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COMMENTS THAT HURT: INCIVILITY IN USER-GENERATED COMMENTS ABOUT MARGINALIZED GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

Latin America is currently going through a process of social transformation that directly affects how marginalized groups (such as LGBTQ+ and immigrants) are treated by hegemonic groups. These transformations have not ended prejudice against marginalized groups, especially in the digital public sphere. This study examines the representation of marginalized groups in user-generated comments posted to a Chilean news outlet. By analyzing 1,176 news articles and 4,225 comments, we explored whether news coverage of minority-related topics fosters deliberative or uncivil discussions in online contexts. Our findings indicate marginalized groups are the target of offensive speech at higher rates than other groups, and comments tend to portray minorities negatively and stereotypically. We also found a disconnect between topics the news media find worth covering and topics users find worth discussing. Consequently, news organizations should revise the topics they devote more coverage to if they want to connect with their readers' interests.

Keywords: Incivility ▪ offensive speech ▪ deliberation ▪ marginalized groups ▪ user-generated comments ▪ Latin America

1. INTRODUCTION

Constant transformations have shaped the history of Latin America in terms of social values and demographic profiles, the beginnings of which can be traced back to the Spanish conquest. Since the 16th century, significant European migratory waves settled on the continent, changing the social codes of those who originally inhabited the region.

Today, the continent continues to experience social transformations that challenge the conservative and mostly Catholic Latin American identity. Three issues related to minorities and marginalized groups are currently shaking the region: immigration, feminism, and the presence of lesbian/gay/transgender/bisexual/queer (LGTBQ) groups in the public and media agendas.

Social conditions in countries such as Venezuela or Haiti have caused human displacements to different areas of the continent, causing profound demographic changes in many places (Albor-Chadid et al., 2018). Countries with traditionally low racial diversity, such as Chile, nowadays have people from different cultures and origins (Canales, 2018). This “forced” interaction creates continual situations of discrimination, in which racial minorities are perceived negatively by the rest of the community (Cirano, Espinoza, & Jara, 2017).

Similarly, debates about issues related to gender and sexual minorities, such as gay marriage, LGBTQ+ parenting, and anti-discrimination laws (Corrales, 2015), have also emerged in the last few years. The feminist movement has gained strength in the region (Hernández, 2018), which, under the slogan #NiUnaMenos, denounces violence against women and demands the protection and defense of women’s rights, such as legal abortion, equal pay, and improved labor conditions (Laudano, 2017). Despite the increased awareness towards recognizing their rights, both gender and sexual minorities continue to confront violent speech against them (Hiner, 2019).

The media take part in the way marginalized groups are portrayed. According to Etchegaray and Correa (2015), exposure to media discourse can shape how audiences perceive certain groups, such as immigrants. The stereotypes and stigmatization reinforced by media narratives transfer to and get reproduced in audience narratives (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, & Benoit, 2006). In this context, studying how people perceive minority-related issues becomes not only relevant but also imperative. The present study aims to identify the extent to which news coverage of marginalized groups fosters deliberative or negatively passionate discussions in online contexts. To that end, this study analyzed 1,176 news articles and 4,225 user-generated comments to observe incivility and deliberation traits in the public discussion of minority-related news.

Previous research has found that user-generated comments posted in response to news stories are a place for public deliberation. News comments foster the exchange of opinions between addressee and speaker (Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015), provide a space where audiences discuss news content with each other and journalists (Graham & Wright, 2015), and allow users to hold discussions with people who do not necessarily share the same values and beliefs (Saldaña, 2020). While this positive, optimistic view of news comment sections has been challenged by previous research (Hughey & Daniels, 2013), this article explores how minority-related issues are discussed in the online public sphere, specifically in comment threads posted to a news organization’s Facebook page.

This study takes place in Chile, a country with high rates of social media penetration (We Are Social, 2021) as well as high levels of online news consumption (Newman et al., 2021, 2022) that is currently experiencing the social transformations described above. Although most Latin American countries present different political, economic, and social conditions, Chile is a good proxy to study news coverage of marginalized groups and public talk in online news settings.

2. MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS

The news media have become the arena where individuals dispute power to establish social representations and meanings (Hall, 1980, 1992). Hegemonic ideologies in a social structure are the result of how the social discourse is constructed and who has the power to control it (Hall, 1996). The media are said to be a powerful actor shaping the construction of social representations, where some groups are marginalized from the dominant discourse. That is the case of minorities and marginalized groups — especially the ones related to race and gender — whose image has been harmed by how the media usually portray them.

