

Linking Exposure to Uncivil Online Comments to Decreased Political Knowledge: The Mediating Role of Active News Avoidance

ALBERTO ARDÈVOL-ABREU^{•*1}
HÉCTOR CENTENO MARTÍN
SHEILA GUERRERO ROJAS
Universidad de La Laguna, Spain

A relatively small but growing body of literature has examined incivility in online news comments and its consequences on democratic orientations, especially in the U.S. context. However, we still lack a detailed understanding of the processes and mechanisms that may be triggered by exposure to this particular type of online discourse. Using original survey data collected from a large, national sample of residents in Spain ($N = 1,207$), this study seeks to elucidate the direct and indirect relationships between exposure to uncivil news comments, intentional news avoidance, and political knowledge. Results indicate that exposure to uncivil comments online positively correlates with news avoidance and is indirectly associated with reduced political knowledge through news avoidance. We did not find evidence of an interaction between exposure to incivility and gender in predicting news avoidance. Results are discussed with a broader reflection on the role of social media use in political knowledge and democratic governance in general.

Keywords: political knowledge, intentional news avoidance, uncivil news comments, social media, online news

Political discussions on social and digital media can at times degenerate into insults, vulgarities, or stereotypes against minorities. Research suggests that uncivil speech, as defined by Chen (2017), may have negative consequences at the individual and societal levels. Thus, exposure to uncivil speech online seems to predict negative outcomes such as hostile cognitions (Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016), anger, dissatisfaction with the online experience, or increased adoption of uncivil language by a mimicking effect (Gervais, 2015; see also Chen & Lu, 2017). At the system level, online incivility may erode political trust

Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (corresponding author): aardevol@ull.es

Héctor Centeno Martín: hcenteno@ull.edu.es

Sheila Guerrero Rojas: sguerrer@ull.edu.es

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* The first author is part of the Instituto Universitario de Neurociencia and leads the Laboratorio de Investigación sobre Medios y sus Efectos (Universidad de La Laguna).

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(Skytte, 2021), exacerbate perceived polarization, and lower expectations about the value of public debate (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014).

A parallel and prolific line of research into emerging challenges to democratic deliberation is concerned with the rising levels of news avoidance. Some people exclude news from their “media diet” because they dislike it, while others simply prefer entertainment over the news (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; see also Humanes & Valera-Ordaz, 2023). The reasons behind news avoidance are not yet fully explained, but the literature points to the important role of individual-level variables such as political disinterest (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013), news overload and fatigue (Park, 2019; Song, Jung, & Kim, 2017), reduced internal efficacy, news media distrust (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), and the “news finds me” perception (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021; see also Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Research also suggests that women tend to avoid the news at higher rates than men (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Understanding news avoidance is important due to its potentially negative effect on cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors that are central to democratic life, such as political knowledge, discussion, and participation.

This study aims to reconcile the contributions of literature on online incivility and news avoidance. To achieve this objective, we propose and empirically test a novel pathway suggesting that exposure to online incivility serves as (1) a positive predictor of news avoidance and (2) a trigger for an indirect mechanism that negatively affects political knowledge—thus contributing to enhancing explanations for why social media news may not be the optimal arena for political learning. Thus, uncivil online news comments may elicit unwanted feelings and emotions, and news avoidance may serve as a natural regulatory response (see the concept of situation selection in Gross, 2009). This association between exposure to uncivil comments and news avoidance, we argue, may be stronger among women: Qualitative findings suggest that women are more prone to “screen out the news” when they perceive it as negative and potentially damaging to the emotional climate at home (Toff & Palmer, 2018, p. 1572). Avoiding political news could in turn erode political knowledge, which suggests that news avoidance may serve as a mediator between exposure to uncivil news comments and political knowledge.

