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Incivility and Political Identity on the Internet: Intergroup Factors as Predictors of Incivility in Discussions of News Online

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Although incivility is an increasing concern among scholars and the public, explanations for this phenomenon sometimes overlook the role of computer-mediated communication. Drawing from the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), we consider incivility as a form of identity performance occurring in the visually anonymous contexts that are typical online. Specifically, we examine partisan political identities and intergroup factors as predictors of incivility in a newspaper discussion forum. Contrary to expectations, conservatives were less likely to be uncivil as the proportion of ingroup members (i.e., other conservatives) in the discussion increased and less sensitive to incivility directed at outgroup members (i.e., liberals) than were nonconservatives. Audience members had more extreme evaluations of uncivil comments made by partisans than nonpartisans.

Keywords: Civility, SIDE, Identity Performance, Computer-mediated Communication, Political Communication.

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The Internet was originally hailed as a space uniquely suited to the productive exchange of ideas (Rheingold, 1993). In recent years, this promise has been replaced by concerns about political polarization and decreased exposure to diverse viewpoints. There is also the question of what happens when online contact between political groups *does* occur. How do people from different social groups communicate with one another online and, in particular, how civil is that communication? Although this topic has received some attention (e.g., Benson, 1996; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015), the role of intergroup communication in contributing to incivility in visually

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anonymous interactions online merits consideration as part of understanding how political discourse becomes polarized and antagonistic.

This study explores the ways that incivility is shaped by contextual factors related to the communication medium, ongoing communication dynamics, and salient political group membership. We use the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Spears & Lea, 1994)—specifically, the extension to the strategic aspect of SIDE focusing on identity performance (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007)—to explain incivility among members of different political groups in discussions of news stories online. We examine how intragroup and intergroup processes predict incivility and evaluations of uncivil comments in visually anonymous interactions online. This project advances research on civility, intergroup communication, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in two important ways. First, it advances theory-building efforts related to SIDE by formally examining the notion of identity performance. Identity consolidation and mobilization are investigated during naturally occurring interactions among individuals discussing stories posted to the online edition of a local newspaper. Second, our findings make needed contributions to research on incivility and CMC by elucidating group-related contextual factors that predict incivility online. Incivility is studied as an emergent phenomenon that is contingent upon group membership during interactions in which others are visually anonymous.

Literature Review

Incivility Online

Incivility can be understood as those "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics" (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014, p. 660), such as ad hominem attacks or profanity. Concerns about incivility in American public discourse are as old as the republic itself (Massaro & Stryker, 2012), suggesting that civility speaks to "the fundamental tone and practice of democracy" (Herbst, 2010, p. 3). In recent years, public concerns about incivility have reached remarkable highs. In 2013, for instance, 95% of Americans agreed that the nation had a "civility problem," and 70% believed that incivility had reached "crisis levels" (Weber Shandwick, 2013). Scholars too have increasingly turned their attention to incivility. In an extensive study, Berry and Sobieraj (2014) tracked what they call "the new incivility," pointing to an increasingly fragmented and partisan media environment as a key cause of heightened incivility. Whatever its causes, incivility has potentially deleterious effects. It can make political arguments less credible, weaken political trust, generate unfavorable views of political institutions, and increase public perceptions of political polarization (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz, 2015).

Much of the current research on the content and effects of incivility has focused on online environments—an ironic venue in some respects, given that the Internet has long been heralded for its potential to enhance democratic discourse (Benson, 1996; Papacharissi, 2004). In many online environments, incivility is common (Coe et al., 2014; da Silva, 2013), though there are exceptions (e.g., Ruiz et al., 2011). One content analysis of discussions in an online newspaper forum showed that incivility was present in one out of every five comments (Coe et al., 2014). When present, incivility online has a host of important effects. Experimental research has found that incivility in online comments can increase the perceived risk of topics under discussion (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014), as well as decrease open-mindedness, trust, and efficacy (Borah, 2013, 2014). As yet, however, there have been relatively few attempts to better understand how group dynamics in visually anonymous online settings account for incivility. With this in mind, we draw on SIDE to offer such an account.

