

Social media incivility and engagement: The role of experiences, perceptions, and expectations

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Abstract

This study investigated how incivility and the perception of discussion benefits influence online opinion expression on social media. Results of an online survey ($N=521$) revealed that experiencing incivility is significantly related to a high fear of incivility and leads to decreased online engagement. However, the impact of fear of incivility on opinion expression varies by social media platforms. Finally, the results suggested that perceived benefits predict online opinion expression on social media.

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Introduction

The Internet and social media offer many opportunities to discuss sensitive and polarized issues online. However, scholars contend that the excessive presence of incivility prevents it from fostering democratic and relevant discourse. Therefore, research has examined different platforms to understand the underlying causes (Papacharissi, 2004), roots (Frischlich, *et al.*, 2021), and types of incivility (Rossini, 2020). A growing body of research suggested that incivility might deepen polarization (Lee, Liang, and Tang, 2019), create echo chambers (Mutz, 2015), cause self-censorship (Powers, Koliska, and Guha, 2019), and lead to

more incivility and flaming (Masullo Chen and Lu, 2017). Other lines of research have focused on different types of incivility, such as extreme versus mild (Rossini, 2020), and attempted to understand how people perceive different types of incivility and whether any demographics affect their perceptions (Kenski, Coe and Rains, 2020). Despite a growing body of research on online incivility, there is a gap in understanding how it affects social media users' perceptions and experiences, particularly in the context of sensitive issues like vaccine hesitancy, where cyber armies and trolls often employ uncivil comments to hijack discussions (Shandwick and Tate, 2018; Yoon, 2016). Additionally, the examination of vaccine hesitancy in relation to online incivility is crucial due to its impact on public health. The World Health Organization (2020) has declared vaccine hesitancy as one of the top 10 threats to global health. Social media plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards vaccines (Puri, *et al.*, 2020).

The overarching question of this study was how incivility experiences affect the spiral of silence process on social media. Answering this question is critical because incivility is a widespread and serious problem in online spaces (Shandwick and Tate, 2018). Especially when it comes to discussing a sensitive issue like vaccine hesitancy, cyber armies and trolls hijack social media discussions by employing verbal attacks, harassment, and other types of uncivil comments (Yoon, 2016). Thus, some social media users may view these platforms as hostile environments and refrain from participating in discussions if uncivil comments in the past frequently targeted them.

The primary purpose of this study was to understand how users' negative experiences affect their perceptions of social media discussions. More specifically, the study proposes negative perception of social media discourse may lead to fear of incivility (perceived risk of being targeted by uncivil comments). As the spiral of silence theory suggested, fear of isolation may increase if they think their opinion environment is hostile (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Similarly, this study argues that social media users who were targeted by uncivil comments frequently in the past may have a negative perception of social media discourse, and they may see these platforms as hostile environments (Ordoñez and Nekmat, 2019). As a result, this perception may increase their fear of incivility (a fear of being victimized by uncivil comments).

The second aim of this study was to examine whether the perceived benefits of social media discussions might moderate the association between incivility and willingness to speak up. The factors that might encourage or discourage social media users' involvement in online discussions have long been examined by scholars (*e.g.*, Oz and Cetindere, 2023; Neubaum, 2022). The spiral of silence theory is a common theoretical framework used to study political engagement on social media (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). However, the spiral of silence literature primarily focused on the cost of expressing an opinion on a sensitive issue. The theory suggests that users tend to stay silent if they perceive a hostile opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). However, some scholars argue that fear of isolation is a limited concept in explaining the factors that may discourage people from participating in online discussions because people may not only consider the cost of discussing a sensitive issue but also its benefits (Neubaum, 2022). So, if users perceive discussing an issue as beneficial, they may still express their opinions regardless of their perception and the opinion climate.

Overall, even though some studies argued that incivility might encourage online political engagement because uncivil comments might trigger certain emotions (Masullo, *et al.*, 2021). This study argues that incivility may not have the same uniform effect on everyone. Therefore, people who perceive social media discussions as hostile may refrain from discussing sensitive issues, whereas those who perceive them as beneficial are more likely to participate. Also, perceived benefit might be an important predictor of willingness to express opinion on social media.

Online incivility

Defining incivility poses a conceptual challenge due to its context-dependent nature, as acknowledged by

Herbst (2010). Despite the theoretical ambiguity surrounding its definition, scholarly investigations consistently depict online incivility as an inherently problematic and undesirable aspect of public discourse. Early discussions on this topic, as proposed by Papacharissi (2004), suggest that uncivil discourse entails threats to societal norms, often manifesting through the use of slurs and stereotypes. Coe, *et al.* (2014) further contributed to the discourse by identifying and operationalizing five distinct forms of incivility, namely name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, and pejorative speech. These classifications, employed in subsequent studies (*e.g.*, Kenski, *et al.*, 2020), have become foundational in understanding and studying the multifaceted nature of incivility in online interactions.

In a broader context, studies on political incivility, such as those by Stryker, *et al.* (2016), Bentivegna and Rega (2022), and Hopp (2019), have contributed essential insights. Stryker, *et al.* discern three dimensions — insulting utterances, deception, and hindrances to open discussions — forming a foundational understanding of political incivility. Bentivegna and Rega’s exploration extends this understanding to social media, emphasizing the multidimensional nature of incivility, incorporating violations of political context norms. Hopp’s network analysis approach uncovers interconnected clusters of uncivil behavior, revealing the intricate relationships between different forms of incivility. Consequences of political incivility were explored by Feinberg and Frimer (2022), who found a negative effect on public interest in political messages, thereby diminishing political engagement. Rossini’s (2020) distinction between incivility and intolerance in online political talk further enriches the discourse, highlighting the need to differentiate between meaningful disagreement and intolerance, particularly concerning minorities and civil society.

