Intolerant versus uncivil: Examining types, directions and deliberative attributes of incivility on Facebook versus Twitter
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Abstract
This study was an attempt to understand incivility, intolerance, and deliberative attributes on social media. Instead of solely focusing on incivility, this study distinguished incivility from intolerance and examined these two concepts in the context of public comments on two social media platforms. More specifically, in the study, we conducted content analyses to examine whether uncivil and intolerant comments vary based on platforms and topic sensitivity, as well as the relationship between uncivil and intolerant discourse and deliberative attributes. The results revealed that incivility occurred on both platforms but that a significant difference existed between Facebook and Twitter in terms of intolerant comments. The results also showed a positive relationship between topic sensitivity and intolerance. Finally, we found that Facebook discussions were 46 percent more likely than Twitter discussions to contain deliberative comments.

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Introduction
As online platforms have become popular venues for political discussions, political communication scholars have focused on how political discussions take place on these platforms (Papacharissi, 2004; Oz, et al., 2018). In recent years, Americans have heavily relied on social media to discuss social and political issues. For example, according to the Pew Research Center (2020), about half of Americans participated in discussions, encouraged others to take political action, and followed a social issue on social media, though this participation varied by individuals’ age, race, and gender. While some scholars have focused on the
democratizing potential of social media platforms (Xenos, et al., 2014; Halpern, et al., 2017), others suggest these platforms have an incivility problem that may hinder the deliberative process of discourse (Mcclurg, 2009; Coe, et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015).

No consensus exists regarding the conceptualization of incivility in research literature. While some define incivility as impolite behaviors that violate social norms (Borah, 2013; Mutz, 2015), others suggest that the concept of impoliteness differs from incivility and that impoliteness — unlikely incivility — does not harm deliberation and democratic processes (Papacharissi, 2004). Other scholars have acknowledged incivility and impoliteness as different concepts but suggest a more nuanced approach to understand uncivil discourse because the magnitude of incivility might differ. For example, while a modest level of incivility may help people to express their opinions, extreme incivility may harm the deliberative process by damaging discussion plurality (Rossini, 2020).

This study is an attempt to shed light on several aspects of incivility. First, this study asserts that not all uncivil comments are harmful to the deliberative process and that some uncivil comments might have deliberative attributes. As Rossini (2020) suggested, the toxicity levels of uncivil comments may differ, with some comments being highly toxic. Thus, this study distinguishes highly toxic comments (intolerant) from less toxic comments (uncivil) to see if uncivil and intolerant comments differ in terms of deliberative attributes. Second, this paper asserts that toxicity levels of incivility might increase if incivility is personal (Su, et al., 2018). In other words, if an intolerant or uncivil comment specifically targets discussion participants, then that kind of intolerant or uncivil comment could be more harmful to the deliberative process than impersonal incivility may be.

Finally, this study examined whether uncivil and intolerant comments vary based on different social media platforms and according to the sensitivity of the issue. Although Twitter and Facebook are both social media platforms, participants have different networks on each one, and these platforms have different affordances (Fox and Holt, 2018). Thus, we expected to see that intolerant and uncivil comments may vary based on the platform. In addition, we examined whether issue sensitivity may contribute to the likelihood of uncivil behavior. That is, intolerant and uncivil comments may be more frequent during discussion of more sensitive topics than less sensitive ones. Finally, this research explores each social media platform’s likelihood of producing uncivil or highly toxic comments. Oz, et al. (2018) asserted that uncivil discourse might be more frequent on some platforms than others due to each platform’s characteristics, which may encourage or discourage uncivil comments. By incorporating previous assertions that incivility does not occur uniformly across all content providers, while accounting for each platform’s characteristics that might bolster or hinder incivility, this piece examines the correlation between platform characteristics and users’ behaviors.

Prior research has shown that Facebook’s patrons use it to maintain existing relationships: therefore, users are more likely to create a profile that represents their real life and reveals some personal information (Christofides, et al., 2009; Chen, 2011). Twitter users, on the other hand, do not reveal significant amounts of personal information and tend to engage primarily with users with whom they lack strong preexisting social ties (Chen, 2011; Himelboim, et al., 2013). The differences between these two mediums in terms of users’ purposes for engagement is also indicative of users’ behaviors on these platforms. In addition, Santana (2014) concluded that anonymity has a significant impact on incivility. Uncivil discourse therefore occurs more often on the platform that affords greater anonymity, which is Twitter. Platforms like Facebook, where identifiability is high — given that people tend to reveal more personal information — are less likely to create an environment in which incivility emerges. Thus, this study attempted to facilitate a deeper understanding of the differences between uncivil discourse on Twitter and Facebook.