A SIDE-Based Account of Incivility in Discussions of News Online

Scholars have long been concerned by the potential for technologically-mediated interaction to exacerbate group-based rivalries and stoke intergroup hatred, and also intrigued by the potential for it to overcome such barriers (Davies, 1995; Wojahn, 1994). The SIDE model was developed to account for a variety of effects of computer mediation on social interaction and to understand how CMC might exacerbate or ameliorate the effects of social identities on interaction (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1994). Early versions of SIDE underscored the importance of visual anonymity — a key way in which CMC differs from face-to-face interaction. In many CMC contexts, visual anonymity can increase the effects of social group cues present in the situation. The inability to see or be seen by one's interaction partners can lead to deindividuation, or a state of decreased self-evaluation, and depersonalization in which others are perceived to represent broader social groups that are salient during interaction. SIDE research has shown that when individuals are visually anonymous during CMC, they are particularly influenced by cues related to group membership (Lea & Spears, 1991). Importantly, this theoretical perspective (consistent with self-categorization theory; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) does not suggest that individuals "lose" their identity in these contexts, but rather that people are more likely to operate at the level of a *social group identity* rather than an idiosyncratic *personal identity*, and hence are more likely to conform to group-based norms. In the absence of a salient group identity, SIDE suggests that conditions of visual anonymity in CMC lead people to act in terms of personal norms and conformity to the situation in which they are placed (Spears & Lea, 1994). Put broadly, people self-present in terms of the particular "self" that is most relevant to them.

Beyond these cognitive dimensions, there is also a strategic aspect of SIDE involving the way that people behave to support their group identity when visually anonymous in CMC (Postmes et al., 1998). This strategic aspect of SIDE has been extended to consider dimensions of "identity performance" — the ways people intentionally express a social identity (Klein et al., 2007). By shifting from the cognitive to the strategic, SIDE moves squarely into the realm of communication. People can communicate in ways designed to *consolidate* their identity or seek acceptance as an ingroup member, as well as to *mobilize* those around them and enhance the standing of their ingroup. Consolidating identity includes communication behaviors such as conforming to group norms, expressing prototypical group opinions, and rendering oneself identifiable as a group member. Mobilizing identity includes behaviors such as "we" talk (explicitly invoking the group), statements concerning resistance against the outgroup, or outgroup denigration. Such communication patterns discursively construct both the ingroup and the nature of intergroup relations. In other words, while online communicators may be visually anonymous, audiences are psychologically present and communicatively active, and hence influence the strategic performance of identity.

Membership in a political group can be an especially salient identity (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Greene, 2004). For example, political identity via party identification is often the most important predictor of vote choice (Campbell et al., 1960), even in nonpartisan elections (Bonneau & Cann, 2015). Owing to increased polarization, party identification has in recent years become intertwined with ideology, such that liberals identify as Democrats and conservatives identify as Republicans (Levendusky, 2009). Evidence is also emerging that political identities and group dynamics explain some effects of online incivility. Gervais (2015), for example, found that incivility in an online discussion prompted feelings of anger in those who encountered it, but only when it took aim at one's political party. In short, membership in a political group is one form of identity that has important implications for incivility online.

The preceding discussion underscores the broader significance of incivility online as well as the potential for group communication processes to explain such behavior. In this project, we examine the role of identity performance (Klein et al., 2007) as an explanation for incivility appearing in a local

newspaper's online discussion forum. Given the potential for political groups to be salient identities (Campbell et al., 1960; Greene, 2004), we focus specifically on liberals and conservatives. These two groups were most represented in our data and have obvious importance in the country in which the study was conducted. Moreover, the newspaper discussion forum was largely visually anonymous in that members could not see one another, and it was not normative to include self-portraits in members' avatars.

As one form of identity performance, consolidation involves gaining acceptance and demonstrating commitment to one's social group (Klein et al., 2007). Incivility is a potential means for partisans such as conservatives and liberals to mark themselves as group members. Research applying social identity theory to explain intergroup insults, for example, suggested that directing insults at an outgroup reinforces one's status as an ingroup member (Korostelina, 2014). If incivility serves as a mechanism for identity consolidation in visually anonymous CMC, then partisans should be more likely to engage in incivility under certain conditions. Partisans should be more likely to be uncivil when in the presence of other ingroup members or when their group has been the target of incivility. As the size of their ingroup increases, so too should a partisan's desire to self-present as a strong group member and, thus, the likelihood of incivility. Similarly, attacks on the ingroup threaten ingroup identity and ingroup positive distinctiveness and should encourage incivility in an effort to re-establish positive ingroup identity.

Hypothesis 1: The identity of a commenter moderates the association between the proportion of commenters in a discussion who affiliate with a political ingroup and the likelihood of incivility. As the proportion of ingroup members increases, partisans will be more likely to make an uncivil comment.

Hypothesis 2: The identity of a commenter moderates the association between previous incivility directed at a political ingroup and the likelihood of incivility. When incivility has been previously directed at their ingroup during the discussion, partisans will be more likely to make an uncivil comment.