Exposure to Uncivil Discussion Online and News Avoidance

The concept of incivility has been extensively discussed in previous literature from two perspectives: Individual and public (Muddiman, 2017). Incivility from an individual perspective is traditionally associated with the violation of the cultural norms of politeness in the context of communicative interactions (Mutz, 2015). This includes both verbal and nonverbal cues, where style issues such as tone or body posture may be more important than the actual content of the messages. In a civil interaction, speakers strive “to maintain each other’s positive public self-images” (Mutz, 2015, p. 6). From this point of view, an uncivil political discussion can be identified through indicators such as the use of name-calling, aspersions, vulgarity, noncooperative language, or hyperbole, among others (Jamieson & Falk, 1998).

From a public, democratic perspective, Papacharissi (2004) suggests that civility should be understood in a broader sense and dissociated from politeness. Although civility is crucial for a democratic society to function properly, excessive politeness can result in conversations that are

constrained, avoid conflict, limit diversity, and hinder the plurality of democratic discussions. Conversations that lack politeness and good manners can still be lively and foster democratic capital. From this more expansive point of view, incivility should be understood as “disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy” and includes behaviors such as verbalizing challenges to democracy (e.g., expressing intentions to stage a coup d’état), stereotyping (e.g., using mild or openly offensive labels to associate individuals with a particular social group), or threatening the rights of others (e.g., their freedom of expression; Papacharissi, 2004). Taking a comprehensive approach that integrates both the individual and public perspectives of incivility, Chen (2017) argues that for speech to be considered uncivil, it must possess at least one of the following three attributes: “insulting language or name-calling; profanity; and a larger category that encompasses stereotypes, and homophobic, racist, sexist, and xenophobic terms that may at times dip into hate speech” (p.6).

Uncivil interactions can occur in both face-to-face and online environments. Online, the Internet’s flexibility and anonymity often foster an environment where individuals feel at ease expressing opinions they might hesitate to share in conventional contexts (Borah, 2013; see also Stromer-Galley, 2002; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). Thus, while the Internet offers a secure arena for discussing controversial topics and encountering diverse viewpoints (see Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), it also facilitates the occurrence of incivility.

Recent research on incivility in political discourse has focused on digital news media’s comments sections and social media threads discussing news topics (see, e.g., Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Rossini, 2022; Saldaña & Rosenberg, 2020). Although uncivil language is widespread and present in all analyses of this type of online content, previous studies have repeatedly found that civic political discussions outnumber the uncivil ones. To put it in numbers, Su and colleagues (2018) content-analyzed a large sample of U.S. news outlets’ social media pages and estimated that 12% of the comments were extremely uncivil, while another 64% could be considered civil. In a different national context, Gonçalves, Pereira, and Torres da Silva (2022) found that 30.9% of the comments posted on online news channels about the 2015 Portuguese legislative election were uncivil.

When Internet users stumble upon uncivil comments or post uncivil content themselves, they may feel and behave in various ways. According to Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory, exposure to aggressive modeling (e.g., others’ uncivil news comments) can lead to a greater tendency to behave aggressively (e.g., mimicking others’ uncivil language). Being exposed to uncivil messages may also lead to hostile cognitions, negative emotions, and feelings of aversion (Gervais, 2015; Rösner et al., 2016). Although research in this area is not yet conclusive, some initial studies suggest—with some nuances and negative results—that these negative reactions do occur. Gervais (2015) identified a range of affective and behavioral impacts resulting from exposure to uncivil messages on an online discussion forum, which differed somewhat depending on whether the posts were disagreeable or like-minded. These impacts included anger, aversion, dissatisfaction with the message board, and increased use of uncivil comments (mimicking effect). Zimmerman and Ybarra (2016) also found partial support for the social modeling hypothesis although their stimuli were not related to news and did not have a political character: The participants who read an aggressive post after engaging in a frustrating social situation wrote more aggressive blog posts than those who were exposed to neutral stimuli. Somewhat differently, Rösner and colleagues (2016) found that

reading uncivil news comments increased participants' hostile cognitions although they did not observe mimicking effects (increased use of uncivil language) or any influence on participants' feelings of hostility.

