

How Hate Speech Varies by Target Identity: A Computational Analysis

Michael Miller Yoder¹ Lynnette Hui Xian Ng¹ David West Brown² Kathleen M. Carley¹

¹School of Computer Science ²Department of English

Carnegie Mellon University

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

{mamille3, huixiann, dwb2, carley}@andrew.cmu.edu

Abstract

This paper investigates how hate speech varies in systematic ways according to the identities it targets. Across multiple hate speech datasets annotated for targeted identities, we find that classifiers trained on hate speech targeting specific identity groups struggle to generalize to other targeted identities. This provides empirical evidence for differences in hate speech by target identity; we then investigate which patterns structure this variation. We find that the targeted demographic category (e.g. gender/sexuality or race/ethnicity) appears to have a greater effect on the language of hate speech than does the relative social power of the targeted identity group. We also find that words associated with hate speech targeting specific identities often relate to stereotypes, histories of oppression, current social movements, and other social contexts specific to identities. These experiments suggest the importance of considering targeted identity, as well as the social contexts associated with these identities, in automated hate speech classification.

Warning: *This paper contains offensive and hateful terms and concepts. We have chosen to reproduce these terms for clarity in aiding efforts against hate speech.*

1 Introduction

Researchers working in natural language processing (NLP) often treat hate speech as a binary, unified, concept that can be detected from language alone. However, as a linguistic concept that relies heavily on social context, hate speech contains a variety of related phenomena (Brown, 2017). Hate speech is characterized by variation in linguistic features (e.g. implicit vs. explicit), context (e.g. platforms, prior conversations), and communities (social histories and hierarchies). This paper focuses on a crucial aspect of this variation: how hate speech varies by the identity groups it targets.

To study this variation, we analyze hate speech datasets that include annotations for which identity

group is targeted. Drawing from multiple of these datasets, we sample new corpora that target the same identity group. These identity groups vary according to several dimensions, including relevant demographic category (e.g. gender, religion) and relative social power (e.g. socially marginalized or dominant). We empirically test which dimensions most clearly separate different forms of hate speech by evaluating how well classifiers trained on one set of identities generalize to hate speech directed at different sets of identities.

We find that hate speech varies most prominently by the targeted demographic category and less so by the social power of the targeted identity group. Theorists working in philosophy and sociolinguistics have drawn attention to how hate speech directed at marginalized groups differs from hate directed toward socially dominant groups (Butler, 1997; Lakoff, 2000). However, we do not find that hate speech toward dominant groups is sufficiently different to consistently increase classification performance when removed from existing datasets.

Analyzing the most representative terms in hate speech directed toward different identities, we find that many words reflect identity-specific context such as histories of oppression or stereotypes. These results have implications for NLP researchers building generalizable hate speech classifiers, as well as for a more general understanding of variation in hate speech.

Contributions

1. An empirical analysis of variation in hate speech by target identity. Specifically, how well classifiers trained on hate speech directed toward specific identities generalize to hate speech directed at other identities.
2. An analysis of which dimensions of social difference (demographic category, power) among targeted identities reflect the most variation in hate speech.

3. A qualitative analysis of the hate speech terms most strongly associated with specific target identities.

2 Hate Speech

Hate speech is an example of a “thick concept” with a set of related, but difficult to define meanings and understandings (Pohjonen and Udupa, 2017). Legal theorist Alexander Brown (2017) argues for a set of attributes that make an expression more or less likely to be considered hate speech, similar to Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” concept. Key attributes include an incitement of emotion and violence, and a direction of that incitement toward a targeted identity group (Sanguinetti et al., 2018; Poletto et al., 2021). Though others have studied the linguistic properties of this incitement (Marsters, 2019; Wiegand et al., 2021), we focus on how variation in the identity group targeted by hate speech affects the linguistic characteristics of hate speech.

2.1 Variation by identity

Identities are central to hate speech. Classifiers often learn to associate the presence of identity terms, especially derogatory ones, with hate speech and abusive language (Dixon et al., 2017; Uyheng and Carley, 2021). Computational studies of the targets of online hate speech have included measurement studies of its prevalence toward different targets. Silva et al. (2016) and Mondal et al. (2017) searched for templates such as “I hate ___” to measure hate toward different identity groups. We analyze datasets manually annotated with the targets of hate speech. This captures a broader range of hate speech, including indirect hate speech and stereotypes. ElSherief et al. (2018a,b) investigated differences between hate toward groups versus individual targets. In contrast, we compare differences among identity targets. Rieger et al. (2021) measured multiple types of variation, including by identity target, in hate speech from fringe platforms such as 4chan and 8chan. We test if such differences affect the generalization of hate speech classifiers.

