

International Conference: An End to Anti-Semitism

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The trade and consumption of Jewish Figurines in contemporary Poland - old fashioned anti-Semitism in new cloths?: An Internet exploration.

Abstract

In Poland, especially in Krakow during the Feast of Emmaus (Easter Monday) Jewish figurines, made mostly of wood, but also metal, ceramics and plastic, are sold and bought as a talisman or souvenir. Typically, Jews are presented with (a coin or bag of) money, which is supposed to usher in good luck to its owners. These figurines can also be found in souvenir shops throughout the town. Our goal is to investigate if, and if so to what extent, the phenomenon of trading figurines of Jews has also a presence on the Internet. Our initial results suggest online purchasing and online commentaries can impact on the image of the Polish Jew, reinforcing or rejuvenating social stereotypes.

Introduction: Contemporary attitudes towards Jews in Poland

The Anti-Defamation League regularly surveys over 100 countries, based on sample sizes of at least 500 per country for anti-Semitic views, allowing direct comparisons to be drawn between different countries. In 2014, the percentage of the population expressing anti-Semitic views about Jews in Poland was 14 million out of a potential 31 million, or 45%, whereas in 2015 this had dropped to 37% but still relatively high compared to the global percentage of 26%. Amongst the criteria used to evaluate the anti-Semitic index are questions about Jews' role in business, wealth generation, and in looking after themselves. Central to this theme is the stereotype that Jews hold too much power and control in the world, with the implication they should be restrained or tempered in a way to create a greater equality between other groups. Literature on ethnocentric consumer behavior by others who might view Jews as an outgroup reflects a defensive stance that may be designed to protect the economic position of the in-group¹. The persistent presence of anti-Semitism was evinced by celebrations on November 11th, 2017, in which 60,000 people gathered in central Warsaw to mark the 99th anniversary of

¹ W.G. Sumner, *Folkways: The Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (New York: Ginn and Company, 1906).

Poland's Independence Day, when significantly Poland regained sovereignty at the conclusion of WW1. Banners were held by the National Radical Camp, an anti-Semitic group founded before WW2 on extreme nationalist values. Marchers were heard chanting, among other slogans "Pure Poland, Jew free Poland" and "Jews out of Poland" according to the weekly report *everydayantisemitism.com*. There was an anti-far right demonstration too, but numbering no more than 2,000. Interestingly, the stereotype of the Polish Jew, as perceived by other Poles, is different to the perceptions of Jews living in the States or in Israel². Ury accords their perceived heterogeneity by others to the geographic and political transformations since the nineteenth century.

That is the backdrop to our study on Jews, their place in Polish history, and their imagined place in contemporary Polish society. Jews in today's Poland amount to a miniscule share of the population - about 0.0005%. Most Poles have never met a Jew in their life. The fact that in spite of that, anti-Jewish sentiment occupied such a prominent space in the Independence Day march, encapsulates part of the enigma of Jewish 'existence' in the mind of contemporary Poles. For at the same time, interest in the Jewish past of Poland has never been more intense, with numerous civic projects commemorating Jewish heritage and spaces where Jews once lived^{3,4}. This polarity is poignantly represented in the sea change in Poland since 2015, (compared to the previous decade) when a right wing party orchestrated strong nationalistic overtones and became the government of Poland, in which, 'politics of the past' have become entangled with the 'politics of the present'.⁵

The Research focus: Jewish figurines in contemporary Poland

The subject we explore originates from the Middle Ages (but is entirely a contemporary phenomenon). Our focus is in Jewish figurines (in wood mostly) which are made, sold &

² S.Ury, "Who, What, When, Where, and Why Is Polish Jewry? Envisioning, Constructing, and Possessing Polish Jewry," *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no.3 (Spring/Summer 2000): 205-228.

³ R. Batko, "Identity of Place – Revitalization of Memory. Home, Sanctuary, Cemetery," In *Contemporary understanding of revitalization in Poland*, ed. A. Noworól & K. Skalski, Kraków: Monographs and Studies of Jagiellonian University Institute of Public Affairs, 2010, 97-117.

⁴ R. Batko, "The vacuum and the imagination of space?: the cultural role of Zyznowski Publishing House," In *faces of identity and memory?: the cultural heritage of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. E. Kocój & L. Gawel, Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2015, 89-111.