As a second form of identity performance, mobilization involves encouraging one's group to take action (Klein et al., 2007). Incivility may facilitate mobilization by positively distinguishing one's group from an outgroup. If incivility is used for mobilization in visually anonymous CMC, then partisans should be more uncivil in the presence of outgroup members and when the outgroup has been the target of incivility. As the proportion of outgroup members increases, a partisan's status as a minority should become apparent and identity as a group member should be more salient (Verkuyten, 2005). The increased salience of a group identity should make incivility more likely as partisans seek to establish positive distinctiveness for their (now threatened) ingroup. When an outgroup is attacked, the norms for ingroup behavior shift to a mode of intergroup conflict and, as a result, partisans will be more likely to conform to the new norm and be uncivil.

Hypothesis 3: The identity of a commenter moderates the association between the proportion of commenters who affiliate with a political outgroup in a discussion and the likelihood of incivility. As the proportion of outgroup members increases, partisans will be more likely to make an uncivil comment.

Hypothesis 4: The identity of a commenter moderates the association between previous incivility directed at a political outgroup and the likelihood of incivility. When incivility has been previously directed at their outgroup during the discussion, partisans will be more likely to make an uncivil comment.

Finally, whereas the previous hypotheses focus on the likelihood of being uncivil, it is also important to consider how incivility is evaluated by the discussion community. Indeed, researchers have shown that uncivil comments in discussions of news online can impact the emotions of individual community members (Gervais, 2015). The SIDE model (Postmes et al., 1998; Spears & Lea, 1994) and, more specifically, identity performance (Klein et al., 2007) should have consequences for how a given comment is evaluated. The SIDE model suggests that a salient social identity attached to a comment in visually anonymous CMC may serve to heighten attention to its content and lead to more varied responses by readers. The community could be particularly sensitive to comments contributed by members of a recognizable political group. Moreover, if incivility serves as identity performance, then the effects stemming from the identity of the commenter could be magnified among uncivil comments. The consolidation and mobilization functions of incivility among partisans should be recognized by the community and lead them to respond more strongly to uncivil comments than civil comments from partisans. We pose the following research questions to examine how comments—including those that are uncivil—made by partisans are evaluated by readers.

Research Question 1: Are there differences in reader evaluations of comments made by partisans?

Research Question 2: Does the presence of incivility impact reader evaluations of comments made by partisans?

Method

Overview and Data

The data for this study were gathered from discussions of news stories reported in the online edition of the *Arizona Daily Star*, which is a local newspaper that serves 1 million people in the metropolitan area of Tucson, Arizona. The major county served by the newspaper included slightly more registered Democrats (175,998) than registered Republicans (145,806) during 2011, but overlapped with a congressional district that was considered competitive. A three-week census was conducted of all articles published in eight sections of the newspaper during October and November 2011. Of the 706 articles that appeared in the newspaper during the census, 310 had at least one reader comment. In order to test our predictions about identity performance, it was necessary to identify articles in which political affiliation would be relevant. The 310 articles with at least one reader comment were reviewed by the authors to determine if they addressed political topics. A subset of 32 articles and corresponding reader comments ($N = 2{,}428$, $M = 93.51$ comments/article, $SD = 96.84$) were identified and used in this study. Articles in the sample addressed topics such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, the role of race in the 2012 Republican primaries, and the environmental implications of a local mine. They were drawn primarily from the local news, business, and opinion sections of the newspaper.

Focusing on a single newspaper over a limited period of time was critical to account for the idiosyncrasies of individual commenters and better reflect the situated nature of discourse occurring in online contexts like newspaper discussion forums. In particular, focusing on a single paper made it possible to evaluate the behavior of individual commenters over time in a naturalistic environment, while holding constant technological features of the discussion forum (e.g., ability to include an avatar image). In structure and reach (more than 225,000 readers), the chosen newspaper was similar to at least 15 other midsized daily papers (e.g., *Seattle Times*, *Jacksonville Daily News*, *Buffalo News*). The paper had an online comment section where readers could log in and submit a comment in response to a specific article. Readers' names appeared as their first name, last initial, and a screen name that they chose. Readers also had the opportunity to upload an image to serve as their avatar. Notably, it was not

normative for readers to include a photograph of themselves as an avatar. The vast majority of readers who participated in the discussion forum were visually anonymous. Discussions were moderated by staff members, and commenters were expected to conform to the newspaper's guidelines restricting threatening, vulgar, or discriminatory behavior. Less than 2% of all comments from the articles in the sample were removed by moderators. In these instances, they were replaced with a message indicating that the comment had been redacted.

Content Analysis

Given the significant volume of data to be coded, the content analysis was completed using four separate teams of coders. One team evaluated the comments for the presence of incivility, the second team recorded the "thumbs-up" and "thumbs-down" ratings for each comment, the third team identified the incivility target (i.e., conservatives, liberals) in the uncivil comments, and the fourth team evaluated the screen names and avatars of commenters for a salient partisan identity (i.e., conservative, liberal).

