. Communication is always located within context, and such context is hard to grasp with a quantitative methods.

As stated by Schreier (2012, p. 22):

Qualitative researchers [...] are interested in all those messy features that make up real-life contexts. They assume that it is this very context that makes their data meaningful and rich in information. Because of this, qualitative researchers often try to capture as much of this context as possible [...]

This study employs sentiment analysis based on manual coding. According to the assumptions of the applied method (Appel et al., 2015), author has conducted a three-step process of analysis:

1. subjectivity classification – classification of comments as opinionated or not opinionated;
2. sentiment classification – classification of comments according to the polarity of opinion [*positive/negative*]
3. complimentary task – identification of the target entity about which opinions are being issued.

The third step was narrowed to entities directly involved in the conflict, without those whose involvement was suspected by commentators (e.g. USA, Russia, China). Before subjectivity classification, author extracted comments concerning Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was a necessary pre-step to exclude comments on the YouTubers' appearance or speaking style, video background, frequency of publishing new videos or simply greetings for YouTubers and viewers, as well as insults users throw at each other. These were coded as non-related to the studied topic.

## RESULTS

### Recognized entities and sentiment towards them

The sample of 2615 comments was qualitatively analyzed and manually coded. First step was to exclude comments not related to the studied topic. Excluding unrelated comments resulted with the sample of 1423 comments, which then undergone subjectivity classification.

At this step both not opinionated comments as well as comments which were impossible to assess were excluded. This resulted with the sample of 758 comments.

There is no agreement among YouTube users when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even civilians are not always perceived as innocent, as Palestinian civilians are accused of supporting Hamas and Israeli civilians are accused of settling the Palestinian territories. Most of comments recognized following entities involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in fall 2023 (listed alphabetically): civilians, Israel and its citizens, Hamas, Jews and Judaism, Muslims and Islam, Palestine and Palestinians. Since in Polish language there may be an implied subject in sentences, which can be read from the context (e.g. the discussion in many comments), the analysis also indicates two separate targets of the sentiment (the Palestinian/Muslim side in general and the Israeli/Jewish side in general).

H a m a s was recognized by users both as

- separate entity, not to be confused with Palestine:  
Palestine does not do this. Hamas does this. [...]
- a Palestinian unit, either
  - a terrorist organization:

[...] [war] not between Israel and Palestine, but between a peaceful country and a bunch of savages from the terrorist organization Hamas that does not represent Palestine

- a political party:

It is not that Palestine is not Hamas, Germany 1944 is not the Wehrmacht and today Russia is not Putin... Hamas won the elections in Gaza, people there generally support Hamas, or rather they collectively hate Jews.

- or heroes fighting for their independence:

Calling Hamas a terrorist organization is like calling PPS [Polish Socialist Party] a terrorist organization instead of a national liberation movement. [...]

- or as an Israeli partner:

[...] Hamas was funded by Israel, which created and supported it as a far-right, religious organization in response to the secularist, left-wing freedom movements that were gaining popularity among Palestinians a dozen or so years ago. [...]

**Palestine** was recognized either as supportive for Hamas, same entity as Hamas, or completely different entity.

**Israel** was sometimes portrayed as US or Russian ally, which could also finance Hamas. Another interesting case is accusing Israel of being aware of planned attack on 7th October 2023 or even organizing the attack under the Palestinian flag:

How naive do you have to be to believe that Israel didn't know an attack was coming? :/ now they can start fighting and drive the Palestinians away

The analysis also reveals the phenomenon of expressing support for one side of the conflict due to prejudice or hatred towards Muslims or Jews. Also, some comments issued criticism or even hate towards both sides of the conflict:

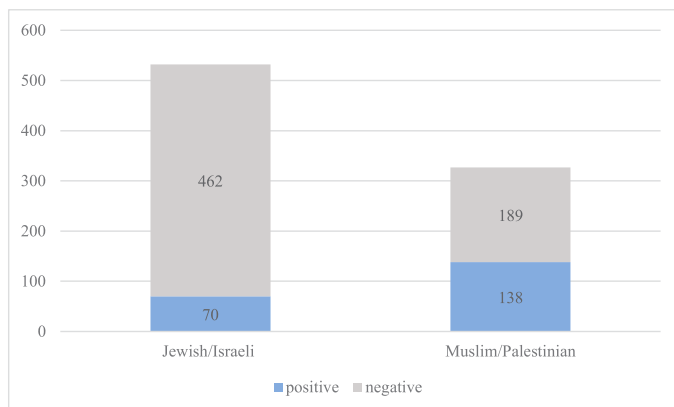
Jihadists and terrorists are fighting [against] the chosen nation of banksters. [...]