On the one side, minority-related issues tend to be ignored by journalistic practices. Problems related to marginalized groups and their needs are rarely covered, nor are minority voices quoted as information sources (Campbell, 1995). Such practices intensify the marginalization and misrepresentation of these communities in the news media (Campbell, LeDuff, & Brown, 2012). Researchers have coined the term “symbolic annihilation” (Thaker, Dutta, Nair, & Rao, 2019) to refer to the exclusion (intentional or not) of these groups from mainstream media, resulting in a lack of representation.

On the other side, when marginalized groups do become visible and covered in the news, their portrayal is burdened with stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, 2007). The media tend to portray them exaggeratedly, perpetuating the negative characteristics they are usually associated with (LeDuff, 2012). In the case of racial minorities, they are usually associated with crime and violence (e.g., Dixon, 2017; Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2018; Robinson & Culver, 2019), illegal immigration (LeDuff & Cecala, 2012; Santana, 2015), and a paternalistic compassion (Poo, 2009). Gender-marginalized groups tend to be sexualized (Antunovic, 2019), and LGBTQ+ groups are associated with HIV/AIDS disease (Thaker et al., 2019) or represented as outcasts (Gross, 1991; Strand & Svensson, 2019). In all these cases, these groups are portrayed as “the others” in contrast to the white, straight Western culture (Liebler, 2010).

The invisibility and marginalization of these groups, together with misrepresentation and stereotypes, have a direct impact on the way audiences perceive these communities and the attitudes people develop toward them (Etchegaray & Correa, 2015). Research has shown that, in the case of comment sections in online newspapers, messages posted by news readers are influenced by media discourse (Harlow, 2012). As such, we expect a relationship between news coverage and user-generated comments. If news media have historically neglected marginalized groups, or made their problems imperceptible, news readers might not consider paying attention to or discussing news stories about marginalized groups. Following this line of thought, this study predicts:

H1: Stories about marginalized groups will receive fewer comments than stories about other topics.

Previous research has identified the presence of offensive speech in public conversations about minority groups in which they are addressed with uncivil comments (Santana, 2015). Uncivil speech is often associated with a disrespectful tone toward a subject, a topic, or another participant in a discussion (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). While the literature offers different definitions of what is considered civil or uncivil (Coe et al., 2014), there are two main lines of thought defining incivility. The first one approaches uncivil language as the violation of interpersonal norms directly related to impoliteness (e.g., Herbst, 2010; Mutz, 2015), while the second one distinguishes incivility from impoliteness, considering threats to democracy and to individuals' rights as uncivil (Papacharissi, 2004). This study relies particularly on Chen's definition of incivility (2017), which defines uncivil speech as a continuum with impoliteness on the softer end and hate speech and stereotypical language on the more extreme end (Chen, Muddiman, Wilner, Pariser, & Stroud, 2019).

Recent studies have shown that marginalized groups are directly targeted with incivility (Yacobov & Rossini, 2020), receiving hostility and intolerance from other users in online interactions (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018; Rossini, 2019). As a result, these messages end up reinforcing stereotypes and promoting acerbic discourses (Chen, Fadnis, & Whipple, 2020). At the same time, uncivil speech could be a tool for marginalized groups to speak up and get their points across (Chen et al., 2019), which might also increase the levels of incivility in online discussions. This evidence leads us to the following hypothesis:

H2: There will be more incivility in comments posted to stories about marginalized groups as compared to stories about other topics.

3. DELIBERATION AND INCIVILITY

Deliberation stands out as an essential concept for exercising democracy in social life. This ideal of deliberative democracy, envisioned by Habermas (1998) from a political perspective, relies on citizen exchanges for effective discussions when making decisions. Consequently, communicative actions are directly related with democracy. When studying democracy and mass media, many authors have adopted Habermas' conception of deliberation, sharing some key points. They conceive it as the democratic practice of informed discussions among citizens, in which they engage in attentive dialogue concerning public issues (e.g. Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Min, 2007). In essence, everyone can participate in the decision-making process instead of leaving this power in the hands of a few (Chen & Lu, 2017).

Even though deliberation finds its origins in the offline world, some of the exchanges on social media and news comment sections show deliberative traits, with active engagement from readers (Ndhlovu & Santos, 2021; Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018). At the same time, studies show that news comment sections might be especially harsh toward marginalized groups, as racist and misogynist attacks are likely to happen in

these spaces (Watson, Peng, & Lewis, 2019). Thus, user-generated comments could be a venue for the exercise of deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2012) and the development of civic life (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009) in an imperfect digital version of Habermas' deliberative democracy. In this study, however, we are approaching deliberation from a more practical stance. According to Chen (2017), deliberative speech is related to openness to discuss challenging viewpoints, asking questions to better understand such viewpoints, and arguing based on factual information. As such, backing one's claims with evidence, and asking legitimate questions, would be measurable forms of deliberation in user-generated comments (Chen, 2017).