Many identities are involved in the production and recognition of hate speech, including the identities of those who produce hate speech and those who annotate hate speech datasets. The post history and inferred gender of social media users have been found to be useful in predicting hate speech (Waseem and Hovy, 2016; Unsvåg and

Gambäck, 2018; Qian et al., 2018). Waseem (2016) find differences in hate speech annotations between crowdworkers and experts, while Sap et al. (2022) find differences by the political ideology of annotators. We focus on identities presented in the hate speech itself.

2.2 Generalizability

In this paper, we evaluate the ability of hate speech classifiers to generalize across targeted identities. Gröndahl et al. (2018) find that hate speech models generally perform poorly on data that differs from their training data; we look at how shifts in the distribution of identity targets affects generalization. Swamy et al. (2019) look at generalizability across subtasks of abusive language detection and find that a larger proportion of hateful instances aids generalization. Pamungkas et al. (2020) and Fortuna et al. (2020) find that hate speech models using variants of BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) generalize better than other models. We thus use a variant of BERT in our generalization experiments. See Yin and Zubiaga (2021) for a more thorough survey on generalizability in hate speech detection.

3 Data

From surveys of hate speech datasets (Vidgen and Derczynski, 2020; Poletto et al., 2021) and the Hate Speech Dataset Catalogue¹, we selected datasets with annotations for targeted identities. We only selected datasets that do not restrict target identities in order to minimize differences in other properties (e.g, domain, year) when comparing across targeted identities. This excludes hate speech datasets and shared tasks that focus on particular targeted identity groups, such as women or immigrants (Kwok and Wang, 2013; Basile et al., 2019).

We also did not consider hate speech datasets that label targeted demographic category, such as race or gender (Waseem, 2016), but do not specify the identity group targeted. Demographic category is just one of the dimensions of similarities and differences among identity groups that we wish to compare for their affect on hate speech. We included datasets from all domains, except those with synthetic data.

Since we only found one non-English dataset that contained unrestricted annotations for targeted identities (Ousidhoum et al., 2019), we focus on hate speech in English in this work.

¹<https://hatespeechdata.com/>

For generalization analyses, we sampled corpora specific to identity groups across datasets large enough to contain a minimum number of instances of hate speech against enough groups (described in Section 4.1). These are the first 4 datasets noted in Table 1. All datasets are used in the analysis of removing dominant groups (Section 6.2).

Datasets are resampled to a 30/70 ratio of hate to non-hate to eliminate a source of variance among hate speech datasets known to affect generalization (Swamy et al., 2019). Non-hate instances are upsampled or downsampled to meet this ratio, which was chosen as typical of hate speech datasets (Vidgen and Derczynski, 2020). If they do not already contain a binary hate speech label, dataset labels are binarized as described in Appendix A.

3.1 Target identity label normalization

Annotations for targeted identities vary considerably across datasets. Some of these differences are variations in naming conventions for identity groups with significant similarity (‘Caucasian’ and ‘white people’, for example). Other identities are subsets of broader identities, such as ‘trans men’ as a specific group within ‘LGBTQ+ people’.

To construct identity-based corpora across datasets, we normalized and grouped identities annotated in each dataset. One of the authors, who has taken graduate-level courses on language and identity, manually normalized the most common identity labels in each dataset and assigned these normalized identity labels into broader identity groups (such as ‘LGBTQ+ people’). Intersectional identities, such as ‘Chinese women’, were assigned to multiple groups (in this case ‘Asian people’ and ‘women’). Hate speech was often directed at conflated, problematic groupings such as ‘Muslims and Arabs’. Though we do not condone these groupings, we use them as the most accurate descriptors of identities targeted.

4 Cross-Identity Generalization

We examine variation among hate speech targeting different identities in a bottom-up, empirical fashion. In order to do this, we construct corpora of hate speech directed at the most commonly annotated target identities, grouped and normalized as described in Section 3.1. We then trained hate speech classifiers on each target identity corpus and evaluated on corpora targeting other identities.

Along with practical implications for hate speech classification generalization, this analysis suggests which similarities and differences among identities are most relevant for differentiating hate speech.

