

Social Media Incivility: An Investigation of the Trends and Practices among Young Students in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, South Africa



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ABSTRACT

One of the emerging concerns over the growing popularity of social networks amongst young people is the incivility displayed on these platforms. It is now commonly recognised that social networks are now primary sites for youth civic performance. This paper thus examined trends of digital incivility and the experiences of young people in this regard. A mixed methods research design was used for this study, and data was collected using a quantitative survey as well as focus group discussions among young students in Mthatha, Eastern Cape South Africa. The results revealed that insensitive language, deception, hate speech and trolling - are the most common forms of incivility. Stalking and cyberbullying are, however, less common experiences. The results show that social networks reduce public self-awareness amongst young people and drive online civic engagement as some of the participants got positive emotional experiences implying that these practices pose no significant threats to democratic practices. The study observes a growing trend of intolerant discourses amongst young people with some statements bordering on hate speech mostly spurred by the disinhibition effect. The study recommends that there is a need to strengthen digital literacies to reduce. Given the importance of deliberative democracy, the paper argues that strengthening cultural norms of respect of the other, improving digital literacies and the use of available laws where necessary is vital to curb the growing instances of incivility caused by deindividuation and promote digital civic virtues amongst this demographic group scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

As an increasing number of people now use social media, incivility in those digital spaces has been on the rise. It is commonly agreed that social networks can positively impact the lives of most people. Recent research in areas such as education, health, agriculture, commerce, and many other spheres shows that if the technology is appropriated and deployed appropriately, the lives of ordinary people can be improved. Over the past decade, there has also been a proliferation of evidence that these digital technologies can enhance democratic practices even in African countries. Beyond enhancing democratic participation, other studies have shown that the technologies have created new ways through which young people can perform citizenship.¹ Through tagging, commenting, sharing, rating, mashing, editing,

¹ Josephine Lukito et al., “Connective Action in Myanmar: A Mixed-Method Analysis of Spring Revolution,” *Information, Communication & Society* 27, no. 7 (2024): 1422–40; Zizi Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere, and

and co-creating content, citizens are now able to participate in the political, social, and economic life worlds of their communities.² Bennet and Sergeberg point out that the citizenship that is realised through these social networks is embodied and experiential, implying that it is also ‘felt’ and takes the form of offline citizenship practice.³ Julien, similar to Mandarano *et al.*, adds that this form of participation online is invaluable as people are now able to accumulate social capital, which is essential for individual and social development.⁴

Having noted the positive contributions of social media to society, it is important to note that these tools have also been blamed as etiologies for some common online maladies occurring in societies. Amongst these are that online digital spaces are making people interact with others who are like-minded (*Balkanisation*), a culture of using the Internet to criticise at the expense of real civic activism (*Clicktivism*), and even a dislike of participating in the political lives of communities (*Apathy*). However, unlike Sampson and Parikka, this paper argues that what is ‘anomalous, accidental and dysfunctional’ can be appropriated as part of what appears to be the norm.⁵ They further maintain that this must be challenged instead of being taken as stabilising force of the collective social consciousness. Rather, the accidental and dysfunctional that emerges in the digital network spheres must be taken for what they are - a sign of a dysfunctional society that arises from the unsavoury content that one can be exposed to and be influenced.⁶

Researchers have always cautioned that it is incorrect to assume that contexts do not impact human behaviour.⁷ With regard to social media technology use patterns, Bidwell and Lengauer have maintained that using first world or democratic country experiences as recognised and sole standard neglects the fact that other countries have their own experiences which are often ignored in scholarship and yet they exist.⁸ Since 2015, following the #FeesMustFall youth movement in South Africa, it has become apparent that social media tools are enabling young people to be more expressive, and since they challenge existing norms, both mainstream media and other social groups may label these movements as uncivil.⁹ With this in mind, this study seeks to phenomenographically explore the youth experiences of incivility in social media platforms in Mthatha. Incivility, as argued before, is a huge threat to democracy since it hinders effective deliberation and participation.¹⁰ Since young people are the dominant users of the digital sphere for communicative behaviours, it is imperative to understand their experiences of online incivility. This paper investigates the incivility trends and experiences of

Beyond,” in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (Routledge, 2008), 230–45; Shelley Boulianne, “Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research,” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 5 (2015): 524–38; Peter Dahlgren, “Media, Knowledge and Trust: The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy,” *Javnost-The Public* 25, no. 1–2 (2018): 20–27; Ethan Zuckerman, “New Media, New Civics?,” *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 151–68.

² Mónica Simon et al., “Linked in the Dark: A Network Approach to Understanding Information Flows within the Dutch Telegramsphere,” *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 15 (November 18, 2023): 3054–78,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2133549>; Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, “Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media,” *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (January 2010): 59–68,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>; Jan W Van Deth, “New Modes of Participation and Norms of Citizenship,” in *New Participatory Dimensions in Civil Society* (Routledge, 2012), 115–38.

³ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (June 2012): 739–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>.

⁴ Chris Julien, “Bourdieu, Social Capital and Online Interaction,” *Sociology* 49, no. 2 (2015): 356–73; Lynn Mandarano, Mahbub Meenar, and Christopher Steins, “Building Social Capital in the Digital Age of Civic Engagement,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 25, no. 2 (November 11, 2010): 123–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412210394102>.