Deliberation is somehow linked to incivility — for a discussion to take place, opposing positions are required. And it is easy for one side to get carried away by its emotions and attack its counterpart (Chen, 2017). Therefore, incivility and deliberation can coexist in the same message. Under certain conditions, the presence of deliberation is more common than incivility (Chen, 2017). Yet, this outcome depends on the topic under discussion (Coe et al., 2014; Oz et al., 2018) and the cultural context where such discussion occurs. In the case of Chile, deliberative discussion seems to be very scarce (Saldaña & Rosenberg, 2020).

Marginalized groups could benefit from deliberation in public spaces by making their interests and perspectives more visible. Still, studies indicate minorities are often humiliated in these spaces, transgressing some of the basic principles of deliberation (Ottonelli, 2017). Considering these conflicting perspectives, we ask:

RQ1: Will comments posted to stories about marginalized groups present more deliberation than comments posted to stories about other topics?

Previous literature has identified predictors of incivility. The use of all capital letters and exclamation points — as typographic representations of the act of shouting — (Gervais, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) is associated with higher levels of incivility. Similarly, anonymity in the delivery of a message usually increases incivility levels, as users do not face backlash or negative consequences for exerting uncivil speech. User gender is also related to incivility. Researchers have found that men tend to use more uncivil expressions in their comments than women (Chen, 2017; Proust & Saldaña, 2022). Therefore, we expect:

H3: There will be more incivility in comments posted by anonymous users and male users, and in comments containing words in all capital letters, regardless of the topic of the story.

We do not know if factors increasing incivility could negatively impact deliberation, i.e., if attributes like gender or anonymity could decrease the use of deliberative arguments. To explore a possible relationship, we ask:

RQ2: Do anonymity, gender, and using all capital letters affect the presence of deliberation in news comments, regardless of the topic of the story?

4. METHODS

This study conducts a content analysis of news articles and user-generated comments in a six-month time frame: October, November, and December 2018, and January, February, and March 2019. Data for this study come from news articles published by Radio Bío Bío, the most important radio news network in Chile, and the most trusted news outlet in the country (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). Despite many news organizations providing comment sections in their websites, we worked with user-generated comments posted to news stories published on Facebook. The latest reports on news consumption indicate audiences get their news through social media, especially in Latin American countries (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022; We Are Social, 2021). As such, we worked with the Facebook page of Radio Bío Bío to retrieve both the news articles published daily and the comment threads posted to those articles.

4.1. Sample and coding: News articles

We generated a Python script to retrieve all news content and user-generated comments posted on Radio Bío Bío's Facebook page from October 1, 2018, to March 31, 2019, building a database of six months' worth of news content and comment threads. No significant political event (such as an election) nor social conflict (such as Chile's social uprising in October 2019) occurred in this six-month period, so we did not have to account for any unusual episode that could eventually influence the news content. We produced five constructed weeks based on sampling strategies developed by previous studies working with online news content (Hester & Dougall, 2007; Valenzuela, Piña, & Ramírez, 2017). The initial five-week sample contained more than 5,700 news articles and approximately 660,000 news comments. Once we discarded articles containing videos and infographics with no written story, op-eds, and duplicated stories, we ended up with a final sample of 2,994 news articles.

We trained three undergraduate students to code the articles manually. The training process used a pool of 500 stories (not contained in the sample analyzed in this study) to familiarize the students with the codebook and to calculate inter-coder reliability (ICR). Students coded for news topics according to a list of 40 categories (see Appendix 1). The news categories were mutually exclusive, and the codebook provided guidance on how to decide what the main news topic was when a story could have more than one topic. For instance, if the story covered a football player dating a model, the story would not be coded as "sports" but as "celebrities." If a story covered the first transgender student being accepted at a Catholic school, it would be coded as "LGBTQ+" and not as "education." Coders were prompted to look at the

main issue being the focus of the coverage to make their coding decisions. Using the ReCal3 software (Freelon, 2010), ICR levels reached 80% agreement and Krippendorff’s alpha of .65.

4.2. Sample and coding: News comments

Once we completed coding of news articles, we randomly selected a subsample of stories to code comment threads posted to those stories. To ensure our sample included stories with different number of comments, we ranked the 2,994 articles in descending order of comments, and then used a skip interval of eight to create a sample of 370 articles. After removing pieces with less than five comments or more than 100 comments, the final sample of comments contained 11,767 comments posted to 341 news stories.

While most studies analyzing news comments randomly select individual comments (e.g., Chen et al., 2020), we wanted to capture the essence of the online discussion happening below a specific news story. That is why we did not sample comments but comment threads, although the unit of analysis is still the individual comment.