4.1 Data sampling

In order to have enough data targeting many identities and to generalize beyond the particularities of specific datasets, we assembled identity-specific corpora from multiple source datasets. To mitigate dataset-specific effects, we uniformly sampled hate speech instances directed toward target identities from the first 4 datasets listed in Table 1. We select these datasets since they contain enough data to train classifiers targeting a sufficient variety of identities. The corpus for each target identity contains an equal amount of hate speech drawn from each of these datasets, though the total number of instances may differ among corpora. Negative instances were also uniformly sampled across datasets, and were restricted to those which had no target identity annotation or an annotation that matched the target identity of the hate speech.

We selected target identities that contained a minimum of 900 instances labeled as hate across these four datasets after grouping and normalization. We selected this threshold as a balance between including a sufficient number of identities and having enough examples of hate speech toward each identity to train classifiers. In order to include a variety of identities in the analysis while maintaining uniform samples for each dataset, we upsample identity-specific hate speech from individual datasets up to 2 times if needed. Corpora are split into a 60/40 train/test split. Selected target identities and the size of each corpus can be found in Table 2. These identity-specific corpora, which are samples of existing publicly available datasets, are available at <https://osf.io/53tfs/>.

4.2 Cross-identity hate speech classification

Due to the high performance of BERT-based models on hate speech classification (Mozafari et al., 2019; Samghabadi et al., 2020), we trained and evaluated a DistilBERT model (Sanh et al., 2019), which has been shown to perform very similarly to BERT on hate speech detection with fewer parameters (Vidgen et al., 2021). Models were trained with early stopping after no improvement for 5 epochs on a development set of 10% of the training set. An Adam optimizer was used with an initial learning rate of 10^{-6} . Input data was lowercased

Dataset	Domain	Original size
Civil Comments (Borkan et al., 2019)	News comments	1999516
Social Bias Inference Corpus (Sap et al., 2020)	Reddit, Twitter, Gab, Stormfront	44781
Kennedy et al. (2020)	YouTube, Twitter, Reddit	39565
HateXplain (Mathew et al., 2021)	Twitter, Gab	20148
Contextual Abuse Dataset (Vidgen et al., 2021)	Reddit	27494
ElSherief et al. (2021)	Twitter	19650
Salminen et al. (2018)	YouTube, Facebook	3222

Table 1: Overview of datasets used in this study. Original size is the number of instances before resampling for experiments. The last 3 datasets are only used in the experiment removing hate toward dominant social groups (section 6.2).

Corpus	Train size	Test size
Women	27960	18624
Black people	17664	11776
Muslims, Arabs	13712	9136
LGBTQ+ people	10544	7000
Asian people	7968	5312
Latinx people	7016	4688
Jews	5080	3400
White people	2328	1560
Men	1832	1232
Christians	1816	1224
Race/ethnicity	71024	47240
Gender/sexuality	63032	42056
Religion	32144	21376
Marginalized	168904	112792
Dominant	7952	5368

Table 2: Number of instances in corpora used in generalization experiments. These corpora are sampled by target identity uniformly from the first 4 datasets listed in Table 1.

and an uncased base DistilBERT model was fine-tuned using the Hugging Face Transformers package, Keras, and Tensorflow. We removed URLs, hashtags and @mentions of users, but kept emoji in preprocessing. To mitigate random variation, we trained separate DistilBERT models 5 times and report the average performances.

As a baseline, we also evaluated a logistic regression classifier with TF-IDF unigram features over the entire vocabulary. This classifier used L2 regularization with a constant $C = 1$.

Results from only the DistilBERT models are reported as they consistently outperformed the logistic regression model by 0.1 F1 or more. Generalization performance trends across identities were similar for DistilBERT and logistic re-

Train	Test									
	Asian	Black	Christians	Jews	Latinx	LGBTQ+	Men	Muslims, Arabs	White	Women
Asian	71.5	40.2	30.6	39.4	49.9	24.4	26.6	35.9	42.2	24.9
Black	39.5	78.2	29.7	32.7	48.4	23.9	30.3	28.4	49.3	28.6
Christians	23.7	27.1	52.1	40.5	27.1	25.4	22.2	33.5	25.6	21.5
Jews	20.6	21.2	35.0	79.9	18.3	17.7	14.8	25.5	21.7	14.3
Latinx	44.5	39.4	33.4	35.5	68.2	24.1	23.2	30.1	48.0	23.2
LGBTQ+	15.7	22.2	27.8	20.3	15.2	72.4	32.4	15.2	14.8	29.1
Men	24.0	39.3	33.0	26.5	27.3	45.5	47.2	28.2	31.0	39.9
Muslims, Arabs	40.8	38.6	51.5	57.3	40.8	28.0	30.8	77.0	34.1	30.1
White	29.1	36.9	27.6	25.7	35.7	15.8	24.9	19.8	70.6	19.3
Women	35.2	48.5	47.7	45.0	36.2	57.3	58.6	42.4	40.7	70.1

Table 3: Hate speech classification performance (F1 score) across identity-specific corpora

gression. Code for these analyses are available at https://github.com/michaelmilleroyder/hate_speech_identities.