Building on previous research (Muddiman and Stroud, 2017; Oz, et al., 2018; Rossini, 2020; Su, et al., 2018;), this study aims to contribute to the incivility literature in social media discourse by examining less studied aspects of incivility: types (extreme incivility versus incivility), directionality (personal versus impersonal), deliberative attributes of incivility, and variations in incivility by platform.
Deliberation and deliberative attributes

As Habermas suggested, *deliberation* is necessary for a democratic society. The purpose of deliberation is to find solutions to civic matters and reach a political consensus without violence (Habermas, 1984). According to Habermas, a deliberative discussion must include rational and objective arguments as well as help solve public problems (Habermas, 1984). While Habermas defined *deliberation* as rational arguments to find solutions to civic matters, others have defined deliberation as behavior that promotes civility and plurality (Marti, 2017). Some researchers have argued that deliberative discussion promotes rationality and encourages further discussion (Burkhalter, et al., 2002). They suggest that a deliberative discussion should include some evidence and a meaningful argument, and should promote, rather than prevent, further discussion (Gastil, 2008; Landemore, 2012). *Deliberation* should also encourage people to use rational and evidence-based conversation to further discussion (Gastil, 2008; Landemore, 2012). Scholars collectively agree that deliberative communication must be rational and interactive [1]. Overall, the main benefit of deliberation is to lead a political consensus and action (Gastil, 2008). However, scholars argued that online deliberation rarely leads to a consensus (Baek, et al., 2011), but it increases political knowledge and encourages people to participate in political and civic matters (Min, 2007). Thus, in this study, we did not examine full-scale deliberation; instead, we focused on “attributes of deliberative speech.” While full-scale deliberation is related to political action, deliberative attributes are related to “expressive political talk” [2]. Within this talk, some comments/tweets might include “deliberative moments” [3]. Deliberative attributes include some features of full-scale deliberation such as rationality, sourcing, and interactivity (Ryfe, 2005; Jacobs, et al., 2009; Oz, et al., 2018). This type of “political talk” might increase users’ political knowledge and encourage them to take political action (Graham and Wright, 2014). In online environments, deliberative attributes can help discussants understand opposite views, learn about political issues, and participate in civic matters (Hoffman, et al., 2013). Especially in polarized political environments, *deliberative attributes* are required for different sides to understand each other. According to Mutz [4], “the whole reason deliberative democracy is normatively desirable is because it is thought to produce tangible benefits for democratic citizens and societies.” Without deliberative attributes, partisan divides will widen, incivility will increase, and solutions to the civic issues will be delayed (Gutman and Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1996). Attributes of deliberation, however, create an inclusive and evidence-based discussion environment, enabling discussion participants to learn from each other and become well-informed citizens (Gastil, 2008).

While scholars have addressed differing benefits of deliberation, they mostly agree on the features of deliberative attributes. According to the literature, deliberative attributes require three essential features: *rationality* (Ryfe, 2005), *sourcing* (Stromer-Galley, 2007), and *interactivity* (Barber, 1984). The rationality requirement means that deliberative attributes should be evidence-based and logical (Gastil, 2008; Landemore, 2012). Habermas (1984) argued that people learn from each other when they exchange their ideas in a deliberative communication environment and have a meaningful conversation. Some scholars have additionally suggested that the “rationality” feature requires people to stick to the same topic (Burkhalter, et al., 2002) instead of moving to another topic to support their arguments.

The second feature of deliberative attributes is *sourcing*. Stromer-Galley (2007) notes that online deliberative communication requires evidence. Especially in online discussions, users should provide external links, articles, or additional evidence to support their arguments (Oz, et al., 2018). Many scholars have used “sourcing” when measuring deliberative communication (Stromer-Galley, 2007; Monnoyer-Smith and Wojcik, 2012). Finally, *interactivity* is at the core of deliberation attributes. In a deliberative discussion, people exchange ideas and make arguments and counter-arguments. *Interactivity* includes listening because if no listening occurs, no meaningful arguments or counter-arguments can occur (Habermas, 1984).

Again, it is important to note that this study does not examine the full scale of deliberation; instead, it
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focuses on “attributes of deliberative speech” that might exist in online discussions [5]. Thus, the purpose of this study is not to understand “political action” or “political consensus” but to understand meaningful “expressive political talk” on social media platforms [6].

Types and directions of incivility

As discussed earlier, deliberation is necessary for the democratic process. When people discuss controversial issues, individuals might challenge others’ views. During a heated discussion, then, discussants might exchange uncivil comments. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) suggested that incivility is not uncommon in deliberative discussion and does not hinder deliberative attributes.