⁵ W.B. Fowler and A. Szczerbiak, "Explaining lustration in Eastern Europe: A Post-Communist politics approach," *Democratization* 12, no.1 (2005): 22-43.

bought by the Poles for use in specified locations and at particular times (e.g. Krakow's Emmaus fair), as well as by visitors in tourist stalls and shops, as souvenirs. Typically, the figurine features an orthodox Jew wearing traditional cloths (long black cloak, fur hat, side hair curls). The most common figurines comprise of studying the scriptures or prayer, alternatively holding a chest or a large portfolio, their most prominent attribute being a shiny one grosz coin - normally disproportionately large to the size of the figurine; which is held by the figurine or embedded in it. The figurine is believed to usher in 'good luck', and bring money to its keeper. These figurines made by Polish artisans sell from 1 Euro up to 60 Euros (depending on make, size and sale location, as well as its artistic value). Buyers take them home to display unless bought as gifts, sometimes as part of a collection, serving as talisman, protector of the premises and its people, and bearer of good luck. Increasingly, these figurines are displayed at work and in shops.

Material artefacts representing the past have shared economic, symbolic and aesthetic values, with values and meanings changing over time.^{6,7} Artefacts can reframe connections to past events, or create new meanings of significance for their owners⁸. We assert that figurines, as artefacts, can stimulate collective memories of a society's past, creating or reinforcing self-identities. Our research focus aims to find out what can be discerned from the Internet trade in these Jewish figurines. Apart from reporting the type of Internet activity, we wish to pay particular attention to the tone and contents of the online discourse - the extent of (anti-Semitic) stereotyping, depersonalization and reification of Jews.

Research Objectives

Our goal is to ascertain whether there is an online market for these figurines based on their online presence, based on types of trade where they can be located, the scope of the offer, the underlying motives for buying gleaned through ad claims and online forums, and price ranges. This provides some insight into who is buying them, and why. We also examine the range of

⁶ R. Belk, R., M. Wallendorf, and J.F. Sherry, "The scared and the profane in consumer behaviour: Theodicy on the Odyssey," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, (1989):1-38.

⁷ G. McCracken, "Culture and consumption: A theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of the consumer goods," *Journal of Consumer Research* 13, (1986):71-84.

⁸ S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

comments made about the figurines, restricted to Polish websites. Future work will seek to determine the symbolic meanings attached to these figurines to ascertain the extent of their meaningful historical connections in relation to superstition and how the figurines reinforce or influence the kinds of stereotypes identified from the present study.

Methodology

Two studies were completed. **Study 1** examined the range of trades involved in figurines on the Internet. The study was conducted from 29th August to 3th September 2017, examining the most popular Polish online sites offering figurines and paintings featuring Jews. The study comprised of observation and visual ethnography which will allow us to examine the pictures and figures depicted on the Internet.

Study 2 involved an analysis of online forums to trace the motives in buying the figurines, and to report on the range of attitudes held about the Polish Jew, represented by the figurine. Study 2 was conducted over two periods: 11-17 September and then 26-28 September 2017 when the same sites were visited to check for added posts. Overall 57 comments were counted that relate directly to the trade and collection of Jewish figurines and pictures. Interpretation involved using content and discourse analysis, especially in terms of semantics of Web text, in rhetorical figures-of-speech, and employed language registers.

The analysis of study 1 comprised of the types of organisations trading in figurines, the style of the promotion (the content of the advertisements that indicates the buying rationale or motive), the range of figurines for sale, and the price of the items. Using the search engine Allegro.pl, keywords searched included Żydek (Jew boy), Żydki (Jews), Żyd figurka (Jewish figurine), and Żyd obraz (Jew and work). This led to the most popular Polish online sites offering figurines and paintings that featured Jews to be examined.

Analysis

Analysis of study 1 involved classifying organisations into a range of categories, especially under handicrafts, as decorative items for the house and garden, as collectibles and for collections, including antiques and art. Items for sale were also reported as either new or used, and method of purchase (direct purchase or online auction). Figurines were also described by

what they represented by activity or occupation, and motives gleaned from either the products on display or the supportive promotional claims. Price ranges are also commented on.