⁵ Tony, D. Sampson and Jussi Parikka, *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2011), 452.

⁶ Emily Sydnor, “Platforms for Incivility: Examining Perceptions across Different Media Formats,” in *Studying Politics across Media* (Routledge, 2020), 97–116.

⁷ Weiyu Zhang and Emmanuel C Lallana, “Youth, ICTs, and Civic Engagement in Asia,” *International Communication Gazette* (SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2013).

⁸ Nicola J Bidwell, “Moving the Centre to Design Social Media in Rural Africa,” *AI & Society* 31, no. 1 (2016): 51–77; Dayana Lengauer, “New Media in Southeast Asia: Concepts and Research Implications,” *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 187–94..

⁹ Lorenzo Cini, “Disrupting the Neoliberal University in South Africa: The #FeesMustFall Movement in 2015,” *Current Sociology* 67, no. 7 (November 12, 2019): 942–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119865766>; Tanja Bosch and Bruce Mutsvaivo, “Pictures, Protests and Politics: Mapping Twitter Images during South Africa’s Fees Must Fall Campaign,” *African Journalism Studies* 38, no. 2 (2017): 71–89.

¹⁰ Lincoln Dahlberg, “Visibility and the Public Sphere: A Normative Conceptualisation,” *Javnost - The Public* 25, no. 1–2 (April 3, 2018): 35–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418818>; Claire Hardaker, “‘I Refuse to Respond to This Obvious Troll’: An Overview of Responses to (Perceived) Trolling,” *Corpora* 10, no. 2 (2015): 201–29.

selected young people in Mthatha, a rural town where it can be assumed that African cultural norms are still existent and explains how this relates to democratic deliberative practices. Rural communities are often viewed as important custodians of cultural norms like tolerance, respect for the other, humanity and generally unbuntu, it is important to understand the practice of uncivil behaviours in those spaces. The aim of the research is to therefore establish the trends and practices of social media incivility amongst young students in Mthatha, Eastern Cape. The following objectives guide the study;

1. To determine what are young people's experiences of online incivility.
2. To examine what are the digital incivility trends among students in Mthatha.
3. To establish the common forms of incivility amongst young people.
4. To explore the exposure to incivility and how willing are participants to further participate in online civic practices.

The study is underlined by the following questions;

1. What are young people's experiences of online incivility?
2. What are the digital incivility trends among students in Mthatha?
3. What are the common forms of incivility amongst young people?
4. After exposure to incivility, how willing are participants to further participate in online civic practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Incivility Concept

It has been acknowledged that defining the concept of uncivil discourses is problematic.¹¹ Incivility refers to those negative and uncivil behaviours that social network users engage in, such as trolling, cyberbullying, hate speech and other forms of behaviours that disrupt the deliberative culture that is required for a functional democracy.¹² This uncivil sociality, as pointed out by Kosmidis and Theocharis, represents 'disrespectful discourse that silences or derogates alternative views' and is defined mostly by name-calling, belittling, insults, impoliteness, obscenity, racial slurs and many other words that are regarded as outside of social norms.¹³ Antiohci *et al.*, add that incivility can simply be characterised as offensive interactions, a notion like Berry and Sobieraj's outrage discourse.¹⁴ Rossini goes further to explain that incivility can be explained through deliberative theory wherein discourse participants fail to acknowledge and engage with opposing views, while politeness theory explains vulgarity and disrespect in discoursing common in online platforms.¹⁵ Ganesh explains incivility through the notion of thymos – the part of the soul that fights for justice redress – to explain how incivility is a way for the marginalised to speak to power and oppression.¹⁶ For Ganesh incivility is mainly driven by those marginalised seeking to participate in democratic deliberations, and social networks, by their very nature, are platforms for incivility.¹⁷ These behaviours have been attributed to the lack of identifiability and reduced public self-awareness that arises mostly from the Internet's anonymity, and the next section explains further this phenomenon of disinhibition.¹⁸

¹¹ Angelo Antoci et al., "Civility vs. Incivility in Online Social Interactions: An Evolutionary Approach," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 11 (November 1, 2016): e0164286, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0164286>; Rocio Galarza Molina and Freddie J Jennings, "The Role of Civility and Metacommunication in Facebook Discussions," *Communication Studies* 69, no. 1 (2018): 42–66; Patrícia Rossini, "Disentangling Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk," in *A Crisis of Civility?* (Routledge, 2019), 142–57; Spyros Kosmidis and Yannis Theocharis, "Can Social Media Incivility Induce Enthusiasm? Evidence from Survey Experiments," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84, no. S1 (2020): 284–308.

¹² Hardaker, "'I Refuse to Respond to This Obvious Troll': An Overview of Responses to (Perceived) Trolling"; Peter Muhlberger, "Pro-Social Reasoning in Deliberative Policy Choices," *International Journal of Public Participation* 1, no. 1 (2007).

¹³ Kosmidis and Theocharis, "Can Social Media Incivility Induce Enthusiasm? Evidence from Survey Experiments."

¹⁴ Antoci et al., "Civility vs. Incivility in Online Social Interactions: An Evolutionary Approach."