We have religious lunatics on both sides, and I don't like them equally. The entire Holy Land with mosques and temples should be excavated to a depth of 10 meters and sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Let them fight after completing their diving course.

This conflict is nothing more than terrorists fighting terrorists. Let Poland stay away from this.

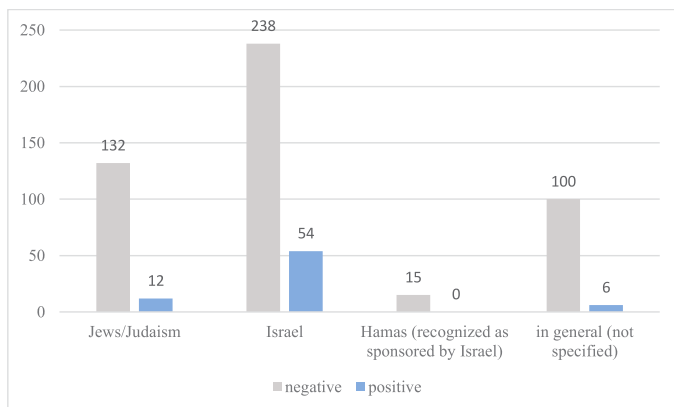
These basic characteristics of how entities involved in the conflict are perceived by YouTube users, was a starting point for sentiment analysis, results of which are presented in Fig. 1, 2, 3. It has to be noted, that one comment may either be negative/positive towards one side of the conflict, or state positive attitude towards one side and negative towards the other.

Figure 1. Distribution of opinionated comments according to sentiment and group of target entities



Source: own work.

Figure 2. Distribution of opinionated comments according to target entities among Jewish/Israeli side



Source: own work.

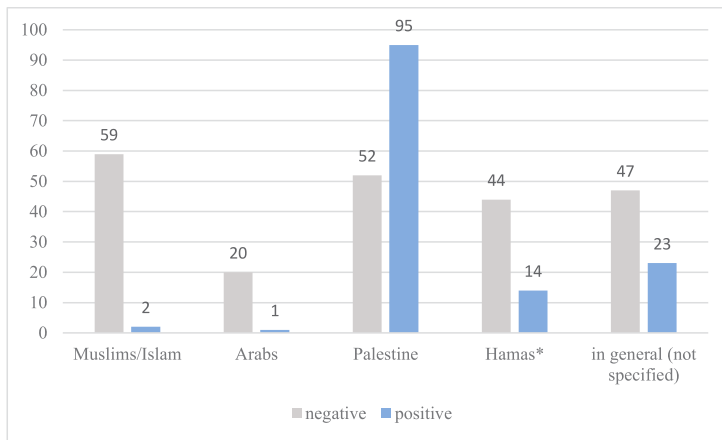
There is an observable disproportion between opinionated comments regarding Jewish/Israeli side (532 comments) and opinionated comments regarding Muslim/Palestinian side (328 comments). Going deeper into these differences, we may observe that comments about Jewish/Israeli side are clearly more critical: 462 comments with negative sentiment and 70 comments with positive sentiment. Therefore only 13,16% of opinionated comments on Jewish/Israeli side are

positive. At the same time comments regarding Muslim/Palestinian side are more balanced when it comes to the sentiment: 138 positive (42,2%) and 189 negative (57,8%).

Opinionated comments most often issued sentiment about Israel, both in case of negative and positive sentiment. Hamas recognized as funded by Israel was always criticized.

Figure 3. Distribution of opinionated comments according to target entities among Muslim/Palestinian side.

\*Hamas – recognized as fighting for Palestinian citizens or being supported by them.



Source: own work.