Analysis of study 2 involved the reporting of conversations in online forums verbatim, selectively reported here for their aptness to the objectives of the study. These conversations are presented to show the range of meanings allocated by the online forums. The authors have added their own interpretations where relevant to capture the gist of the messages. To ensure robustness, two researchers independently examined the conversations and later shared their interpretations.

Results

For study 1, most of the offers were reported under antiques and art (including pictures), interior decorating, with few classified as handicrafts or for collections. From the Allegro.pl website, organisations could be further classified by descriptors such as images/reproductions, wooden products, jewellery, antiques, including furniture, interior decorations, gift souvenirs, and home appliances. We also examined the websites of Pamiątki.pl, Doye!, Sprzedajemy.pl, Firma Wood-World Michał Widziszewski, Allegro.pl, Dolina Kultury, Olx.pl, Jubileo.pl, Ceneo.pl, and Saavart.flog.pl. Table 1 summarises the results of the motives, types of figurine and prices.

There is a fairly wide price range depending on the quality of the figurines/pictures. Among the cheapest are figurines for a magnet - a few zlotys; whilst the most expensive are artistic handicrafts that are hand-made and customized (several dozen to several hundred zlotys). In the latter case, more labour is involved than in the mass produced, cheaper versions. The size of the figurines varies, with normal ranges being 20-50 cm in height.

Concerning motives for buying, in the websites and classifieds, the figurines are advertised primarily as objects that are to bring good luck, principally in the form of financial success, designed for decoration or gift or souvenir from Poland. Notably, the most popular among the Internet sales seem to be the pictures of the "Jew with a coin" available for a small price, produced in wholesale quantities. Figurines are often associated with other products in advertisements intended to bring happiness (pendants, figurines, amulets - such as zodiac signs, frogs, elephants, etc.).

Table 1 summarizing results of study one

(W)eb site, (S)earch engine or (O)ther online presence	Reason/motive for buying	Types of figurine	Price
Pamiatki.pl (W) (https://www.pamiatki.pl/figurki-zydow/).	(1) As omen of good luck (2) As souvenir or gift	Jew with a penny and trumpet, book, harmonica, double bass, cat in a bag	17 zlotys
Doye (W?)	(1) As owner of good luck (2) As owner of success (3) As owner of fortune	Magnets or pendants of plastic, with grosz or musical instruments	12.50-30 zlotys; but 6 to 125 zlotys for standing figures
Sprzedajemy.pl (https://sprzedajemy.pl/temat/figurka+%C5%BCyda), the largest free classifieds site in Poland	(1) As bringer of happiness in finance (2) As unique gift	Unique, hand-made Jewish figurines with bags, crates or barrels of money	Starting from 90 zlotys
Firma-Wood World Michel Widziszewski (W) sprzedajemy.pl, https://sprzedajemy.pl/obrazy-przynoszace-szczescie-zyd-z-pieniazkiem-najlepsza-jakosc-olsztyn-7897fb-nr11012087	(1) As omen of good luck (2) As owner of success (3) As owner of fortune (4) As a gift	As accountants, bankers, or musicians, with pictures of Jews counting money	Unreported
Allegro.pl (W) of pictures, similar for figurines (http://allegro.pl/promocja-obrazek-15x20-zyd-na-szczescie-3gratisy-i6930694006.html):	(1) As owner of happiness (2) As owner of success-money in pocket (3) As owner of prosperity (4) As owner of freedom from troubles (5) As gifts	Jew with a lemon, Talar Jew, Jew with a newspaper, Jew with a flashlight, Jew with candle, Jew with a glass of wine, associated with amulets, pendants and zodiac signs	Pictures of Jewish caricatures are 3 zlotys each
Dolina Kultury (online shop) (http://dolinakultury.pl/en/c/Figurki-zydow/67)	Not reported	Customized wooden sculptures, such as with violin	350 zlotys
Oxl. Pl (Nationwide service of ads)	Not reported	Placed in departments of interior decorations or as collectibles	Unreported
Jubileo. Pl (W) of unisex jewellery and figurines	(1) As owner of success (2) As owner of fortune	Jew with pouch covered in gold, with seal symbol,	5.90 zlotys