While some scholars defined incivility as a threat to a democratic plurality (Bormann, et al., 2021; Papacharrissi, 2004), others argued that people might use incivility as a “rhetorical act” [7]. In online environments, users may normalize incivility and see it as a communicative practice. For example, Hmielowski, et al. (2014) argued that online users who discuss politics often tend to normalize uncivil discussions. Similarly, others suggested that users may not be offended by incivility towards their opinions, but they are likely to be offended if uncivil behavior targets people because of their backgrounds or orientations (Muddiman and Stroud, 2017; Rossini, 2020). Moreover, some empirical evidence suggests that incivility may be beneficial for political discussions. For example, people tend to recall uncivil arguments better than civil ones (Mutz and Reeves, 2005; Mutz, 2016), they may use incivility to get attention and stand out among the crowd (Herbst, 2010), uncivil discussions may increase interest in political issues (Brooks and Geer, 2007) and sometimes people even use incivility to entertain discussion participants and make discussions more interesting (Sydnor, 2018). Further, Chen, et al. (2019) argued that marginalized groups might need incivility to make their voices heard. Overall, defining incivility as a threat to democratic plurality undermines its value as a “rhetorical act” [8]. Thus, in this study, we align with Rossini (2020) and Mutz (2015) and argue that incivility may be compatible with a democratic plurality. Scholars focused on uncivil online discourse not because of certain negative online expressions but because of possible harmful consequences of uncivil discourse (Chen, et al., 2019). The main consequence of uncivil discourse is its silencing impact (harming democratic plurality) (Papacharissi, 2004). However, as Rossini [9] argued, the concept of “intolerance” is more suitable than incivility to define the threat to democratic plurality. Thus, intolerance should be distinguished from incivility and treated as a separate concept [10]. In the next section, we operationally define incivility and intolerance and discuss how intolerance threatens democratic plurality.

Incivility, intolerance, and democratic plurality

The literature suggests that even though uncivil comments may have a harsh tone, people may still have meaningful arguments using such language (Benson, 2011; Rossini, 2020). Thus, some scholars argue for needing a nuanced approach to better understand uncivil discourse (Mutz and Mondak, 2006; Coe, et al., 2014; Rossini, 2020). This study argues that a more nuanced approach is necessary because the toxicity of uncivil comments may vary. For example, Rossini (2020) suggested that intolerant discourse could be more toxic than uncivil discourse. That is, intolerant discourse might hurt the deliberative process by using a discriminatory and violent tone while uncivil discourse may not threaten the democratic process or deliberation in general because a “disrespectful or offensive” tone might not engagement in discussions [11]. Similarly, Tromble (2018) suggested that we should distinguish incivility that consists of vulgarity, attacks to opinions by using a disrespectful tone from intolerance that “targets categories of people for discrimination, hate, abuse, etc.” because while “incivility may still serve important democratic purposes,”
intolerance is a threat to a democratic plurality.

As Rossini argued, uncivil comments may resemble civil comments after removing “vulgar, profane” language from them. In this sense, such uncivil comments may not be a threat to the democratic process and to deliberation (Rossini, 2020). While acknowledging the overall breadth of how incivility is conceptualized in the literature, this study defines incivility as “attacking arguments” or “attacking discussion participants” by using a disrespectful tone (e.g., vulgar language) (Coe, et al., 2014). Like previous work, this study operationalizes uncivil comments “as a feature of tone, not a feature of discourse” [12]. Some may argue that this definition of incivility is very similar to the definition of impoliteness. However, as Papacharissi [13] suggested, impolite comments usually “have fewer words, and they are spontaneous.” On the other hand, uncivil comments are usually longer and have better-structured arguments. When distinguishing incivility from impoliteness Papacharissi argues that “incivility was part of the argument structure; impoliteness, in contrast, was simply an argument flaw that was frequently taken back” [14]. The main difference between intolerance and incivility is an uncivil tone can be used while presenting a perspective, on the other hand, intolerant comments aim to silence people due to their backgrounds, such as ethnicity, sexual identity, or religion. Thus, the use of intolerant comments may prevent further deliberative discussion (Gibson, 1977; Rossini, 2020). This study argues that uncivil comments might still contain some deliberative qualities because users may post uncivil comments when they are in a heated discussion (Mutz and Mondak, 2006) without hindering deliberation. Uncivil comments could be a strategical tool to argue a point in a heated discussion (Rossini, 2020). Since it helps reveal other users’ perspectives, it remains a part of the deliberative discussion.