The same undergraduate students who coded the sample of articles were trained to code the sample of comments. The codebook included three attributes of incivility, two attributes of deliberation, and three attributes usually associated with the presence of uncivil speech: gender of the commenter, anonymity, and using all capital letters. Coding categories and ICR levels are described in detail in Table 1.

The present study reports results from analyzing news stories (N=1,176) and comments (N=4,225). As explained above, stories were coded for 40 categories of news topics. In this study, we used 11 topics to focus our analysis on four minority-related issues (feminism, LGBTQ+, immigration, and discrimination against people with disabilities) and seven non-minority topics that are usually featured as the main topics in the media agenda (politics, economy, education, health, culture & arts, science & technology, and sports). There were 4,225 comments posted to the news stories contained in these 11 topics, which comprise the comment sample of this study.

Table 1. News-comment codebook and inter-coder reliability.

Coding categories	Description	Agreement	Krippendorff’s alpha
Gender	Gender was determined by looking at the username of the commenter, and coded as 1 for males, 2 for females, and 3 for indeterminate. This variable was further recoded as 1 for males, and 0 for other.	95%	.80
Anonymity	Anonymity was the absence of elements in the username (such as first and last name) that could reveal user identity. Using nicknames (e.g. Fran Fran, Mario A, or Superman45) was considered as being anonymous and was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	96%	.81

Coding categories	Description	Agreement	Krippendorff's alpha
All capital letters	We considered the use of all capital letters as an act of shouting on the internet. If all or some words in the comment were written in all caps, it was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	99%	.80
Profanity	A comment was profane when the user wrote profanities or used vulgar language in the comment, with the intention of offending someone. If such language was present, it was coded as 1. If not, 0.	92%	.77
Insulting language	This variable alludes to the use of any name-calling with pejorative intention (e.g. you are a jerk!). When insulting language was found in a comment, it was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	90%	.73
Stereotypes	Stereotypes are words or expressions negatively portraying a group of people (such as women, immigrants, racial or sexual minorities). If stereotypical language was used in the comment, it was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	85%	.70
Evidence	If the comment provided numeric or statistical evidence to support a fact, or if it included links to access additional information, it was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	92%	.75
Legitimate question	Any non-rhetorical question in the comment that invited to deliberate or further elaborate was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	93%	.72

4.3. Main variables

Drawing upon Chen's approach to uncivil and deliberative speech (2017), we measured incivility by coding for the presence of three attributes of uncivil speech: profanity, insults, and stereotypes (see Table 1). These three attributes were added to create an index of incivility ranging from 0 (no uncivil attributes) to 3 (three uncivil attributes). To make the analyses more parsimonious, we recoded this index into a dichotomous variable where comments with no incivility attributes were coded as "civil" (0) and comments with one or more incivility attributes were coded as "uncivil" (1).

We measured deliberation by coding for the presence of two attributes of deliberative conversation: evidence and legitimate questions (see Table 1). We added these two attributes to create an index of deliberation ranging from 0 (no deliberative traits) to 2 (two deliberative traits). To make the analyses more parsimonious, we recoded this index into a dichotomous variable where we coded comments with no deliberation traits as "non-deliberative" (0) and comments with one or more deliberation traits as "deliberative" (1).

News coverage of marginalized groups was created by using four categories of the

news topic variable described in Appendix 1: feminism, LGBTQ+, immigration, and discrimination against people with disabilities. These topics refer to issues currently happening to marginalized groups in several Latin American countries: marginalized racial/ethnic groups facing violence, women and LGBTQ+ people being discriminated against, immigrants receiving hostility for challenging the value system in the hosting country, and people with special needs facing discrimination in several contexts. We considered news stories about these groups as minority-related topics.

News coverage of mainstream issues was created by using seven categories of the news topic variable described in Appendix 1: politics, economy, education, health, culture & arts, science & technology, and sports. These categories represent issues that are continuously covered by the news media. As such, we considered stories related to these issues as mainstream topics.

Comment attributes such as gender, anonymity, and all capital letters were previously described in Table 1 and refer to comment features that are usually associated with the presence of incivility (Chen, 2017).

4.4. Data analysis

H1 was tested by comparing the number of comments in minority-related topics versus mainstream topics. A T-test for independent samples was performed to establish whether differences between both groups were significant.

H2 was tested by comparing the proportion of uncivil comments in minority-related topics versus mainstream topics. A Chi-square test was calculated to identify significant associations between topics and incivility.

RQ1 was answered by comparing the proportion of deliberative comments in minority-related topics versus mainstream topics. A Chi-square test was calculated to identify significant associations between topics and deliberation.

Finally, H3 and RQ2 were tested/answered by running logistic regression models with comment attributes and news topics entered into the equation as predictors.

