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Investigating the role of opinion dissonance for the effects of  
incivility on attitudes, emotions and the willingness to participate**

**Inzivilität in User-Kommentaren zu Online-Nachrichtenartikeln:  
Zur Rolle von Meinungsdissonanz für die Effekte von Inzivilität  
auf Einstellungen, Emotionen und Partizipationsabsichten**

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# **Incivility in user comments on online news articles: Investigating the role of opinion dissonance for the effects of incivility on attitudes, emotions and the willingness to participate**

## **Inzivilität in User-Kommentaren zu Online-Nachrichtenartikeln: Zur Rolle von Meinungsdissonanz für die Effekte von Inzivilität auf Einstellungen, Emotionen und Partizipationsabsichten**

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**Abstract:** Online discussions in comment sections on news websites often do not follow deliberative standards but are instead marked by uncivil expressions of disaffirmation and frustration. This study investigates the effects uncivil statements can have on readers of those comments, especially when the opinion expressed in that comment is contrary to their beliefs. In an online experiment embedded in an online survey 427 participants were confronted with a neutral news article that was accompanied by either civil or uncivil user comments that supported or opposed their own opinions (2×2 between-subject design). Articles and commentaries dealt with the refugee question in Germany. The research focuses on readers' open-mindedness, willingness to talk to the other side, attitude certainty, moral indignation and willingness to participate in online and offline activities when being exposed to incivility in an online debate. The results support the assumption that incivility has detrimental effects for a deliberative online discussion, but we cannot confirm that the combination of uncivil and unlike-minded comments has the most adverse effects.

**Keywords:** Online debate, user comments, incivility, opinion dissonance, online experiment

**Zusammenfassung:** Diskussionen in den Kommentarspalten von Nachrichtenwebseiten entsprechen häufig nicht deliberativen Standards, sondern sind stattdessen von inzivilen Ausdrücken der Anfeindungen oder Frustration gekennzeichnet. Die Studie untersucht die Effekte solch inzivilen Kommentare auf die LeserInnen und beachtet insbesondere die Fälle, in denen inzivile Kommentare inhaltlich den Meinungen der LeserInnen widersprechen. In einem Online-Experiment wurde 427 Teilnehmenden ein neutraler Online-Nachrichtenartikel präsentiert, dem dann zivile oder inzivile Kommentare beigefügt wurden, welche entweder der Meinung der LeserInnen entsprochen bzw. widersprochen haben (2×2 between-subject design). Inhaltlich behandelten Artikel und Kommentare die Flüchtlingsfrage in Deutschland. Im Speziellen untersuchen wir die Aufgeschlossenheit gegenüber abweichenden Meinungen der LeserInnen, die Bereitschaft mit Leuten anderer Meinung zu reden, die Meinungssicherheit, die moralische Empörung sowie die Bereitschaft, sich offline oder online einzubringen. Unsere Ergebnisse unterstützen die Annahme, dass Inzivilität nachteilige Effekte für den deliberativen Online-Diskurs haben kann, wobei die Grundannahme der

Studie, dass die Kombination aus Inzivilität und Meinungsinkongruenz die negativsten Effekte produziert, nicht bestätigt werden kann.

**Keywords:** Online-Diskurs, Nutzerkommentare, Inzivilität, Meinungsdissonanz, Online-Experiment

## 1. Introduction

People participating in online discussions do not always share their arguments in a civil manner. On the contrary, speech used in Internet discussions is often characterized by defamation and dislike instead of tolerance and respect towards those who hold opposing views. More often, people use open online spaces to express their frustration and even hate for others, making use of insulting and abusive language, also called *flaming* (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Albrecht, 2006). *Civility* as one of the basic normative standards for deliberative discussions is therefore often violated within the online context. Instead, discussions are rather marked by *incivility*.

The phenomenon of *hate speech* is one of the most extreme forms of incivility. Here people completely turn away from the argument and instead insult another person “based on race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation or preference” (Smolla, 1992, p. 152). Gagliardone et al. (2016) emphasize that hate speech is one example for speech that “goes against” discussion partners and delegitimizes the right of people or groups to be part of the debate, e.g., by “belittling, challenging, provoking, teasing them maliciously, or explicitly threatening them.” This particular form of expressions existed before the Internet but grew to new level of popularity in the public discourse since its apparent omnipresence in the online world (Brown, 2018). Dealing with such uncivil behavior online has become a considerable challenge for journalists and especially for those supervising the moderation of online discussions on news websites and social media platforms (Mawindi Mabwezara, 2014; Wolfgang, 2018) and also concerns the legislators<sup>1</sup>.

There is an ongoing societal debate over this kind of disrespectful, insulting and even hate driven forms of communication and the consequences that may occur. We are still at the beginning of understanding what such developments mean for the individuals involved as well as for the society and its public discourses as a whole. What we know is that it is a fundamental precondition for democracies that their citizens are able to engage in arguments. People need to understand that there are opposite interests and perspectives on issues other than their own. These interests have to be balanced to ensure an untroubled community life. Balancing interests requires role-taking and empathy with the situation of another person, but this is especially difficult to accomplish in online discussions where people and their specific backgrounds are unknown to each other (Brown, 2018). Understanding and accepting a person’s opinion and their reasons for it may therefore

1 In Germany, the so called “Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz” [Law to assert law enforcement considering Social Network Sites] entered into force January 2018. It obligates social media platforms and others to delete “obvious illegal” content (e.g., hate speech) from users on their sites.

often be more difficult than vigorously defending one's own opinion (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2017; Ellis, 2012).

The primary research interest of this study is concerned with the effects of incivility in user comments in comment sections of online newspapers (as the "digital cafés of the Public Sphere 2.0", Reich 2011, p. 464) on readers of such comments – especially if the content of those comments opposes readers' own opinions. We focus on readers' open-mindedness, willingness to talk to the other side, attitude certainty, emotions and willingness to participate when being exposed to incivility in a like-minded or unlike-minded comment in an online debate on a current political issue.

