

# Incivility (Hate Speech/ Incivility)

---

## AUTHOR

Katharina Esau

---

## KEYWORDS

*incivility, civility, respect, disrespect, impoliteness, stereotyping*

---

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The variable incivility is an indicator used to describe violations of communication norms. These norms can be social norms established within a society, a culture or parts of a society (e.g. a social class, milieu or group) or democratic norms established within a democratic society. In this sense incivility is associated with behaviors that threaten a collective face or a democratic society, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype individuals or social groups. Furthermore, some scholars include impoliteness into the concept of incivility and argue that the two concepts have no clear boundaries (e.g. Seely, 2017). They therefore describe incivility as aggressive, offensive or derogatory communication expressed directly or indirectly to other individuals or parties. In many studies a message is classified as uncivil if the message contains at least one instance of incivility (e.g. one violent threat). The direction of an uncivil statement is coded as ,interpersonal' / ,personal' or ,other-oriented' / ,impersonal' or sometimes also as ,neutral', meaning it is not directed at any group or individual

---

## FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

One unifying element to communication that is labelled as incivility is that it has to be a violation of an existing norm. Which norms are seen as violated depends on the theoretical tradition. Incivility research is related to theories on social norms of communication and conversation: con-

versational-maxims (Grice, 1975), face-saving concepts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1989) or conversational-contract theories (Fraser, 1990). Further, incivility research has ties to theories that view public communication as part of democratic opinion formation and decision-making processes, e.g. theories on deliberative democracy and deliberation (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1994).

---

## REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER

### METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Incivility is examined through content analysis and sometimes combined with comparative designs (e.g., Rowe, 2015) or experimental designs (Muddiman, 2017; Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2017). In addition, content analyses can be accompanied by interviews or surveys, for example to validate the results of the content analysis (Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012).

---

## EXAMPLE STUDIES

**Research question/research interest:** Previous studies have been interested in the extent, levels and direction of impoliteness in online communication (e.g. in one specific online discussion, in discussions on a specific topic, in discussions on a specific platform or on different platforms comparatively).

**Object of analysis:** Previous studies have investigated impoliteness in user comments on political newsgroups, news websites, social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook), political blogs, science blogs or online consultation platforms.

**Timeframe of analysis:** Content analysis studies investigate impoliteness in user comments focusing on periods between 2 months and 1 year (Coe et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015; Seely, 2017). It is common to use constructed weeks.



<https://doi.org/10.34778/5c>

© 2021, the authors. This work is licensed under the "Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International" license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

**Level of analysis:** Most manual content analysis studies measure impoliteness on the level of a message, for example on the level of user comments. On a higher level of analysis, the level of impoliteness for a whole discussion thread or online platform could be measured or estimated. On a lower level of analysis impoliteness can be

measured on the level of utterances, sentences or words which are the preferred levels of analysis in automated content analyses.

**Table 1.** Previous manual content analysis studies and measures of impoliteness.

Example study	Construct	Dimensions/variables	Explanation/example	Reliability
Papacharissi (2004)	impoliteness (separate from incivility)	name-calling	e.g. “weirdo”, “traitor”,	Ir = .91
		aspersion	e.g. “reckless”, “irrational”, “un-American”	Ir = .91
		synonyms for liar	e.g. “hoax”, “farce”	N/A
		hyperboles	e.g. “outrageous”, “heinous”	N/A
		non-cooperation	–	N/A
		pejorative speak	–	N/A
		vulgarity	e.g. ”shit”, “damn”, “hell”	Ir = .89
		sarcasm	–	N/A
		all-capital letters	used online to reflect shouting	N/A
		impoliteness		Ir = .90
Coe et al. (2014)	impoliteness (included in incivility)	name-calling	mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people	K- $\alpha$ = .67
		aspersion	mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at an idea, plan, policy, or behavior	K- $\alpha$ = .61