Comments issuing sentiment towards Muslim/Palestinian side most often concerned Palestine, which gathered mostly positive opinions. There is an observable dominance of negative sentiment towards Muslims and Arabs. Hamas recognized as supportive for citizens or being supported by them was mostly criticized.

As already mentioned, Hamas was also recognized as an independent unit, not supported by either Israel or Palestine. There were 74 opinionated comments regarding Hamas as independent entity. Among those, only 2 (2,7%) were positive, and remaining 72 (97,3%) were negative.

In conclusion, there is a disproportion between opinionated comments when it comes to target entities – far more comments regard Jewish/Israeli side, and most of them are negative. Yet, there is no

one main narrative about the course of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both parties are being accused for terrorism, for supporting Hamas, for organizing the attack on 7th October, for bombing the hospital and for collaborating with Russia, to name just a few allegations. The very same idea, e.g. collaboration with US, may meet both criticism or approval.

### *Common types of verbal expression*

For the methodological contribution to the social media literature, this article presents qualitative overview of verbal expressions used by YouTube users in order to issue approval or criticism.

### Support and approval

The analysis of thousands of YouTube comments revealed that one of most popular form of expressing approval for Palestine was fight for the independence. Comments in favor for Palestinian side wish Palestine freedom:

Freedom for Palestine 🙌  
Let Palestine stand proud <3 It's better to die standing than to live on your knees They fight for freedom like our uprisings

Another common form of expression was referring to recovery of lost lands:

And very well they will finally chase them down and regain the lands taken by the occupier  
[...] The Palestinians are only defending themselves and fighting to regain the occupied lands.

The support for Israel was expressed with praise for democracy and Western culture:

Besides, I don't know what people have in their heads to support the liquidation of the only relatively civilized democracy in the Middle East and replacing it with the Palestinian version of ISIS.

## Criticism

Common form of expression was stating, that “there is no such state” – either towards Israel or Palestine. Also, negativity for Israel was expressed by using terms such as “invader” or “occupier”. Calling Palestine a “concentration camp” or “prison” was also a mean to express lack of acceptance for Israeli actions (not only those taken since 7th October 2023).

Comments expressing negativity or even hate towards were published not only with reference to Palestine (and/or Hamas) and Israel, but also Muslims, Arabs and Jews. These comments concerned stereotypes and prejudices, e.g. Jews being allowed more:

Israel must be well spoken of or not at all. Jews are allergic to truth and any criticism. Then they launch the anti-Semitism protocol and accuse everyone of it.

while Muslims being wild terrorists and jihadists:

Give birth only so that your sons and daughters will die for jihad. [...] Here one sentence comes to mind: “Not all Muslims are terrorists – but ALL TERRORISTS were Muslims” [...]

All entities involved in the conflict were accused of propaganda, and some also of terrorism.

Another way of sentiment expression is use of historical and geographical comparisons. This, however, may serve both for criticism and approval.

## Historical and geographical comparisons

The qualitative nature of the study helped to identify some often used means of expression of criticism and support, presented here for the methodological contribution to the literature and support of further studies.

Presented examples of metaphorical expressions may also be helpful for creating dictionaries for future computer-assisted sentiment analysis. Those types of comparison, however, may serve as

independent research problem, e.g. for historians or public opinion researchers. Main types of comparisons found in the research material, are presented below, along with examples.

1. Comparison to Russia-Ukraine war

Can someone explain to me why Israel is occupying Palestine and in this situation israel is harmed, and in the case of the occupation of Ukraine by Russia, ukraine is harmed?

[...] The war of Russia and Ukraine, like that of Palestine and Israel, is a war of totalitarian regimes against democracy. The victims here are Israel and Ukraine, not the other way around. [...]

2. Comparison to Nazi Germany and Polish Home Army (AK).  
The metaphor of Nazis was also present in spelling "Israel" as "iSSrael".

[...] The occupiers call the Palestinians terrorists!... The Germans called the Home Army soldiers Polnische banditen... Because they fought for the Freedom of their country... [...]

[...] AK [Home Army] planted bombs in cinemas where civilians were sitting, children were also killed. During the uprising, children were used in combat, which is a war crime. In the east, AK [Home Army] units often liquidated Jews in hiding, I can even send you a link to the materials. Exactly like Hamas. Circumstances alter cases.