On the other hand, highly toxic comments, defined as intolerant in this study, might negatively impact cross-cutting discussions in online environments (Anderson, et al., 2014; Borah, 2013). The recent literature suggests that intolerant comments might impact users’ behavior in expressing opinions. People exposed to highly toxic comments may avoid discussing pertinent issues on social media, for example (Oz, et al., 2018). However, no consensus exists yet on the operationalization of incivility and its impact on how people express opinions. A deeper understanding of the magnitude of toxicity of uncivil comments is necessary to more effectively understand the role incivility plays in determining an individual’s online behaviors. Rossini (2020) suggested that using uncivil discourse as a rhetorical explanatory device to support a particular stance or viewpoint can be seen more normal or acceptable than directly targeting others with intolerant and uncivil comments in online spaces. Accordingly, targeting individuals or groups due to their race or their social, sexual, political, or religious identities might be seen highly toxic by users. Incivility that includes racism, xenophobia, or even physical threats might discourage people from engaging in discussions (Gearhart and Zhang, 2014; Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). These expressions might hinder the conversation and harm the deliberative process, so understanding the directionality of incivility is crucial to identifying its potential outcomes. This study therefore distinguishes incivility from intolerance and operationalizes intolerant comments as “harmful and discriminatory comments toward a group of people or a person based on their race or identities (sexual, religious and political) to undermine or silence users’ participation” [15].

Intolerant speech targets discussion participants or a group of people by using socially undesirable language. It also aims to silence participants (exclusion), threaten their free speech rights, and target individuals because of some characteristic of their identity.

Uncivil comments, on the other hand, do not target a group of people based on race, social status, preferences, or identity with the intent of silencing them in the discussion, and people might therefore see this kind of incivility as more acceptable and less toxic (Mutz, 2015). The use of uncivil comments to stand out, get attention, make counterarguments, or reveal a point of view is common in online environments but does not aim to silence other users (Mutz, 2015; Rossini, 2020). It is therefore logical to expect that uncivil comments may have more deliberative qualities, such as meaningful arguments and providing sources, than intolerant comments have.

To sum up, heated arguments may involve people who use an uncivil tone, but they may still have a
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meaningful argument. On the other hand, threats, racial slurs, and the use of derogatory stereotypes all represent undemocratic actions and are attempts to deny people the freedom to engage in participatory political discourse. Intolerant comments are therefore less likely to have deliberative qualities. So, we propose:

\[ H1: \text{Uncivil comments will have more deliberative attributes than intolerant comments.} \]

Affordances, topic sensitivity, and network characteristics

After social media platforms became popular for political discussions, scholars started to examine how platform affordances might influence users’ behavior in expressing opinion on these platforms. According to Gibson (1979), some affordances might prevent certain behaviors. For example, scholars have concluded that anonymity, visibility, and identifiability affordances might significantly influence users’ opinion expression behaviors (Rowe, 2015; Oz, et al., 2018; Fox and Holt, 2018; Rossini, 2020). Anonymity is an especially important aspect of affordances in influencing online uncivil discourse. Several studies have found that some platforms afford full or partial anonymity (Qian and Scott, 2007). Especially in social media platforms, anonymity may vary. For example, Facebook expects users to use their real names when they open an account. Further, since Facebook users usually have real-world ties, they are less likely to use a pseudonym or fake profile photos (Matthes, et al., 2017).

In contrast, Twitter does not require people to use their real names (Kaarakainen and Hutri, 2016). Users may use a pseudonym if they prefer, and using a pseudonym offers some benefits. For example, users who take on different identities online might feel freer to participate in discussions more. Twitter users also do not have to worry as much about “context collapse,” having different groups of people simultaneously in one’s network (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). Context collapse is even more salient on social media platforms like Facebook, where users must deal with people from different spheres of their lives, such as relatives, close friends, and employers. According to Goffman (1978), individuals tailor their behavior and actions based on social settings and audience. When “context collapse” occurs, with different audiences in one social setting (Papacharissi, 2012), individuals tend to be more careful about avoiding embarrassing or undesirable situations because it may be challenging to navigate discourse among multiple types of audiences in one setting (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). For example, if context collapse leads to the blurring of personal and professional lives, users may be careful when sharing something on that platform. Previous research has found that Facebook users tend to conform to social rules and expectations and avoid socially undesirable behaviors (Brandtzæg and Lüders, 2018). Facebook users also feel increasingly self-aware on Facebook and tend to present a “highly filtered version of themselves” (Brandtzæg and Lüders, 2018).

The use of pseudonyms and pseudonymous profiles on social media, however, can reduce the impact of context collapse. Since Twitter allows use of pseudonyms, users may not need to worry about the consequences of context collapse. Many scholars have suggested that using pseudonyms can cause flaming, trolling, and uncivil behaviors (Sternberg, 2013) because anonymity reduces accountability (Postmates and Spears, 1998; Fox and Holt, 2018). Users may therefore feel more comfortable engaging in socially undesirable behaviors, such as posting uncivil or intolerant comments. As may be expected then, some studies have found less incivility on Facebook than on anonymous platforms (Rowe, 2015). Again, people tend to use their real names and profile photos on Facebook in order to connect with their “real-world” friends, and research has also suggested that using real names and identifiable information encourages rationality and sincerity (Friess and Eilders, 2015).