¹⁵ Rossini, "Disentangling Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk."

¹⁶ Bharath Ganesh, "Weaponizing White Thymos: Flows of Rage in the Online Audiences of the Alt-Right," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): 892–924.

¹⁷ Ganesh, "Weaponizing White Thymos: Flows of Rage in the Online Audiences of the Alt-Right"; Sydnor, "Platforms for Incivility: Examining Perceptions across Different Media Formats."

¹⁸ Kevin C Runions and Michal Bak, "Online Moral Disengagement, Cyberbullying, and Cyber-Aggression," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 18, no. 7 (2015): 400–405.

Disinhibition and Incivility

While most people may be consistent in how they present themselves both online and offline, there are people who can easily express themselves differently when they are online compared to how they engage in face-to-face interactions.¹⁹ Suler referred to it as the disinhibition effect, and he explained this effect simply as a situation when people often self-disclose and express themselves more frequently and openly online than they would offline.²⁰ They are less restrained and are usually not amenable to control by norms.²¹ Suler's findings in the groundbreaking study of this effect point out that disinhibition occurs due to several reasons.²² Firstly, when interacting, people adopt a persona that is completely different from their offline self (dissociative anonymity). Secondly, when the Internet user believes that they are invisible to users (invisibility). Thirdly, when they think that due to the asynchronicity of communications online, one can always 'sneak off'. Fourthly, solipsistic introjection when people wrongly believe that due to the absence of non-verbal cues, people cannot understand what they are doing or saying. Suler further adds that dissociative imagination can lead to disinhibition, and this is when people have separate personalities.²³ The last factor relates to the minimisation of authority and status when online, as people falsely believe that they have a similar status and power as everyone and forget that the Internet is as differentiated as society itself.

This phenomenon is not new, as Bandura has described a similar phenomenon as moral disengagement, wherein people tend to be at ease when they engage in anti-social behaviours at a time when they are invisible to the perpetrator.²⁴ In the case of disinhibition, Internet users tend to pass rude remarks, harass others, become quarrelsome, engage in trolling, bully, swear, engage in hate speech and many other behaviours, thereby engaging in what Runions & Bak referred to as cyber incivility.²⁵ Kurek *et al.* and Carli *et al.* have argued that high online usage and web surfing are associated with dysfunctional behaviours such as attention deficit, impulsivity, obsessive-compulsive disorder, hostility even aggression.²⁶ Such behaviours, when enacted online, display an absolute lack of virtue ethics as the perpetrator lacks those traits that are required for living well with others.²⁷ While not a subject of this paper, virtue ethics are important in understanding online behaviour in that they propose that it is neither consequentialism nor deontology that defines online behaviours but the moral character of people.²⁸ Therefore, it can be argued that virtuousness can be a factor in determining how to behave online. Another important concept used to explain online immoral behaviour is deindividuation - where anonymity and invisibility make people less likely to follow moral guidelines. Perfumi *et al.* insist that online environments are more likely to promote deindividuation as it reduces the likelihood of adhering to social influence.²⁹ Aikin and Chanton refer to these traits as deliberative virtues as these people lack the tolerance to deliberate in groups.³⁰ In digital societies, deliberation has become as important as it is the only vehicle to generate the wisdom of the crowds.³¹ Gervais maintained that deliberative incivility is dangerous as it prevents effective information processing and can lead to people being demobilised

¹⁹ Samuel Merrill and Nigel Copsey, "Retweet Solidarity: Transatlantic Twitter Connectivity between Militant Antifascists in the USA and UK," *Social Movement Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2022.2142547>.

²⁰ John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–26.

²¹ Jan Bats, "The Moral Matter of an Interactive Online Domain: A Philosophical and Empirical Exploration of How Our Interactive Relation with the Online Domain Mediates Online Morality" (University of Twente., 2019); Katja Rost, Lea Stahel, and Bruno S Frey, "Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media," *PLoS One* 11, no. 6 (2016): e0155923.

²² Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."

²³ Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."

²⁴ Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication," in *Media Effects* (Routledge, 2009), 110–40.

²⁵ Runions and Bak, "Online Moral Disengagement, Cyberbullying, and Cyber-Aggression."

²⁶ Anna Kurek, Paul E Jose, and Jaimee Stuart, "'I Did It for the LULZ': How the Dark Personality Predicts Online Disinhibition and Aggressive Online Behavior in Adolescence," *Computers in Human Behavior* 98 (2019): 31–40; Vladimir Carli et al., "The Saving and Empowering Young Lives in Europe (SEYLE) Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT): Methodological Issues and Participant Characteristics," *BMC Public Health* 13, no. 1 (December 16, 2013): 479, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-479>.

²⁷ Guy Axtell and Philip Olson, "Recent Work in Applied Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (July 1, 2012): 183–203.

²⁸ Julia Annas, "Nicomachean Ethics," *Virtue, Happiness, Knowledge: Themes from the Work of Gail Fine and Terence Irwin*, 2018, 184; Francesca Bellazzi and Konrad v Boyneburgk, "COVID-19 Calls for Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* 7, no. 1 (2020): Isaa056.

²⁹ Serena Coppolino Perfumi et al., "Deindividuation Effects on Normative and Informational Social Influence within Computer-Mediated-Communication," *Computers in Human Behavior* 92 (2019): 230–37.