Uncivil behavior on platforms like Twitter during political events, such as the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, was influenced by various factors, including candidate gender and the presence of bots (Trifiro, *et al.*, 2021). The repercussions of online incivility extend beyond political realms, impacting perceptions of risk associated with emerging technologies (Anderson, *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, the prevalence of incivility discourages user participation in online discussions, posing a threat to the diversity of perspectives in political debates (Kluck and Krämer, 2021). The consequences of online incivility reach into off-line spaces, contributing to the erosion of trust in government and public institutions (Mutz and Reeves, 2005). When exploring online incivility, it is crucial to distinguish between behaviors indicative of impoliteness and interpersonal disrespect from those that are genuinely threatening, harmful, or in violation of democratic norms (Rossini, 2020). Exposure to online incivility has been linked to a decrease in open-mindedness, political trust, and efficacy, as well as the polarization of individuals’ views on a given topic (Theocharis, *et al.*, 2020). Given the prevalence of uncivil discourse in online political discussions, encountering incivility is virtually unavoidable for individuals engaging in such conversations (McGowan-Kirsch, 2022).

In conclusion, this examination of political incivility, considering both platform-specific nuances and broader dimensions explored in the literature, offers a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. The varying experiences of incivility across social media platforms underscore the need for tailored interventions and highlight the dynamic interplay between online platforms and user behavior.



Incivility across platforms

Political incivility, a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, has received significant scholarly attention, prompting explorations into its various dimensions and consequences. This study delves into the impact of incivility across social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, acknowledging that user experiences of uncivil discourse may differ based on platform characteristics (Oz and Cetindere, 2023). While recognizing the similarities between these platforms, it is crucial to note their distinct “relational structure,” which influences how users perceive their options and, consequently, their communication practices (DeVito, *et al.*, 2017; Treem, *et al.*, 2020).

The platform-specific nuances are illuminated by the contrasting features of Facebook and Twitter. Facebook, with its insistence on real names and connections with familiar individuals, fosters a heightened perceived identifiability and self-awareness among users (Oz and Cetindere, 2023; Treem, *et al.*, 2020). For example, users of Facebook must use their actual names, and they are more likely to connect with people they already know. Utilizing real names, disclosing personal information, connecting with real friends, and having reciprocal relationships might increase perceived identifiability and self-awareness for Facebook users. Therefore, since their network can identify them quickly, they may feel more responsible for their actions, such as using uncivil language or participating in an uncivil discussion.

On the other hand, Twitter users can afford anonymity on Twitter. Despite not being completely anonymous on Twitter, users are still not required to reveal their actual identity or other personal information (Theocharis, *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, connecting with weak or distant ties on Twitter and lacking reciprocal relationships could result in losing their real identities (feeling de-individuated). Because of this, they may be less concerned about the consequences of their actions (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013), and incivility might be less of a concern to them, given that they are likely to mainly deal with their weak ties and their sense of de-individuation. The literature also suggested that reduced identifiability leads to incivility and flaming (Oz and Cetindere, 2023; Theocharis, *et al.*, 2016; Yun, *et al.*, 2020). Based on these perspectives, incivility experiences might vary across platforms. However, it is important to note that the primary purpose of this study is not to compare two social media platforms but rather to determine whether incivility is experienced differently across social media platforms to draw a more definitive conclusion.

RI: What are the differences, if any, between Twitter and Facebook in terms of experiencing incivility?

Fear of incivility as social sanctions

Noelle-Neumann (1974) created a theoretical framework for examining individuals' participatory behavior in social-communicative practices. Noelle-Neumann asserted that an individual's interaction within specific social environments shaped public opinion. Her SOS theory regarding public opinion hypothesizes that when individuals perceive their opinion to be in the minority, they will begin to doubt their judgment and remain silent. Noelle-Neumann's study posits that, when perceiving their opinion as contrary to the majority, an individual will either relinquish their previous belief by reconstructing their opinion in a manner that corresponds with the majority opinion or remains silent out of fear of social sanctions or punishment in the form of alienation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

The central premise of Noelle-Neumann's (1974) argument is that when an individual perceives themselves as holding a minority opinion — based on their interpretation of environmental cues — the individual will remain silent and spiral down within themselves, resulting in adopting the opposing viewpoint or remaining disengaged from discourse for fear of social isolation. Therefore, fundamental to the spiral of silence theoretical framework is Noelle-Neumann's (1974) conclusion that individuals will refrain from joining discourse or voicing their opinion if they perceive themselves as a member of a minority. Fearing social isolation subsequent to publicly sharing an opinion in opposition to the majority will result in individuals practicing self-censorship behaviors (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Furthermore, with dissenting opinions quelled, the majority opinion garners greater perceived legitimacy and social support (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In essence, the primary axiom of SOS is that individuals who believe their opinion counters the majority are more likely to refrain from vocalizing their point of view in an attempt to avoid social isolation, which strengthens the majority perspective.

Since the turn of the century, new media use has increased considerably. Adopting new media and subsequent consumption of digitized content has supplanted traditional media consumption. According to Twenge, *et al.* (2019), 82 percent of young adults, on average, visit social media sites at least once per day

and interact with digital content for about six hours each day. In particular, the increased usage of social media over the last decade helped establish the widespread and venerated position that social media platforms hold in modern American communicative practices (Hanson, *et al.*, 2010; Perrin, 2015). That is to say, when stating one's opinion on current issues and controversies in modern society, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are routinely used by individuals engaged in discursive communication processes (Bennett, *et al.*, 2014).