Overall, the research results mentioned point to the fact that encountering uncivil messages online is typically an unpleasant experience that is associated with negative emotions. Looking at it from a hedonistic standpoint, it is conceivable to assume that frequent exposure to this type of online content could create an aversion to news, at least for most (hedonistically motivated) individuals. This hedonistic premise fits well not only with broader motivational explanations but also with specific accounts for predicting media choices. From the perspective of emotional regulation strategies, individuals are motivated to avoid situations where they know they will experience emotions they would rather not feel (see "situation selection" in Gross, 2009). We may take action to avoid being exposed to uncivil content if it is likely to elicit negative emotions such as anger, fear, or disgust. Furthermore, the mood management theory "claims that individuals seek out media content that they expect to improve their mood" (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2011, p. 240). From a more cognitive perspective, the expectancy that exposure to news will entail an (emotional) cost that does not outweigh its informational utility could drive news avoidance (see Ohme, Araujo, Zarouali, & de Vreese, 2022).

These ideas provide a framework to integrate research on uncivil online comments with that on news avoidance. The academic study of news avoidance has gained traction in recent years in the fields of communication, public opinion, and political science. The trend of news avoidance appears to be on the rise globally, especially since the widespread accessibility of the Internet as an additional mass medium (Gorski & Thomas, 2022). Between 2017 and 2022, the number of news avoiders doubled in countries such as Brazil and the United Kingdom, with an overall increase of 9% (from 29% to 38%) across the countries covered in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022). In the United States, which is the primary focus of scientific literature, this proportion increased by 4%, resulting in a total of 42% news avoiders in 2022. This sharp rise could have been due to a combination of individual and contextual factors, such as information overload, news and social media fatigue, distrust in professional news, the "news finds me" perception, increased availability of entertainment-oriented content, and reduced levels of press and political freedom, among others (Blekesaune, Elvestad, & Aalberg, 2010; Bright, Kleiser, & Grau, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020).

Recent qualitative research suggests that news avoidance may exhibit a degree of selectivity based on the medium rather than being consistently applicable across all contexts. Deliberate disengagement from news content across diverse media platforms—whether read, watched, or listened to—may be traced back to various cognitive and emotional motivational factors (see Villi et al., 2022). Relatedly, additional research suggests that news avoidance may manifest as an "inherently human" situational strategy: Individuals themselves may exhibit variations between news monitoring and news avoidance, engaging in an adaptive approach that enables them to stay informed while concurrently preserving their emotional energy and cognitive resources (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021; see also the alternative perspective of "news resisters" in Woodstock, 2014).

For instance, avoidance of television news may be influenced by a conscious effort to shield oneself from distressing imagery perceived as detrimental to emotional well-being. Within the realm of social media, news avoidance may be driven by the desire to steer clear of disagreement and controversy with friends and followers. Moreover, at times, avoiding radio news appears to be linked to news fatigue (Villi et al., 2022). In the context of Spain, the country from which the data for this study originate, extant research posits similar reasons for news avoidance. These include seeking refuge from the negative emotional tone of news, lacking trust in the veracity of news, steering clear of discussions related to news content, or perceiving powerlessness in addressing the issues described in the news (Palmer, Toff, & Nielsen, 2020; Serrano-Puche, 2020; Vara, Amoedo, Moreno, Negredo, & Kaufmann, 2022).

Despite the importance of the problem of news avoidance for democracy in general and for news media outlets in particular, its academic study has been hindered by the lack of a uniform conceptualization. According to Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020), the various theoretical and methodological approaches to the phenomenon have resulted in different studies reporting highly variable figures regarding the proportion of news avoiders, as well as diverse assessments about what causes their behavior. After conducting a careful review of the literature on the issue, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) suggest distinguishing between intentional and unintentional forms of news avoidance (see also Palmer, Toff, & Nielsen, 2023, for a critical account of this categorization).