Methodologically, we conducted an experiment embedded in an online survey. We confronted the participants with a neutral news article as well as civil or uncivil user comments that supported or opposed their own opinions on refugees coming to Germany. This topic was a central issue in the news coverage during the time the survey took place and is still part of the German daily news agenda. The question whether Germany should and can give shelter to the refugees coming from Syria and other conflict areas especially in Northern Africa has caused massive media debate during the last years and heavily polarizes debates and audiences. The online debate exacerbated intensely after 2015 when Chancellor Angela Merkel had optimistically announced that Germany would be able to take care of the incoming refugees. According to representative polls (infratest dimap, 2015) almost half of the German population doubted this decision in 2015, while currently more than half of the citizens are displeased with how the government is approaching this issue (infratest dimap, 2018). Additionally, mainstream media coverage at the beginning of the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015 was perceived as too one-sidedly (Haller, 2017) which might have contributed to an increasingly critical tone and polarization in some online discussion spaces of people with differing views. Our study will therefore also foster understanding of the specific public debate in Germany on refugees and might help to better comprehend online debate dynamics. This may also be of use for those who are required to engage in these discussions professionally, e.g., journalists or social media editors. Audience engagement, especially online, is still a field of development; uncertainty over the right amount and practice remains, especially when considering still rapidly changing media environments and the ongoing scrutinizing of resources within news rooms (Wolfgang, 2018). However, to know more about how uncivil contributions in polarized discussions affect other participants might help professionals to decide when and how to intervene to prevent escalation or deadlock of a debate.

## 2. Civility as a deliberative ideal

Civility is one of the ideals of classic deliberation as introduced by Jürgen Habermas (1989/1962). What deliberation exactly means is well explained by Gastil (2008) whose definition of deliberation states that "people deliberate when they carefully examine a problem and a range of solutions through an open, inclusive exchange that incorporates and respects diverse points of view" (p. xi). Hence, disagreement is a necessary condition for the deliberative process to exist in the

first place when different points of view should be contrasted in the deliberative debate. However, being open-minded towards different positions as well as being able to change the own opinion to let the better argument prevail in the end is essential for good deliberation. To attain this quality of thought, people of course need to be willing to engage in the discourse and talk to other people with whom they might disagree (Ellis, 2012). The discourse itself should be marked by rationality. Emotional responses are not per se excluded as long as the aim of coming to a shared solution is not dismissed (Ferree et al, 2002). These very basic characteristics of deliberation are of special interest for our study which means that we are going to focus on how they are affected by incivility in a discourse.

For scholars following the tradition of deliberative theory, civility is a necessary condition to achieve situations in which people show the willingness to talk to people with an opposing opinion, open-mindedness, and the flexibility to change their own opinion in a rational discourse. In deliberation's original notion, civility is seen as a basic precondition that is necessary to engage in a free discourse where argument and reason are means to come to a good solution. But what if this ideal is violated? Which consequences does a violation have for the ongoing discourse? Can deliberation work under the absence of civility? There are different assumptions concerning the actual role of civility or incivility.

Ellis (2012) for example emphasizes that civility contributes to creating an atmosphere of mutual respect that is necessary in the process of conflict resolution. On the contrary, any forms of assaultive speech or even hate speech as the extreme of incivility make an open discourse nearly impossible since in those cases "words are used as weapons to ambush, terrorize, wound, humiliate, and degrade" (Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 2018, p. 1).

Santana (2013) points to the assumed consequence: "When incivility creeps into the discourse, people begin to harden their belief and there becomes no room for further debate" (p. 21). Thus, a direct negative effect of incivility for the deliberative process is expected when following the original thoughts of the deliberative theory.

However, there are others who argue that democracy needs vital debates, including emotional and passionate expressions, in which differences should be treated openly instead of trying to find consensus at all means (Benhabib, 1996; Young, 1996). Mouffe (2000) for example argues: "Too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation lead to apathy and disaffection with political participation" (p. 104).

The question is whether there can be a definitive verdict that decides if incivility is per se good or bad. It is more likely that incivility has different impacts under certain circumstances. We argue, that incivility in an online discussion has negative consequences especially on the deliberative aspects when it is expressed by people with an opposing opinion. With negative consequences, we refer to normative assumptions of the deliberative theory in which discourse is needed to reach agreements on which political action can build. In this sense, we mean every effect that would either end the discourse or harden standpoints to a degree where agreement becomes impossible. But when do people withdraw from a debate or become less open for the other side's arguments? Due to theories on selective information pro-

cessing, motivated reasoning and the disconfirmation biases (see for example Kunda, 1987, 1990; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2008), people feel threatened especially by information that contradict their own prior beliefs and develop defensive reactions such as withdrawal, stolidity or the reinterpretation of arguments within the own cognitive schemes to fit the familiar worldview. Incivility resulting from people with a different opinion in a discourse may therefore even reinforce such reaction while incivility coming from someone with a like-minded position – where a defensive reaction due to the missing threat would hold off – would not have such consequences.

### 3. (In-)Civility in the age of the Internet

With its various shapes of participatory forms, the Internet has long been seen as a promising device for public deliberation. Theoretically, people can engage in discourses, independently of temporal and spatial constraints, and exchange ideas, viewpoints and opinions as an end in itself. However, skeptics confine the initial optimism about the liberating potential of the Internet as it has rather not become the first address to find tolerance and openness in independent discourses of open-minded participants. The expression ‘flaming’ is frequently used to refer to uncivil online behavior in particular. Papacharissi (2004) defines the term as “offensive, nonsensical, albeit passionate online response” (p. 269). Brown (2018) reflects on what constitutes online hate speech, as the most extreme form of such uncivil flaming, especially when compared to offline hate speech and points to four factors: anonymity, invisibility, community and instantaneousness. Considering these factors helps to understand how uncivil online behavior enters the discourse in the first place. While (perceived) anonymity of the Internet may remove fear of being held accountable, it is also the lack of the face-to-face dimension which may facilitate uncivil behavior due to missing social-psychological cues needed for empathy and social norm control. Beyond these frequently mentioned characteristics of online communication, Brown names “community” as an important factor since hate speech in particular can be aimed primarily to connect or impress like-minded people who are more easily to be found online than in the offline world. Last but not least, Brown emphasizes the role of “instantaneousness” of online communication that facilitates “gut reactions” or “unconsidered judgements” (p. 8) which in the offline world are more often attenuated by the time that is passing between a cause (e.g., a specific news story the user is angry about) and the reaction (e.g., the letter to the editor).

The body of empirical research on civility and incivility in the online environment is growing and has regarded different aspects. There are several content analyses that measure the amount of incivility trying to find context factors that facilitate uncivil behavior (e.g., Coe et al., 2014), or for example intended to investigate the role of anonymity for civil or uncivil commenting on newspaper websites (Santana, 2013; Rowe, 2014).