³⁰ Scott F Aikin and J Caleb Clanton, "Developing Group-deliberative Virtues," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2010): 409–24.

³¹ James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations* (London: Doubleday & Co., 2004).

from further participation in any deliberative moment.³² Stryker *et al.* blame incivility on the growing online aggressiveness, retaliation, and polarisation.³³ Perhaps one of the most notorious anti-social behaviours online has been trolling, especially given the pervasiveness of the social media networks nowadays.³⁴ Axtell and Olson and Hardaker maintain that trolling can be made visible through online aggression, disruptive communicative behaviours and even deception.³⁵ To Hardaker, it is merely a game on how to deceive others online by digressing from important topics when discussing online, focusing on criticising spelling or grammatical mistakes or using inflammatory language, amongst others.³⁶

Trolls engage in all sorts of uncivil behaviours just for fun and mischief, to spur others towards fruitless argumentation, and they do not hesitate to engage in other reprehensible behaviours such as cyberstalking, bullying, online grooming and others. Furnham *et al.*, Coles and West and Buckels *et al.* have identified the causes of trolling as the dark personality triad mainly referring to behavioural traits associated with Machiavellianism, sadism, psychopathology and/or narcissism.³⁷ Narcissists can be described as people who have an overinflated and grandiose sense of the self, have a huge sense of self-entitlement, and always engage in relationships that enhance their social status and self-esteem. Psychopaths, on the other hand, have heightened levels of selfishness, no respite, and low inhibition traits. Sadists engage in provocative behaviours mainly for pleasure and amusement and always enjoy the suffering of others. Lastly, Machiavellianism traits are characterised by being cynical and having no purpose. Their being is defined by the manipulation of others to achieve their aims. Research has found that there is a positive correlation between these personality traits and anti-social online behaviours.³⁸ It is important to underscore that these negative happenings online may impede online civic participation, and this phenomenon must be understood to encourage civic participation.³⁹

However, not all scholars dislike incivility. Muhlberger observes that encountering negative comments online does not affect the satisfaction experienced by those deliberating or the legitimate outcome of that process.⁴⁰ Also, Chen *et al.*, in their paper titled ‘*We should not get rid of incivility in social media and society*’, argue that incivility is a necessary ingredient in a deliberative society.⁴¹ They go on to the extent of maintaining that incivility must not be removed on social networks as such comments and views often oil the deliberation, strike interest, and draw attention. Bennet calls the drive to promote civility as the new censorship.⁴²

³² Bryan T Gervais, “Incivility Online: Affective and Behavioral Reactions to Uncivil Political Posts in a Web-Based Experiment,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12, no. 2 (2015): 167–85.

³³ Robin Stryker, Bethany Anne Conway, and J Taylor Danielson, “What Is Political Incivility?,” *Communication Monographs* 83, no. 4 (2016): 535–56.

³⁴ Patrick Joseph Connolly, “Trolling as Speech Act,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (September 7, 2022): 404–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12427>; Aashish Srivastava, “Social Media and Online Trolling: Examining the Legal Developments in Platform Responsibilities for Tackling Trolling in the US, UK, and Australia,” in *Handbook on Cyber Hate: The Modern Cyber Evil* (Springer, 2024), 275–99.

³⁵ Axtell and Olson, “Recent Work in Applied Virtue Ethics”; Claire Hardaker, “‘Uh... Not to Be Nitpicky, But... the Past Tense of Drag Is Dragged, Not Drug’: An Overview of Trolling Strategies,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 1, no. 1 (2013): 58–86; Hardaker, “‘I Refuse to Respond to This Obvious Troll’: An Overview of Responses to (Perceived) Trolling.”

³⁶ Hardaker, “‘I Refuse to Respond to This Obvious Troll’: An Overview of Responses to (Perceived) Trolling.”

³⁷ Adrian Furnham, Steven C Richards, and Delroy L Paulhus, “The Dark Triad of Personality: A 10 Year Review,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7, no. 3 (2013): 199–216; Bryn Alexander Coles and Melanie West, “Trolling the Trolls: Online Forum Users Constructions of the Nature and Properties of Trolling,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 60 (2016): 233–44; Erin E Buckels, Paul D Trapnell, and Delroy L Paulhus, “Trolls Just Want to Have Fun,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 67 (2014): 97–102.

³⁸ Alexander Moore, “Online Disinhibition and Its Influence on Cyber Incivility” (Clemson University, 2019); Rost, Stahel, and Frey, “Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media”; Coles and West, “Trolling the Trolls: Online Forum Users Constructions of the Nature and Properties of Trolling.”

³⁹ Alexander Cho, Jasmina Byrne, and Zoë Pelter, “Digital Civic Engagement by Young People,” *UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy*, 2020, 3–23; Gervais, “Incivility Online: Affective and Behavioral Reactions to Uncivil Political Posts in a Web-Based Experiment.”

⁴⁰ Muhlberger, “Pro-Social Reasoning in Deliberative Policy Choices.”

⁴¹ Gina Masullo Chen *et al.*, “We Should Not Get Rid of Incivility Online,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (April 16, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119862641>.

