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Quid pro quo in Web 2.0. Connecting personality traits and Facebook usage intensity to uncivil commenting intentions in public online discussions



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 February 2017

Received in revised form

27 September 2017

Accepted 12 October 2017

Available online 12 October 2017

Keywords:

Cyberhate

Incivility

Personality

Social media

ABSTRACT

Fueled by tragic incidents worldwide, many studies have investigated dispositional factors that lead to virtual abuse and cyberbullying. In contrast to this, less extreme forms of uncivil online behavior have received only little attention. The current paper strives to overcome this research gap by focusing on uncivil commenting intentions in public Facebook discussions. We presented controversial online comments to a convenient student sample of 256 Facebook users asking them to consider their likely response on several scales ranging from a functional to an uncivil style of reasoning. Users' intended commenting was then linked to several personality traits (Big Five, Dark Triad, sensation seeking, and impulsivity) and their Facebook intensity. Analyses revealed openness, agreeableness, and experience seeking as negative predictors of participants' intention to comment uncivilly, whereas attentional impulsivity, boredom susceptibility as well as intense Facebook use emerged as positive predictors. No connections were found for the Dark Triad. Possible explanations for these effects are discussed.

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Each day, more than a billion people access social networking services (SNS) to broadcast their personal life, socialize with fellow users, or simply procrastinate. The heightened importance of SNS for social and political discourse has been motivating users to join public discussions by expressing their personal viewpoint on different issues (Taha, Hastings, & Minei, 2015). Unfortunately, this development has paved the way for new forms of virtual abuse, which often lead to severe real-life consequences for their victims (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Motivated by these precarious effects, numerous studies have attempted to find explanations for the occurrence of 'cyberhate,' connecting it to personality traits, motivational, and socio-demographic factors (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015). Furthermore, recent literature has also started to explore the phenomenon of 'trolling'—online comments that only serve to bring chaos and emotional distress to strangers, while hiding this intention behind a pseudo-sincere identity (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

Alongside these highly destructive activities, more subtle

manifestations of uncivil online behavior are commonplace in online discussions (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014). These milder forms of misconduct include generalizing or dramatizing statements, nonspecific insults, as well as provocative and impolite comments in public online discussions that are not necessarily directed toward certain individuals (unlike cyberbullying, cyberhate, or trolling). Although previous studies have shown that both impoliteness and incivility are actually less common in SNS compared to more anonymous online platforms (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Rowe, 2015), a recent finding by Rösner, Winter and Kramer (2016) indicates that SNS users might indeed show a similar increase in hostile intent after being exposed to uncivil comments. Therefore, a single provocative posting can elicit hostile cognitions among its recipients, making SNS such as Facebook a permanent source of uncivil intentions. A perceived hostile social norm within these online discussions can then result in an increased likelihood to respond aggressively, thus creating a vicious circle of online incivility (Rösner & Krämer, 2016).

Further psychological insight on the emergence of those milder forms of incivility is scarce. Extant research thus far has focused mainly on the influence of contextual factors, such as framing (Borah, 2013), inequality among commenters (Blom, Carpenter,

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Bowe, & Lange, 2014), or various content characteristics of the respective article (Coe et al., 2014). Even though a large body of research has confirmed that personality traits contribute to the way people engage in social media—thereby promising a robust prediction of users' actions—commenters' dispositions are seldom taken into account to explain uncivil commenting (for a notable exception see Krishnan, 2016). By examining an important antecedent of those behaviors in the form of individuals' intended responses to uncivil comments in public online discussions (Sheeran, 2002), the current paper is addressing this research gap, connecting several personality factors to harmful cognitions.

1. Social media and user personality

Although SNS encourage their users to update their status regularly, it is also possible to present only little data to the respective community. Likewise, some users may apply a neutral tone to their virtual identity while others demonstrate little restraint in publishing embarrassing or hostile content. Nevertheless, those online behaviors that are typically considered more extreme must not be pathologized since existing research found more similarities than differences between users who occasionally participate in uncivil online behavior and perpetrators of severe cyber-aggression (France, Danesh, & Jirard, 2013). Accordingly, we proceed on the assumption that uncivil commenting (i.e., generalizing and blatant comments on public SNS pages) should be associated with similar personality correlates as more serious cases of online harassment. Thus, we link previous insights about behavioral consequences of the Big Five, the Dark Triad, impulsivity and sensation seeking (in their function as empirically relevant predictors of online behavior) with users' spontaneous reactions to provocative statements made by unknown others.