Intentional news avoidance stems from a dislike for news and is characterized by conscious behaviors that result in disconnection from news sources (such as switching off the television when the news comes on or unfollowing a friend who shares too much news on social media; see also Bode, 2016; Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, et al., 2021). Unintentional news avoidance, on the other hand, is not driven by a dislike of news but rather a relative preference for entertaining content, which leads to a lower proportion of news in avoiders' media consumption. The effect of unintentional news avoidance on an individual's media diet can be either facilitated or mitigated by contextual factors, such as the availability of content choices in their environment (i.e., in a media-rich environment, those who prioritize entertainment may find it easier to opt out of news; see also Prior, 2005, 2007).

In this study, we will focus on the intentional type of news avoidance because we theorize it as an active avoidant response to incivility in news comments. Our prediction, therefore, is that the (likely) negative experience associated with exposure to uncivil news comments will energize early avoidance actions (e.g., situation selection). In this sense, it is reasonable to hypothesize that exposure to uncivil news comments online will be positively correlated with news avoidance.

Some previous studies, primarily drawing from data in the United States, provide support for this avoidance-based interpretation. According to Lu, Liang, and Masullo (2022), comment threads that begin with uncivil (at the individual level) comments or that contain a high proportion of incivility tend to discourage Internet users from engaging with the content. This finding was supported by Lu and colleagues' (2022) use of experimental data with comments on general news topics as stimuli. Goyanes, Borah, and Gil de Zúñiga (2021) employed U.S. longitudinal survey data and found that (individual-level) uncivil political discussion predicted avoidant situation selection strategies (in their study, social media user filtering or unfriending). Muddiman, Pond-Cobb, and Matson (2020) conducted a series of related experiments focusing

on the effects of news coverage of incivility in the U.S. Congress, observing that individuals were more likely to select and interact with "news depicting politicians as respectful and willing to compromise" (p. 829; see also Overgaard's, 2023 perspective on constructive journalism and news avoidance). In an investigation conducted by Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2021), which employed video-ethnography, some participants managed their mood "by following familiar routes" online and by actively avoiding specific news topics: "Everything I experience as negative I scroll through as quickly as possible, because I don't want to, I don't need to experience that" (p. 83).

An alternative (and opposing) conjecture could be made from the theoretical perspective of the negativity bias. Thus, long-standing research in psychology has suggested that information about negative events recruits a greater amount of psychological resources, which makes sense from an evolutionary standpoint due to its connection with danger and survival: Negative information elicits greater attention and is associated with increased cognitive processing and reasoning, heightened search for meaning, enhanced memory retention and, more broadly, a deeper impact (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Fiske, 1980; Gilovich, 1983; Soroka & McAdams, 2015). Considering that uncivil comments convey negatively valenced information, it could be argued that exposure to uncivil news comments will be associated with increased attention and engagement with news (i.e., reduced news avoidance). However, as Lu and colleagues (2022) explain in detail, the negativity bias does not mean that "such negativity [in news will] elicit preference and consequently, selection," but rather quite the opposite (p. 4). In simpler terms, the fact that one may devote significant resources to deal with a negative situation does not imply a desire to be exposed to that same negative situation in the future. Consequently, we formulate our first hypothesis as follows:

H1: Exposure to uncivil news comments online is positively associated with intentional news avoidance.

The Moderating Role of Gender

There are good theoretical reasons to anticipate that women will be more inclined to avoid the news as a result of their repeated exposure to an uncivil discourse environment. On the one hand, due to traditional gender stereotypes, women perceive (and, in fact, do so to a greater extent than men) that it is their responsibility to maintain a positive emotional atmosphere at home and for their children (Toff & Palmer, 2018). This makes women more prone to distancing themselves from the news when they perceive it as too negative or when it makes them worry excessively (Toff & Palmer, 2018). Thus, it is reasonable to infer that women who are exposed to uncivil news comments will be more inclined than men to resort to avoidance behaviors for emotional self-protection.