5. RESULTS

5.1. News coverage versus readers' discussion

As explained in the methods section, we coded a sample of articles to identify news topics in five constructed weeks of news content. In this study, we present the results of the content analysis of 1,176 articles categorized in eleven news topics: politics, health, economy, education, science & technology, sports, culture & arts, immigration, feminism, LGBTQ+, and discrimination against people with disabilities.

According to Figure 1, sports-related stories comprised almost half of our sample (48%), while fewer than 8% were related to one of the four minority-related topics

we coded for. These numbers reveal that issues like feminism, immigration, LGBTQ+, and discrimination receive minimal daily news coverage.

Yet, highly covered news topics are not necessarily the topics people discuss the most. While only 2% of the articles were about the economy, this topic was the focus of most of the news comments. As shown in Figure 1, economy registered more than 400 comments per story (on average), followed by LGBTQ+ (384 comments) and feminism (315). Sports received an average of 31 comments per story. As such, readers might consider it worthy to discuss topics the media do not always place at the top of the agenda.

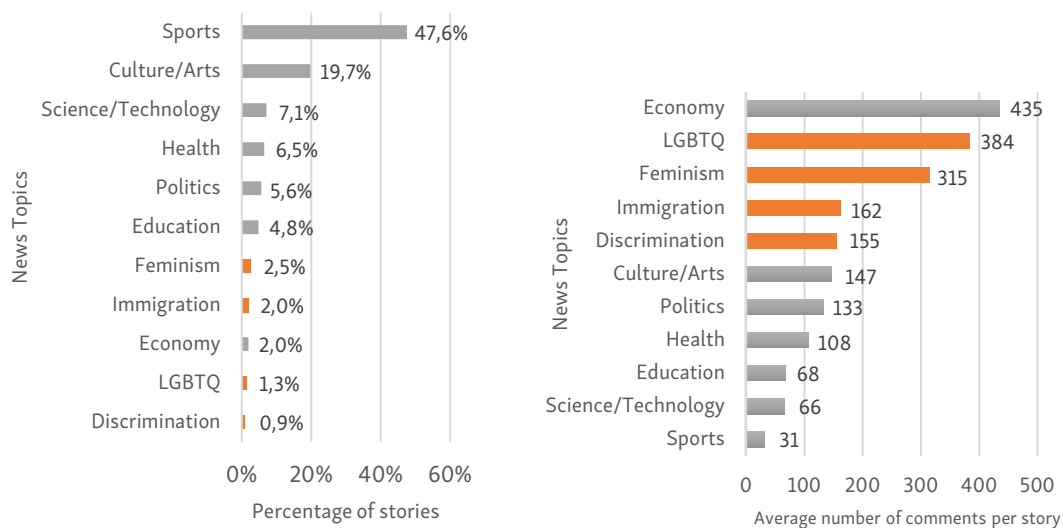


Figure 1. Percentage of stories per topic versus the average number of comments per story in each topic

H1 predicted that stories about marginalized groups would receive fewer comments than stories about other topics. Results in Figure 1 suggest the opposite, as the four minority-related topics observed in this study ranked in the top five topics with more comments per story. If we compare minority-related topics with mainstream topics, stories about marginalized groups received 260 comments on average ($M=260.5$, $SD=424.4$), while stories about other topics received around 80 comments on average ($M=80.2$, $SD=231.3$). A T-test for independent samples shows these differences are significant ($t_{(80.3)}=3.71$, $p<.001$)¹. As opposed to what H1 suggested, stories about marginalized groups received significantly more comments than stories about other topics. Thus, H1 is not supported.

1 As the number of comments was not normally distributed (skewness=6.6, kurtosis=58), we log transformed the variable (skewness=.25, kurtosis=-.64) and ran the t-test again. Results held significant after the log transformation ($t_{(1,174)}=7.22$, $p<.001$), confirming our initial findings.

5.2. Presence of incivility attributes

H2 suggested that comments on stories about marginalized groups would present more incivility than comments on stories about other topics. According to the analysis, uncivil comments made up 25% of the sample. In other words, one out of every four comments in the sample had at least one attribute of incivility. Results in Figure 2 show the four minority-related topics presented incivility levels above the sample average, while most of the mainstream topics scored below the mean. Forty percent of the comments on stories about immigration were uncivil, while health (10%) and technology (12%) had the fewest uncivil comments. When grouping topics as minority versus mainstream, we observed that stories about marginalized groups received a higher proportion of uncivil comments as compared to stories about mainstream issues (see Figure 2). A Chi-square test indicated a significant association between topics and incivility ($\chi^2=107.5, p<.001$), with minority topics triggering significantly more uncivil conversations. Consequently, H2 is supported.

