



Dangerous minds? Effects of uncivil online comments on aggressive cognitions, emotions, and behavior



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ABSTRACT

Despite the potential of online commenting spaces for public deliberation, they are often full of destructive or uncivil and aggressive comments. Based on research on social learning and social influence, we conducted an online experiment to investigate the effects of uncivil comments on readers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions. The experiment was built on a one-factorial between-subjects design including four experimental conditions and a control group: Participants were exposed to a news article and six user comments of which zero, one, three, or six were uncivil. Results suggest that exposure to uncivil comments can lead to an increase in readers' hostile cognitions. The effect, however, does not rise with exposure to a higher proportion of incivility. No significant effects were found on hostile emotions or the use of incivility in readers' own comments.

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1. Introduction

The Internet promotes opportunities for the freedom of expression, exchange of ideas, and public deliberation but simultaneously provides a high potential for misuse of these goods. Often ascribed to the anonymity on the Internet, online commenting spaces frequently feature incivility and impolite user statements that vary from mockery and sarcasm to insults and slander (Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). Verbal attacks in online discussions, which have been described as flaming or venting (Kayany, 1998), can be directed at other discussion members, organizations, the media or the source of a news item (e.g., author of a news article), or specific stakeholders involved in the discussion topic such as politicians or specific subgroups of people (e.g., refugees, homosexuals, drug addicts, etc.). Moreover, people often use foul language and a variety of uncivil expressions, such as profanity or expletives, to state their views on a discussion topic (Blom, Carpenter, Bowe, & Lange, 2014).

Beyond the negative psychological effects of virtual attacks for the individual targets, uncivil and destructive user comments can also be a threat to the deliberative quality of online discussions as

they might incite others to imitate uncivil behavior (Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2014) or increase anger and aversion toward the comments' authors and reduce satisfaction with the entire discourse (Gervais, 2015). Thus, incivility in online discussions can have immediate effects on the individual reader and might affect his/her subsequent commenting behavior or emotional reactions. This paper builds on prior research on the influence that uncivil online comments can have on their readers and extends the findings by analyzing the connection between exposure to incivility in online commenting spaces and hostile cognitions.

Building on Bandura's social learning theory, which states that individuals can learn by observing other individuals modeling a behavior (Bandura, 1986), it can be argued that users of participatory websites learn and adopt certain forms of commenting behavior by observing the comments of other users. Moreover, social influence theories posit that individuals are highly susceptible to the influences of other people and conform to others' attitudes and behaviors (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Thus, uncivil comments generated by other users are likely to influence how uncivil the readers of these comments behave in online discussions: If others use incivility in their comments, this might be perceived as a normative standard and an appropriate thing to do.

Recent research has already shown that uncivil user-generated comments may have a substantial influence on readers, for instance by polarizing preexisting attitudes (Anderson, Brossard,

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Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014) or affecting their commenting behavior (e.g., Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2014). However, the current literature lacks research on the influence of incivility in online discussions on individuals' internal state variables, in terms of their cognitive and emotional reactions. Therefore, this paper does not limit its analyses to the behavioral level of outcome effects (uncivil commenting behavior) but examines the whole process of social influence on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level. Using the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Carnagey, 2004) as a theoretical framework, we investigate whether uncivil comments on a news page function as aggressive cues to elicit cognitive priming of hostile thoughts and anger emotions. By drawing the attention to the importance of internal state variables when examining effects of uncivil online comments, we aim to broaden the knowledge on the psychological mechanisms associated with exposure to incivility in online discussions.

Furthermore, we draw on Social Impact Theory to examine whether these effects are dependent on the quantity of incivility in online discussions. According to Social Impact Theory, social influence increases with the size, strength, and immediacy of the group of people who serve as sources of influence (Latané, 1981). In this line, early research has shown that conformity to a group increases with every additional source of influence up to a group size of four (Asch, 1955). Against this background, we conducted an online experiment with a one-factorial between subjects design consisting of four experimental conditions and a control group to examine the effects of exposure to different proportions of uncivil comments in an online discussion. By exposing participants to six online comments on a news article, of which either zero, one, three, or all six were written in an uncivil tone (no comments were displayed in the control group), we address the question whether the influence of incivility on hostile cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions is immediate, linearly increasing with every additional comment, or subject to threshold and ceiling effects. Thereby, this paper contributes to the current literature in the field by providing new insights on the connection between exposure to uncivil online comments and hostile cognitions and extends research on computer-mediated social influence processes by systematically analyzing effects of different proportions of incivility on conformity in the context of online commenting.