Goffman (1978) argues that people are connected to their networks, and their networks define their roles and relationships and shape their engagement. Someone who uses their real name and profile photo and knows their close relationship can see their posts might feel discouraged from using uncivil or intolerant
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In this study, then, we expected some differences in uncivil/intolerant discourse to emerge between Twitter and Facebook. We propose that Facebook would have fewer uncivil and intolerant posts than Twitter.

The logic behind this supposition is not just about full or partial anonymity but also about network characteristics. As scholars have suggested, audience types may significantly affect what users choose to disclose (Rubin and Shenker, 1978). As Goffman (1978) argued, people’s networks can influence their behavior. In this case, on Facebook, people tend to have their friends, relatives, and colleagues. So, their network and their identification level might discourage them from using uncivil and intolerant rhetoric. For example, scholars have suggested that incivility is less common on Facebook than on other social media platforms such as YouTube (Rowe, 2015; Oz, et al., 2018), where anonymity is more common.

Again, scholars have concluded that affordances might shape political engagement on online platforms (boyd, 2010). So, this study argues that, since social media platforms have different affordances and network characteristics, the frequency of uncivil and intolerant discourse may differ based on platform. Thus, the following hypotheses were proposed:

\[ H2 \]: Facebook discussions will have more deliberative attributes than Twitter discussions.
\[ H3 \]: Intolerant comments will be less frequent in Facebook discussions than in Twitter discussions.
\[ H4 \]: Uncivil comments will be less frequent in Facebook discussions than in Twitter discussions.

Scholars define sensitive issues as morally loaded issues with two clear sides, such as the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” sides of abortion (Nekmat and Gonzenbach, 2013). Usually, sensitive topics are more controversial than non-sensitive ones, and people tend to have strong feelings about sensitive topics (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015), which may negatively impact overall discussion. For example, people may get angry or sad, and, as a result, use an uncivil or intolerant tone when discussing these topics (Nabi, 2002). Thus, we propose:

\[ H5 \]: Discussions about sensitive topics will attract more a) uncivil and b) intolerant comments than discussions about non-sensitive topics.

While the literature suggests that sensitive topics might attract more intolerance and incivility, we also wanted to know if any significant relationships existed between issue sensitivity and deliberative qualities. As Mutz and Mondak (2006) suggested, discussing sensitive issues may trigger negative emotions and reduce discussion quality. Thus, sensitive topic discussions might have fewer deliberative qualities comparing to non-sensitive topic discussions.

\[ R1 \]: What is the relationship between sensitive topic discussions and deliberative attributes?
\[ R2 \]: What is the relationship between non-sensitive topic discussions and deliberative attributes?

King (2001) concluded that people tend to avoid joining discussions if they are targeted by hateful speech. Thus, directly targeting users through incivility might create a more toxic discussion environment, harm the overall discussion, and cause people to avoid joining the discussion (Phillips and Smith, 2004; Rossini, 2020). Thus, we wanted to understand the relationship between direct replies and intolerant/uncivil comments.

\[ R3 \]: Is there any relationship between direct replies and uncivil
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R4: Is there any relationship between direct replies and intolerant comments?

Methods

Data collection

We collected data from the White House’s official social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Since we aimed to examine uncivil discourse and deliberative attributes, we needed to examine a social media account that is highly political and offers a space for potential deliberative communication. Therefore, we selected the White House’s social media accounts for this study. Immigration and health care issues were selected as sensitive topics since we wanted to compare sensitive and non-sensitive posts in terms of intolerance and incivility. Immigration and health care issues were among the top hot-button issues in the U.S. in 2020, and Americans consider these issues very sensitive and important (Pew Research Center, 2020), so these issues were examined as sensitive topics. Also, these issues were very hot topics during the collection of data (Pew Research Center, 2020). For non-sensitive issues, White House posts related to the president’s visits and technology were examined. First, the authors found all posts related to immigration, healthcare, technology, and the president’s visits on the White House accounts within a specific period (1 January to 31 December 2020). After identifying all posts on these topics, the authors randomly selected four posts, one for each topic type, using a random number generator. The authors then collected all replies to the White House’s immigration, healthcare, technology and president’s visit posts were collected. Across all four posts a total of 1,512 comments (832 tweets and 680 Facebook comments) were collected. Two coders examined the tweets and Facebook comments. To achieve intercoder reliability 152 comments/tweets (10 percent of the sample) were selected from the data. Two coders independently coded this sample. The coders practiced coding until achieving acceptable intercoder reliability for each variable. The intercoder reliability ranged from .79 to .90 (Hayes and Krippendorf, 2007), measured by Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient ($\alpha$). Reliability scores were reported under each variable separately.

Three logistic regression analyses were run to answer the hypotheses (H1–H5) and research questions (R1–R4).