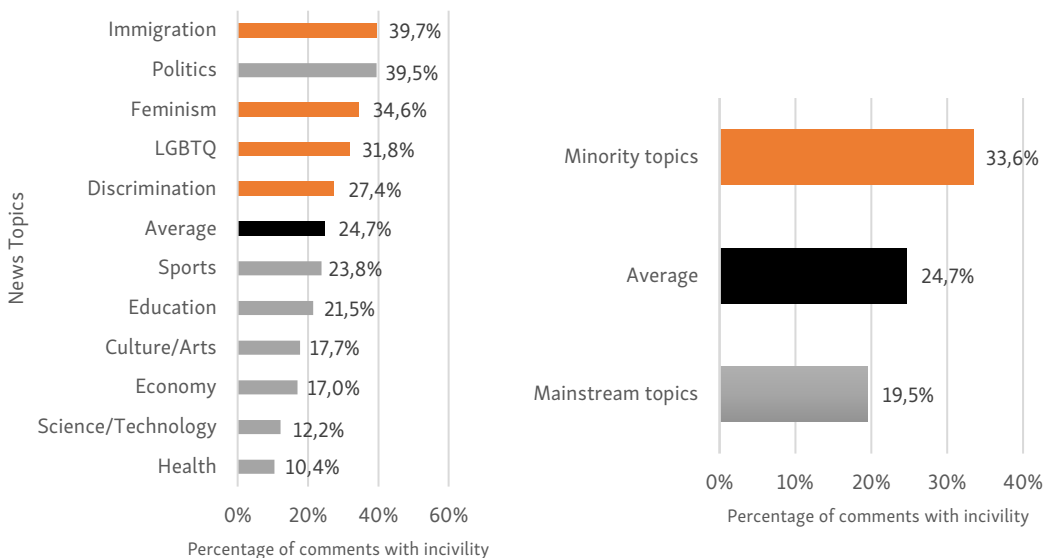


Figure 2. Percentage of uncivil comments per topic (single and aggregated)

5.3. Presence of deliberative traits

RQ1 inquired about deliberation in news comments. Results illustrated in Figure 3 suggest Chilean commenters do not deliberate much — less than 4% of the comment sample presented attributes of deliberation. Some topics showed higher levels of deliberative conversation, such as economy (8%) and education (5%), but topics like politics (1%) and sports (2%) showed almost no deliberation traits. Among minority-related topics, stories about discrimination and LGBTQ+ scored above the

mean, while stories about immigration and feminism scored below the mean. When grouping topics as minority-related versus mainstream, we see that the proportion of deliberative comments is similar in both categories (see Figure 3), which is confirmed by a non-significant Chi-square test ($\chi^2=.09$, $p=.75$) indicating no association between topics and deliberation. In summary, comments on stories about marginalized groups do not present more deliberation than comments on stories about other topics.

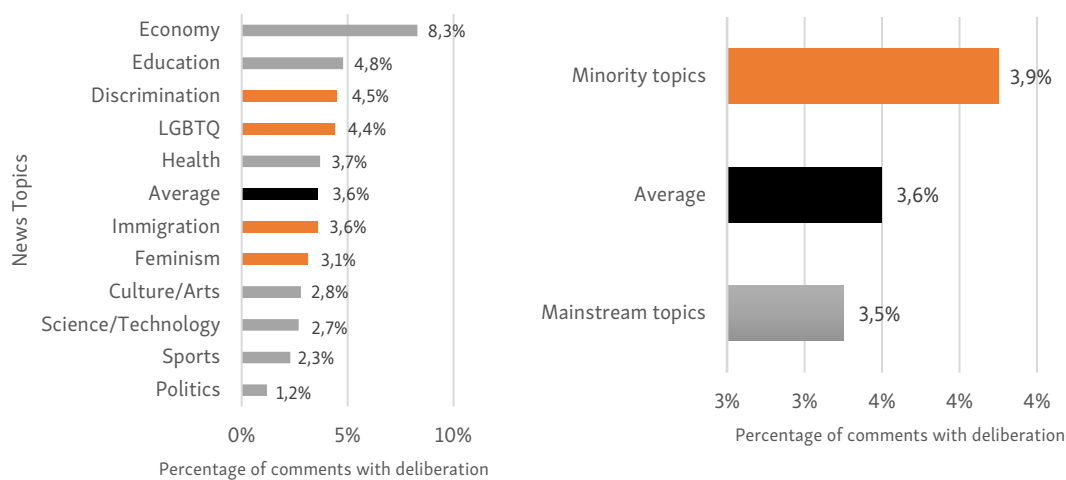


Figure 3. Percentage of deliberative comments per topic (single and aggregated)

5.4. Factors affecting incivility and deliberation

Finally, H3 suggested that comments posted by anonymous users, male users, and comments containing words in all caps, are associated with higher levels of incivility, regardless of the topic of the story. And RQ2 inquired whether these comment attributes (gender, anonymity, and all capital letters) are associated with deliberation. Results from a logistic regression indicate that comments containing words in capital letters and comments posted by male commenters have higher odds of presenting attributes of incivility. Anonymity, however, had no significant effect on incivility. Consequently, H3 is partially supported. In terms of deliberative speech, comments posted by anonymous users had higher odds of presenting attributes of deliberation, while comments in all caps reduced the odds of deliberative conversation. Results from the logistic regression models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Logistic regression analyses predicting incivility and deliberation in news comments.