In summary, the spiral of silence theory argues that people tend to monitor opinion climate before expressing their viewpoint (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Individuals tend to understand whether the opinion climate is hostile or friendly to them, especially when expressing opinions on polarized and sensitive issues. If they perceive a hostile opinion climate, their fear of isolation may increase, and they will be less likely to speak out. According to a recent study, exposure to online incivility can also increase users' perceptions of the environment as hostile. (Ordoñez and Nekmat, 2019). Also, several other studies suggested that cyber troops and trolls attack users and create hostile discussion environments (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017). As a result, users may see such environments as aggressive and hostile and refrain from discussing sensitive issues (Stroud, *et al.*, 2019). Thus, users' incivility experiences may affect their perception of platforms. For example, users may refrain from engaging in a discussion if they frequently experience incivility on a specific platform.

Scholars argued that fear of isolation increases due to the consequences of a particular condition, such as social sanctions (Neuwirth, *et al.*, 2007). Due to concerns over possible social sanctions, users tend to self-censor their opinions if they perceive an environment as hostile (Neubaum and Krämer, 2018). However, research suggested that online social sanctions are not limited to social isolation. There are various ways in which social sanctions are manifested online, such as verbal attacks, incivility, and flaming (Yun and Park, 2011). Some scholars argue that people not only see discussion environments as hostile due to being in the minority, but incivility also causes them to perceive an environment as hostile (Stroud, *et al.*, 2019; Ordoñez and Nekmat, 2019). As the spiral of silence argued, expressing opinions in hostile environments has social costs. However, we argue that this cost is not limited to social isolation but also includes fear of incivility. Experiencing incivility in online spaces might increase a perception of hostility, and users might be afraid of being targeted by uncivil behavior (Rainie, *et al.*, 2012). Research has shown that in online environments, people tend to protect "social harmony" (Binder, *et al.*, 2012), "present their desired identity" (Bohnert and Ross, 2010), and manage a positive impression (Sun, *et al.*, 2021). It may, therefore, be detrimental to these desires and expectations to be a victim of incivility. Moreover, experiencing incivility on a particular platform might cause users to think that there might be a wide discrepancy between their opinions and the opinions of the majority on that platform (Gearhart and Zhang, 2018). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Users who are frequently subjected to incivility on Twitter will be more likely to be afraid of incivility, and high fear of incivility will lead them to be less willing to express their opinions.

H1b: Users who are frequently subjected to incivility on Facebook will be more likely to be afraid of incivility, and high fear of incivility will lead them to be less willing to express their opinions.

As stated in the notion of a spiral of silence, people consider the opinions of others before expressing their own and estimate the opinion climate by evaluating how many people agree with them. Individuals may be more inclined to express their opinions if they feel the majority supports them (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Conversely, minority views may be self-censored if there is a perception of a climate of minority opinion (Fox and Holt, 2018; Matthes, 2015). In order to better understand how a fear of incivility affects willingness to express an opinion, we also tested the perceived majority variable to determine if user perceptions of a majority moderates the association between fear of incivility and willingness to express

opinions. As the spiral of silence suggests, the perception of majority opinion should be a predictor of willingness to speak out (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). So, we propose:

H2: The perceived majority will moderate the association between fear of incivility and willingness to speak out on both platforms.

Benefits of expressing opinions

Considering why people participate in discussions is critical when examining one's willingness to speak out. According to Anderson, *et al.* (2018), people who find online political discussions informative and interesting tend to discuss issues online. Many scholars have attempted to answer why people engage in online political and civic conversations. Some have suggested that people with high political efficacy and interest in politics are willing to discuss issues online (*e.g.*, Levy and Akiva, 2019). Others have argued that the importance (*e.g.*, Kioussis and McDevitt, 2008) and knowledge (Conroy, *et al.*, 2012) of an issue were significant predictors of online discussion.

The spiral of silence focuses on the cost of opinion expression as Noelle-Neumann (1974) defined fear of isolation as a social cost of expressing an opinion on sensitive and controversial issues. However, some scholars suggest that people should consider the costs as well as the benefits of expressing an opinion (Dienlin and Metzger, 2016; Neubaum, 2022). Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.* (2016) suggested that those willing to discuss political issues are motivated by the prospect of persuading others and encouraging mobilization. Others have suggested that if people think that discussing an issue is beneficial to them, they are likely to discuss it (Neubaum, 2022). For example, according to Berry, *et al.* (2017), when people think they can raise awareness of an issue, they are likely to discuss it.

Similarly, social psychology literature suggests that when people are about to take action, they are likely to first think about the benefits and costs of their actions (Basten, *et al.*, 2010). Other studies found similar results by suggesting that people were likely to weigh benefits and risks when making decisions (Halpern-Felsher and Caufmann, 2001), such as discussing a sensitive and controversial issue on social media. In line with these perspectives, this study argues that not only do the characteristics of people (conflict avoidance), the cost of opinion expression (fear of isolation or fear of incivility), or their political interests (partisanship) determine whether to discuss an issue on social media, but people think about the benefits of participating in discussions and expressing their opinions.

Benefits can be personal, like demonstrating their knowledge to others, or societal, like contributing to the deliberative process by sharing their knowledge (Neubaum, 2022). In light of all these reasons, this study suggests that perceived benefits may influence the relationship between fear of incivility and willingness to express an opinion. So, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Perceived benefits will moderate the association between fear of incivility and willingness to speak out on both platforms.

Method

An online survey ($N=521$) was conducted to test hypotheses and answer research questions. This study was

approved by the University's institutional review board. Prolific (<https://www.prolific.com>) recruited participants. Participants were 18 years and older and active users of Twitter and Facebook (meaning that they had at least 50 followers/friends and they used these platforms at least once a week). Participants were compensated with US\$1 upon survey completion. A representative sample of the general U.S. population was requested from Prolific. Utilizing Prolific as a survey platform offered several advantages. The platform provided access to a diverse participant pool, enabling researchers to engage individuals with varying demographic characteristics. Prolific's pre-screening capabilities allowed researchers to filter participants based on specific criteria, ensuring alignment with study requirements. The platform's emphasis on ethical compensation contributed to high participant motivation and commitment, potentially leading to superior data quality (Peer, *et al.*, 2022; Turner, *et al.*, 2020). However, while costs associated with participant compensation could be higher, the familiarity of participants with survey tasks may introduce response variations on Prolific platform. Furthermore, the possibility of professional participants engaging for income may affect motivations and responses.