⁴² W. Lance Bennett, “What’s Wrong with Incivility? Civility as the New Censorship in American Politics,” (Seattle, WA, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This study used mixed methods research, which requires that both qualitative and quantitative research methods be used in a single study. This design is used mainly because the use of both of these methods allows for the advantage of one methodology to address the weaknesses of the other,⁴³ is more sophisticated, and this design is now at the forefront of new research procedures⁴⁴ and is pragmatic.⁴⁵ Through qualitative research, one can understand both the experiential meanings and the subjective experiences of the social group under study. Through quantitative research, one can understand how strong the perceptions and attitudes of the research group are.⁴⁶

Quantitative data was obtained using a questionnaire, while focus group discussions generated qualitative data insights. As maintained by Sekaran and Bougie and Plano-Clark and Creswell, focus groups are important in so far as they generate spontaneous, unstructured, and more open responses quickly and cost-effectively.⁴⁷ On the other hand, through questionnaires, the researcher was able to get the responses quickly from many participants and at a lower cost. A total of 351 voluntary participants from Walter Sisulu University, KSD TVET College and two local high schools that were conveniently selected participated in the quantitative survey. Of these, 176 students were from the two tertiary public institutions in Mthatha, while 175 were doing grade 12 at the two randomly selected high schools.

With regard to focus groups, six focus group discussions were conducted with conveniently sampled participants. These participants volunteered to participate in the focus group as they had the time to do so after being told that the focus groups could take nearly an hour. Two were conducted at KSD TVET College, another two at Walter Sisulu University, while one was conducted at each of the selected high schools. Again, all the participants were conveniently selected. All the participants in the study did so voluntarily and were requested to sign consent forms.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, the results on the significance of social networks as citizenship performance sites. Secondly, the respondents' own experiences with online incivility, either as victims or perpetrators, are explained, and lastly, their opinions on what can be done to reduce this digital incivility.

a. Social Media as Sites for Civic Performance

Before presenting the findings on digital incivility, it is important to establish whether young people in the study area are also using, like other young people, social media platforms as the primary sites for enacting citizenship. The findings from the study showed that there is greater awareness amongst the respondents of the importance of working with others to address social challenges and that civic engagement is now more important than ever for their communities' social and economic development. An average of 62% of respondents noted that they are involved in communities through their involvement in local politics, and community meetings, and an average of 69.85% acknowledge that their communities are facing huge challenges related to unemployment, crime, infrastructure challenges and poverty. Having said this, the respondents acknowledged that the social networks are now enabling them to discuss community issues (53.9%), read the opinions of others on community matters (72%), read political news (78.4%), and provide their views on how the community can develop. These results were confirmed by findings from the focus group discussion, where the majority echoed the same sentiments. However, a few participants from the focus group discussions noted that the lack of sufficient resources curtailed their participation and further highlighted that their notion of the community had changed significantly. This is because they no longer focus on areas where they are

⁴³ Vicki Plano-Clark and John Creswell, *Understanding Research: A Consumer's Guide* (Boston: Pearson, 2015).

⁴⁴ John Ward Creswell and John David Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018).

⁴⁵ Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioural Research*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2010).

⁴⁶ David Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World*, 4th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2018); A. Strydom and R.M. Bezuidenhout, "Qualitative Data Collection," in *Research Matters*, ed. Du Plooy Cilliers F., C. Davis, and R.M. Bezuidenhout (Cape Town: Juta, 2014), 228–63.

⁴⁷ U. Sekaran and R. Bougie, *Research Methods for Business*, 7th ed. (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); Plano-Clark and Creswell, *Understanding Research: A Consumer's Guide*.

staying or where they were born but on their social groups like classmates and other online social groups. One member of the focus groups at a local high school said succinctly:

“I am a member of many social groups online. They are from my school, my previous school, and those that follow what I like on the Internet. We share lots of information, but since I do not have enough money to always buy data, I only focus on reading what these groups are saying.”

The other participant said:

“I no longer listen to the news on radio or TV. As you can see, I do not have them here. I read Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and when I have data, I also watch YouTube. Everything that I know about what happened or what is happening, I know that through social media. Sometimes, I also share with others my views on these platforms.”

The study also revealed that the most popular social networks were WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, in this order. According to the respondents, this order is influenced mainly by the cost of use and their social memberships in different social media groups. This highlights the significance of social media networks in the lives of young people. These findings are in line with the research findings of other scholars such as Zuckerman, who calls online civic performance as new civics, and Shelley Boulianne’s meta-analysis also observed how many studies confirm the potency of these social networks as sites for civic performance.⁴⁸

b. Digital Incivility in Social Networks

Recent research about dark traits mentions that they can contribute to a variety of anti-social online behaviour, including cyberbullying.⁴⁹ These behaviours, which have been highlighted in the paper, including what March *et al.* mention about cyberstalking, are anti-social online behaviour that has a damaging effect on the victims.⁵⁰ Anti-social online behaviour affects the ability of individuals to engage with each other as well as promotes apathy among young people, who are the majority in the country. The study findings revealed that 69% of the participants noted that there was no respect for others online. A further 88% believed that the cause of such behaviour online was anonymity and invisibility. In the focus groups, one participant pointed out that they have had to have fake profiles, which they use if they need to do anything ‘silly’. The participant noted:

“I have three Twitter profiles and two Facebook pages. Whenever I want to say something silly, I use these profiles. But for other sites like Instagram and WhatsApp, I always say something that I would have said if I am talking to someone since I am visible.”