Example study	Construct	Dimensions/variables	Explanation/example	Reliability
		reference to lying	stating or implying that an idea, plan, or policy was disingenuous	K- $\alpha$ = .73
		vulgarity	using profanity or language that would not be considered proper (e.g., “pissed”, “screw”) in professional discourse	K- $\alpha$ = .91
		pejorative for speech	disparaging remark about the way in which a person communicates	K- $\alpha$ = .74
		impoliteness/incivility		K- $\alpha$ = .73
Rowe (2015)	impoliteness (separate from incivility)	name-calling	e.g., “gun-nut”, “idiot”, “fool”	$\kappa$ = .82
		aspersion	comments containing an attack on the reputation or integrity of someone or something	$\kappa$ = .72
		lying	comments implying disingenuousness	N/A
		vulgarity	e.g., “crap”, “shit”, any swear-words/cursing, sexual innuendo	$\kappa$ = 1
		pejorative	comments containing language which disparage the manner in which someone communicates (e.g., blather, crying, moaning)	$\kappa$ = 1

Example study	Construct	Dimensions/variables	Explanation/example	Reliability
		hyperbole	a massive overstatement (e.g., makes pulling teeth with pliers look easy)	$\kappa = .75$
		non-cooperation	a situation in a discussion in terms of a stalemate	$\kappa = .66$
		sarcasm	–	$\kappa = .71$
		other impoliteness	any other type of impoliteness	$\kappa = .72$
		impoliteness		$\kappa = .78$
Seely (2017)	impoliteness (included in incivility)	insulting language	name calling and other derogatory remarks often seen in pejorative speech and aspersions	K- $\alpha = .84$
		vulgarity	e.g. “lazy f**kers”, “a**holes”	K- $\alpha = 1$
		stereotyping of political party/ideology	e.g. “typical lying lefties”	K- $\alpha = .88$
		stereotyping using “isms”/discriminatory language	e.g. “if we don’t get rid of idiotic Muslim theologies, we will have growing problems”	K- $\alpha = 1$
		other stereotyping language	e.g. “GENERALS LIKE TO HAVE A MALE SOLDIER ON THEIR LAP AT ALL TIMES.”	K- $\alpha = .78$
		sarcasm	e.g. “betrayed again by the Repub leadership . . . what a shock”	K- $\alpha = .79$

Example study	Construct	Dimensions/variables	Explanation/example	Reliability
		accusations of lying	e.g. “typical lying lefties”	K- $\alpha$ = .80
		shouting	excessive capitalization and/or exclamation points	K- $\alpha$ = .83
		impoliteness/incivility		K- $\alpha$ = .81

Note: Previous studies used different inter-coder reliability statistics: Ir = reliability index by Perreault and Leigh (1989); K- $\alpha$  = Krippendorff's- $\alpha$ ;  $\kappa$  = Cohen's Kappa

Codebook used in the study Rowe (2015) is available under: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2014.940365>

## REFERENCES

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S. A. (2014). Online and Uncivil? Patterns and Determinants of Incivility in Newspaper Website Comments. *Journal of Communication*, 64(4), 658–679. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12104>
- Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. Oxford political theory. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Erjavec, K., & Kovačič, M. P. (2012). “You Don't Understand, This is a New War!” Analysis of Hate Speech in News Web Sites' Comments. *Mass Communication and Society*, 15(6), 899–920. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2011.619679>
- Fraser, B. (1990). Perspectives on politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(2), 219–236. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(90\)90081-n](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(90)90081-n)
- Goffman, E. (1989). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Grice, P. H. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Syntax and Semantics: Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. F. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1994). Three Normative Models of Democracy. *Constellations*, 1(1), 1–10.
- Muddiman, A. (2017). Personal and public levels of political incivility. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 3182–3202.
- Oz, M., Zheng, P., & Chen, G. M. (2017). Twitter versus Facebook: Comparing incivility, impoliteness, and deliberative attributes. *New Media & Society*, 20(9), 3400–3419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817749516>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media & Society*, 6(2), 259–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444804041444>
- Rowe, I. (2015). Civility 2.0: A comparative analysis of incivility in online political discussion. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(2), 121–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.940365>
- Seely, N. (2017). Virtual Vitriol: A Comparative Analysis of Incivility Within Political News Discussion Forums. *Electronic News*, 12(1), 42–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1931243117739060>