4.3 Results

Table 3 shows generalization performance, measured by F1-score on the positive class of hate speech, across identity splits. We choose F1 on the ‘hate’ class since that focuses on performance in detecting hate speech across different target identities, rather than the non-hate instances which may or may not target identities. Generalization across target identities is poor, often dropping from over 70 F1-score when training and test sets match by targeted identity to less than 40 when they do not.

Following Uyheng and Carley (2021), we perform a PCA dimensionality reduction of this generalization performance to 2 factors in order to visualize which target identities exhibit similarities (Figure 1).

Evident from this PCA is a clustering of iden-

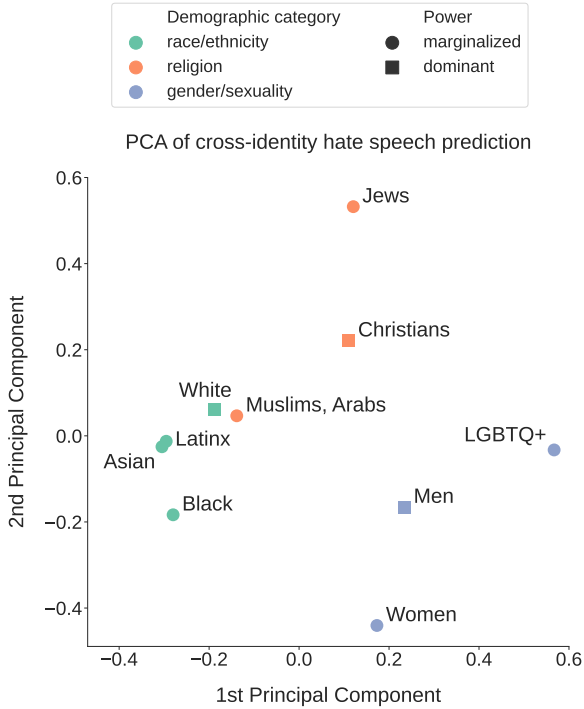


Figure 1: PCA of cross-identity hate speech classification performance. Hate speech classifiers trained on data targeting identities in the same demographic categories perform most similarly.

tity targets by demographic category. In particular, three clusters are evident: identities that reference religion are in a similar space, while identities that reference race and ethnicity are in a different space, as are terms that reference gender and sexuality. We look specifically at the effect of these distinctions on hate speech in Section 5.

Three identities included have relative social power in the European and North American English-speaking contexts from which our datasets were drawn: white people, Christians, and men. These identities do not form a clear cluster in Figure 1, though they contain factor loadings relatively close to 0 for both factors. In Section 6, we investigate how hate speech varies according to the relative social power of the identities targeted.

5 Variation by Demographic Category

Poor generalization results across identity targets (Table 3) suggest that hate speech varies significantly by the identities it targets. Our results also suggest that this variation patterns largely by demographic categories such as race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and religion (Figure 1). We hypothesize that if demographic categories are particularly discriminative, hate speech classification perfor-

Train	Test		
	Race/ethnicity	Religion	Gender/sexuality
Race/ethnicity	76.6	73.7	41.8
Religion	56.3	78.5	30.2
Gender/sexuality	48.1	48.4	70.9

Table 4: Hate speech generalization performance (F1 on hate) by demographic category.

mance will drop sharply when attempting to generalize across categories.

To test this, we manually assigned normalized and grouped identities to the categories referenced by the identity. For example, the identity of ‘Asian’ references race/ethnicity, while ‘Asian women’ references both race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality. In cases where target groups fit multiple categories (which is not common), we include instances in all corpora they reference. Though targeted identities sometimes reference categories such as politics, interests, and age, the only categories that met a threshold of 900 hate speech instances uniformly sampled across datasets were race/ethnicity, religion, and gender/sexuality. Details on corpora constructed by category can be found in Table 2.

We then train DistilBERT hate speech classification models on each corpus and test on all others to measure generalization performance in the same way as for identity generalization. Results can be found in Table 4.