The survey was completed by 540 respondents. A closer examination of the data revealed 19 incomplete responses. We removed these responses from the data. A total of 521 responses were examined. See [Table 1](#) for demographic information. The participants were asked questions related to their social media use, their experiences, perceptions, and their willingness to express opinions on the vaccine hesitancy issue. To make sure all our respondents understand the topic, we provided a description of vaccine hesitancy. First, the respondents read the description and then answered questions. The respondents were also asked about their socio-demographic characteristics. All the dependent and independent variables are listed below.

Table 1: Demographics of the Participants

	n	%*	m	SD
Gender			1.50	.56
Male	271	52%		
Female	250	48%		
Education			2.83	1.01
Less than High School	77	14%		
High School graduate	128	25%		
Some college	170	32%		
Four-year degree	97	19%		
Post graduate	49	10%		
Race			1.77	1.28
White	272	52%		
Black or African Amer.	125	24%		
Hispanic & Latino	92	18%		
Other	32	6%		
Age			2.45	1.08
18-29	97	19%		
30-39	203	39%		
40-49	142	27%		
50-59	48	9%		
Above 60	31	6%		
Income			2.90	1.0
Less Than 10,000	3	3%		
10,000-39,999	153	28%		
40,000-69,999	290	54%		
70,000-89,999	73	14%		
More than 90,000	2	1%		

Measures

Willingness to express opinions. The dependent variable was one's willingness to express opinions on vaccine hesitancy issue. Please note that this question was asked for each platform separately. This variable was borrowed from Masullo, *et al.* (2021) and Xu, *et al.* (2021). On a 5-point scale (1 very unlikely to 5 very likely) The respondents were asked whether they would express their opinions on the vaccine hesitancy issue on Twitter ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .92$; $\alpha = .89$) and Facebook ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .83$; $\alpha = .84$). A total of three items were asked: "I would share my opinion on Twitter/Facebook"; "I would post a comment in a comment thread on Twitter/Facebook"; and, "I would retweet or reshare a post related to vaccine hesitancy issue on Twitter/Facebook." We ran factor analysis and indexed items together to create a willingness to speak out variable.

Perceived majority. The respondents were asked if their social media friends/followers supported their views. The question was asked separately for each platform (Facebook and Twitter).

"To what extent do you think your Facebook friends agree with your views about the vaccine hesitancy issue?" ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .87$). "To what extent do you think your Twitter followers agree with your views

about the vaccine hesitancy issue?” ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .96$).

Experiencing incivility. Incivility was conceptualized as personal level incivility (Kenski, *et al.*, 2020; Muddiman, 2017). Scholars have defined personal level incivility as vulgar, pejorative language and name-calling (Coe, *et al.*, 2014). The questions were asked separately for each platform and indexed together for each platform. Facebook $M = 2.35$, $SD = .88$; $\alpha = .80$) and Twitter $M = 2.80$, $SD = .90$; $\alpha = .86$). Specifically, we asked users to think about how often they experienced followings in the last year and on a 5-point scale (1 never to 5 very often) rated the following statements:

“Received VULGAR user comments when I expressed my opinion on Twitter/Facebook during the last year” (*i.e.*, F*ck you. I will kick your as*!)

“Received PEJORATIVE user comments when I expressed my opinion on Twitter/Facebook during the last year” (*i.e.*, Oh stop crying like a baby)

“I was called OFFENSIVE names when I expressed my opinion on Twitter/Facebook during the last year” (*i.e.*, what a moron!). We provided examples for each item to the respondents, and each item was asked separately for each platform.

Perceived benefits. The “perceived benefits” variable was borrowed from Neubaum [1]. Neubaum created four items to measure perceived benefits. These are “persuasion, corrective action, civic contribution, and self-presentation” [2]. The respondents were asked to rate these four items (*i.e.*, If I discuss this issue on social media, I may change someone’s opinions (persuasion)). Then we ran factor analysis and indexed these items together to create the perceived benefits variable ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .82$; $\alpha = .87$).

Fear of incivility. We defined fear of incivility as the fear of being victimized by uncivil messages on social media. On a 5-point scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) the respondents were asked to rate three statements for each platform such as “I am afraid of being targeted by VULGAR comments if I express my opinion on the vaccine hesitancy issue on Facebook/Twitter, I am afraid of being targeted by PEJORATIVE comments if I express my opinion on the vaccine hesitancy issue on Facebook/Twitter and I am afraid of being called OFFENSIVE NAMES if I express my opinion on the vaccine hesitancy issue on Twitter/Facebook.” These items were indexed for each platform (Facebook ($M = 2.32$, $SD = .83$; $\alpha = .89$) and Twitter ($M = 2.72$, $SD = .87$; $\alpha = .87$)) and created a fear of incivility variable. We provided examples for each item to the respondents, and each item was asked separately for each platform.

Issue importance and issue knowledge. On a 5-point scale the participants also reported how important ($M = 2.62$, $SD = .82$) the vaccine hesitancy issue was to them and how knowledgeable ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .83$) they were regarding the issue.

In addition to these variables, control variables race, age, income, education, conflict avoidance, frequency of Twitter and Facebook use and gender variables were measured. Please see [Table 1](#) for demographic information.

Analytical strategy

I performed several principal component analyses prior to indexing our variables to ensure each had an acceptable level of reliability. To address the research question and hypotheses, we conducted a *t*-test and separate OLS regression with moderation analyses (Hayes, 2018). We included all our control variables in the model. Process Macro estimated direct and indirect (mediation) effects between our main variables (Hayes, 2018). Our mediator variable was “fear of incivility.” We ran a mediation analysis to see whether fear of incivility (M) changed how the experiencing incivility (X) variable affected willingness to express opinions (Y). Also, we ran moderation analyses to see if “perceived benefits” and “perceived majority” (W) variables moderated the association between fear of incivility (X) and willingness to express opinions (Y).