	Incivility			Deliberation		
	OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Anonymity	1.07	.85	1.35	1.51**	1.12	2.04
All capital letters	1.40*	1.03	1.90	.45**	.24	.81
Gender (1=male)	1.22***	1.10	1.34	.94	.82	1.09
Nagelkerke R-square	.01			.01		
Chi-square	8.21*			1.66		
Df	2			2		

Note: N= 4,225. Cell entries correspond to Exp(B) coefficients. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

When we entered news topics in the regression models, findings observed in Table 2 hold significant. Yet, certain topics do make a difference in terms of both incivility and deliberation. Taking sports as the baseline category, results suggest that issues like feminism, immigration, and LGBTQ+ have higher odds of receiving comments with uncivil traits. Among mainstream issues, politics also present higher odds of uncivil comments. In contrast, news topics like science & technology, economy, and health have lower odds of generating uncivil conversations.

Regarding deliberation, topics like education, economy, and discrimination increase the odds of deliberative arguments on news comment sections, while culture & arts decrease such odds. Results from the logistic regression models are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Logistic regression analyses predicting incivility and deliberation in news comments.

	Incivility			Deliberation		
	OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Anonymity	1.02	.80	1.30	1.563*	1.00	2.66
All capital letters	1.38*	1.00	1.89	.14*	.02	.98
Gender (1=male)	1.19***	1.08	1.33	.93	.74	1.
Science & Technology (dummy)	.45***	.30	.67	1.18	.50	2.79
Education (dummy)	.94	.69	1.29	2.10*	1.07	4.12
Feminism (dummy)	1.82***	1.39	2.38	1.33	.63	2.79
Immigration (dummy)	2.16***	1.69	2.77	1.48	.76	2.89
LGBTQ+ (dummy)	1.53***	1.18	1.98	1.85	.98	3.49
Politics (dummy)	2.05**	1.28	3.29	.53	.07	3.96
Health (dummy)	.41***	.27	.62	1.51	.72	3.20
Economy (dummy)	.68*	.48	.97	3.73***	2.04	6.82
Discrimination (dummy)	1.28	.97	1.69	1.98*	1.02	3.84
Culture/Arts (dummy)	1.05	.71	1.55	.32***	.16	.62

	Incivility			Deliberation		
	OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
		<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>		<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
Nagelkerke R-square	.07			.03		
Chi-square	5.33*			15.59*		
Df	7			8		

Note: N= 4,225. Cell entries correspond to Exp(B) coefficients. Sports as baseline category for news topic. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

6. DISCUSSION

This study explored how news stories about marginalized groups are discussed in the public sphere of user-generated comment threads. By observing the user discussion on stories from a popular, highly trusted news outlet in Chile, this study was able to identify how news commenters refer to minority-related issues, and the extent to which the news media provide visibility to those issues in times of profound social transformations occurring in Latin America.

As previous research has shown, minority-related issues are rarely covered by the news media (Campbell, 1995) and when they do become visible, they are portrayed in negative, stereotypical ways (Ramasubramanian, 2007). While this study did not analyze the attributes used by the news media to refer to marginalized groups, we did observe the coverage in terms of quantity, and found that stories about feminism, LGBTQ+, immigration, and discrimination against people with disabilities make up less than 8% of the stories in our sample (N=1,176). These numbers indicate that, despite the growing relevance of issues like immigration or gender in Chile and Latin America, even highly trusted news organizations like Radio Bío Bío devote minimal coverage to such issues. In contrast, stories about sports comprised almost half of the sample.

While the high number of sports-related stories could reinforce the idea of sports being one of the most popular things in Latin America —in the words of Bocketti, “it is essential to understand sports if we are to understand the region,” (2017, para. 1)— this study found that sports do not necessarily trigger lengthy comment threads. In fact, in our 11-topic list, sports ranked last in terms of number of comments, with an average of 31 comments per story. In comparison, the minority-related issues received hundreds of comments per story. These results suggest that news readers are likely to engage in conversations about topics they care about, no matter how prominent those topics are in the news media. These findings also suggest that news organizations should revise the topics they devote more coverage to, if they are to increase user engagement and, most importantly, if they want to connect with their readers’ interests.