However, 12% said anonymity and invisibility do not impact their behaviour as they would always say what they want to say, and they attributed this to their personality traits. These findings confirm that online disinhibition and deindividuation do indeed affect social media behaviours, as argued by Rost *et al.*, Buckells *et al.*, and Bats.⁵¹ Also, this highlights the role of the dark personality triad in driving some of the online incivility.

The findings furthermore showed that gender did affect the perception of lack of respect since more female participants (83%) felt that the digital sphere was becoming more anti-social. This negative view was expressed well by one university student who pointed out that this targets more female young users than male ones. In her words, she said:

⁴⁸ Zuckerman, “New Media, New Civics?”; Boulianne, “Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research.”

⁴⁹ Vimala Balakrishnan, Shahzaib Khan, and Hamid R. Arabnia, “Improving Cyberbullying Detection Using Twitter Users’ Psychological Features and Machine Learning,” *Computers & Security* 90 (March 2020): 101710, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cose.2019.101710>.

⁵⁰ Evita March *et al.*, “Exploring Anger as a Moderator of Narcissism and Antisocial Behaviour on Tinder,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 161 (July 2020): 109961, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109961>; Lily Moor and Joel R. Anderson, “A Systematic Literature Review of the Relationship between Dark Personality Traits and Antisocial Online Behaviours,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 144 (July 2019): 40–55, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.02.027>.

⁵¹ Rost, Stahel, and Frey, “Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media”; Buckells, Trapnell, and Paulhus, “Trolls Just Want to Have Fun”; Bats, “The Moral Matter of an Interactive Online Domain: A Philosophical and Empirical Exploration of How Our Interactive Relation with the Online Domain Mediates Online Morality.”

“It is worse for us young females. Sometimes you post just a picture on Facebook, and the comments that you get are shocking. They call you all sorts of names. So you have to be careful. I have heard of other young ladies whose pictures were manipulated. It is no longer safe.”

These findings confirm that offline perceptions and views are sometimes implemented online, which implies that offline gender biases are digitally materialised, constructed, and transmitted. Gender then is culturally transformed in online spaces, thus becoming part of the medium – or as Sharma calls such phenomenon part of the techno-cultural assemblages.⁵² About specific incivility behaviours, Figure 1 summarises the findings as shown below.

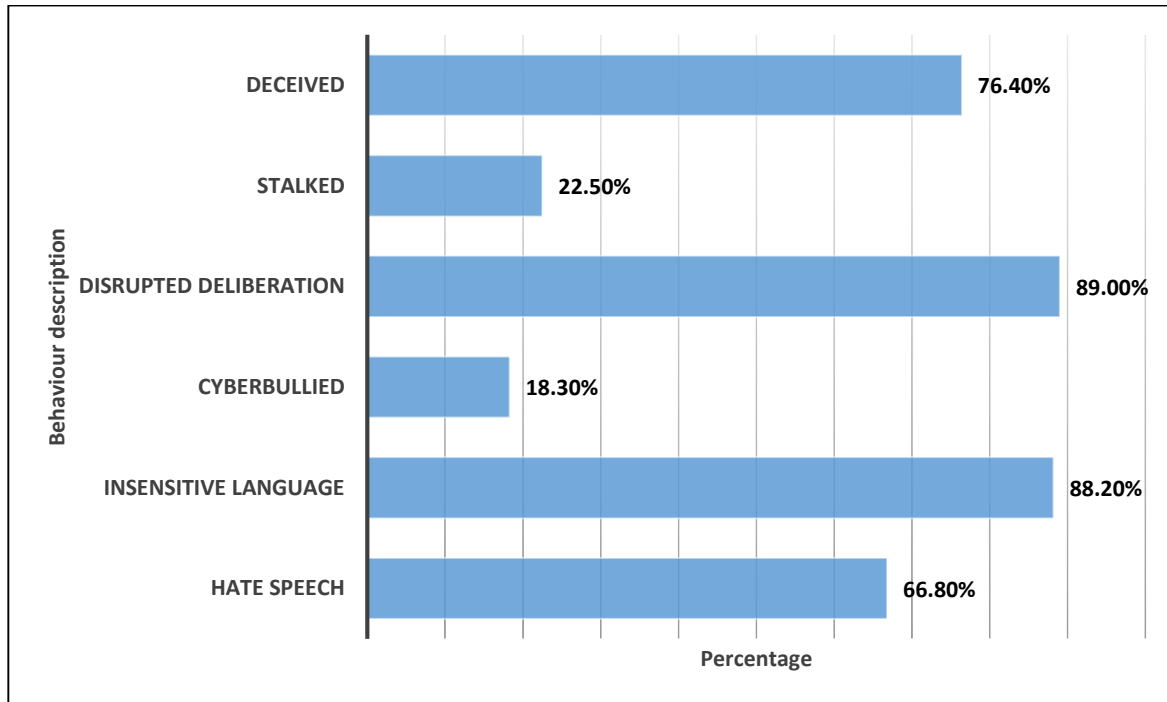


Figure 1: Common Anti-social Behaviours Online

As shown in Figure 1, most of the participants (88.20%) in the study concurred that insensitive language had been directed at them. In the focus groups, insensitive language was described as a language that is discourteous, rude and does not show respect. One of the participants at a local university focus group said:

“One day on Twitter, I said my own opinion about a local political issue. I will never say anything like that as people ganged up on me and started attacking me using all sorts of bad language. They attack your parents, your girlfriends - everyone close to you. It seems the only safe thing that you can say is how beautiful you are or how you feel. It is bad out there.”