2. Online incivility

The definition of incivility and the ways in which it is operationalized vary among research areas, contexts, and studies. In mediated political discourse, incivility can range from milder forms of disrespectful remarks to outrage (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), which is described as a severe type of incivility that most frequently manifests as “mockery, misrepresentative exaggeration, insulting language, and name calling” (p. 29). Scholars in the context of online communication have defined online incivility as “features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics” (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). By emphasizing the words unnecessarily and disrespectful, the authors dissociate uncivil comments from those providing relevant information and substance to the discussion in a respectful tone. Gervais (2014) argues furthermore for a clear distinction between “uncivil negative” and “civil negative” comments, describing the former as intentionally disrespectful making the uncivil claim very clear by their hyperbolic nature.

Concerning the question what constitutes a disrespectful tone, different forms of incivility have been detected in the online context. On a general level, uncivil online comments can be divided in “uncivil attack posts”, including attacks toward different targets (article author, news media, other commenters), and “uncivil

language posts”, including profanity, expletives, racism, or punctuation associated with aggression, such as letters followed by dashes and words in capital letters that resemble shouting (Blom et al., 2014). While the former has also been referred to as flaming, the latter describes verbal aggression directed at a topic, idea, or viewpoint rather than aggressions toward other individuals.

3. Social influence and social modeling of online incivility

According to social influence research and conformity theories, individuals are highly susceptible to the influences of other people and use others' attitudes and behaviors as a guide in order to be accurate, socially accepted, or to maintain a positive self-concept (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Informational social influence occurs when individuals aim to do something correctly and efficiently and therefore rely on others as a source of information, while normative social influence is characterized by conformity to others' attitudes or behaviors due to the desire to be accepted and liked by others (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In order to accomplish these aims, individuals attempt to observe what other people do or what they approve of. The process of observing other people and thereby learning social behavior is described by social learning theories. According to Bandura (1986), individuals can learn and adopt a behavior when they observe other people. If a model is attractive or similar to the observer, the influence of modeling is even greater. The observation of models must not necessarily take place face-to-face, behavioral concepts can also be learned through words and images (Bandura, 1986). Against this background, media effect researchers have proposed social learning effects through exposure to media content, with a great amount of research having focused on the influence of violent media stimuli. In this line, the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Carnagey, 2004) was developed as a framework to explain short-term as well as long-term learning effects of exposure to violent media, proposing that violent media stimuli can trigger aggressive reactions and affect individuals' arousal, affective, and cognitive states.

These considerations can be applied to the context of perceiving uncivil user comments on the Internet. Here, observing uncivil commenting behavior of other users could influence observers' use of incivility in their own comments: Users who provide uncivil comments can serve as “models” and create the impression that verbal aggression in online discussions is acceptable and a legitimized style of communication. In this regard, experimental research has shown that aggressive user comments on a weblog can serve as a basis for social modeling and lead to more verbal aggression in readers' own comments, especially when they comment anonymously (Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2014). Han and Brazeal (2015) found that the “social modeling” effect also works for the other direction and can lead to increased civility in online discussions when civil “models” (i.e., comments that express disagreements in a respectful way) are present: Participants in their experiment, who were exposed to civil comments compared to those who were exposed to uncivil comments, not only adopted the civil tone in their own comments when acknowledging opinions that deviate from their own, but also reported a greater willingness to participate in the discussion and enhanced the discussion by providing more additional perspectives on the discussion matter. Participants in the uncivil condition expressed significantly more dissatisfaction with the discussion; however, they did not use more incivility in their comments than participants in the civil condition (Han & Brazeal, 2015).

In the context of political online discussions among members of opposing parties, individuals seem to react differently on incivility depending on whether an uncivil remark supports or challenges

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