Other studies have examined the effects of incivility in the online environment. Besides looking for the direct effect of incivility on users’ perceptions, emotions or intentions, several studies also aim at identifying those circumstances under

which incivility has a certain effect. Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, and Ladwig (2014), for example, examine how uncivil online interpersonal discussion may contribute to polarization of perceptions about an issue, namely nanotechnology in their case. They do not find a significant direct relationship between the exposure to incivility and the risk perception of the new technology. However, the authors can show how uncivil blog comments contribute to the polarization of risk perception depending on an individual's level of religiosity and support for the technology. Another study that is concerned with attitude polarization due to incivility was presented by Hwang, Kim, and Hu (2014). They specifically examine how the exposure to uncivil online comments influences individuals' attitude polarization along political party lines, the perceived political polarization of the public, and the expectations about public deliberation. Testing their hypotheses with the help of civil and uncivil comments on a YouTube video on health care, they find that uncivil online discussion does not directly affect attitude polarization, but it does significantly affect the perceived polarization of the public.

Further studies that are particularly relevant for our own research design are the ones by Hwang, Borah, Namkoong, and Veenstra (2008) and Borah (2012). Both studies investigate incivility in connection with blogs and specifically regard open-mindedness and attitude certainty. Hwang et al. (2008) also look at negative emotions and the willingness to talk with the other side while Borah (2012) additionally investigates the willingness to participate politically and online. Hwang's et al. (2008) special focus lies on the original opinion participants carry towards a topic, asking if people react differently to incivility if the opinion expressed is conform to their own or not. Their findings support concerns about detrimental effects of incivility especially when the readers feel attacked in their own views. Findings show that uncivil blog commentary that was consistent with a respondent's opinion did not significantly affect the participant's open-mindedness or emotions, but uncivil blog commentary reinforced the certainty of unlike-minded participants' prior attitudes while it weakened the certainty of like-minded participants. While uncivil blog commentary weakened the willingness to talk to unlike-minded participants, it increased the willingness of like-minded respondents. The comparison of like-minded and unlike-minded incivility is also the central focus in the study of Gervais (2014). His results indicate that exposure to disagreeable uncivil political talk induces feelings of anger and aversion.

In another recent study, Hwang, Kim, and Kim (2017) investigate the effects on discussion incivility with a special focus on the role of moral indignation. Negative emotions here function as a mediator: While an uncivil online discussion increases participants negative emotions towards an unlike-minded discussion partner, this will in turn lead to more close-mindedness and more disagreement with the other side. Their findings also indicate that like-minded discussion partners were not in the same way effected by uncivil agreement or disagreement, suggesting that discussion incivility has greater negative impacts on behaviors and attitudes toward outgroup members than ingroup members.

In line with previous research, we do not expect a direct main effect of incivility. Nor do we expect opinion disagreement to have a general direct negative effect since disagreement is a fundamental base for any kind of deliberative discus-



sion. Instead, we focus on the effects of uncivil – unlike-minded comments which we expect to be the greatest risk to a discussion when it comes to negative effects. We therefore expect:

*Participants who are exposed to uncivil comments that object their own opinion will be less open-minded towards the other side (H1), less willing to talk to the other side (H2), more certain of their own opinions (H3), and more morally indignant (H4) compared to when exposed to civil comments and to participants reading civil or uncivil and like-minded comments.*

For democracies, it is important that people engage in the general process of public debate and opinion formation. Therefore, people should participate in some way or another – that is, for example, translate a debate outcome into some kind of action or facilitate further communication – both online and offline. We are therefore also interested in the effects of incivility on the willingness to generally participate online and offline. Incivility may lead to a rupture in a debate if people's willingness to engage in that debate is reduced by uncivil behavior of others. The premature ending of a debate would be undesirable from a deliberative standpoint.

The study of Borah (2012) however suggests that incivility can even facilitate the willingness to participate. Pang, Ho, Zhang, Ko, Low and Tan (2016) constrict this finding by showing that people with a high fear of isolation who are confronted with an unlike-minded and uncivil environment would rather conceal their original opinions and refrain from further engaging in a debate while people in a like-minded but uncivil online environment express their opinions more often and show support, e.g., by liking comments.

Beyond that, there are studies that show that uncivil online behavior causes more incivility. As Gervais (2014) shows, exposure to like-minded incivility can even increase the use of uncivil behavior of a message poster who was exposed to uncivil debate him\*herself. This goes in line with Hsueh, Yogeewaran, and Malinen (2015) who showed that prejudicial comments also cause more prejudicial comments online. However, Masullo Chen and Lu (2017) conclude in their study that it is disagreement rather than incivility that causes aggressive or retaliatory intentions.

Facing such inconsistent previous research findings, we cannot formulate unambiguous assumptions about the effects on the willingness to participate and instead ask the following research questions:

*RQ1: Does the exposure to uncivil commentary increase participants' willingness to participate (a) online and (b) offline?*

*RQ2: Which role do other factors like (a) an unlike-minded opinion, (b) relevance of the topic in general, (c) political interest play for participants' willingness to participate online and offline in relation to the exposure to uncivil commentary?*

## 4. Research Design

The data for this study were collected using an experiment, which was embedded in a web-based survey. The decision to conduct an experiment made it possible to systematically manipulate the tone and content of the comments and measure their effect on participants' attitudes and emotions.

### 4.1 Participants

The study was conducted from December 10–24. The 427 participants have mainly been recruited through Facebook or via e-mail<sup>2</sup>. Most participants were female (67.2%) and students (76.3%). The average age was 26 years, with the youngest participant being 18 and the oldest 74 years old. The level of education was quite high with almost 60 percent having a general qualification for university admission ("Abitur"). The survey was conducted in German.

### 4.2 Design and procedure

The study used a 2 (civil vs. uncivil tone) × 2 (like-minded vs. opposed opinion) between-subject design, which was produced by manipulating the user comments to a neutral online newspaper article.

The questionnaire consisted of both pre- and post-manipulation survey items. At the beginning of the survey participants were asked questions about their opinion in the refugee debate. We directly asked them to indicate on a 5-point scale whether or not they approve the growing number of refugees coming to Germany. We added ten different statements to which participants could express their approval on a 5-point scale (e.g., "Germany should even take more responsibility for refugees in European comparison." "On the long run, Germany can profit from the acceptance of refugees in the country." "More refugees would only stress the social security system of the country." (reversed scale), etc.). These questions were used to sort participants according to their opinion towards refugees with overall 301 people being pro refugees coming to Germany, 47 being against, and 79 being rather neutral.

After having answered these questions concerning their general assessment towards refugees, respondents read a fictitious news story about refugee policy, which provided a balanced summary of the two sides of the debate<sup>3</sup>. The article contained facts and arguments as well as quotations that were drawn from existing news articles. Proponents and opponents in the refugee debate were portrayed equally. The content of the news story remained consistent across all experimental conditions.