Among other common anti-social phenomena noted by this study are the common occurrences of disruptive behaviour of online users (89%) and the prevalence of deception (76.40%). These findings are in line with other findings that have established that deliberative misbehaviour is the most common since the nature of the cyberspheres themselves nurture anti-normative behaviours.⁵³ As pointed out by other participants, it is common that when one is following an issue, some of the participants always try to bring out other unrelated issues. On deception, most participants observed that there is a proliferation

⁵² Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion,” *New Formations* 78, no. 78 (July 1, 2013): 46–64, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NewF.78.02.2013>.

⁵³ Bats, “The Moral Matter of an Interactive Online Domain: A Philosophical and Empirical Exploration of How Our Interactive Relation with the Online Domain Mediates Online Morality”; Perfumi et al., “Deindividuation Effects on Normative and Informational Social Influence within Computer-Mediated-Communication.”

of fake news in most social networks, with some of the fake news so sophisticated that you cannot tell whether it is indeed a lie or not. One of the participants noted that:

“I have come across lies a lot. In almost all platforms - Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and others. You must be careful. There are many people on these networks, and they do so, not only about important things but even mundane things. It’s bad.”

Another maladaptive behaviour that is now common is hate speech online. As was pointed out previously, hate speech refers to hateful statements about specific social groups such as women, LGBTQ, blacks, different ethnic groups, and other social groups. In this study, the most common forms of hate speech were targeting women, different ethnic groups, people of other nationalities, as well as gays and lesbians. With women, it was quite apparent from the focus groups that they face huge challenges. The common statement that most participants of the focus group agreed on was that women were especially vulnerable to these attacks. One student said:

“It is bad, really. There are some issues that you cannot comment on, especially issues on local campus politics and other matters. If students see that you are female, they attack you and some, instead of engaging with the issues, they digress and poke at your femininity. It seems, perhaps the only safe thing to [do] is to post your pictures, and others can comment on how you look. Still, there is that odd comment about my femininity.”

Other participants added that even an innocent picture would be commented on with people accusing you of being gay or lesbian, while in other circumstances when one is not from the Eastern Cape, they start asking you to go to other universities in the country. The only participants in the focus groups who were not South African also pointed out they refrain from commenting on sensitive issues as they are often reminded about their status when they comment. She said:

“While the problem is not that widespread, I have experienced that somewhat. Here some students just vent on you, reminding you that you are not South African. Once, I was commenting on some campus issues, and I regretted [it] as some of the students started attacking me. It happens.”

Cyberbullying and stalking were common among high school students, with 22.50% having reported being cyberbullied while 18.30% had been stalked.

“At high school, we have to be careful whom you interact with, especially those older guys. I had a case when someone that I have never met who kept on sending me messages. Even if you say I do not know you, it’s a problem, and I think other learners must be made aware of these dangers.”

The participants mentioned Instagram, Facebook and Twitter as the most common platforms where one is likely to be stalked by unknown predators. Some, however, noted that it is becoming popular on WhatsApp as more often, “you wonder where they got your contact numbers.”

However, in a democracy, working with others and trusting them is important for a thriving democracy. When asked how important it is to consider how someone will feel before saying or writing something online, 89% of survey participants agreed that it was particularly important, while only 11% thought it is important to say whatever one has to say. Being considerate of the interests of others is often an important determinant of building a cohesive and active citizenry that believes in collective self-efficacy. This was confirmed by focus group findings, but when probed further on why it was not important to consider what others would feel, a few participants noted that online anonymity was what gave them the right to speak whatever they wanted to. They pointed out that they do not behave like that on WhatsApp and other groups where they are known but will always do that when they are on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Another important finding was that many participants (90, 94%) indicated that when commenting on issues online, it was important to first fully understand what that person was trying to say before commenting. This is important since it allows conversations to be meaningful instead of creating a ‘Babel phenomenon’ online. Good democratic values depend on people

engaging with one another in a civil manner, and this research has indicated that there is a will to uphold these basic moral principles, even though a few thrive on causing online chaos.

Lastly, the results show that the majority (92%) still feel that despite the common occurrence of incivility in most social networks, they will continue to participate in these online platforms. These findings are in line with Antoci *et al.*, who observed that young people are more tolerant of online incivility.⁵⁴ In the focus group discussions, some participants concurred with these findings as one participant said:

“I can’t live without my social networks. Perhaps the only way that I will not use these is when I am dead. No abuse can stop me from using WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, if I can’t fight back, I will block the person.”