Performance drops across identity categories, sometimes falling by almost half of the F1-score. This suggests that for purposes of automatic classification, hate speech varies significantly by demographic category. Classifiers generalize particularly poorly from race/ethnicity and religion to gender/sexuality, and less poorly between race/ethnicity and religion. This may be because of the blurred lines in hate speech targets between racial and religious categories, for example, by conflating Muslims and Arabs or targeting Jews by both religious and racial characteristics.

6 Variation by Power

Another significant dimension of variation among targeted identities is relative social power in the societies from which hate speech data has been drawn. Work on hate speech detection in NLP is often motivated as an effort to fight sexism, racism, homophobia, and other oppressions of marginalized groups, and improve participation of these groups online (Mathew et al., 2021; Jurgens et al., 2019). However, this work often frames hate speech as a property of language without considering social context. Abstracting away from the particulars of targeted identities, datasets often include hate speech directed at any identity group, regardless of the social context of power or marginalization. Such datasets thus include hate speech directed toward groups with relative social power, such as white people or men in English-speaking European and American contexts.

Calls are growing to consider the role of power and historical oppression in NLP work (Blodgett et al., 2020; Field et al., 2021). Moreover, some theorists of social meaning in language argue that hate speech is fundamentally different when directed at social groups with power (Butler, 1997; Lakoff, 2000). They note that such speech does not reference the same historical threat of possible violence and recurring oppression as does hate directed toward marginalized groups. From a lens of social dominance theory (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999), hate speech serves either to perpetuate or challenge group hierarchies depending on its target. Activists have called for social media platforms to incorporate this social context by treating hate speech toward marginalized groups as more serious than hate directed toward groups with relative social power (Nurik, 2019; Dwoskin et al., 2020).

For these theoretical and practical reasons, we consider empirical differences in hate speech based on the social power of targeted identity groups. Similar to previous experiments, we test the generalization of classifiers across identities with different levels of social power. We also test for effects on classification performance when removing hate directed toward socially dominant identity groups from hate speech datasets. If this type of hate is sufficiently different, including it could “muddy” the concept we are after and reduce the effectiveness of classifiers in identifying hate speech. Removing it would more closely match commonly stated motivations of NLP work on hate speech.

6.1 Generalization

Just as with demographic categories, we construct separate corpora of hate speech directed at identities with relative social power and identities with relative social marginalization.

We manually label normalized, grouped identity terms with a coarse-grained label as either *dominant*, *marginalized*, or *other*. This labeling was done by one of the authors familiar with the North American and European English-speaking contexts from which hate speech datasets were drawn. Identity groups certainly have different social power depending on the setting. For example, though LGBTQ+ people are generally marginalized, gay men in LGBTQ+ spaces can have higher social power relative to people with more marginalized genders and sexualities (Stulberg, 2018). Our goal in annotation was to label identity groups for which there would be broad agreement of enduring dominance or marginalization in North American and European English-speaking societies. All other cases were marked *other*. This included political identities such as ‘Republican’ or ‘liberal’, since political power is generally transient in these societies. Some targeted identities were intersectional, that is, contained multiple identity groups, such as “white women” or “transgender men”. These cases were taken case-by-case, considering the marginalization of each identity component and marking *other* for many tough cases. A full list of identities labeled as dominant and marginalized is available in Table 7 in Appendix A. Any identities not in these lists were marked *other* by default.

Some datasets all annotators to mark multiple targeted identities. We marked these instances as directed to *marginalized* groups if there was only *marginalized* or *other* identities targeted. Instances with both *marginalized* and *dominant* identities targeted were marked as *other*. Details on corpora constructed by power are in Table 2.

As with identities and demographic categories, we evaluated the ability of DistilBERT hate speech classification models to generalize across marginalized and dominant identity targets (Table 5).

Generalization does not suffer as much across target identities with differences in social power, particularly when trained on the corpus of hate directed at marginalized identities. This suggests that which target identities have power does not structure variation in hate speech as much as differences in demographic category.

Train	Dominant	57.9	42.1
	Marginalized	61.3	72.8
		Dominant	Marginalized
		Test	

Table 5: Hate speech generalization performance (F1 on hate) by relative social power.

6.2 Removing hate speech toward socially dominant groups

We further evaluate the effect of removing hate speech toward socially dominant groups on classification performance. We hypothesize that if it is sufficiently different, as some theorists argue, then it may act as noise. For this experiment, we resample all 7 hate speech datasets listed in Table 1 separately instead of combining across datasets as in generalization experiments. This allows us to see trends across even more datasets than we could examine if uniformly sampling from just those with enough to reach a certain threshold.