https://www.jubileo.pl/figurka-zyd-z-sakiewka-942.html?gclid = Cj0KCQjw557NBRC9ARIsAHJv VVPjuU41 iruia7mN6 fBVP3au08vuAsj70mCMq5q7 sv0JHlu2EE4vvoaAsOOEALw wcB		stereotyped as old, bearded men with side curls and yarmulka, garbardine or pelisse	
Ceneo. Pl (W) of online shops http://sklepzupominkami.com.pl/na-szczescie/2749-figurka-zyda-zydek-na-szczescie.html	(1) As route to financial success (2) as souvenirs	Jew with wooden key box, Jew depicted as old man with gold coin, with long white beard and black cloak, as musicians or with bird on a spring	8.50 zlotys
Saavart. flog. Pl http://savaart.flog.pl/wpis/4573697/zydki-emausowe-figurki-o-wysokosci-okolo-2535-cm-poruszajace-sie-na-tajemniczych-sprezynach	(1) As reminder of the past heritage and identity (?) (2) As collectibles	Associated with the tradition of the Emmaus, Krakow, presented in traditional black cloaks	Unreported

As Michał Widziszewski promotes under his online platform, Firma-Wood World:

“According to many people it really works. Superstition is very popular among financiers, bankers, brokers everywhere where money matters. A Jew who counts money has positive associations as a symbol of a great businessman who wisely invests and wisely saves money. Jews have always been and are a financial elite, have multi-generational traditions of activity in this market, associated with wise and reasonable investment. The operation of this image is interpreted in two ways: it attracts money; protects against unnecessary expenses.”

There is a widely held assumption in the promotional messages that financial success brings happiness. There is also the assumption that by following certain rituals, such as displaying the figurines in a prominent part of a house (such as entrance door) or office (e.g., working table), these figurines will bring good luck. However, when the type of figurines displayed are examined objectively, the caricatures show faces not of success and happiness, but of old grey men with grim faces and long jowls. Such images reflect more about impending gloom and

doom, austerity, and perhaps, penny-pinching, than successful businessmen free of financial worries. Notably, remarks about these wooden caricatures include Jews in traditional Jewish garb, with exaggerated noises, disproportionately large ears, and gold coins, portraying a particular image of the Polish Jew⁹.

The type of figurines for sale often reinforce the negative stereotype of Polish Jews. The interest in money can be shown through activity-what the figurine is doing, such as hoarding bags, crates or barrels of money, or counting or holding money. See Figure 1. One exemplar taken from Jubileo.pl is a Jew with a pouch or money as an amulet for financial success, which has become popular at the beginning of the 21st century. The interest in money is also shown in the type of occupations Jews are shown to hold, such as accountants and bankers. That said, the range of caricatures tends to widen beyond an interest in pecuniary matters - many other images show Jews as musicians playing a variety of instruments, or as symbols of hope, by holding candles or prayer books.

1. Pamiątki.pl



Figure 1: Images 1-3b, examples of Jewish figurines sold in Poland

⁹ S.Ury, "Who, What, When, Where, and Why Is Polish Jewry? Envisioning, Constructing, and Possessing Polish Jewry," *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no.3 (Spring/Summer 2000): 205-228.

2. Doye!



3a. Sprzedajemy.pl, with crate



3b. Sprzedajemy.pl, with bags



Figure 1: Images 1-3b, examples of Jewish figurines sold in Poland

In reporting the findings for study 2, we present a selection of commentaries from the online platforms. Next, we content analysed the number of positive, negative and neutral comments. Of the few comments on the sale of figurines, both flattering and negative comments were found. However, more positive comments were reported under handicraft, where artistic values of the figurines were praised. A snapshot of the comments reported are revealed below. In addition, the websites <http://sklepzupominkami.com.pl/na-szczescie/2259-figurka-zydek-na-szczescie-prezent.html> and <http://srebrnaagrafka.pl/sklep/anielskiewariacje/produkt/zydek-na-szczescie-i-pieniadze> provided explanations about how the figurines should be used to create happiness, with several rules that require following for the Jew to make financial success:

- 1) “Jew should be middle-aged with beard and gray - which symbolizes his maturity, knowledge and experience.
- 2) Should hold (count) money
- 3) Hang the figurine in the corridor above the entrance door or the left side of the door, which symbolizes successful business, and always look at him before leaving the house.
- 4) At the end of the year and on Saturday (Sabbath day), turn the figurine upside down and shake, then the accumulated money will return to the house where he is.
- 5) The company should be in the boss's office to make the business profitable.”