On the other hand, Abendschön and García-Albacete (2021) argue that women are more sensitive to uncivil comments online than men, a view supported by Kenski, Coe, and Rains' (2020) survey-based study. In this latter study, participants were exposed to a sample of uncivil news comments that included name-calling, vulgarity, and aspersions, among others. Kenski and colleagues (2020) found that respondents' gender was the primary predictor of perceived incivility of the online comments, with women more likely to view the statements as uncivil. Finally, some research suggests that women tend to be more avoidant of political conflict than men and less likely to participate in disagreeable political discussion

networks (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2017; Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013). If women tend to perceive incivility in news comments more often, feel responsible for maintaining emotional well-being around them, and are more avoidant of disagreeable and belligerent political discussions, it is reasonable to expect a gender moderation effect on the relationship between exposure to uncivil news comments online and news avoidance. More formally, this can be hypothesized as the following:

H2: The positive association between exposure to uncivil news comments online and news avoidance is stronger for women. In other words, gender moderates the relationship between exposure to uncivil news comments online and news avoidance.

Indirect Implications of Exposure to Uncivil News Comments on Political Knowledge

Beyond its typology, news avoidance can have repercussions on the acquisition of political knowledge. According to Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), political knowledge is “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (p. 10). The existing literature suggests that two key variables are influential in how individuals attain political knowledge: Education level and frequency of exposure to news. Education is the strongest predictor of *static* political knowledge (Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, & Rainey, 2014), which refers to citizens’ knowledge about the institutional arrangements and the fundamental issues of politics that barely change over time (van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2020). On the other hand, exposure to news is the key variable that affects *surveillance* political knowledge (Barabas et al., 2014), a more dynamic type of knowledge that is closely linked to “developments as they are happening, the day-to-day politics” (van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2020, p. 409). In line with these explanations, extant literature indicates that exposure to news generally has a positive effect on political knowledge and learning, particularly when measured as *surveillance* political knowledge (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021; Xenos & Moy, 2007). It seems, therefore, pertinent to investigate the indirect relationship between exposure to uncivil news comments and political knowledge through news avoidance. As we explained in the preceding section, we anticipate that exposure to uncivil news comments will increase intentional news avoidance, which will serve as the first link (*a* path) in our proposed indirect association model. Meanwhile, the inverse relationship between news avoidance and political knowledge will serve as the second link (*b* path). Based on this, we put forth our third and fourth hypotheses:

H3: News avoidance is negatively associated with political knowledge.

H4: Exposure to uncivil news comments online is negatively associated with political knowledge indirectly, through (increased) news avoidance.

Method

Sample

Data for this study come from a larger, longitudinal project examining citizens’ use of traditional and new media and its potential impact on social and political life. The items on news avoidance and political knowledge were included in the first wave of this project. Our methodology involved partnering with

Netquest, a Spanish opinion polling company that maintains a list of preregistered adult panelists who complete online questionnaires for compensation. The questionnaire was hosted on the online platform Qualtrics and distributed to 3,571 residents in Spain based on quotas mirroring national ratios for key demographic variables: Age, gender, and education level. The survey included an informed consent item. The questionnaire was in Spanish and open between November 2 and 8, 2022. Out of the 3,571 individuals who were invited to complete the survey, 1207 responded, resulting in a response rate of 33.8%. Our sample was balanced in terms of gender (51.7% females, five cases did not identify themselves as male or female and were recoded as missing for the analysis). Respondents had a mean age of 48.36 years ($SD = 16.51$; 10.5% were less than 25 years of age, 13.9% were aged between 25 and 34 years, 19.2% between 35 and 44 years, 33.7% between 45 and 64 years, and 22.7% were aged 65 years or older) and reported a median education of high-school graduation ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.87$ on a 7-point scale from 1 = primary education to 7 = post-graduate and doctoral studies; 11.1% had received only primary education, while 37.4% had some university education or higher degree).

Variables of Interest

Exposure to Uncivil News Comments Online. Drawing on and adapting previous approaches to online incivility (Chen, 2017; Saldaña & Rosenberg, 2020), our three-item measure captures both the individual and public perspectives of incivility. We asked respondents about the frequency with which they find the following types of uncivil comments posted to online media carrying news and political information: "insulting language or name calling," "profanity or vulgarities," "stereotypes or terms that dip into hate speech (homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia, etc.)." Respondents chose their responses from a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 5 = "all the time" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$; $M = 3.21$; $SD = 0.97$).