Results

The research question asked whether there were any differences between Twitter and Facebook in terms of experiencing incivility. To answer the research question, we ran a paired sample *t*-test. The result suggested that the respondents experienced incivility more often on Twitter than on Facebook (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2

Results of paired sample t-test for experiencing incivility.

	Social Media						95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Facebook			Twitter					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
Experiencing incivility	2.30	1.10	521	2.95	1.12	521	.86, 1.09	12.54*	520

H1a suggested that incivility experiences on Twitter would increase the likelihood of fear of incivility and that fear of incivility would mediate the relationship between incivility experiences and willingness to express an opinion on Twitter. This hypothesis was partially supported. Even though users who had experienced incivility on Twitter were likely to have high levels of fear of incivility ($B = .190$, $SE = .12$), this fear did not affect their willingness to express an opinion on Twitter ($B = .101$, $SE = .08$) (see [Figure 1](#)).

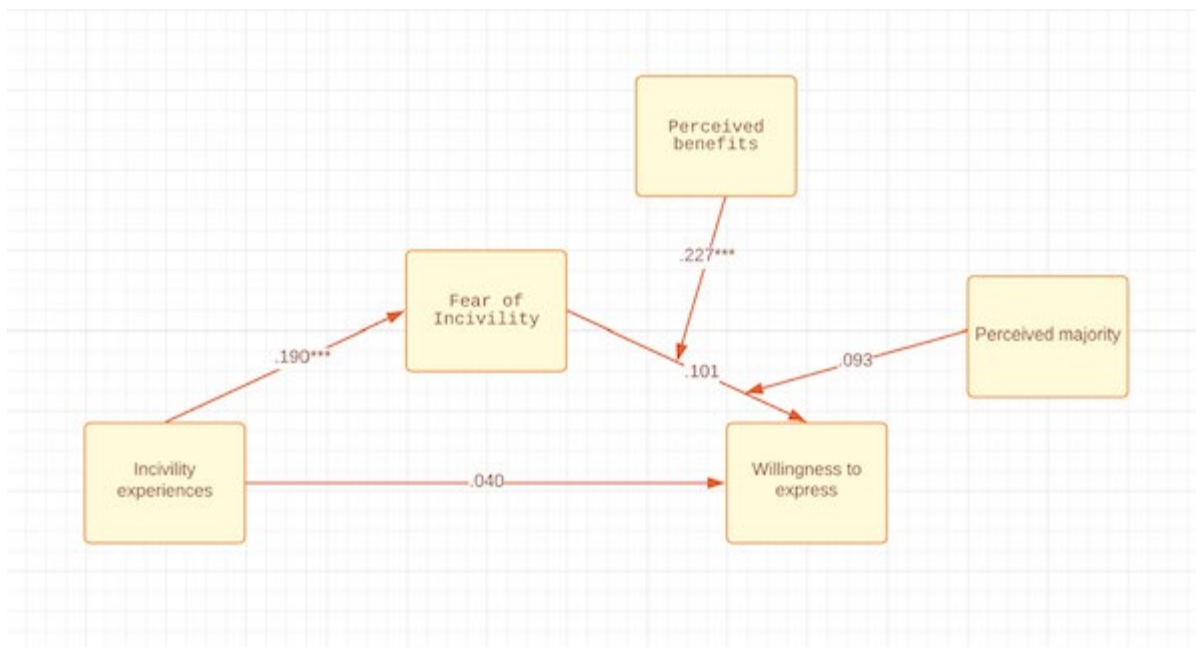


Figure 1: The model shows the path from experiencing incivility to willingness to speak out on Twitter. Note that unstandardized coefficients were reported in this figure; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Positive Correlation Between Incivility Experiences and Fear of Incivility