In considering where to hang the figurines in order to bring luck or financial fortune, most commentators on the online forum <http://forum.szafa.pl/84/4746068/zydek-na-szczescie.html> were convinced that this advice was only a superstitious ritual, such as Asiunia and Ilmina: “I have heard that a Jewish picture hung in the house (usually near the entrance door) guarantees money at home. Some people believe that the general possession of any Jewish figurine keeps “hold” of our money... but is it worthy of belief? In my opinion, this is another superstition, although I don’t mind faith makes wonders” [asiunia2706, 2011/10/21]

“My mom has a figurine, she has to put it upside down on Friday and turn it back on Sunday, I guess. But my mother is not a good example of miraculous power of the Jew (Another superstition in which I completely don’t believe).” [ilmina, 2011/10/21]. But comments were nevertheless less negative than Kaplenz, with Ilmina defending the Jew in terms of their enterprising appeal:

“They're going to come up with even worse things. And the only stereotype that can harbor this superstition is that the Jews are a very enterprising nation.” [ilmina, 2011/10/21. Commenting on the wider context:

“Entrepreneurship is one thing, but it is the atmosphere that often encompasses it ... and the very definition of Jewish (Żydek)... Somehow it's all pejorative anyway” [kaplenz, 2011/10/21] However, based on the blog <http://aga-oaza.blogspot.com/2009/02/zydek.html>, those that turned around their fortunes seemed to be more convinced in its powers:

“[...] I have 3 Jewish figurines in my house for a few years and I find that something is in it. will not write here that I made a fortune and I have villas with a swimming pool and 3 cars - no - but I don't complain ... maybe it just affects positive thinking and ... I believe in it and I will not give it to anyone....” [Anonymous 2010/06/20]

Based in the site <http://bobemajse.blogspot.com/2011/06/obraz.html?showComment=1329601500659#c7289385814219478301>, an anonymous businessman seems to believe in the superstition, evinced by his improved relationships at work:

“Hello. I wanted to write something about this image. I am a businessman and I have often seen such paintings in law offices, consultancy offices, real estate brokers... The first time I saw this picture I didn't dare ask anyone why this picture hangs. You know why? Because I was scared to offend someone ... But it's been a while, and I came across this picture again, ...I had such a strange feeling that I also hung such a picture at home. Did my business crouch? All I have worked hard on is someone else used and earned it! After I hung up this image strange things started to happen. The people I used to do business with suddenly started calling me, meeting me, and above all, playing honestly with me. So you have the answer if it really works. My hunch and lesson from life, hard work led me to this picture ...” [Anonymous 2012/02/18].

Several further comments referred to the fact that the main purpose of creating figurines is financial gain and happiness, not reported here but can be distilled from <http://www.forum.rzezbierz.idl.pl/viewtopic.php?t=1322&start=60&sid=b56f9b2ebfd012932354fba035b8d53f>

However, negative comments can relate to the effects on one's identity, especially where questioning the status of the superstition in public might lead others to cast anti-Semitic assertions:

“This macabre tradition is just superstitious. A hanged-up Jew is a terrible association of me. And if you heard that abroad [that] someone hangs in their house, for example, Polish figurines - for some reason? - it is not worth propagating such "traditions" because if that is not enough that it offends other nations one can still be accused of anti-Semitism.” [Doplos2, 2013/04/28],

Sara questions the consequences of such superstitions, arguing it has pre-war associations:

“I also heard the opinion that the Jews themselves don't care about a figurine with a coin, but rather make them laugh...Not all superstitions concern humans (among humans are the hunchback, the chimney sweepers...). There is something scary and depressing at the same time, considering that adult people follow these suppositions. What else can be implied in them, one wonders. How far will they go with this (ill)logic? Can this be dangerous for me?” [Sara, 2011/09/11], <http://bobemajse.blogspot.com/2011/09/bez-komentarza.html>

and argues it has pre-war associations:

Based on <http://bobemajse.blogspot.com/2011/06/obraza.html?showComment=1329601500659#c7289385814219478301>:

“Such images have long disgusted me, there are plenty of them (you did not notice?). There is a superstition that such a picture or figure brings happiness in business. It's a curiosity even in my local pizzeria, and in many homes, it is depressing, but it testifies to some pre-war associations. Such a grim calling.” [Sara, 2011/06/05]

Ysabell doesn't find the purchasing of Jewish images offensive, and adds that maybe it's because she does not misconstrue it as a zero-sum game, in which the Jew's gain is perceived as another's loss:

“Probably because I live in Łódź and such pictures can be bought here in every second gallery, [...] I don't see in these associations anything especially offensive. [...]” [Ysabell, 2011/06/05]

“It is not about those bad Jews who take our money. No. Pictures of the money-counting Jew bring money to the house where it is hanging, so this talent for money becomes positive ... Maybe I'm naive, but I have the impression that with these pictures at least a few people got rid of their dislike for the Jews. It certainly did not get rid of stereotypical thinking, ...” [Ysabell 2011/06/05]. <http://bobemajse.blogspot.com/2011/06/obraz.html?showComment=1329601500659#c7289385814219478301>

Sara adds that there's nothing wrong in managing your own money: “I also thought to myself that what is wrong? controversial? in counting money. We do it every day, buying food, watching our accounts, planning holidays, etc., and people were doing it also in times when there were far more Jews. So why are the Jews "not allowed" to do this? ... Today in our country no one prevents access to ... to setting up their own business, ...” [Sara, June 5, 2011].

Green Canoe adds that feeling good about financial security is surely not insulting to others: “In many homes of friends in my mother's age - hanging on the walls, besides the image of angels, hangs a portrait of a Jew counting money, watercolors, etc. ... I once asked my mother why they are just hanging out with portraits of a Jewish man with money (I didn't know anything about the meaning of that portrait) and I received the explanation that such a portrait brings financial happiness. Just as the angels take care of the peace and health of the household members, the portrait of the Jew is to bring about a lack of hunger, financial liquidity, a sense of security (...) symbols, associations of different nationalities can be received very differently. I do not take a negative view of Jews, but I do not believe in such amulets - but if anyone is going to help, even subliminal somewhere in the mind to make him feel financially "safer"? Is it really so insulting?” [Green Canoe, June 14, 2011].

Another commentator attributes such superstitions to the Poles per se rather than Jews, or more specifically Polish Jews: “Since you bought a picture of a Jew, it shows that you believe in the sorcery and you easily let yourself be manipulated. Don't worry, this is a defect of most Poles. I have no pictures of the similarity of a Jew, even Jesus and Mary, but I have friends of this nation.” [Wankabor, 05/08/2015]

Finally, the plurality of imagery evoked from these figurines was highlighted: "It was just giving me a thought - I would never have thought that such a small object would carry so many

meanings!" [Joanna Malita, 2014/08/01], <https://coczytamalita.wordpress.com/2014/07/31/naszczescie-to-zyd-polskie-figurki-zydow-erica-lehrer/>

Further negative comments from a few argued that a figurine with the image of a Jew with the attribute of happiness can have the opposite effect to the intended - i.e. misfortune in the form of financial failure.

From comments online apparently Internet users usually buy them for themselves in order to decorate the interior and ensure financial success in the future. Ads often suggest ways of hanging images and their placement in individual rooms in the house. Sometimes a link to other deals related to the sale of items that bring happiness (pendants, amulets, figurines, etc.) is added to the ads. Also, Internet users themselves exchange tips on how to handle figurines and pictures that bring happiness.

Summary of the discourse includes:

- Figures/pictures bringing happiness and how to handle them to make financial success.

Recognizing the benefits of decorating home in a specific way.

- Scornful comments indicating that such practices are manifestations of non-serious behavior (wives' tale/superstitions/sorcery)
- Figurines/pictures treated as objects that preserve old stereotypes
- Defence of practices, searching for their historical roots and justification
- Alleviation of stereotypes - funny look of figures should not be a negative association
- Recognizing past stereotypes and perceiving positive aspects of stereotype (e.g., entrepreneurship, a consideration in spending money, etc.
- Recognizing the dark side of these associations: chimney sweepers, hunchbacks, Jews...