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2 Recruiting participants in an online environment for this study has one central advantage: The chances that people have experiences with such kinds of online debates as generated in the experiment are high. The experimental situation should therefore match a more natural user experience compared to a lab situation.

3 The article and comments presented to the participants were written in German language. Translated examples can be found in the Appendix. Original material can be requested by e-mail from the authors.

Afterwards, participants were confronted with the user comments<sup>4</sup>. They were told that readers of the before-seen article wrote the comments, explaining their perspectives about the issue.

To produce the civility/incivility condition we manipulated the comments by changing the tone of the statements towards the other side of the debate. According to Brooks and Geer (2007) incivility is marked by “inflammatory comments that add little on the way of substance to the discussion” (p. 4). Uncivil statements, in our understanding, are not directed at finding a common ground or even a solution. On the contrary, uncivil statements aim at delegitimizing others in a discussion (Gagliardone et al., 2016).

Hence, while the content of the comments remained the same, the form was changed. Considering the works of Mutz and Reeves (2005), and Brooks and Geer (2007) we manipulated the comments by adding polemic expressions and words, which were clearly violating social norms and therefore considered as uncivil. Plus, both uncivil statements contained a personal attack on the reader by either calling him\*her a “stupid know-it-all and naïve thinker” or “heartless and disgraceful.” Additionally, the comments were manipulated in terms of content, speaking either for or against receiving and welcoming refugees in Germany. Consequently, there existed four different variations of user comments (civil/pro, civil/contra, uncivil/pro and uncivil/contra; see Appendix). The comments were allocated randomly to the participants showing always three comments of one kind at a time. Reliability and validity of the stimuli were tested in a manipulation-check<sup>5</sup>.

4 Other than for example Hwang et al (2008) and Borah (2012) we use an online newspaper article and comments instead of texts from an online blog. Newspaper websites and their commentary functions differ from blogs in several ways. While blogs often reflect the opinions and reflections of their authors and while a blog entry is therefore already a contribution to a discussion (Xenos, 2008) the average articles on newspaper websites are more oriented towards providing facts. Discussions might still be provoked but they are then led in the comment section. Thus, these user comments can be seen as a form of *participatory journalism* (Ruiz et al., 2011). According to Reich (2011) this can be attributed to various characteristics of user comments. First, they represent a public forum to express opinions in a spontaneous, informal and in some cases impulsive or aggressive way that could not be communicated through other channels, such as letters to the editor. Second, user comments give readers the opportunity to react immediately and directly on an article. Third, user comments create a new hybrid form of news, where journalistic content cannot be separated from public content any longer, establishing a relationship of collaboration between journalists and the audience. Fourth, Reich (2011) points out that controversy can result from a lively exchange of opinions in the comments. It can be said that user comments are a new form of *vox populi* (Reich, 2011, p. 96), the voice of the people. At the same time, this poses new challenges to journalists and other professionals who have to deal with these forms of audience engagement. What rules and practices need to be enforced, is still a matter of vital debate (Mawindi Mabweazara, 2014; Wolfgang, 2016).

5 In the manipulation check the news article and comments were tested regarding their content and civility. The first manipulation was checked using a 5-point scale ranging from “negative” to “positive” and civility was measured using a semantic differentials 5-point scale with the items “hostile/friendly”, “rude/polite”, “disrespectful/respectful”, “quarrelsome/cooperative” and “fair/unfair”. The results show that the article can be seen as balanced as 75 percent of the participants indicated so. Manipulation checks for civility show that the news story is written neither in a civil nor uncivil way. Comments in favor of the refugee debate were evaluated as “supportive” (civil comments:  $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ , uncivil comments:  $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) and comments against refugees as “negative” (civil:  $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ , uncivil:  $M = 1.34$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ). Bonferroni-post hoc test revealed that the comments’ civility differed significantly (both in favor and against refugees:  $p < .001$ ). Thus, all manipulations check measures indicated successful manipulation.

After carrying out the survey, participants were divided into different experimental groups by comparing their stated opinion about the refugees with the attitudes within the comments. That way, we had 170 participants who had read comments congruent with their own point of view and 178 participants who saw comments incongruent with their attitude. 79 participants indicated that they were neutral or indifferent to the topic.

**Table 1. Absolute and relative frequencies of experimental groups**

Experimental group	n	%
like-minded civil	80	18.7
like-minded uncivil	90	21.1
opposed opinion uncivil	89	20.8
opposed opinion civil	89	20.8
neutral civil	45	10.5
neutral uncivil	34	8.0
total	427	100.0

### 4.3 Dependent variables

**Open-mindedness.** To measure the open-mindedness towards the other side of the debate we chose the items used by Hwang et al. (2008). After reading the comments participants should indicate their level of agreement with the statements “I felt more open to the views differing from my position to the issue” and “I got a better understanding of those who disagree with me on the issue”. Both items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Unfortunately, the items could not be used to calculate an index since the reliability of the scale was quite low (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.58$ ; inter-item correlation  $r = 0.41$ ), which lead to the assumption that the items were more heterogeneous than assumed. Because of that we do not rely only on the mean value of the index but analyze the two items separately.

**Willingness to talk with the other side.** The concept ‘willingness to talk with the other side’ was measured according to Hwang et al. (2008). Respondents were asked to indicate their attitude about discussing with people who have opposing views in the refugee debate. They had to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale with the following items: “After reading the comments...” (1) “I would enjoy interaction with these people,” and (2) “I would find it difficult to talk with these people on the issue” (reverse coded). The reliability of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.69$ ,  $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ).

**Attitude certainty.** To measure the effect on participants’ perception of their own attitude we also used already existing items from Hwang et al. (2008). Respondents should indicate in what way they agree on the following two statements: “After reading the comments...” (1) “I felt my opinions on this issue becoming stronger” and (2) “I felt more confident in my own opinion on this issue”. Both items were measured on a 5-point scale. The scale was also reliable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.73$ ,  $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ).