We resample each dataset to exclude or include hate toward dominant social groups. All instances are the same between these samples except for instances of hate speech toward dominant social groups and those instances replaced by them. This allows a comparison across samples of equal size and hate speech ratio.

Removing hate speech toward any set of target identities could improve performance since the remaining instances are more likely to be similar to each other. For this reason we compare removing hate speech toward dominant groups with removing hate speech toward a set of non-dominant identities. We select these “control” identities to be similar in frequency across datasets to identities labeled as dominant. Specifically, we match each identity labeled as dominant with the non-dominant identity that has the closest log frequency distribution across datasets (by Euclidean distance).

We perform 5x2-fold cross-validation with a DistilBERT model to estimate performance with and without dominant or control identities. Parameters are the same as were used with the models built to test generalization, and 10% of training sets are used as development sets for early stopping.

Two out of the 7 datasets, ElSherief et al. (2021) and HateXplain, show significant improvement after removing hate speech toward dominant social identities. However, when removing the control identities, 2 out of the 7 datasets, Civil Comments and HateXplain, also show significant improvements, while the Social Bias Inference Corpus shows a significant decrease in performance. This does not show convincing evidence that hate speech toward dominant groups is sufficiently different to act as noise for hate speech classification.

7 Lexical Variation Across Target Identities

To explore how hate speech varies by target identity, we examine the words most strongly associated with each target identity and grouping of identities. We use the Sparse Additive Generative Model (SAGE; Eisenstein et al., 2011) to find words that are most representative of each hate speech corpus. SAGE finds representative words by learning a generative model that contrasts terms in documents in a section of a corpus with a background frequency distribution over the whole corpus. We run SAGE over 3 separate corpora: one where each section is an identity-specific split, another with category splits, and another with splits by relative social power. We run SAGE with a vocabulary size of the most frequent 3000 words and a smoothing rate of 50. Larger vocabulary sizes and lower smoothing included less informative, specialty words that did not occur frequently in the corpus. The 10 most representative terms for each of these splits are shown in Table 6.

Identity terms, many of them derogatory, form the bulk of these representative words. This provides more evidence for the centrality of identities to hate speech (Uyheng and Carley, 2021). Some representative words relate to identity-specific histories of oppression. For example, ‘oven’ and ‘gas’ are representative terms of antisemitic hate speech. Identity-specific stereotypes are also visible: ‘terrorist’ and ‘bomb’ are top terms in hate speech against Muslims and Arabs. Current culture wars issues are also relevant. For example, transphobic attitudes around bathrooms are reflected in the top terms in hate speech targeting LGBTQ+ people. ‘BLM’, for the Black Lives Matter movement, is a top term associated with anti-Black hate speech.

The difficulty in a binary distinction of dominance and marginalization can be seen through the

<i>Identity</i>	<i>Top terms</i>
Asian	chinese, china, asian, ching, chong, asians, japanese, chinaman, ch*nk, japan
Black	n*ggas, black, n*gga, n*gger, africa, blm, negro, ethiopian, blacks, african
Christians	priest, catholic, jesus, priests, bible, christians, christianity, christian, church
Jews	jewish, jews, holocaust, jew, israel, hitler, gas, oven, zionist, k*ke
Latinx	latinos, latino, mexico, mexican, mexicans, beaner, sp*c, latin, hispanic, beaners
LGBTQ+	transgender, transgendered, transgenders, bisexual, queers, bathroom, f*g, gay
Men	divorce, dudes, men, male, negative, movies, man, priests, soy, dad
Muslims, Arabs	islam, muslim, islamic, muslims, isis, terrorist, terrorists, iran, bomb, radical
White	redneck, white, supremacist, supremacy, mudshark, trash, fascist, shootings
Women	hoes, sexist, woman, hoe, feminist, women, feminists, feminism, slut, bitches
<i>Category</i>	
Gender/sexuality	hoes, dyke, transgender, f*ggot, f*g, sexist, sexual, lesbian, hoe, dykes
Race/ethnicity	chinese, black, blacks, asian, asians, mexicans, whites, africa, supremacist
Religion	catholic, priest, christians, christian, christianity, religion, church, jesus, koran
<i>Power</i>	
Dominant	priest, catholic, priests, jesus, catholics, virgin, church, devil, dress
Marginalized	muslim, muslims, she, islam, her, woman, n*gger, black, jews, women

Table 6: Most representative terms (lowercased) in corpora divided by different target identity sets from SAGE.