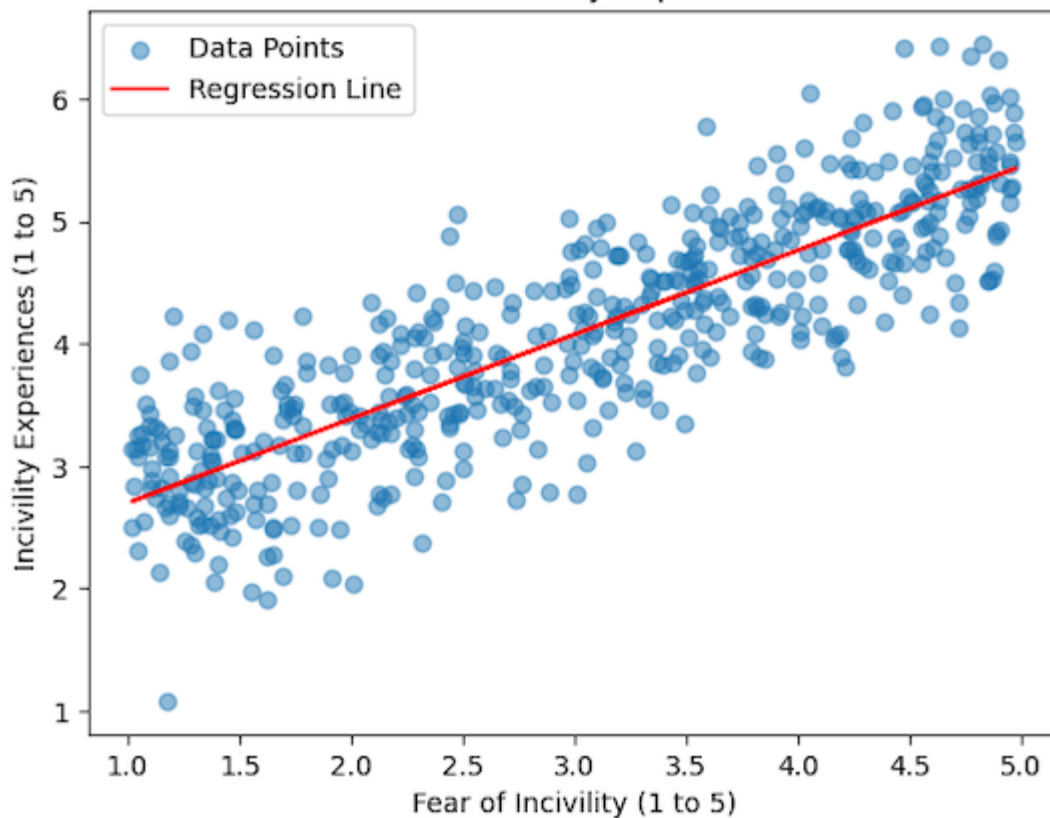


Figure 2: Significant relationship between incivility experiences and fear of incivility on Twitter.

Similarly, *H1b* suggested that incivility experiences on Facebook would lead to a greater likelihood of fear of incivility ($B = .221, SE = .11$), and fear of incivility would mediate the association between incivility experiences and willingness to express an opinion ($B = .220, SE = .13$). This hypothesis was fully supported. According to the mediation results, incivility experiences on Facebook and fear of incivility were positively related. It means users who see experienced incivility on Facebook were likely to have a high fear of incivility. Also, the mediation model suggested that fear of incivility mediates the association between experiencing incivility and willingness to express an opinion. This means that people who had experienced incivility frequently were likely to have high levels of fear of incivility, and that fear made them less willing to express opinions on Facebook (see [Figure 2](#)).

The first moderation analysis examined the perceived majority to see if it affected the association between fear of incivility and willingness to express an opinion. We argued that the perceived majority might moderate the association between these two variables. However, the results suggested that both on Facebook ($B = .087, SE = .09$) and Twitter ($B = .093, SE = .07$), the perceived majority had no significant impact on the association between fear of incivility and willingness to express opinions. It means that regardless of the opinion climate, users who had a high fear of incivility would be less likely to express their opinions on Facebook and Twitter. Finally, the last hypothesis suggested that the perceived benefits of social media discussions would moderate the association between fear of incivility and willingness to express opinions on both platforms. The moderation analyses suggested that people who perceived social media discussions as beneficial tended to express their opinions regardless of their level of fear of incivility. So, perceived benefits encouraged social media users to express their opinions on both Facebook ($B = .234, SE = .12$) and Twitter ($B = .227, SE = .09$). Furthermore, some control variables were significant. Respondent age was positively related to their willingness to speak out on Facebook ($B = -.18, SE = .13$) and Twitter ($B = -.21, SE = .14$). It meant that the younger users tended to express their opinions more than older ones. Also, issue importance was positively related to one's willingness to express opinions on Facebook ($B = .250, SE = .12$) and on Twitter ($B = .271, SE = .13$). When people think that an issue is important to them, they are likely to express their opinions.

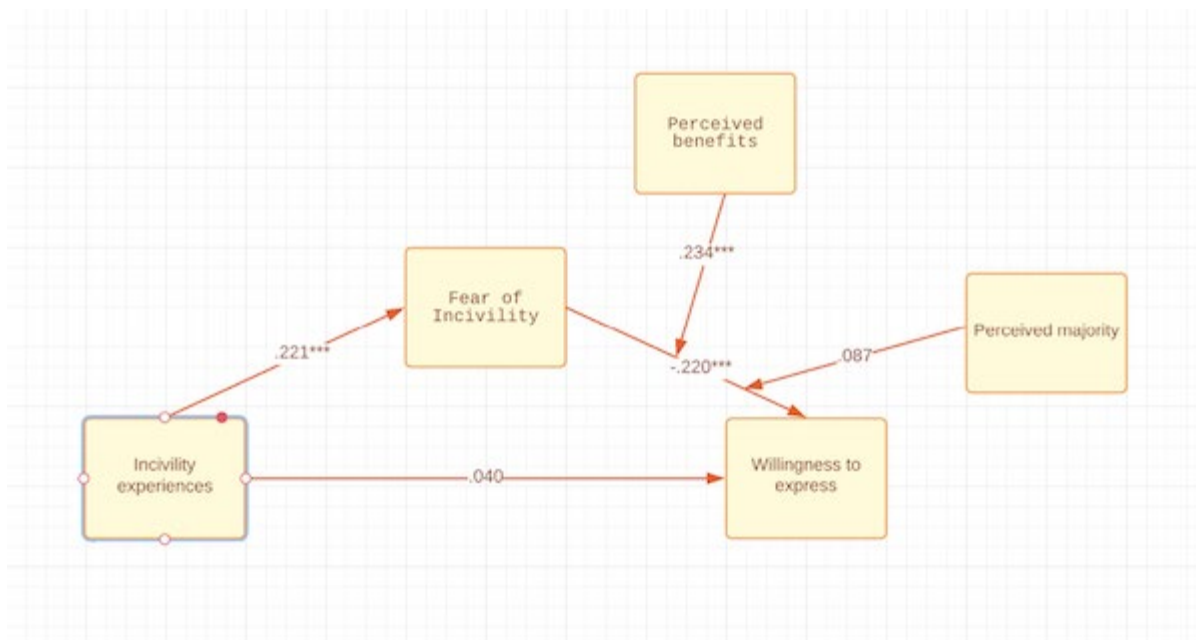


Figure 3: The model shows the path from experiencing incivility to willingness to speak out on Facebook. Note that unstandardized coefficients were reported in this figure; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