**Moral indignation.** According to Izard (1971, 1977) the three emotions anger, disgust and contempt are summed up in the so-called *hostility triad*. Hence, to measure moral indignation participants were asked how strongly they felt each of these three emotions (Hwang, 2008). On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *not correct at all* to 5 = *fully correct* respondents could indicate their emotional reaction. As for the other scales an index was built ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) and the reliability was tested with an acceptable result (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Willingness to participate.** Like in the study of Borah (2012) we considered willingness to participate as the willingness to advocate actively for a certain issue and take part in the public debate. In the present study we constructed willingness to participate by using and modifying items from prior studies and from a questionnaire drawn from the representative poll of German citizens (ALLBUS, 2014). Additionally, reflecting the work of Vissors and Stolle (2014) two items of so-called Facebook activism were enclosed. In total the scale contained of twelve activities, seven of them being traditional offline activities (contributing money, signing a petition, contacting a politician, joining a demonstration, joining a public meeting, joining a citizens' initiative), and six items representing online activities (signing an online petition, join a group on Facebook that is supporting your opinion, leave a comment to an article, contacting a politician via e-mail or online message, engage in an online discussion, posting a Facebook status update on the issue). Respondents were asked to rate their willingness to participate on a 5-point scale (1 = *I definitively would do*, 5 = *I wouldn't do at all*). The items showed good reliability for online participation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) and offline participation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ,  $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). Both forms of participation are highly correlated with a Pearson's coefficient of 0.648,  $p < .001$ .

**Control variables.** In order to find more explanations for the intentions to participate online or offline further items were added to the questionnaire and then used in a regression analysis. These included questions concerning participants' general opinion towards the issue, their attitude towards the refugee policy, agreement with the content of the comments, media use, personal relevance, political interest, and political ideology on a left-right scale as well as indicators for political participation within the last 12 months.

## 5. Results

To test the hypotheses a series of two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were applied<sup>6</sup>. In this way the main effects of the factors civility (civil vs. uncivil) and opinion congruence (like-minded vs. opposed opinion) as well as their interaction effects on the readers' attitudes and emotions concerning the user comments

6 A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality of the distribution of the dependent variables revealed a violation of that assumption for all variables. This may increase the possibility for making type I errors. However, since the ANOVA is a fairly robust test when group sizes are equal (which they are in our case) even when the assumption of normality is violated (Field, 2009), we proceeded with the conduction of the analyses. Levene's test for homogeneity of variance for all dependent variables was applied and revealed no significant differences between the groups.

could be calculated. Since we were particularly interested in the comparison between like-minded and unlike-minded persons and the effect incivility may have in combination with the opinion (in)congruence, we did not regard neutral people in the following analyses for the hypotheses 1 to 4. Table 2 gives the overview for means and standard deviations of all groups and the dependent variables.

**Table 2.** Estimated means and standard deviations (in parentheses) from 2 x 2 ANOVAs

Manipulations		Open-mindedness I	Open-mindedness II	Willingness to talk	Attitude certainty	Moral indignation
like-minded	civil ( <i>n</i> = 80)	3.21 (1.22)	2.06 (.91)	3.38 (1.09)	3.58 (1.03)	1.76 <sup>c</sup> (0.97)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =90)	3.11 (1.21)	2.19 (1.10)	3.20 <sup>b</sup> (1.05)	3.44 (1.01)	2.29 <sup>b</sup> (1.07)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =170)	3.16 (1.21)	2.13 <sup>a</sup> (1.02)	3.28 (1.07)	3.51 <sup>a</sup> (1.02)	2.04 <sup>d</sup> (1.06)
opposed	civil ( <i>n</i> =89)	3.45 <sup>a</sup> (1.15)	2.82 <sup>b</sup> (1.16)	3.42 <sup>a</sup> (1.15)	2.98 <sup>b</sup> (0.98)	3.13 <sup>a</sup> (0.99)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =89)	3.02 <sup>a</sup> (1.20)	2.48 <sup>b</sup> (1.24)	3.05 <sup>a, b</sup> (1.05)	3.30 <sup>b</sup> (1.04)	3.61 <sup>a, b, c</sup> (1.01)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =176)	3.24 (1.19)	2.65 <sup>a</sup> (1.21)	3.24 (1.11)	3.14 <sup>a</sup> (1.02)	3.37 <sup>d</sup> (1.02)
overall	civil ( <i>n</i> =169)	3.34 <sup>b</sup> (1.19)	2.46 (1.12)	3.4 <sup>c</sup> (1.05)	3.26 (1.04)	2.49 <sup>c</sup> (1.2)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =179)	3.07 <sup>b</sup> (1.2)	2.34 (1.18)	3.13 <sup>c</sup> (1.05)	3.37 (1.03)	2.95 <sup>c</sup> (1.23)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =348)	3.2 (1.2)	2.4 (1.15)	3.26 (1.09)	3.32 (1.03)	2.72 (1.23)

Note. In a column, means sharing letters are statistically different at or below  $p < .05$ .

### 5.1 Open-mindedness

The first hypothesis predicted that people who are exposed to uncivil user comments objecting their opinion are least open-minded towards the other side of the discourse. Because of the low reliability of the used scale to measure open-mindedness we analyzed the two items separately.

The ANOVA applied to test the first item “I felt more open to the views differing from my position to the issue” revealed that there is a weak but significant main effect of civility on the open-mindedness towards the other side ( $F(1,344) = 4.25, p = .040, \eta_p^2 = .012$ ). People who read uncivil user comments were less open-minded towards the other side ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.20$ ) than people who read civil comments ( $M = 3.34, SD = 1.19$ ). The ANOVA model showed no significant main effect of opinion congruence ( $F(1,344) = 0.34, p = .563, \eta_p^2 = .001$ ). Additionally, results revealed no significant interaction between civility and opinion congruence ( $F(1,344) = 1.61, p = .205, \eta_p^2 = .005$ ).

A simple effect analysis<sup>7</sup> showed that participants reading unlike-minded comments were less open towards opposing opinions when the comments were uncivil ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than when they were written in a civil way ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). The difference of 0.43 points showed that incivility had a significant and detrimental effect on open-mindedness for participants that read comments opposed to their opinion ( $p = .018$ ).

The second item to measure open-mindedness focused on the understanding of the opposed opinions. The ANOVA showed no significant main effect of civility here ( $F(1,344) = .77$ ,  $p = .381$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ). Opinion congruence however had a significant and quite strong main effect on open-mindedness ( $F(1,344) = 19.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ): people who read comments objected to their own opinion found it easier to understand the arguments of the opposed side ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), whereas participants who read like-minded comments had more difficulties in understanding the other side ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). The interaction between civility and opinion congruence was marginally insignificant ( $F(1,344) = 3.73$ ,  $p = .054$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .011$ ).

A simple effect analysis additionally shows that incivility in the unlike-minded user comments reduced the understanding of that opposed opinion ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) compared to the civil comments ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). The difference in these means is significant ( $p = .045$ ).