Discussion

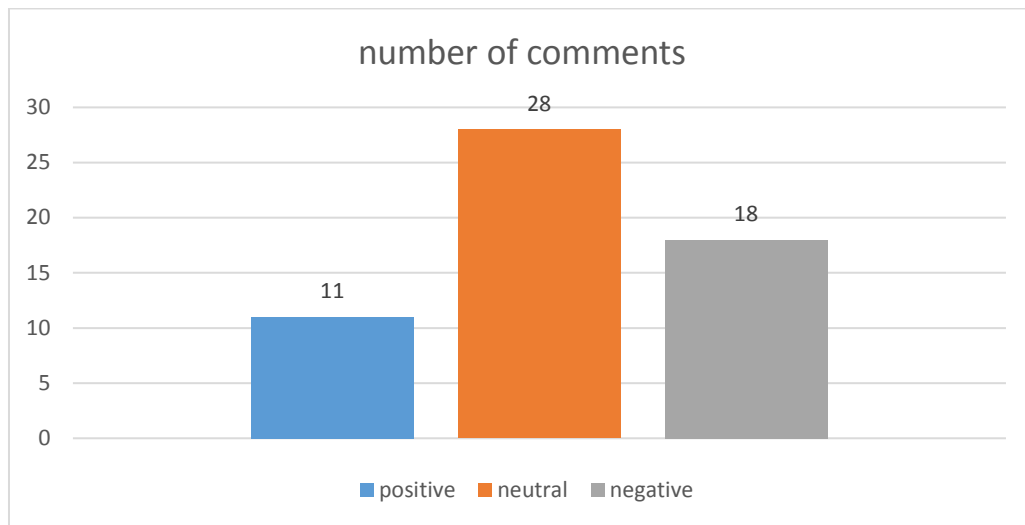
This study sought to identify the online presence for Jewish figurines, which can be purchased easily from a range of websites. Figurines were most likely offered under antiques and art (including pictures), interior decorating, with few classified as handicrafts or for collections. These could be further located or associated with reproductions, wooden products, jewellery, antiques, furniture, interior decorations, gift souvenirs, and home appliances. Therefore, figurines seem to be available not only in specialist shops but more mainstream ones as accessories or gifts.

The figurines are limited to a range of roles, mostly in traditional garb that may heighten negative stereotypes. Nevertheless, there was generally a range of opinions raised about the impressions of the figurines ranging from warm feelings to utter contempt. Apart from exploring the effects of Jewish figurines in Jewish society, we sought to identify their impact on the image of the Polish Jew, and whether this was negative or positive (see Figure 2). Since negative images outweigh positive ones by almost two to one in an online context, it would appear that these figurines may do more harm than good for the image of the Polish Jew.

We restricted our analysis to the types of figurines displaying Jews in online sites, and specifically to Polish websites and blogs. Concerning motives for buying, in the websites and classifieds, the figurines are advertised primarily as objects that will bring good luck, principally in the form of financial success, designed for decoration or gift or souvenir from Poland. Notably, the most popular among the Internet sales seem to be the pictures of the “Jew with a coin” available for a small price, produced in wholesale quantities. In supporting financial success, Jews are either displayed by occupation (e.g., banker, accountant) or by activity (e.g., holding, clasping or overseeing money).

There is a fairly wide price range depending on the quality of the figurines/pictures. Among the cheapest are figurines for a magnet - a few zlotys; whilst the most expensive are artistic handicrafts that are hand-made and customized (several dozen to several hundred zlotys).

When examining qualitatively the online comments made, most commentators do not believe in the superstitious claims that the figurines, if acquired and displayed in specific positions, can bring good luck and happiness, principally through improving the owner’s financial position or that of his family. The fact that the superstition is equated with financial prowess and mastery may give credence to some outsiders or non-Jew Poles believing that Jews have too much power, as reinforced by the ADL Survey (2014-5), creating some vulnerability to the Polish Jew. Nevertheless, there are other online commentators who argue that superstitions, however far-fetched, are personal and should not prove offensive to others. Follow-up studies will be conducted in Spring 2018 to add more robustness to these initial exploratory findings.



The above graph shows that there are mostly neutral comments on the issue (28). Negative comments (18) also outweigh the positive ones (11). N=57

Figure 2: Content analysis of number of positive, negative and neutral online comments

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