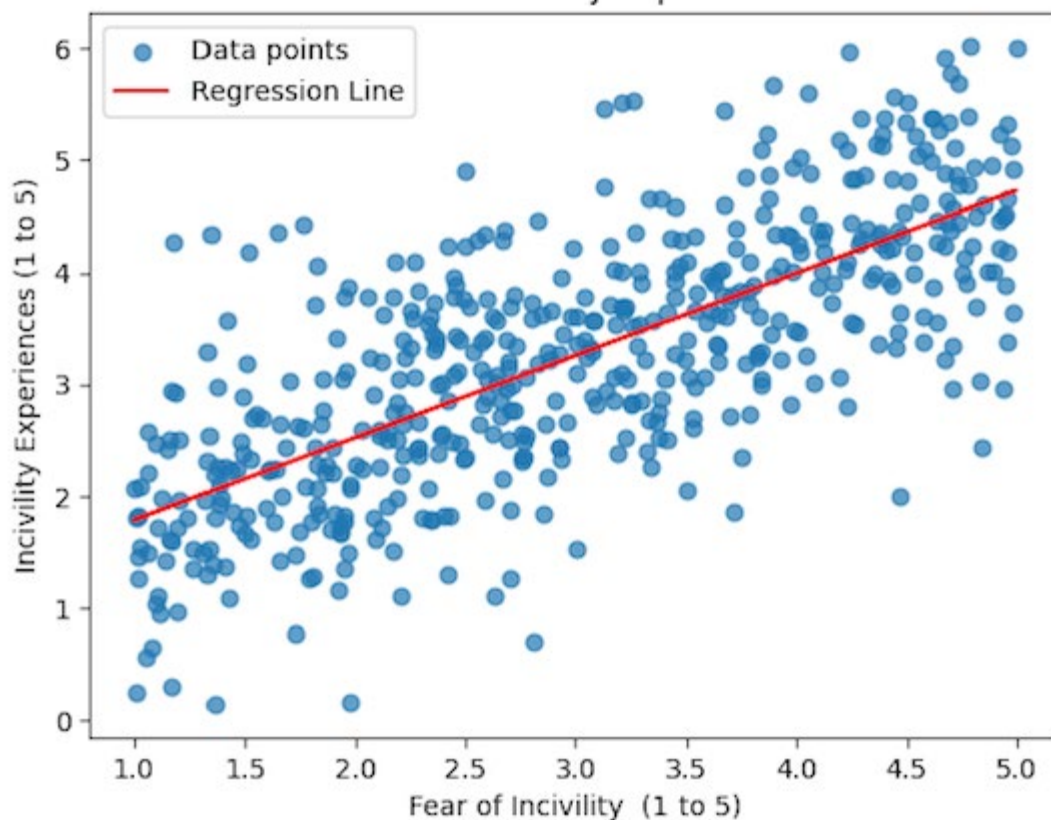


Figure 4: Significant relationship between incivility experiences and fear of incivility on Facebook.

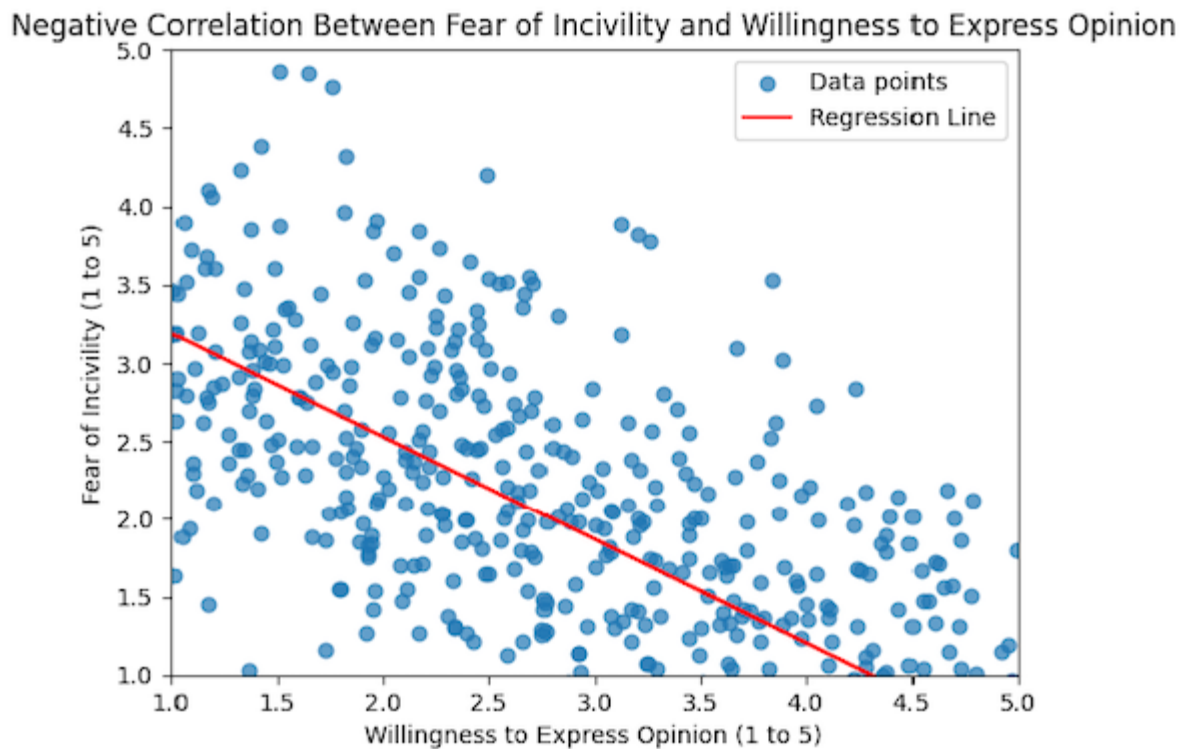


Figure 5: Significant relationship between fear of incivility and willingness to express opinion on Facebook.