The mixed results from these two items do not allow us to support our first hypothesis. In both cases, incivility in unlike-minded comments was significantly connected to less open-mindedness and less understanding of the other side compared to civil unlike-minded comments. However, there were no significant differences between people who read uncivil unlike-minded comments compared to both groups that read like-minded comments with regard to openness, nor did like-minded readers show more understanding of the other side compared to people that read uncivil/ unlike-minded comments.

## 5.2 Willingness to talk with the other side

The second hypothesis predicted that people who read uncivil user comments that objected their own opinion would be least willing to talk to the other side. The analysis showed a significant main effect of civility ( $F(1,344) = 5.52$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .016$ ), revealing that the people who read civil comments were in general more willing to talk with the other side ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than are those who read uncivil ones ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). On the other hand, opinion congruence had no main effect on willingness to talk to the other side ( $F(1,344) = 0.2$ ,  $p = .658$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ ). The interaction between both factors was not significant ( $F(1,344) = 0.71$ ,  $p = .400$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ).

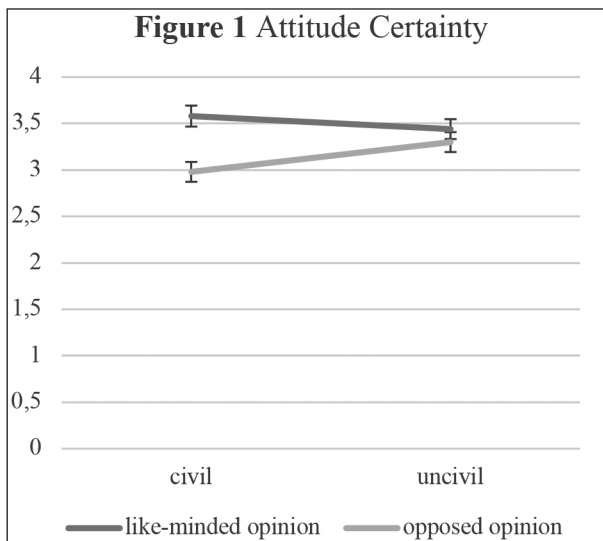
<sup>7</sup> Adding simple effects analyses after conducting the ANOVA is critical (Wei, Carroll, Harden, & Wu, 2012) when not having a significant interaction effect since it facilitates the alpha error. However, to answer our specific hypotheses we needed more insights about how exactly people in the uncivil/ unlike-minded condition differ from the other three groups. We therefore report those differences that reached significance in order to gain a better understanding but suggest handling these with care.

The simple effects analyses show that people reading comments opposed to their own opinion were more willing to talk to the other side when they were written in a civil way ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than when they were uncivil ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). This difference ( $0.37$ ) was significant ( $t(176) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .02$ ). Therefore, incivility in the opinion incongruent condition caused the participants to be less willing to talk with the other side. They were also least willing to talk to the other side compared to both groups in the like-minded condition, however, only the difference between the uncivil unlike-minded group and the civil like-minded group is significant ( $t(167) = -1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ )

Again, we cannot confirm our hypothesis 2: People in the uncivil and unlike-minded condition were the ones with the lowest will to talk to the other side. The difference, however, was only significant compared to those two groups who read civil comments but not to the group who read uncivil like-minded group.

### 5.3 Attitude certainty

In our third hypothesis we predicted that reading uncivil comments of the opposed opinion would cause participants to be most certain of their own opinion. The ANOVA to test the hypothesis showed that civility had no single main effect on attitude certainty ( $F(1, 344) = 0.75$ ,  $p = .386$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ). The main effect of opinion congruence however was significant ( $F(1, 344) = 11.71$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .033$ ) showing that respondents who read like-minded comments were more certain on their opinion ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than respondents who read unlike-minded comments ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). This effect was modified by the significant interaction of civility and opinion congruence ( $F(1, 344) = 4.52$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ).



**Figure 1. Attitude certainty.**  $N = 348$  participants ( $n = 170$  like-minded opinion;  $178 =$  opposed opinion); error bars represent the standard error.



Simple effect analyses showed that incivility in comments with an opposed opinion led to more certainty of the own opinion ( $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) than civility ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). This difference is significant ( $t(176) = -2.15$ ,  $p = .023$ ). In comparison with like-minded comments the opposite was the case: Participants who read uncivil comments were less certain on their own opinion ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) than participants who read civil ones ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), but this difference (0.14) is not significant ( $t(168) = .88$ ,  $p = .381$ ). Therefore, H3 cannot be supported since participants who were exposed to uncivil comments that object their own opinion were more certain of their own opinion than compared to when exposed to civil comments, but participants reading like-minded comments were overall more certain of their opinion.

#### 5.4 Moral indignation

Our fourth hypothesis predicted the highest moral indignation for people who were exposed to uncivil comments that oppose their own opinion. Our analyses revealed significant main effects of civility as well as opinion congruency. Uncivil comments caused a higher moral indignation in participants than civil comments ( $F(1,344) = 21.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .059$ ) with an average score of moral indignation for people who read uncivil comments of  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.23$  and for people who read civil comments of  $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ . People in the opinion incongruent condition reached higher levels of moral indignation ( $F(1,344) = 157.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .309$ ), showing that those participants that read comments opposing their own opinion reached higher levels of moral indignation ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) than participants that read comments that supported their own opinion ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). There was no significant interaction effect of incivility and opinion congruency ( $F(1,344) = .47$ ,  $p = .829$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .309$ ). Reading uncivil comments that support the own opinion causes a similar increase in moral indignation.

Looking at the difference of people reading civil or uncivil comments that oppose their opinion we also find a significant difference ( $t(176) = -3.201$ ,  $p = .002$ ) for people who read uncivil comments ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) having a higher level of moral indignation than people who read civil comments ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .99$ ). Therefore, people who read uncivil comments that opposed their own opinion had the highest levels of moral indignation, which confirms our fourth hypothesis.

#### 5.5 Participation

Our RQ1 addressed the effect of incivility on intended (political) participation. We distinguished between online and offline participation to find out if an online activity such as reading comments on a newspaper website would cause different effects in online and offline behavior. Also, for the analysis of participation we decided to include those people indicating that they had no opinion concerning the issue as control group to find out whether having an opinion (either like-minded or opposed) would make a difference for the participation variables.