most representative words in hate directed toward groups with high relative social power. As a marker of Christianity, ‘Catholic’, for example, could be seen as dominant in European and American contexts where Christianity has historically been a religion with relative social and cultural prominence. However, some white nationalist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan have targeted Catholics as outside idealized Christian Protestantism (Burris et al., 2000; Berlet and Vysotsky, 2006). ‘Redneck’ and ‘trash’ are top terms in hate targeting white people, and ‘virgin’, a top term in hate targeting dominant groups, is used in jokes stereotyping incest. Such terms target poor white people based mainly on class. Also in the top terms against white people is ‘mudshark’, a derogatory term targeting white women who have relationships with Black men. These terms target groups that are marginalized within broadly dominant groups: white women, poor white people, and Catholics. Such examples show how social power is relative, complex, and intersectional. They also evidence a tendency for hate speech to target marginalized groups, even within groups that have higher relative social power.

8 Discussion

Our results demonstrate that hate speech varies considerably according to which identities are tar-

geted. We show evidence that classifiers trained on hate toward one target identity generalize poorly to other target identities, especially across demographic categories such as race/ethnicity, religion and gender/sexuality.

These results suggest that the designers of hate speech classifiers pay attention to the distribution of targeted identities in training data. Many commonly used hate speech datasets do not specify this information. If the distribution skews toward a particular identity group (such as anti-Black racism), then using such a classifier on data that has a different distribution (e.g., mostly antisemitic) would likely give poor performance. More generally, these results suggest a value in treating hate speech as a social and linguistic category with lots of internal variance. This variance depends in part on the social context around targeted identities.

Classifiers trained on hate speech toward dominant or marginalized groups suffered somewhat when tested on the opposite group. However, we did not find evidence that removing hate speech toward dominant groups clarifies the hate speech signal enough to consistently increase performance beyond what might be expected by removing a random set of targeted identities. This suggests that differences based on the social context of power do not affect the language of hate speech enough to

be easily detectable by machine learning classifiers. Differences in severity between hate speech targeting socially marginalized or powerful groups is more likely a matter of interpretation by those with social knowledge of power in a particular society.

9 Conclusion

We present a meta-analysis of hate speech datasets annotated for identity group targets. This analysis shows that hate speech differs significantly by target identity, as classifiers trained on hate speech toward one identity do not generalize well to other identities. We then examine what factors of social context structure this variation by target identity. We find evidence for hate speech varying substantially by demographic category, and less so by the relative social power of targeted identities.

These results reinforce the importance of variation by social context within hate speech and suggest that researchers pay attention to variation by target identity. Future work may address improving generalization across target identities by strategically sampling training data or incorporating multiple identity-specific classifiers. Similar analyses may also be conducted on multilingual hate speech datasets in future work.

10 Limitations and Ethics

As a meta-analysis of existing datasets, this study is limited by the availability of hate speech data labeled with target identity. Performance estimates with and without hate speech toward dominant groups would be more reliable with more labeled hate speech toward socially dominant groups. The scarcity of hate speech against socially dominant groups is not coincidental: this speech is less prototypically considered hate speech than that against marginalized groups. This can be seen in the dataset from [Kennedy et al. \(2020\)](#), for example, where annotators rate the average severity of hate against dominant groups as less than the average severity of hate against marginalized groups.

Another limitation is that datasets each have their own definitions of hate speech and associated annotation criteria, which may vary considerably. We attempted to mitigate the effects of any one dataset’s definition with uniform sampling (see Section 4.1). Since we take these annotations as representative of hate speech, it is necessary to be mindful that we are not capturing any true sense of “hate speech”, but simply what annotators have identified as hate

speech. However, we wished to investigate the role of target identity in existing hate speech classification approaches, for which existing datasets and their associated definitions are most relevant.

These datasets are only in English and largely reflect European and American societies. Our findings are specific to this context. Experiments on multilingual datasets may reveal other trends and reflect different social associations around identity terms, which are culturally specific.

When sampling identity-based corpora from datasets, we attempted to control for the idiosyncrasies of any particular dataset. However, the sizes of the resulting identity-specific corpora vary depending on how much hate speech directed toward them occurs across datasets. This could influence our generalization experiments. Classifiers trained on identities with small corpora still perform well on test sets of identities with the same demographic category, the general trend we report. As seen in [Figure 1](#), identities with lots of data sometimes exhibit behavior similar to identities with not as much data. These factors lead us to doubt that corpus size has a large impact on generalization results.