Intentional News Avoidance. We understand news avoidance as an intentional and proactive behavior that arises from people's aversion to news (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; see also Ohme, Bruin, et al., 2022). Building on similar operationalizations of the construct (De Bruin, de Haan, Vliegenthart, Kruikemeier, & Boukes, 2021; Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen, 2020; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), we asked respondents three questions preceded by the following introductory text: "Some people actively avoid news, for example, by switching to another channel when TV news starts. Over the last few weeks, how often have you . . .?" "avoided watching the news (e.g., on TV or the Internet)," "avoided reading the news (e.g., on the newspaper)," "avoided listening to the news (e.g., on the radio)" (1-5 Likert-type scale, Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$; $M = 2.49$; $SD = 1.14$). The most frequent response or mode was 1 ("never"), endorsed by 19.9% of the participants; 45.5% of the sample reported "never" or "rarely" avoiding the news, while 14.3% fell within values suggesting they do so "often" or "all the time."

Gender. We used a single-item measure to account for respondents' gender (0 = male and 1 = female; 51.7% of the sample comprised females).

Political Knowledge. Our measure of political knowledge was designed to capture political knowledge in a broad sense, as it included items that measure both *static* and *surveillance* political knowledge. We used the following two open-ended items and six multiple-choice test questions: "What

political position does Nadia Calviño currently hold?" (open-ended), "For how many years is a Spanish Member of Congress elected—that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a Spanish Member of Congress?", "From which post did Carlos Lesmes Serrano resign last October?" (open-ended), "According to the available information on the Spanish national budget for 2023, on which of the following is planned to allocate the lowest share?" "Which political parties tried to stop the draft law for the equality of transgender people and the guarantee of LGTBI people with an amendment to reject the entire proposal?" "Which of the following do you think most accurately describes the system of government used in Spain?" "The former Catalan president, Carles Puigdemont, fled Spain in 2017 to avoid arrest on charges of rebellion, sedition, and misuse of public funds. Where has he been living since then?" And "Which high-ranking European Union official provoked international rejection for comparing Europe to a 'garden' and the rest of the world to a 'jungle'?" Answers to each item were coded as incorrect (0) or correct (1), and an additive variable was computed (0–8 index, $M = 3.91$; $SD = 1.89$).

Control Variables

To minimize potential confounding effects, all our models include three blocks of control variables: Demographics (*age*, *education*, and *income*), political antecedents (*strength of partisanship* and *political interest*), and trust-related variables (*trust in government*, *trust in alternative media*, and *trust in traditional media*).

Statistical Analyses

To test our hypotheses, we first performed a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with the assistance of SPSS (version 25) statistical software. We used the HCREG macro for SPSS, which renders heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators (see Hayes & Cai, 2007). To verify the interaction predicted in H2, we employed Model 1 of the PROCESS macro (version 3.5; see Hayes, 2017) with heteroskedasticity-consistent inference (HC0). Finally, to address our fourth hypothesis, we defined and tested indirect effect models with the aid of PROCESS (Model 4).

Results

Hypothesis 1 stated that exposure to uncivil news comments online would be positively associated with intentional news avoidance. As Table 1 shows, we found empirical support for this hypothesis ($\beta = .167$, $p < .001$). As for the rest of the predictors, only political interest ($\beta = -.283$, $p < .001$), trust in traditional media ($\beta = -.171$, $p < .001$), and gender ($\beta = .133$, $p < .001$) were significantly associated with our dependent variable. This means that those with higher levels of political interest and who trust traditional media are less prone to avoid news, while women are more likely to be active news avoiders. The positive association between exposure to uncivil news comments and intentional news avoidance (H1) holds in the mediation model in Figure 1 ($b = .195$, $p < .001$).

Table 1. OLS Regression Models Predicting News Avoidance.