**Table 3. Estimated means and standard deviations (in parentheses) from 2 x 2 ANOVAs**

Manipulations		Participation online	Participation offline
like-minded	civil ( <i>n</i> = 80)	3.05 (1.07)	3.18 (1.06)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =90)	2.92 (1.04)	3.05 (1.04)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =170)	2.98 <sup>a</sup> (1.06)	3.11 <sup>a</sup> (1.05)
opposed	civil ( <i>n</i> =89)	2.84 (1.06)	3.15 (1.04)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =89)	2.89 (1.06)	3.00 (1.08)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =176)	2.86 (1.06)	3.07 <sup>b</sup> (1.06)
neutral	civil ( <i>n</i> =45)	2.57 (.92)	2.4 (.69)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =34)	2.55 (1.13)	2.39 (.88)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =79)	2.56 <sup>a</sup> (1.01)	2.39 <sup>a,b</sup> (.77)
overall	civil ( <i>n</i> =214)	2.86 (1.05)	3.00 (1.03)
	uncivil ( <i>n</i> =213)	2.85 (1.07)	2.92 (1.05)
	overall ( <i>n</i> =427)	2.85 (1.06)	2.96 (1.04)

Note. In a column, means sharing letters are statistically different at or below  $p < .05$ .

Looking at online participation, we did not find a significant main effect of civility ( $F(1,421) = .07, p = .79, \eta_p^2 = .00$ ), but there was a significant main effect of the opinion congruency ( $F(2,421) = 4.21, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ). Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that neutral people ( $M = 2.56, SD = 1.01$ ) were significantly less willing to participate online than people in the like-minded condition ( $M = 2.98, SD = 1.06$ ) ( $p = .01$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the groups of like-minded and opposed opinions ( $p = .93$ ) as well as between neutral and opposed opinions ( $p = .11$ ). There was also no significant interaction effect between opinion congruency and civility ( $F(2,421) = 4.21, p = .73, \eta_p^2 = .002$ ). However, mean values (Table 3) suggest that people in the like-minded condition were more willing to participate overall. Those people that read like-minded comments that were civil reported the highest willingness to participate online ( $M = 3.05, SD = 1.07$ ). This indicates that people are more willing to participate online when they feel like they are surrounded by like-minded comments or even share the majority opinion.

For offline participation, we again find no significant main effect for civility ( $F(1, 421) = .82, p = .37, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ), but again a significant main effect of opinion congruency ( $F(2, 421) = 15.52, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ ). Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that participants in the neutral condition ( $M = 2.39, SD = .77$ ) were significantly lower in their willingness to participate offline than participants in the like-minded ( $M = 3.11, SD = 1.05$ ) and opposed ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.06$ ) condition (both  $p < .001$ ). Again, there was no interaction effect between civility and opinion congruence ( $F(2, 421) = .15, p = .86, \eta_p^2 = .001$ ).

Our investigation of political participation exhibits the difference between people having an opinion and people having no opinion on the refugee issue; this was decisive for participants to report willingness to participate politically online or offline. Since political participation is for itself a complex concept investigated in a vital field of research (Norris, 2002) we tried to find alternative explanations why people in our study reported willingness to participate beyond civility and opinion congruency which for people with strong opinions had no significant effects. We therefore calculated two linear regression models including several predictors that further characterize the individuals. Table 4 shows two models, each for every participation variable of interest.

The regression analysis discloses several relevant factors that predict political participation in our study. We see that people for whom the refugee issue is personally relevant were more willing to participate online and offline. People who are generally more interested in politics were also more willing to participate politically. We also find that people who tend more to the right in a political spectrum were less willing to participate online and offline. People who approve the increasing supply of refugees in Germany were more willing to participate. When it comes to online participation, age was a significant predictor: Younger participants were more willing to engage in online political activities than older ones. For offline participation we also found that women are more willing to participate than men. Our main effect of opinion congruency can also be found in the model for offline participation. Participants in the like-minded as well as in the opposing opinion condition both are significantly more willing to participate offline.

**Table 4. Multiple Regression Predicting Political Participation Online and Offline**

	Political participation online			Political participation offline		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Civility (base: civil)	-0.03	0.09	-0.01	-0.13	0.08	-0.06
Opinion congruency (base: neutral)						
Like-minded	0.05	0.14	0.02	0.26	0.12	0.12*
Opposed	-0.04	0.14	-0.02	0.23	0.12	0.11*
Relevance of the issue						
General	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.04	0.06
Personal	0.13	0.05	0.13*	0.21	0.05	0.22***
Political interest	0.22	0.07	0.14**	0.21	0.06	0.15***
Left-right self-attribution	-0.13	0.05	-0.15**	-0.17	0.04	-0.2***
Approval of liberal refugee policy	0.18	0.07	0.15**	0.27	0.06	0.23***
Age	-0.02	0.004	-0.19***	0.002	0.004	0.02
Gender (base: male)	0.01	0.11	0.006	0.23	0.09	0.11**
Constant	1.67	0.44		0.39	0.39	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		0.21			0.39	

## 6. Discussion

The first take-away message of this paper is: People can handle opposed opinions significantly better when they are presented to them in a civil way rather than an uncivil presentation. People in our study who read uncivil comments to the online news article on refugees were significantly less open-minded, had less understanding for the other viewpoint, were less willing to talk to the other side, were more certain of their own opinion and showed higher moral indignation than people who read civil comments that opposed their own opinion. Additionally, those people who read civil comments that opposed their own opinions were the ones most open-minded, best understood and were most willing to talk to the other side (see Table 2). Regarding deliberative theory, this strengthens the role of civility as a basic condition for dealing with disagreement.

Beyond that, our results show a mixed picture about the relationship of opinion congruency and (in)civility which is why we cannot confirm most of our hypotheses. We expected that people reading uncivil comments that opposed their own opinion would significantly differ in their reactions compared to people in the three other conditions (civil like-minded, uncivil like-minded and uncivil unlike-minded comments) due to defense reactions caused by a perceived threat to their opinion or identity. Only regarding our variable of moral indignation (H4), we find that the people in the uncivil unlike-minded condition were significantly different than all other three groups. In this case, they had the highest moral indignation.

As we have also presumed, there were no general effects of civility or opinion congruency across all variables but certain main effects on some which points to

the assumed complexity of mechanisms. While on the one side, reading civil comments caused people to be more open-minded as well as more willing to talk to the other side, reading unlike-minded comments caused people to better understand the other side and to be less certain of their own opinion.

Regarding the effects of incivility on political participation in an online and offline environment, we have seen that political participation is a complex construct that is influenced by several factors. Our results indicate that people have a variety of more permanent characteristics which are more influential on the willingness to participate online and offline than civility or incivility in online comments, whether they support or oppose their own opinion. However, having an opinion at all was important for political participation as our comparison with people who reported being neutral on the issue showed. Civility or incivility, however, would not motivate these participants much to participate in online or offline political activity compared to both other groups.