Uncivil comments: An uncivil Facebook comment (intercoder reliability = .79) and tweet (intercoder reliability = .80) included attacks toward other participants’ characteristics, attacks towards opinions, or/and attacks towards institutions, organizations, political parties, or media outlets using profanity, vulgarity, and disrespectful language (Rossini, 2020). Comments that included one of the following dimensions were coded as uncivil:

1. Rude or disrespectful attacks toward other people’s or participants’ characteristics: “Orange head thinks he is a winner, but he keeps losing. What a moron!”
2. Rude or disrespectful attacks toward opinions, arguments, and ideas: “Do you really believe this? What a stupid idea! I recommend you to read this [provides a link] before you write such a thing.”
3. Rude or disrespectful comments toward institutions and organizations: “NYT is a propaganda machine! Immigrants are taking our jobs. Everybody knows this. #FakeNews!!”

Intolerant comments: We adapted the conceptualization of intolerance from Rossini (2020). We coded comments as intolerant if a Facebook comment (intercoder reliability = .83) and tweet (intercoder reliability = .84) threatens discussion participants’ or a group of people’s free speech or democratic rights, and aims to silence them based on their race or identity preferences (religious, sexual, political) by using xenophobic, racist, discriminatory, homophobic, or violent language (Rossini, 2020). It was possible for one tweet or comment to be both intolerant and civil, or to be uncivil and tolerant. The categories were not mutually overlapping.
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exclusive. Comments that included one of following dimensions were coded as intolerant:

1. Attack toward a race/nationality: “You f*cking lazy immigrants. You come here and benefit from our social security.”
2. Attack toward identity (religious, sexual, political): “Hey Libtard! Don’t cry like a baby. If you don’t like this country, get the f*ck out of here.”
3. Violent threats: “We should beat illegals before deport them. This is what they deserve.”
4. Threats toward people’s rights: “Is Ilhan Omar a Muslim? Doesn’t she support radical islamists? So why she keeps talking? Let’s stop her talking.”

**Direct reply:** Additionally, uncivil and intolerant comments were examined to see whether these comments were replies to a discussion participant or just an addition to the overall discussion. In Twitter (intercoder reliability = .91), if a user mentioned the @ handle in his/her comments, it was considered a reply to the owner of that handle. On Facebook (intercoder reliability = .90), if a user used the reply button to directly respond to a discussion participant, this comment was coded as a reply. If a comment was simply responding to the post, then it was coded “generic expression.” In some cases, even though users did not use @ handles or reply feature, they still directed their comments to a specific participant. These types of comments were also coded as direct replies.

**Deliberative attributes:** The deliberative attributes variable was adapted from previous studies (Papacharissi, 2004; Oz, et al., 2018). If a Facebook comment (intercoder reliability = .82) or tweet (intercoder reliability = .79) included one of the following items, then it was coded as a comment that included deliberative attributes [16]:

1. “Link to external sources” (e.g., “No! you’re wrong. Check this link to see the real numbers: www ...”)
2. “Rational argument or counter-argument” (e.g., “Well, immigration does not cause more unemployment, but automation does.”)
3. “Providing some statistics or numbers to support his/her argument” (e.g., “According to DHS, the number of immigrants who entered the country decreased by 85%.”).

**Results**

Building on previous research (Muddiman and Stroud, 2017; Oz, et al., 2018; Rossini, 2020; Su, et al., 2018), this study examined comment types (intolerance and uncivil), deliberative attributes, and directionality (personal versus impersonal) of incivility on social media.

Incivility (23 percent of all comments/tweets) more frequently occurred on both platforms than intolerance (6.3 percent of all comments/tweets). Also, only six percent of all comments/tweets had deliberative qualities. This study argued that uncivil comments would have more deliberative attributes than intolerant comments. However, the results suggest that both intolerance and incivility were negatively related to deliberative attributes, which means that deliberation was less likely to occur when intolerance was present (see Table 1). While deliberative attributes were 47 percent less likely to occur when comments were uncivil, they were 51 percent less likely to occur when comments were intolerant. So, Hypothesis 1 (H1) was rejected. Moreover, no significant relationship was found between direct replies and deliberative attributes.

We proposed that there would be a difference between platforms in terms of deliberative attributes of comments/tweets. According to the results, more deliberative comments occurred on Facebook than on Twitter. Facebook discussion was 46 percent more likely to contain deliberative attributes than Twitter discussion. Thus, Hypothesis 2 (H2) was supported.
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Table 1: Logistic regression predicting deliberative attributes of comments.
Note: OR = Odds Ratio; *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

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We predicted that there would be a difference between Facebook and Twitter in terms of uncivil and intolerance discourse. More specifically, we expected to find more uncivil and intolerant comments on Twitter versus Facebook due to affordances and network differences. Two logistic regression analyses were run (one for intolerant and one for uncivil discourse). The results suggest that intolerance was 61 percent less likely to occur on Facebook than on Twitter, resulting in a negative relationship between Facebook and intolerance. This result supported Hypothesis 3 (H3). However, there was no significant difference between Facebook and Twitter in terms of uncivil discourse. Thus, Hypothesis 4 (H4) was rejected.