The first team, consisting of three coders, examined comments for the presence/absence of any one of five types of incivility, following Coe et al. (2014). Coders were trained and then independently evaluated the content; disagreements were resolved by the authors. Reliability was assessed via Krippendorff's alpha. *Name calling* ($\alpha = .67$) involved disparaging language directed at a person or group. *Aspersion* ($\alpha = .61$) included disparaging language directed at an idea, behavior, or policy. *Lying* ($\alpha = .73$) included instances of asserting or implying that someone or something was attempting to deceive or otherwise be disingenuous. *Vulgarity* ($\alpha = .91$) involved profanity or language that would otherwise not be proper in professional discourse. *Pejorative for speech* ($\alpha = .74$) included disparaging the way an individual communicates. Intercoder agreement was adequate for all measures except aspersion, which fell slightly below Krippendorff's (2004) recommendations. Because our hypotheses focus on incivility in general and comments may have included multiple forms of incivility, the five types of incivility were aggregated in this project and used in a dichotomous measure. A comment was considered to be uncivil when one or more of the five types of **incivility** was present ($n = 512$; 21.1%).

Reader evaluations of comments were assessed by a second group of two coders who recorded the number of "thumbs-up" ($\alpha = 1.00$) and "thumbs-down" ($\alpha = 1.00$) ratings for every comment (whether civil or uncivil). Visitors to each discussion could click on a button indicating approval (i.e., thumbs-up) or disapproval (i.e., thumbs-down) for each comment. This metric provides a real-time assessment of how discussion participants evaluate incivility (Coe et al., 2014). Approximately 97% of comments had at least one thumbs-up or -down rating. The raw number of **thumbs-up** ($M = 16.95$, $SD = 18.99$) and **thumbs-down** ($M = 9.15$, $SD = 11.25$) ratings for each comment were used in the analyses.

In order to construct measures reflecting previous attacks on an in/outgroup during discussion, a team of two coders evaluated the 512 uncivil comments to determine the target of incivility. Both coders evaluated every comment to determine intercoder agreement, with the authors resolving disagreements. Coders first examined uncivil comments to determine if the target of the incivility was a specific person ($\alpha = .78$; $n = 159$) or social group ($\alpha = .75$; $n = 298$). A specific person was defined as a distinguishable individual and could include another commenter in the forum, the article author, or a public figure. A social group was defined as a unit or class of people as a whole (e.g., liberals, conservatives, environmentalists, Latinos, etc.); attacks on a portion of a group (e.g., "those idiot liberals/conservatives who attended the rally") were counted as an attack on the group. When the target was a group, coders further evaluated whether or not the target was liberal(s) ($\alpha = .79$; $n = 56$) or conservative(s) ($\alpha = .79$; $n = 45$). These data were used to construct variables evaluating the presence of incivility directed at specific groups *prior* to when a given comment was made during a discussion.

The cases in the data set consisted of individual comments made to a discussion. Coders evaluated each comment for the presence of incivility and, when it occurred, whether the target was liberal(s) or

conservative(s). For each comment, these data were used to construct a dichotomous measure evaluating whether one or more liberals or conservatives were the target of incivility *previously during the discussion*. The resulting variables reflected liberals (i.e., **attacked liberals**; $n = 1{,}643$; 68%) or conservatives (i.e., **attacked conservatives**; $n = 1{,}085$; 45%) having been the target of incivility before a given comment was posted to the discussion. These variables made it possible to evaluate the presence of an attack on an in/outgroup previously during a discussion.

Evaluation of Political Group Membership

In order to construct measures of the proportion of in/outgroup members present in a discussion prior to when a given comment was made, the final team of two coders evaluated the screen names and avatar images of all commenters in the sample to determine whether or not a political affiliation was salient. In the absence of any existing scheme for identifying conservatives and liberals based on screen names and avatar images, we developed a coding scheme for this study. Coders focused on identifying those images or screen names that directly referred to a political party, recognizable politicians, or that suggested an identifiable policy position. Avatars and screen names that explicitly identified Republican party membership or conservative ideology (e.g., "conservative Tom"), included patriotic imagery (e.g., flags, eagles) and language (e.g., "God Bless America"; "Don't Tread on Me"), hinted at media bias (e.g., "NoSpin"), displayed weaponry, were anti-immigrant (e.g., "unhyphenated citizen") or anti-internationalism, or made reference to the Tea Party were coded as conservative ($\alpha = .82$; $n = 26$). Patriotic symbols like the American flag (Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011), concerns with media bias (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999), pro-gun attitudes (Wozniak, 2017), and anti-immigration attitudes (Gil de Zuniga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012) have been linked with conservatism. Avatars and screen names that explicitly identified Democratic party membership or liberal ideology (e.g., "west side democrat"; donkey image), included LGBT imagery (e.g., rainbow flag), non-Christian religious imagery (e.g., Buddha), suggested indigenous status (e.g., "son of a native"), or made generic calls for change were coded as liberals ($\alpha = .85$; $n = 11$). Liberals are more likely than other groups to hold pro-immigration attitudes (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2012) and be pro-LGBT (Herek, Norton, Allen, & Sims, 2010), and the notion of change was a defining theme of Obama's presidential campaign (Coe & Reitzes, 2010).