Yet, our findings indicate quantity does not translate into quality. Although we saw significantly more discussion in stories about minority-related issues, such

discussion was riddled with hostility and offensive speech. While the average amount of incivility was 25%, this number rose to 34% in minority-related stories. In other words, one out of three comments were uncivil, considerably higher than the one-out-of-five rate of uncivil comments found in previous studies (Coe et al., 2014). This finding is worrisome to say the least, and it shows that the negative portrayal of marginalized groups is present in conversations that no longer happen behind closed doors. Interestingly enough, we expected anonymous users to be more uncivil (Chen, 2017), yet, we found anonymity did not make a difference, as users commenting with their actual names were as uncivil as those using nicknames or fantasy names. Apparently, users are not shy about openly using offensive speech when commenting on the news. Just to provide an example, one of the most uncivil comments we found in the sample (containing vulgarity, insults, and stereotypical language at the same time) was a comment describing immigrants as “leprous, drug traffickers, prostitutes, and criminals – people who compete for miserable jobs and rob us on the streets.” This type of comment resembles findings from research about media portrayals of racial minorities, who are usually associated with crime and violence (e.g. Dixon, 2017; Farkas et al., 2018; Robinson & Culver, 2019), as well as studies showing consonance between media narratives and user narratives in comments sections (Harlow, 2012). While we cannot claim the news discussion was affected by the media coverage of minorities (as this study did not focus on news content but only news comments), we do observe that marginalized groups, historically misrepresented by the news media, are also negatively portrayed by news audiences.

That is not to say that all comments in our sample were meant to attack minority populations. In stories about discrimination, users were triggered by reports of people with disabilities being bullied or discriminated against, as this type of story usually triggers a great deal of public sympathy and support for disabled people (Briant, Watson, & Philo, 2013). In these cases, users posted aggressive comments to express anger and discomfort with the content of the stories. But while comments posted to discrimination-related stories followed a different pattern, the main trend we found in this study was that users were uncivil and hostile toward “the otherness” (Liebler, 2010) expressed in stories about immigrants, feminists, and LGBTQ+ groups.

The lack of deliberative conversation follows a trend seen in previous studies about user-generated comments in Chile (Proust & Saldaña, 2022; Saldaña & Rosenberg, 2020). However, we found a couple of unexpected results. First, anonymity increased the odds of comments having deliberative traits. While we do not have a definitive explanation for this finding, future studies could look into spirals of silence that lead users in highly uncivil conversations to shut themselves down and voice deliberative opinions only when their identities are concealed. Second, we expected deliberation to vary depending on story topic. Yet, the story topic made very little difference, unlike what Chen (2017) found in her study. Consequently, more research is needed to understand why Chilean news readers are more likely to engage in uncivil interactions instead of fostering a healthy environment to discuss public issues.

Chile, together with other Latin American countries, is going through a profound process of social transformation that directly affects how marginalized groups are treated by hegemonic or elite groups. Moreover, marginalized groups have been appropriating the digital space to defend their causes and gain more visibility (García-Ruano, Pacheco, & Suazo, 2013). Therefore, news media should reflect on whether to keep the status quo or to take an active role in avoiding the reinforcement of stereotypes about marginalized groups and protecting them from violent messages.

Research has shown that incivility in news comment sections directly affects how readers perceive the content of a news story. Uncivil comments may have a negative effect on how audiences perceive the quality of an article (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweige, 2018), and can make people evaluate the facts presented in the news in a negative way (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014). This research, together with the findings of the present study, highlight the relevance of studying comment sections of news sites. By observing conversations about minority versus mainstream issues, this study sheds light on relevant elements to consider when studying incivility and news coverage of marginalized populations.

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Appendix 1.

	News topic – coding categories
1	Corruption
2	Crime
3	Human rights
4	Education
5	Poverty
6	Health
7	Transportation systems
8	Housing
9	Mapuche conflict
10	Religion
11	Politics (political campaigns, candidates, and political parties)

12	Weather and natural disasters
13	Accidents and tragedies (e.g., car accidents, fires)
14	Death and obituaries
15	Sports
16	Price increases and inflation
17	Labor and wages
18	Economy
19	National industries (agriculture, mining, forest)
20	Economy (other)
21	Environment
22	Science and technology
23	Tourism
24	Feminism
25	Abortion
26	LGBTQ+
27	Immigration
28	Venezuela
29	Israel – Palestine conflict
30	International relations
31	Lifestyle (maternity, beauty, romantic relationships)
32	Animals
33	Culture & arts
34	Celebrities
35	TV industry
36	Curiosity (virals, freak videos, humor)
37	Miscellaneous
38	Discrimination
39	Church sexual abuses
40	Energy (supply and costs)