As shown in Table 2, incivility was 49 percent more likely to occur when discussing sensitive issues. In other words, a positive relationship existed between sensitive issues and posting uncivil comments. The logistic regression analysis suggested a similar result for the intolerant discourse as well: a positive relationship between issue sensitivity and intolerance. The odds ratio values suggest that while incivility was 49 percent more likely to occur, intolerance was 60 percent more likely to occur when users discuss sensitive issues. These results support Hypotheses 5a and 5b (H5a, H5b).

Finally, we examined if there any relationship existed between direct replies and uncivil/intolerant comments. The results suggest that intolerance was likely to occur when comments were direct replies. Intolerance was 2.5 times more likely to arise when discussion participants were directly replying to other users. However, there was no significant relationship between direct replies and uncivil comments. Uncivil comments were mostly generic comments that did not target specific discussion participants.

Table 2: Predicting uncivil and intolerant discourse.
Note: OR = Odds Ratio; *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Uncivil</th>
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<th>Intolerant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue sensitivity</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.94***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>.43</th>
<th>.16</th>
<th>1.3</th>
<th>.90***</th>
<th>.21</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>.44</td>
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Discussion and conclusions

This study was built on previous studies (e.g., Muddiman and Stroud, 2017; Oz, et al., 2018; Rossini, 2020; Su, et al., 2018) to better understand uncivil and intolerant discourse online. This study showed that intolerant discussions were less likely to occur on Facebook than Twitter, however that was not the case for uncivil discussions. As discussed in the literature section, uncivil comments on social media might be seen as more acceptable by social media users than intolerant comments. In addition, as recent literature has suggested, uncivil comments might be used as a strategy to get attention by social media users (Sydnor, 2018; Rossini, 2020). As a result, both Facebook and Twitter users might not refrain from posting uncivil comments on Facebook.

On the other hand, the results suggest that social media users might see intolerance as more toxic than uncivil comments. Thus, they may not be willing to post intolerant comments on Facebook, where they have real-world relationships such as close friends, relatives, and colleagues (Kim and Chen, 2015; Valenzuela, et al., 2018). On the other hand, they might be more willing to use such language on Twitter, where they mainly deal with strangers and their level of identification is low (Valenzuela, et al., 2012).

Scholars have suggested that the level of identification might have a moderation effect on intolerant discourse (Muddiman and Stroud, 2017; Rossini, 2020). For example, users might think they are more responsible for their behavior on specific social media platforms where users share significant amount of personal information (Neubaum and Krämer, 2018; Fox and Holt, 2018). Some social media affordances, such as level of identification and network differences, may explain why intolerance is less likely to occur on Facebook versus Twitter (Rowe, 2015; Oz, et al., 2018; Rossini, 2019). Of course, since this is a content analysis, we are unable to rule out other explanations (e.g., different user base) and suggest that the main reason of these differences is the social media affordances. That said, many other studies have found similar results and concluded that social media affordances significantly impact uncivil discourse on online platforms (Fox and Holt, 2018; Oz, et al., 2018; Rossini, 2020). Future studies should further explore the relationships between uncivil discourse and social media affordances.

As recent literature has suggested, morally loaded topics might lower discussion quality and cause “flaming” and even incivility (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015; Oz, et al., 2018). Some scholars have suggested that certain types of news, such as politics or foreign policy news, tend to get more incivility than other types of news (Coe, et al., 2014). Consistent with the literature, the results of this study showed that sensitive topics were positively associated with uncivil and intolerant comments (Oz, et al., 2018; Rossini, 2020). This is not good news for online political discussions because both uncivil and intolerant comments were common in sensitive topic discussions greater public consensus is more needed. Similar to our results, Rossini (2020) also found that intolerant discourse was more frequent in stories about minorities. One of the sensitive topics included in this study was immigration. Even though the authors did not individually examine the sensitive topics in this study was immigration. Even though the authors did not individually examine the sensitive topics in this study, immigrants and other minorities might be targeted by uncivil and intolerant discourse. Future studies can examine how and why minorities and other vulnerable groups are targeted by incivility.

This study also aimed to explore whether uncivil and intolerant comments contain any deliberative attributes. This is important because the literature suggests that people may use uncivil comments to get attention, and, in many cases, uncivil behavior can be seen as normal in a heated discussion (Hmielowski, et
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al., 2014). Since we consider uncivil expressions as a tone to express one’s opinion and get attention (Mutz and Mondak, 2006), these types of expressions might include some rational, evidence-based explanations (Rossini, 2020). However, our results suggested no significant difference between uncivil and intolerant discourse in terms of deliberative qualities. Both types of speech were negatively related to deliberative qualities. Some studies have suggested that uncivil expression was not an “empty offensive shouting” but contains some evidence-based arguments [17]. However, we could not find any evidence in our study to back up this argument. Future studies should conduct a more detailed examination of uncivil/intolerant comments and deliberative attributes. Future studies can also examine different contexts, platforms, and populations to better understand online uncivil/intolerant discourse.