Of the 2,428 comments in the sample, **liberals** ($n = 156$, 6.4%) and **conservatives** ($n = 162$, 6.7%) authored an almost identical proportion. These variables were further used to determine the proportion of comments in a discussion made by group members prior to when a given comment was posted. For each individual comment, we calculated the proportion of previous comments made by liberals (i.e., **proportion liberals**; $M = .05$, $SD = .05$) and conservatives (i.e., **proportion conservatives**; $M = .07$, $SD = .05$). These variables made it possible to evaluate the presence of in/outgroup members during a discussion.

Procedure for Data Analysis

The data for this study were unique. First, the data were cross-classified in that there were two sources of nonindependence: comments were separately nested within both individuals and news stories. One individual could have contributed multiple comments to one or more discussions, and comments were made in response to one of 32 articles. Second, the outcome variable addressed in the hypotheses was dichotomous, and the outcome variable addressed in the research questions consisted of count data. These two issues make ordinary least squares and logistic regression inappropriate. Instead, we tested multilevel generalized linear mixed models using the GENLIN MIXED procedure in SPSS (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2012). This approach is suited to cross-classified data with dichotomous or count outcome measures.

Results

Unconstrained models were first tested to determine the amount of variation in our three outcome variables (i.e., likelihood of incivility, thumbs-up count, thumbs-down count) explained by the two levels of nesting (i.e., commenter and news article). The intraclass correlations (ICC) were modest. The two levels of nesting explained between 4% and 17% of the variance in comment incivility ($ICC_{commenter} = .15$; $ICC_{article} = .04$), number of thumbs-up ratings received ($ICC_{commenter} = .15$; $ICC_{article} = .16$), and number of thumbs-down ratings ($ICC_{commenter} = .17$; $ICC_{article} = .15$). The ICCs indicate that individual differences among commenters and differences between the various news articles accounted for a relatively small amount of the variance in comment incivility and the number of thumbs-up/down ratings. The remaining analyses were conducted accounting for these two levels of nesting to ensure that they did not unduly influence the results.

Political Identity and Group Consolidation

Hypotheses 1-2 made predictions about political affiliation, presence of ingroup members, and incivility targeted at an ingroup as predictors of incivility in news discussions. Again, the data involved individual comments made in response to a specific news story. Two sets of multilevel generalized linear mixed-model analyses were conducted to test these hypotheses. The analyses were identical, except that they focused on one of the political groups examined in this study (liberals or conservatives). We conducted the analyses in two steps. We examined the identity of the commenter, proportion of previous comments authored by ingroup members, and presence of a previous attack on the ingroup as fixed effects in the first step. In the second step, two-way interactions between these variables were evaluated as fixed effects. Random intercepts were included to account for the nonindependence stemming from the comment author and the article in response to which each comment was made. Comment incivility was the outcome variable. The results can be found in Table 1.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 focused on ingroup processes and proposed that the partisan identity of a commenter would moderate the impact of previous incivility and the presence of political ingroup members on the likelihood of making uncivil comments. The results in Table 1 show that the presence of a conservative identity moderated the association between the proportion of conservatives in a discussion and incivility. Decomposing this interaction revealed that, among conservatives, the proportion of conservatives in the discussion was associated with a reduced likelihood that a comment would be uncivil ($OR = .88$, $p = .01$). Among nonconservatives, however, the increased prevalence of conservatives in a discussion made incivility significantly more likely ($OR = 1.03$, $p = .04$). These findings were inconsistent with Hypothesis 1. None of the other interactions were significant. Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Political Identity and Group Mobilization

Hypotheses 3 and 4 focused on intergroup processes and predicted that incivility could be predicted from a commenter's partisan political identity, the presence of outgroup members, and the presence of outgroup attacks. We conducted two sets of multilevel generalized linear mixed-model analyses to test these hypotheses. The analyses followed the same general form as the analyses used to test Hypotheses 1-2, but focused on outgroups. We included the identity of commenters along with the proportion of outgroup members in the discussion and attacks on the outgroup in an initial model. The two-way interactions between partisan identity and outgroup presence and attacks were then added and evaluated in a second model. The results can be found in Table 2.