1.1. The Big Five

Due to its role as highly comprehensive and popular taxonomy in the field of personality psychology, studies have extensively featured the Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) to account for different SNS practices. For instance, previous research has demonstrated that users' extraversion scores predict uninhibited SNS behavior with regard to their online self-disclosure (Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2014), number of online friends (Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014), and update frequency (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010). Matching the outgoing and enthusiastic nature of the disposition, extraverted people have also been shown to share more photos and videos than introverts, which might be reinforced by the fact that they receive more positive feedback on their social media updates (Shen, Brdiczka, & Liu, 2015). However, a study on trolling activities indicated that extraverts' tendency to be highly energetic might foster destructive forms of online behavior as well (Buckels et al., 2014). Drawing on these findings, we, therefore, expect that extraverted people are more willing to act carelessly in their spontaneous comments.

H1a. Extraversion positively predicts intentions to comment in an uncivil manner.

With regard to users' openness to experience, prior studies have found a positive relationship to extensive self-displays on SNS. As people scoring high in this trait tend to feel curious about technological innovations, they are also eager to adopt many different features of the media (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Concerning public comments, we assume that their openness to different perspectives and opinions should result in a less pronounced preference for aggressive reactions.

H1b. Openness to experience negatively predicts intentions to comment in an uncivil manner.

In contrast to this, agreeableness and conscientiousness have been shown to predict reluctant online behaviors. Individuals with high scores in at least one of these traits were found to be more cautious about disclosing embarrassing content (Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010). Moreover, they tend to use fewer SNS features and upload fewer photos of themselves (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Pursuant of the trait's considerate and self-controlled nature, agreeableness also correlates negatively with enjoyment in trolling (Buckels et al., 2014). Due to this tendency to act in a compassionate and self-disciplined way, we expect that both agreeableness and conscientiousness negatively predict users' intentions to show incivility.

H1c. Agreeableness negatively predicts intentions to comment in an uncivil manner.

H1d. Conscientiousness negatively predicts intentions to comment in an uncivil manner.

Lastly, high scores in neuroticism—which translate as strong tendency to experience stress and emotional instability—have been linked to a strategic form of impression management that emphasizes hidden and idealized aspects of the user's self (Seidman, 2013). According to Michikyan et al. (2014), this behavior might relate to the neurotic habit to seek reassurance in protected environments, culminating in the desire to explore other, more confident identities. Therefore, we hypothesize that neuroticism contributes to an uncivil commenting intention, as users influenced by this trait are typically more vulnerable to provocations.

H1e. Neuroticism positively predicts intentions to comment in an uncivil manner.

1.2. The Dark Triad

Apart from the FFM, research on excessive SNS use and virtual misconduct has traditionally resorted to other personality factors. Among the most prominent of them is narcissism, which describes an inflated sense of grandiosity and entitlement and has long attracted the attention of SNS scholars (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Studies have shown a strong positive relationship between narcissism and the number of online friends (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), status updates (Ong et al., 2011), and uploads of self-portraying photos on social media (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Weiser, 2015). Moreover, people high in narcissism also state a higher importance of social media for their personal life (Błachnio, Przepiorka, & Rudnicka, 2016). In combination with their exaggerated sense of entitlement, this increased significance of the media offers fertile ground for narcissists to engage in antisocial behavior. Carpenter (2012) found that users with narcissistic tendencies demand social support from their virtual friends while expressing only little concern in return. The same study also indicated that narcissists tend to retaliate against other users' comments with angry responses. These results are in line with earlier findings in offline settings, which revealed that narcissistic wounds could predict aggression even better than low self-esteem (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

H2a. Narcissism positively predicts intentions to comment in an uncivil manner.

Due to their common interpretation as malicious personality facets, literature has been summarizing narcissism along with psychopathy and Machiavellianism as the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Accordingly, SNS researchers have started to

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