All in all, our study provided a systematic analysis of the effects of incivility in the online environment on people holding a similar or an opposing opinion on several attitudinal and emotional elements. We concentrated on incivility in comments on online newspaper articles because we see these as vital instruments for the discussion of current events and therefore, an important space for the expression of public opinion. Our results expand the knowledge about people's online behavior and especially complement research that concentrates on blogs which should not be equalized with the rather spontaneous and low-threshold form of online communication provided by comment functions.

Therefore, our results also have certain implications for online deliberation and professionals who need to moderate online debates on newspaper websites. As we have seen, when people with opposing opinions were confronted with each other in an online debate, it made a difference whether opinions are expressed in a civil or uncivil way. This is highly relevant today since the debate on refugees has gotten more polarized over the years and one could overserve an expansion of what is accepted rhetoric today to more xenophobic and racist claims (Fuchs, 2017). When this study was conducted, the peak of the refugees coming to Germany had not been reached yet, nor had Angela Merkel said her famous sentence "Wir schaffen das" [We can do this]. Debates since then might have gotten more heatedly and opinions even stronger and more polarized. To counter further polarization, it seems even more important to try to keep levels of civility up high.

Journalists and social media editors engaging in the debate should therefore regularly point out that different opinions and perceptions are legitimate, and that people should rather elaborate where their attitudes come from in order to keep moral indignation and unconsidered judgements low in the debate instead of defending themselves through offensive reactions. Also, it could be helpful to implement some explicit kind of "civility guidelines" to prevent people from expressing their hate and frustration against others, but to guarantee an open and respectful discussion between individuals with different standpoints – something that is still very important in democratic societies today.

## 7. Limitations and outlook

The study provided valuable insights about relations of incivility and opinion congruence and several dependent variables concerning attitudes and emotions. However, the effects we found are not particularly strong and the mixed results indicated complex mechanisms which should be further investigated. However, we did not include further analyses for moderating effects which could be a fruitful next step. Especially emotional reactions could be important moderating factors when investigating the effects of incivility, as for example Namkoong et al. (2009) have shown in their study. Also, considering the direction and strength of people's opinions seems worthwhile for further investigations and the clarification of the underlying influences in this context (Rinke & Lück, 2010).

Finally, our study has implications for the general discussion about the harms and chances of the Internet as a public sphere. We have seen that there is potential for an open-minded discourse when generally maintaining to a civil tone in the debate. And even a little incivility can keep up discussions if this motivates people of same opinions to enter a debate in order to defend their own point of view. However, how far constant incivility in online debates leads to people's resignation or further motivation in the long run is a question of future research and cannot be answered with cross-sectional experimental data such as ours.

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## Appendix

## 1 News story on refugee policy in Germany

Refugee policy

**Between solidarity and scepticism**

**More and more refugees are coming to Germany. In many places people help, but the violence against asylum seekers is increasing. The question of how to cope with this situation still remains unanswered.**

Nov-04 2014, by [REDACTED]

Too many refugees in too short a time – this is the first impression when taking a closer look at the last couple of months. Housing for refugees includes gyms and abandoned stores and many cities and communities even have to fill their garages with camp beds.

Still, the numbers of arriving asylum seekers are increasing. Owing to the crises going on in Africa and the Middle East the amount of people fleeing from their homes is becoming the largest since World War II. In the entire year of 2014 the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees expects around 200,000 asylum seekers. Here in Germany they search for protection and security. But how will this country handle the growing number of migrants?



The majority of the refugees come from Syria, Serbia or Eritrea.



“For years German policy has focused on how to get rid of the refugees as fast as possible”, criticizes Bernd Mesovic from the human rights organisation “Pro Asylum”. Politicians, on the other hand, accentuate the welcoming culture of Germany. The Federal Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière is “impressed by the willingness to welcome the refugees” in the country. “The boat is never full”, says Winfried Kretschmann, the Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg. According to him the consensus of the population in helping this

situation has never been so strong. In fact, aid initiatives and volunteer associations founded to help refugees are being created all across the country. They organize trips to authorities, visits to a doctor or acquire toys for kids. They wash clothes or teach German. In the city of Hamburg they even established a new institution to better coordinate the overwhelming mass of private offers of assistance.

At the same time feelings of anger and fear are growing in many places. “Since the refugees came I have lost a lot of guests”, complains Matthias Schneider, owner of a beach café in the little town Bautzen in the region of Saxony (East Germany). His bar is located near the new refugee hostel, which was a hotel before. “They cannot put this home for asylum seekers just in front of my door!”, he says, due to his drop in sales. In this region particularly the number of crimes with a racist background have redoubled while across the country violence against asylum seekers is constantly rising. Especially on Facebook more and more citizens are creating groups with a negative attitude towards refugees. They are called “No to the refugee hostel” or “asylum seekers? No thanks!”.

The opposing standpoints in the refugee debate run risk to split the society. In other words, Germany is facing a big challenge.



## 2 Uncivil comment – contra refugees

 **Obscuring the truth**  wrote on Nov-04 2014  
# 2:36 pm

Playing down the actual situation is absolutely hypercritical! From all these thousands of oh-so-poor refugees that -quote- "search for protection and security" the majority are economic refugees and therefore, in the long run, no gain for the country. They have to be lived off the state for decades. Who ever denies this, is behaving like a stupid know-it-all and naïve thinker!

[report](#)



## 3 Civil comment – contra refugees

 **Obscuring the truth**  wrote on Nov-04 2014  
# 2:36 pm

I think it is not very helpful to play down the actual situation. From all these thousands of refugees that -quote- "search for protection and security" most of them are, according to my opinion, economic refugees and therefore no gain for the country on the long run. We shouldn't forget that they have to be supported by the state for decades.

[report](#)



## 4 Uncivil comment – pro refugees

 **inform yourself first!**  wrote on Nov-04 2014  
# 2:36 pm

It's very sad to see how people still can be eaten up by so much xenophobia and at the same time be so absolutely uninformed...Have these people thought about what it takes to apply for political asylum?! What the refugees must go through so that in the end finally one (!! ) percent gets the permission to stay while 99% are being deported?? I wonder how people can be so heartless and disgraceful.

[report](#)

## 5 Civil comment – pro refugees

 **inform yourself first**  wrote on Nov-04 2014  
# 2:36 pm

I think it is shocking to see how many people still behave in such a xenophobic manner and at the same time are so poorly informed...I recommend to these people to review what it means to apply for political asylum. What the people have to go through until only a very small part of them gets the permission to stay while the rest is being deported...In my point of view we sincerely should think about this unsatisfactory situation.

[report](#)