News Avoidance	
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>	
Age	-.021
Education	-.001
Income	-.043
ΔR^2	5.9%
<i>Block 2: Political antecedents</i>	
Strength of partisanship	.043
Political interest	-.283***
ΔR^2	7.5%
<i>Block 3: Trust-related variables</i>	
Government trust	.018
Trust in alternative media	.042
Trust in traditional media	-.171***
ΔR^2	2.6%
<i>Block 4: Variables of interest</i>	
Gender (1 = female)	.133***
Exposure to uncivil news comments	.167***
ΔR^2	4.0%
Total R ²	20.0%

Note. Sample size: $n = 1,038$. Observations with missing data were excluded using listwise deletion. Standardized regression coefficients reported. Significance tests were computed using the Huber-White robust method (HCO; see Hayes & Cai, 2007). *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Our second hypothesis addressed the potential interaction between exposure to uncivil news comments and gender in accounting for intentional news avoidance so that the association between exposure to uncivil news comments and intentional news avoidance would be stronger among women. We did not find empirical support for this hypothesis, as evidenced by the coefficient of the interaction term: $b = 0.005$, $SE = 0.070$, $t = 0.069$, $p = .945$, 95% confidence interval (CI): $[-0.1333 \text{ to } 0.1430]$. We therefore have no empirical evidence to state that the positive relationship between exposure to uncivil news comments and intentional news avoidance is stronger for women than for men.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a negative association between news avoidance and political knowledge. Table 2 shows a negative and statistically significant regression coefficient for news avoidance ($\beta = -.055$, $p = .041$), which provides empirical support for H3. Age ($\beta = .207$, $p < .001$), education ($\beta = .163$, $p < .001$), income ($\beta = .092$, $p = .001$), and political interest ($\beta = .287$, $p < .001$) were positive predictors of political knowledge, while gender ($\beta = -.126$, $p < .001$) was negatively related to the dependent variable. The mediation model in Figure 1 confirms the negative association between intentional news avoidance and political knowledge (H3; $b = -.091$, $p < .041$).

Table 2. OLS Regression Models Predicting Political Knowledge.

Political Knowledge	
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>	
Age	.207***
Education	.163***
Income	.092**
ΔR^2	25.9%
<i>Block 2: Political antecedents</i>	
Strength of partisanship	.034
Political interest	.287***
ΔR^2	9.9%
<i>Block 3: Trust-related variables</i>	
Government trust	.002
Trust in alternative media	-.019
Trust in traditional media	.036
ΔR^2	0.2%
<i>Block 4: Variables of interest</i>	
Gender (1 = female)	-.126***
News avoidance	-.055*
Exposure to uncivil news comments	.039
ΔR^2	1.8%
Total R ²	37.7%

Note. Sample size: $n = 1,038$. Observations with missing data were excluded using listwise deletion. Standardized regression coefficients reported. Significance tests were computed using the Huber-White robust method (HC0, see Hayes & Cai, 2007). *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

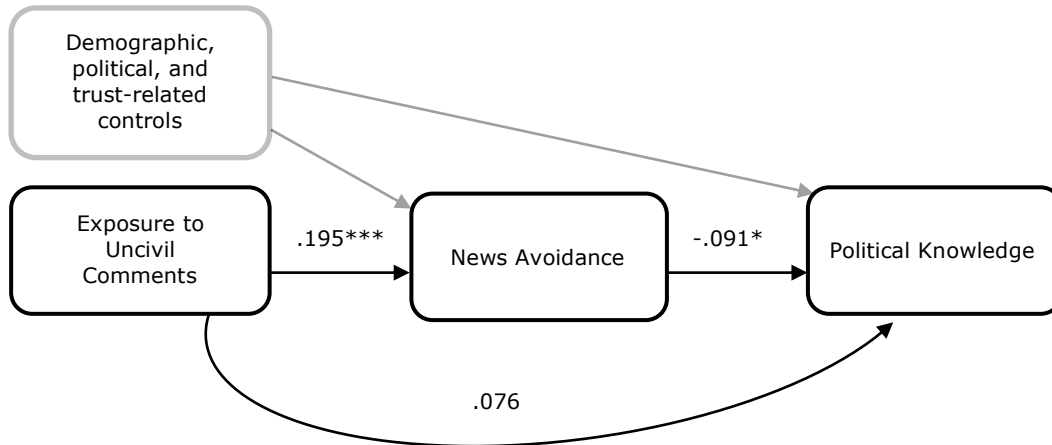


Figure 1. Mediation model of exposure to uncivil comments and news avoidance on political knowledge.