Discussion

This study attempted to contribute to the vibrant body of incivility research by examining social media user experiences, perceptions, and expectations of incivility across social media platforms. Our results suggested that incivility experiences increase user fear of incivility on both Facebook and Twitter. It was also found that the impact of fear of incivility varied across platforms. Finally, while perceived benefits were a significant predictor of one's willingness to express an opinion, the perceived majority had no impact on one's willingness to express an opinion when fear of incivility was present.

Overall, this study advances our understanding of the effects of online incivility in the context of the spiral of silence by adding another layer to the spiral of silence process. The main argument of the spiral of silence is that users perceive the environment as hostile when they think they are in the minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). As a result of the perception of a hostile environment, their fear of isolation increases, and they tend to self-censor themselves. However, some scholars have suggested that fear of isolation is a

limited concept to explain the possible consequences that people may face when expressing their opinions on polarized and sensitive issues (Neubaum and Krämer, 2018). Therefore, this study argued that social media users might also see a discussion environment as hostile regardless of the opinion climate if they experience incivility in that specific discussion environment (Ordoñez and Nekmat, 2021). Similar to the spiral of silence process, the results of this study suggest that negative experiences (experiencing incivility) lead to a fear of incivility. While the spiral of silence argues that perception of opinion climate hostility may lead to a fear of isolation, in this study, we argue that a fear of being victimized by uncivil online behavior might be another predictor of willingness to express an opinion. Several scholars pointed out that users think about how their network would react to their opinions when users express opinions on sensitive issues. They may expect social sanctions from their network if they express a minority opinion, and as a result, they may see the opinion environment as “hostile” (Rössler and Schulz, 2013; Neubaum and Krämer, 2018). Similarly, this study argues that a perception of hostile opinion environments may arise from incivility experiences because users may see incivility threats as another form of social sanctions. The results confirmed that users who experienced incivility tend to see the discussion environment negatively. Users perceive social media environments as “threatening environments” when they experience incivility. Users may feel hesitant to participate in discussions in a “threatening environment” due to fear of being attacked by uncivil comments again [3]. Moreover, users who experienced incivility may also think that the opinion discrepancy between their opinion and the majority is vast (Gearhart and Zhang, 2018). Overall, the results of this study showed that experiencing incivility and fear of incivility are important factors when assessing opinion climates on social media.

The results of this study also suggest that the impact of fear of incivility varies across platforms. This finding can be explained in several ways. First, the affordances of each platform may intensify user fears of incivility. For example, researchers have argued that anonymity and network affordances may significantly affect user actions on online platforms (Rowe, 2015; Oz and Cetindere, 2023; Fox and Holt, 2018). This study did not measure user anonymity. However, studies suggested that users may afford full or partial anonymity on Twitter since it does not require users to sign up with their real names (Kaarakainen and Hutri, 2016). On the other hand, the reciprocal and personal nature of Facebook’s friendship structure may be a contributing factor (Hughes, *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, users tend to connect with other users on Twitter based on similar interests. Thus, fear of incivility on Facebook can translate into “fear of losing a real-world relationship” (Metzger, *et al.*, 2012), “losing face” (Proudfoot, *et al.*, 2018), or/and damaging “social harmony” (Binder, *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, the results show that social media users do not see all social media platforms as a singular experience (Oz and Cetindere, 2023). Therefore, the risk of being targeted by uncivil behavior may have more severe consequences on one platform than another due to social media platforms’ affordances and network differences (Oz and Cetindere, 2023).

The results also demonstrated that users who perceive the high benefits of participating in discussions tend to be more willing to express their opinions. Scholars argued that people tend to think about the costs and benefits of their interactions (Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Trepte, *et al.*, 2017). If they think benefits of their interactions outweigh risks, they will likely continue their interactions (Kankanhalli, *et al.*, 2005). For example, studies found that people tend to contribute if they think their contributions will improve their reputations or if others think their contributions are valuable (Wasko and Faraj 2005). Similarly, this study argued that people undergo the same cognitive process when deciding whether to speak out on social media. The results support the idea that perceived benefits of discussions are positively related to one’s willingness to speak out on both platforms. Overall, these results show that people consider not only the cost of their expression (as the spiral of silence suggests) but also the benefits of their engagement in online environments (Neubaum, 2022).




Limitations

One apparent limitation of this study is its methodological approach. This study relied on self-reporting (a

survey) to understand the impact of incivility on willingness to express opinions. Thus, we cannot establish a cause-effect relationship. However, measuring users' real-world incivility experiences is almost impossible without a self-reporting method. Many studies conducted experiments and exposed users to uncivil conditions. While exposing users to uncivil conditions may predict the impact of incivility, it does not reflect users' real perceptions and experiences; it just captures a snapshot in time. Another limitation was that this study did not measure different types of incivility separately. It means we do not know if one type of incivility, such as name-calling, has a greater effect than others. Future studies should consider understanding the impact of different types of incivility on a willingness to speak out. Also, future studies may conceptualize incivility more broadly and examine how people perceive extreme and mild levels of incivility. Finally, this study did not take anonymity into account. Future studies could examine anonymity in order to understand the association between fear of incivility and anonymity.



Conclusion

An important contribution of this study is demonstrating a new layer to the spiral of silence's notion of a silencing process. This study confirmed that social media users' experiences and perceptions might also contribute to an online silencing process. Furthermore, this study suggests that fear of incivility and perceived benefits are important factors that influence social media users' engagement in social media discussions, and users consider both the risks and benefits of online discussions when discussing sensitive issues online. Overall, this study suggests that online political engagement is a complex process. Other than a "perception of opinion climate," other factors such as incivility and perceived benefits may also influence users' decision to express their opinions. It is, therefore, important that future research investigate other socio-psychological factors in order to gain a better understanding of online engagement. 

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Notes

1. Neubaum, 2022, p. 438.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ordoñez and Nekmat, 2021, p. 2,487.

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