There was a significant interaction between previous attacks on liberals and having a conservative identity for the likelihood of incivility. The simple slopes revealed that, among nonconservatives, the

Table 1 *Civility and Group Consolidation*

	Likelihood of incivility					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	*t*	*OR*	*B*	*t*	*OR*
Analyses Focusing on Liberal Identity						
Liberal identity (liberal = 1; not a liberal = 0)	-.07	-0.19	.93	-.11	-0.12	.90
Proportion of liberals in discussion	-.003	-0.19	1.00	.02	0.11	1.002
Previous attack on liberals (previous attack = 1; no attack = 0)	.31*	1.98	1.37	.29†	1.79	1.33
Liberal × Proportion of liberals				-.08	-1.38	.93
Liberal × Previous attack on liberals				.60	0.70	1.82
Analyses Focusing on Conservative Identity						
Conservative identity (conservative = 1; not a conservative = 0)	.34	1.17	1.41	1.18*	2.79	3.24
Proportion of conservatives in discussion	.01	1.20	1.02	.03*	2.01	1.03
Previous attack on conservatives (previous attack = 1; no attack = 0)	.08	0.56	1.09	.06	0.41	1.06
Conservative × Proportion of conservatives				-.15*	-3.24	.86
Conservative × Previous attack on conservatives				.48	1.01	1.61

Note. OR = odds ratio. Model 2 summaries for the fixed effects: model for liberals, $F(5, 2420) = 1.27$, $p = .28$; model for conservatives, $F(5, 2420) = 2.91$, $p = .01$.
†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$.

presence of an attack on a liberal increased the likelihood that a comment would be uncivil 1.47 times compared to when liberals had not been attacked ($p = .02$). Among conservatives, however, the presence of an attack on a liberal was associated with a decreased likelihood of incivility (OR = .49, $p = .17$). This result is inconsistent with Hypothesis 4. None of the other interactions were statistically significant. Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Reader Evaluations of Incivility From Liberals and Conservatives

Research Questions 1 and 2 asked about how readers evaluated comments made by partisans. The "thumbs-up/down" feature of the newspaper website was used to answer this question. To reiterate, this feature allowed readers to indicate their approval (via clicking a "thumbs-up" icon) or disapproval (via the "thumbs-down" icon) for each comment. Because the data were in the form of counts, we constructed multilevel generalized linear mixed models. The analyses only differ in the outcome—thumbs-up or thumbs-down count. We tested comment incivility and the two dichotomous measures of partisan identity in one model, followed by a second model with the two-way interactions between incivility and partisan identity also included as fixed effects. As in all other analyses, random intercepts for comment author and news article were included to account for nonindependence. The results can be found in Table 3.

The results show that incivility was associated with the number of thumbs-up ratings a comment received. Uncivil comments received 1.17 times more thumbs-up ratings than did civil comments.

Table 2 *Civility and Group Mobilization*

	Likelihood of incivility					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	*t*	*OR*	*B*	*t*	*OR*
Analyses Focusing on Liberal Identity when Conservatives Present and Attacked						
Liberal identity (liberal = 1; not a liberal = 0)	-.06	-0.16	.94	-.27	-0.42	.77
Proportion of conservatives in discussion	.01	1.19	1.01	.01	1.08	1.01
Previous attack on conservatives (previous attack = 1; no attack = 0)	.09	0.57	1.09	.09	0.57	1.09
Liberal × Proportion of conservatives				.03	0.52	1.03
Liberal × Previous attack on conservatives				-.03	-0.07	.97
Analyses Focusing on Conservative Identity when Liberals Present and Attacked						
Conservative identity (conservative = 1; not a conservative = 0)	.34	1.16	1.40	1.35*	2.99	3.87
Proportion of liberals in discussion	-.004	-0.22	1.00	.002	0.11	1.00
Previous attack on liberals (previous attack = 1; no attack = 0)	.31*	1.98	1.37	.38*	2.32	1.47
Conservative × Proportion of liberals				-.06	-1.28	.94
Conservative × Previous attack on liberals				-1.09*	-2.07	.34

Note. OR = odds ratio. Model 2 summaries for the fixed effects: model for liberals when conservatives are outgroup, $F(5, 2420) = 0.42$, $p = .83$; model for conservatives when liberals are outgroup, $F(5, 2420) = 2.69$, $p = .02$.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$.