The results also suggest that deliberative qualities were more likely to occur on Facebook than on Twitter. There are several possible explanations for these findings. One reason may be Twitter’s character limit. We operationalized deliberative qualities as comments that include evidence-based arguments or counter-arguments, supportive links or external materials, and numbers or statistics to support one’s argument. Since Facebook has no character limits, Facebook users might be able to make more meaningful arguments by providing numbers, links, and other evidence-based content. The character limit on Twitter, however, might prevent users from creating a more detailed and meaningful argument. Another possible explanation involves network differences. Some research has suggested that people tend to worry more about what their close ties think about them than what strangers think about them (Fox and Holt, 2018; Oz, et al., 2018). Thus, users might want to be more deliberative on Facebook, where they engage with their close ties, than on Twitter, where they tend to engage with strangers (Liu and Fahmy, 2011; Oz, et al., 2018). Finally, another possible explanation could be that people may perceive different affordances on Facebook versus Twitter (Oz, et al., 2018). The literature suggests that the level of identification and network connections might prevent people from acting in socially undesirable ways (Rowe, 2015). For example, users might feel more identifiable on Facebook versus Twitter. As a result, they might exercise more control in their speech on Facebook than on Twitter and might be less willing to post comments that include extreme incivility (intolerance) and more willing to post an evidence-based/meaningful comment on Facebook versus Twitter. Future studies should examine users’ perception of social media affordances to see if their perception has any impact on uncivil discourse.

Finally, in this study, we argued that intolerant discourse threatens overall social media discussions due to its harmful intent. The current study argues that since intolerant discourse can target discussion participants directly based on their identity and background, it may cause people to withdraw from discussion or cause more incivility and thereby harm the deliberative process (Kenski, et al., 2017; Su, et al., 2018; Oz, et al., 2018). The results suggest that uncivil comments were mainly generic and did not target discussion participants. On the other hand, intolerant comments were likely to target specific participants in the discussion. Again, the literature suggests that if incivility is personal, people tend to see that type of incivility as more offensive (Su, et al., 2018; Kenski, et al., 2017). Since intolerant comments tend to target discussion participants based on their identity, this situation might decrease plurality in online discussions and harm the deliberative process. Future studies can conduct experiments and surveys to understand how exposure to intolerance and incivility impacts users’ political expressions on social media.

One contribution of this study is that it distinguishes extreme incivility (intolerance) from less extreme ones (uncivil comments). As some researchers have suggested, people can use uncivil expressions to stand out and gain attention, but this type of incivility is not necessarily toxic and does not necessarily harm deliberation (Mutz and Mondak, 2006; Kenski, et al., 2017). On the other hand, an extreme level of incivility (intolerance) may harm the deliberative process and discussion plurality, and it could be seen as more toxic than uncivil expressions (Rossini, 2020). This study suggests that researchers and policy-makers should not see all uncivil comments as inherently toxic and should recognize the need for a nuanced approach to identify toxic and harmful incivility. This study also suggests that scholars should not perceive all social media platforms as a singular experience. People tend to use these platforms differently. As a result, as this study showed, deliberative qualities of comments and intolerance may vary based on different platforms due to social media affordances, characteristics of platforms, and network differences.
This study includes several limitations. First, this study only examined comments/tweets, and only 1,512 comments/tweets were examined. The sample size is relatively small. Thus, the results of this study cannot offer a causal explanation or a comprehensive examination of online uncivil behavior. Future studies can conduct experiments and surveys to understand users’ perceptions of uncivil and intolerant discourse. Also, future studies analyze a large amount of data to understand online discourse better. Even though this study made some assumptions on platform affordances by relying on the recent literature, future studies can directly measure users’ perceived affordances for each platform to see how users’ perception of affordances impact their political engagement online.

This study also focused on only two social media platforms. Future studies can measure uncivil and intolerant comments in different contexts, platforms, and populations. For example, researchers can also examine uncivil/intolerant discourse on Reddit, Instagram, and other social media platforms, or they can look at uncivil/intolerant discourse in different cultures. Also, it is essential to note that the data was collected during the very polarized period of time (the 2020 election); therefore, this might impact the overall results, such as causing more uncivil/intolerant comments than usual. Finally, future studies can examine the motivations behind uncivil discourse and users’ characteristics. Characteristics of users might predict why (motivations), when (context), and where (platform) people use uncivil/intolerant rhetoric.

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Notes

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