3. Comparison to Nazi Germany and Warsaw Uprising

this is not a war, this is genocide, a fight like in the Warsaw Uprising, although if you look at it, the Poles had a better chance.

4. Comparison to Stalin or Hitler – not necessarily mentioned by name

Two jewish criminals: J.Biden and Nataniachu. They are no different from A.Hitler and J.Stalin. The goal of these Jewish criminals is to annex Gaza and establish a jewish regime in Ukraine.





### *Pictorial expressions*

The range of symbols possible to use in online communication is enormous, and users may invent their own emoticons using font characters, which was proven by the example of the Lenny Face: (ಠ\_ಠ)(ಠ\_ಠ). Therefore, full list of pictorial expressions is impossible to create, especially as the meaning is constantly negotiated by the internet culture. Yet, some examples provided below may be helpful as framework for further analyses. However, it has to be underlined, that use of symbols does not exclude the use of words – sometimes images and sentences are complementary, but they may be contradictory as well.

Pictorial ways of showing support:

- symbol of flag or religious symbol  ,  – used as way to signal the presence of supporters of a given side, similarly to, for example, sports fans;
-             symbol of flag or religious symbol assisted by symbol(s): heart, muscle, thumb up or similar, e.g.
-    symbols of flags and/or religious symbols and symbol of shaking hands between them, e.g.

Pictorial ways of showing criticism:

-   symbol of flag or religious symbol assisted by symbol(s): middle finger out, devil, stop sign or similar, e.g.
- symbols of flags and/or religious symbols showed in equation, e.g.  = 

## CONCLUSION

In the mediatized world, where even non-professionals may play a role of news sources, it is important for researchers to pay attention to social media. YouTube channels provide information about the current political events and comment section is a place for users to share their opinions, fears and hopes, as well as information from other sources. YouTube comment section may be vulnerable to troll raids or bots, and thus caution is advised when treating comments as source of public opinion. Nonetheless, it may be difficult for everyday user

to distinguish propaganda, fake news and hateful content, let alone fake accounts. Thus, awareness of what emerges from comments may be a good starting point for other research and social interventions, e.g. against propaganda or conspiracy narratives.

This study aimed to outline the image of Israeli-Palestinian conflict emerging from comments on Polish YouTube. The sentiment analysis, conducted in order to answer RQ1, revealed which entities involved in the conflict are targets of issued opinions and how many positive and negative opinions they get. The results show that Jewish/Israeli side gets more opinions, which are mostly negative, while the positive/negative disproportion is much smaller in comments on Muslim/Palestinian side.

The study also revealed main verbal and pictorial forms of expressing sentiment towards sides of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Recognition of common forms of verbal expression, such as stereotypes, metaphors, or historical comparisons, answered the RQ2, and recognition of use of emoticons and sets of symbols provided answer for RQ3. These findings may help to improve future research. Also, problems indicated in the article, such as hatred toward Jews and Muslims or references to history of Poland may serve as separate research problems.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

Despite every effort being made to ensure research reliability and methodological precision, this study is not without limitations. Due to its qualitative nature the researcher bias cannot be excluded – there might be some other means of carrying out meaning unrecognized by the author or sentiment incorrectly recognized. Also, the qualitative nature of study required smaller sample size.

Moreover, the basic unit of this study is a single comment, not a particular user. It is limiting in the way that one user may be responsible for many comments. Comment stating that

The Gaza Strip is a concentration camp for Palestinians, a General Government was published 14 times. Future studies could focus on distinguishing “discursive personae” (Inwood, Zappavigna, 2023) in the comments sections.

YouTube comments are constantly active source of public opinion. However, it has to be underlined, that without distinguishing real accounts from bots, and without access to content blocked by either platform or channel moderators, comments are limited source of public opinion.

The research paper format is also limiting – there are many other conclusions that can be drawn from further analyzes of the collected database and YouTube comments in general, e.g. which comments get most “likes”, is there a correlation between support/criticism towards given entity and the duration of the account’s existence (which is public information for every YouTube account), or whether a positive/negative sentiment is expressed towards a given entity more often using feminine or masculine forms of verbs.

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