There were also significant interactions between incivility and being a conservative or liberal for thumbs-up ratings. The interactions were decomposed to examine the thumbs-up ratings received by liberals/nonliberals and conservatives/nonconservatives when they made civil and uncivil comments. The simple slopes for the multilevel generalized linear mixed models indicated that conservatives who made uncivil comments ($M = 11.29$, $SE = 2.80$) received significantly more thumbs-up ratings than did conservatives who made civil comments ($M = 7.75$ $SE = 1.91$), $t(2373) = 3.54$, $p < .001$. Although the difference was smaller, nonconservatives who made uncivil comments ($M = 10.46$, $SE = 2.01$) also received significantly more thumbs-up ratings than nonconservatives who made civil comments ($M = 8.49$, $SE = 1.62$), $t(2373) = 4.03$, $p < .001$. Among liberals, the simple slopes indicated that uncivil comments received significantly more thumbs-up ratings ($M = 11.69$, $SE = 3.46$) than civil comments ($M = 8.01$ $SE = 2.36$), $t(2373) = 2.97$, $p = .003$. A similar but less pronounced difference was observed among nonliberals who made uncivil comments ($M = 10.11$, $SE = 1.69$) and civil comments ($M = 8.20$, $SE = 1.36$), t $(2373) = 4.78$, $p < .001$.

Uncivil comments received 1.24 times more thumbs-down ratings than did civil comments. Additionally, comments from conservatives received 1.69 more thumbs-down ratings than did comments from nonconservatives. There was a significant interaction between being conservative and (in)civility in predicting thumbs-down ratings. The simple slopes for the multilevel generalized linear mixed models showed that there was no difference in the thumbs-down ratings received by conservatives who

Table 3 *Readers' Evaluations of Incivility From Liberals and Conservatives*

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	*t*	*OR*	*B*	*t*	*OR*
Thumbs-Up Ratings						
Liberal identity (liberal = 1; not a liberal = 0)	.03	0.13	1.03	-.02	-0.09	.98
Conservative identity (conservative = 1)	-.04	-0.25	.96	-.09	-0.54	.91
Comment incivility (1 = uncivil; 0 = civil)	.15*	10.11	1.17	.13*	7.73	1.13
Conservative identity × Comment incivility				.17*	3.38	1.18
Liberal identity × Comment incivility				.17*	2.74	1.18
Thumbs-Down Ratings						
Liberal identity (liberal = 1; not a liberal = 0)	.12	0.43	1.12	.12	0.45	1.13
Conservative identity (conservative = 1)	.52*	2.87	1.69	.57*	3.09	1.77
Comment incivility (1 = uncivil; 0 = civil)	.22*	11.11	1.24	.23*	11.14	1.26
Conservative identity × Comment incivility				-.15*	-2.20	.87
Liberal identity × Comment incivility				-.02	-0.25	.98

Note. OR = odds ratio. Model 2 summaries: model for thumbs-up rating, $F(5, 2373) = 25.60$, $p < .001$; model for thumbs-down rating, $F(5, 2372) = 27.54$, $p < .001$.
*$p < .05$.

made civil ($M = 7.51$, $SE = 1.93$) and uncivil ($M = 8.12$, $SE = 2.11$) comments, $t(2372) = 1.09$, $p = .28$. However, nonconservatives who made uncivil comments ($M = 5.31$, $SE = 1.04$) received significantly more thumbs-down ratings than nonconservatives who made civil comments ($M = 4.25$, $SE = 0.82$), $t(2372) = 3.58$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present project was to examine how intragroup and intergroup processes are related to incivility in visually anonymous interactions online. Several points warrant discussion. First, the results suggest the importance of group identity for incivility, but in unexpected ways. Contrary to expectations, conservatives were significantly less likely to be uncivil as the presence of other conservatives in the discussion increased. Nonconservatives, in contrast, were more likely to be uncivil as the presence of conservatives increased. Similarly, although nonconservatives were significantly more likely to be uncivil when liberals had previously been the target of incivility, this trend was reversed (but nonsignificant) for conservatives.

One possible explanation for this set of findings involves the conditions necessary for identity performance to occur. Incivility is nonnormative in that it deviates from expectations people may hold when interacting with others in public discussions (Coe et al., 2014; Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Although this may make incivility particularly attractive for distinguishing one's group from others in visually anonymous online settings, its nonnormativity means that it will only be used when the desire for intergroup distinctiveness is particularly strong (Klein et al., 2007). Having other members present or having witnessed previous incivility targeting the outgroup may relieve the need for one to behave as a prototypical group member. In a visually anonymous online discussion, group size provides a sense of security and therefore mitigates the need to emphasize one's group identity. As such, the increased presence of conservatives in a discussion made conservatives less likely to be uncivil. This notion

is consistent with the "noblesse oblige" effect in which strength in numbers can reduce intergroup bias (Vanbeselaere, Boen, Van Avermaet, & Buelens, 2006). Similarly, conservatives may have been unmotivated to be uncivil after a liberal had been the target of incivility because they perceived their group to be sufficiently protected. The incivility aimed at liberals previously in the discussion was sufficient.