These findings contradict fears that are quite common in the scholarly community that incivility will drive away people from the public sphere. Previous research by Stryker *et al.* and Bennet point out that incivility has become normalised, and coming across it is no longer unusual.⁵⁵ Two other participants maintained that incivility fuels deliberative participation, thus agreeing with Chen *et al.* that it is a force for increasing deliberative engagement in social networks.⁵⁶ The two participants said:

“I like people who are provocative. There is so much freedom of expression online, and if you just write, then you may be called all sorts of names. I think deeply about what I have to write, and then when I am attacked, I will be able to fight back. I use any language I want, and that is thrilling.”

“I enjoy it when people use uncouth language online. It is interesting as I can say whatever I want. No boundaries, and I say what I want the way I want because we do not know each other. I like to participate because they do not know me, and I do not know them. It is good.”

These participants maintain that this incivility is now the oil that drives further civic engagement in online spaces. In this case, social networks are seen to enhance instead of impeding democratic participation and unlike traditional media platforms that have centralised control systems. These views are like those expressed by Muhlberger and Chen *et al.*, who view incivility as necessary for democratic practice. In this case, therefore, the disinhibition effect is also seen to contribute towards the ‘invisibility’ of deliberative subjects, and this highlights the need for further research on the invisibility of the quality of democratic discoursing.⁵⁷

When participants were asked how online incivility could be reduced, the study showed that it is essential to enhance social media netiquette. This can be done by ensuring that ethical behaviour is nurtured by, as noted by Bellazi and Boyneburgk, enhancing virtue literacies, understanding consequences, and having an awareness of duties and rules expected of good citizens.⁵⁸ One of the respondents noted that:

“When I am online, I tend to learn how to behave from those that are online. If people can do whatever they want and it is normalised, then we tend to just behave like that. If there was good behaviour online, all this behaviour wouldn’t be there. Somehow, I think we must be taught at an early age how to behave.”

This statement points out the importance of providing necessary virtue literacies and thus ensuring that young people are aware of how to behave in online environments. Apart from this, in extreme cases, consequentialist understandings must also be nurtured so that young people can understand the negative consequences of incivility. This was echoed by another student who said:

⁵⁴ Antoci et al., “Civility vs. Incivility in Online Social Interactions: An Evolutionary Approach.”

⁵⁵ Stryker, Conway, and Danielson, “What Is Political Incivility?”; Bennett, “What’s Wrong with Incivility? Civility as the New Censorship in American Politics.”

⁵⁶ Masullo Chen et al., “We Should Not Get Rid of Incivility Online.”

⁵⁷ Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect.”

⁵⁸ Bellazzi and Boyneburgk, “COVID-19 Calls for Virtue Ethics.”

“We are not aware that behaving improperly online can have consequences in future. I know of someone who could not get a job after saying bad things about others. It was like hate speech. We do not know that.”

It is, therefore, important to ensure that in as much as technology has opened new spaces for civic practice, there is growing incivility and hence the need to reduce this growing threat.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes two recommendations that are important to reduce the negative impact of incivility. The first one relates to the strengthening of digital literacies amongst young people even those who may be based in rural contexts. This is so since social network platforms now have a significant reach in these communities. Literacies are now crucial since they allow young people to operate in online environments safely, recognise incivility and also be respectful to others. Smith goes further and observes that what is required are critical digital literacies after noting that new technologies need to be understood in new ways as these technologies can often be viewed as tools that can either reproduce inequity.⁵⁹ New forms of literacies must be imparted to young people to ensure that digital platforms, artifacts and also interactions are understood better. These forms of literacies must be taught at high schools as well as in post-school institutions. The second recommendation, which is related to the above, is also grounded in the moral crisis concerns emanating from loss of ubuntu amongst young people. Without doubt, some of the behaviors exhibited by these young people contravene the moral and cultural norms of Ubuntu and there have been calls for cultural revitalisation through formal and informal education programmes.⁶⁰ This paper, therefore, acknowledges that it will not be only literacies that can see young people behaving and navigating online interfaces in culturally acceptable ways but also require a revisit to the cultural norms that define Africanness/ubuntu.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined trends of digital incivility and the experiences of young in Mthatha, Eastern Cape South Africa. This study has revealed that, as in other countries, incivility seems to be on the increase as social media is increasingly becoming pervasive in the country. The use of uncivil language towards one another tends to be disruptive of democratic deliberations. Furthermore, this incivility is driven by the online disinhibition effect, meaning that online anonymity and invisibility tend to promote anti-normative tendencies, thus leading to an increase in incivility. Social groups such as women, other ethnic groups, queer groups, and other subpopulations seem to be more prone to attacks when online. There are, however, people who actually enjoy incivility and derive positive emotional experiences from practising it. However, while some may enjoy it, victims of incivility experience emotional stress, ridicule, disrespect and isolation. Finally, despite the common occurrence of incivility, the study concludes that this would not lead to a decline in people’s participation in the digital sphere.

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⁵⁹ Erika E Smith, “Building Critical Digital Literacies for Social Media through Educational Development,” *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education* 19, no. 2 (2024): 64–89.

⁶⁰ Raphael Mbendera, “Ubuntu Ethical Values and Africa’s Quest for a Better Home,” *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research* 4, no. 8 (2020): 177–87.

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