Care must always be taken to specify that differences based on identity, in this case hate speech directed toward identities, are due to social, not biological, factors ([Hanna et al., 2020](#); [Lu et al., 2022](#)). We attempt to be clear that these differences are the result of social context.

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- [Contextual Abuse Dataset \(Vidgen et al., 2021\)](#): labeled hate if any of the following labels was present: `AffiliationDirectedAbuse`, `Slur`, `IdentityDirectedAbuse`
 - [ElSherief et al. \(2021\)](#): we paired implicit hate (which was annotated with identity targets) with non-hate from stage 1 annotations
 - [Salminen et al. \(2018\)](#): labeled hate if the class was labeled hateful

A Appendix

We applied the following transformations to datasets for binary hate speech labels:

- [Civil Comments \(Borkan et al., 2019\)](#): toxicity value ≥ 0.5 was labeled hate
- [Social Bias Inference Corpus \(Sap et al., 2020\)](#): offensive value > 0.5 was labeled hate, following the original paper’s binarization
- [Kennedy et al. \(2020\)](#): hate speech value > 1 was labeled hate
- [HateXplain \(Mathew et al., 2021\)](#): labeled hate if any annotator labeled the instance as hate

Marginalized	women, people with mental disabilities, black people, gay men, transgender people, muslims, jewish people, gay people, sexual and gender minorities, feminists, chinese women, people with autism, lgbtqa community, people from china, illegal immigrants, people from pakistan, working class people, elderly people, non-white people, people from mexico, people from india, people with aspergers, people with mental health issues, people with disabilities, romani people, ethnic minorities, immigrants, minorities, jews, blacks, black folks, illegals, people of color, non-whites, islamic people, gays, mexicans, illegal aliens, arabs, africans, refugees, indians, hispanics, black men, arabians, hindus, black lives matter, iranians, mexican, latino folks, asian folks, foreigners, jewish folks, muslim folks, latino/latina folks, physically disabled folks, mentally disabled folks, lesbian women, folks with mental illness/disorder, holocaust victims, native american/first nation folks, trans women, arabic folks, folks with physical illness/disorder, overweight/fat folks, trans men, rape victims, bisexual women, children, poor folks, african folks, ethiopians, bisexual men, sexual assault victims, harassment victims, africa, old folks, orphans, mexican folks, indian folks, child rape victims, ethiopian folks, child sexual assault victims, young children, ethiopian, genocide victims, pregnant folks, ethiopia, pedophilia victims, kids, japanese, chinese folks, holocaust survivors, asian, black, latinx, middle eastern, native american, pacific islander, hindu, jewish, muslim, immigrant, migrant worker, undocumented, non_binary, transgender_men, transgender_unspecified, transgender_women, bisexual, gay, lesbian, seniors, disability_physical, disability_cognitive, disability_neurological, disability_visually_impaired, disability_hearing_impaired, disability_unspecific, disability_other, disability, xenophobia, islam, jews/judaism, special_needs, african_descent, indian/hindu, asians, asian people, muslims and arabic/middle eastern people, lgbtq+ people, victims of violence, non-binary people, older people, bisexual people, chinese people, arabic/middle eastern people, african people, indian people, ethiopian people, japanese people, mexican people, transgender men, undocumented immigrants, latinx people, native american people, people with physical disabilities, transgender women, buddhists, indigenous people, gay or lesbian people, gay and lesbian people
Dominant	involuntary celibates, white people, police officers, people from america, men, christians, rich people, white men, whites, white folks, conservative males, white conservatives, white liberals, americans, white nationalists, male conservatives, cops, police, white, conservative men, christian folks, christian, straight, middle_aged, law enforcement, wealthy people, corporations, military, armed forces, straight people, middle-aged people
Other	left-wing people, moderators, liberals, communists, left-wing people (social justice), non-gender dysphoric transgender people, right-wing people, democrats, activists (anti-fascist), donald trump supporters, republicans, conservatives, gamers, activists (animal rights), people with drug problems, fans of anthropomorphic animals (“furryies”), catholics, progressives, leftists, white women, antifa, germans, journalists, islamists, southerners, media, religious people, assault victims, mass shooting victims, terrorism victims, ugly folks, atheist, buddhist, mormon, specific country, teenagers, young_adults, terrorism, humanity, left_wing_people, terrorists, mormons, atheists, young adults, nonreligious people

Table 7: Labels of relative social power assigned to lowercased identity terms from hate speech datasets. Any identities not in these lists were marked *other* by default.