It is somewhat surprising that the preceding results only applied to conservatives and did not extend to liberal discussion participants. It may be that liberals and conservatives follow different social norms for incivility. This possibility is consistent with how norms and group identities function in social movements (Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, 2015) along with evidence that conservatives and liberals may view incivility differently (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017). Indeed, research showing that conservatives are less likely to perceive messages as uncivil (Kenski et al., 2017) suggests that conservatives may be less likely than their nonconservative counterparts to react to incivility. Whereas conservatives do not change how they express themselves, nonconservatives become more reactive to group membership and the presence of incivility. A second explanation for this trend can be found in the way that group membership was operationally defined. In developing a coding scheme to identify conservatives and liberals, we focused on images and language in avatars and screen names that were linked to each group. This approach yielded a smaller number of liberals than conservatives, although the total number of uncivil comments from each group were almost identical. The lack of consistent findings for liberals may be partially attributable to the smaller number of liberals appearing the discussions we analyzed.

A second set of findings that warrants discussion involves the thumbs-up/-down analyses. The results suggest that group membership may be more significant for how incivility is perceived by an audience than for predicting uncivil communication in visually anonymous contexts online. A distinguishing feature of the online news discussion forum we examined was the opportunity to publicly evaluate others' comments. Recall that each comment posted to the discussions we examined could be evaluated by observers via "thumbs-up" and "thumbs-down" icons that served to report assent and dissent. Overall, incivility polarized responses, with uncivil comments receiving both more thumbs-up *and* thumbs-down ratings than civil comments. However, this pattern was moderated by group membership. Both conservatives and liberals received significantly more thumbs-*up* ratings when they were uncivil than civil. We also observed this trend for the nonconservatives and nonliberals, but it was less pronounced. For thumbs-*down* ratings, there was a significant interaction between incivility and conservative group membership. Whereas nonconservatives received more thumbs-down ratings when they were uncivil than civil, there was no difference in thumbs-down ratings when conservatives were civil and uncivil. The pattern of findings suggest that evaluations of comments are amplified by party membership. Following the SIDE model (Postmes et al., 1998; Spears & Lea, 1994), group membership may color perceptions of a contribution along the lines of ingroup favoritism. That conservatives and liberals did not receive significantly more thumbs-down ratings when they were uncivil is telling. Audience members were willing to support an ingroup member with a thumbs-up rating, but unwilling to punish an outgroup member with a thumbs-down rating. This finding also reflects the positive-negative asymmetry that has repeatedly emerged in research on intergroup relations; absent explicit intergroup threat, group members typically engage in ingroup favoritism more than outgroup denigration (Mummendey & Otten, 1998).

In addition to the findings, several limitations of the study should be noted. Although all but one of the intercoder reliability estimates for the measure of incivility met the minimum criterion established by Krippendorff (2004) for acceptable intercoder agreement, the estimate for the aspersion dimension was lower than is desirable. Second, approximately 2% of the comments in the sample were deemed inappropriate and removed by moderators. Given the high likelihood that these comments were uncivil, it is possible that our analyses did not account for a small proportion of incivility observed

by discussion participants. Third, in focusing on a single newspaper, the generalizability of the findings to other newspaper websites or online communities might be questioned. It is worth reiterating that the newspaper website examined in this study was similar in structure and reach to at least 15 other midsized daily papers in the US. Moreover, focusing on a single newspaper had advantages in that we could account for and understand the behaviors of individual commenters over a period of time. The statistical approach we used to account for nested data allowed us to capture, and to some degree control for, the shared history of members and norms of the group. Finally, the news discussions examined in our study occurred during 2011 and were limited to readers of an American newspaper. Although we would expect the basic theoretical processes examined in this project to persist in the future and in different countries, research empirically exploring these assumptions would be worthwhile.

Conclusion

As online communication increasingly complements or even substitutes for face-to-face interaction, it is essential to better understand those factors that contribute to democratic discourse online. In this project, we examined the implications of intergroup factors for incivility during visually anonymous interactions. The findings were unexpected but underscore the potential of group interaction processes to contribute to (un)civil behavior. Our study also advances scholarship on SIDE by investigating the dynamics of intergroup interaction in a manner not previously done. In focusing on identity performance, we provide a more thoroughly *communicative* approach to the theory, describing not just how static factors (e.g., visual anonymity, group categorization) influence behavior, but also how ongoing (inter)group communicative dynamics (e.g., uncivil comments from one group to another) contribute to subsequent behaviors. Through additional research, it will be possible to further isolate those intergroup factors that promote and mitigate civil discourse online and, more generally, encourage more productive political discussions among the general public.

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