Note. $n = 1,038$. Observations with missing data were excluded using listwise deletion. Model tested using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 3.5; see Hayes, 2017). All shown coefficients are unstandardized. A heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error and covariance matrix estimator (HCO) was used. Gray arrows represent model covariates and include demographic variables (age, gender, education, and income), political antecedents (strength of partisanship and political interest), and trust-related variables (trust in government, trust in alternative media, and trust in traditional media). The model also tests the indirect association of uncivil discussion and political knowledge through news avoidance (*ab* path) reported in Table 3). * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. Indirect Effect of Exposure to Uncivil News Comments on Political Knowledge.

Indirect Effect	Effect [Boot SE]	95% CI
Exposure to uncivil comments → News avoidance → Political knowledge	-.0177 [.0096]	-.0380 to -.0004

Note. $n = 1,038$. Observations with missing data were excluded using listwise deletion. Indirect effect test based on the model in Figure 1 and computed using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 3.5; see Hayes, 2017). Coefficients are unstandardized.

Our fourth hypothesis was that exposure to uncivil news comments is negatively and indirectly related to political knowledge. In other words, we expected that higher exposure to uncivil news comments would predict increased levels of news avoidance, which in turn would reduce political knowledge. The parsimonious mediation analysis in Figure 1 and Table 3 shows that exposure to uncivil news comments indirectly reduces political knowledge via news avoidance ($b = -0.018$, $boot\ SE = 0.010$, $95\% CI = [-0.0380\ to\ -0.0004]$). This provides support for H4 and suggests a fully mediated relationship since there seems to be no direct association between exposure to uncivil news comments and political knowledge ($b = .076$, $p = .144$; see Figure 1).

Discussion and Conclusions

Prevalent theories of representative democracy assume that informed participation is a key component of the process. To function properly, democratic systems rely on citizens who are willing to invest effort in learning about political affairs and staying up-to-date on the most relevant news events. However, the levels of news consumption and political knowledge among citizens in Western democracies are not always ideal (see Newman et al., 2022; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), and news avoidance may be a contributing factor to this phenomenon. In response to this concern, our primary contribution resides in proposing a novel pathway linking exposure to online incivility with diminished political knowledge, thus advancing theoretical explanations regarding why social media platforms may not facilitate optimal political learning.

Drawing from Chen's (2017) approach to incivility, we understand uncivil speech in the context of online news comments as language that includes insults or name-calling, profanity or vulgarities, or stereotypes or terms that dip into hate speech. Our argument suggests that exposure to uncivil news comments online is generally an unpleasant experience that may lead ordinary people to develop news-related avoidant behaviors as a way to protect themselves and regulate their negative emotions (Goyanes, Borah, et al., 2021; see also Gross, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2011). We therefore explored incivility in online news comments as a possible antecedent of news avoidance (direct influence). We also predicted that the link between exposure to uncivil news comments and news avoidance would be even stronger among women (moderated influence). This is because women often feel responsible for maintaining a positive emotional atmosphere at home and for their children, are more sensitive to uncivil comments online, and tend to avoid political conflict and disagreeable political discussion networks to a greater extent than men (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2017; Kenski et al., 2020; Klofstad et al., 2013; Toff & Palmer, 2018). Finally, we also expected that exposure to uncivil news comments would have a negative impact on political knowledge through news avoidance (indirect influence).

Our results support the prediction that exposure to uncivil news comments is directly associated with a greater tendency to avoid news in general. This is in line with our suggestion that exposure to uncivil comments online is an unpleasant experience that may be associated with negative emotions. While evolutionary mechanisms cause negative information to recruit more psychological resources due to the negativity bias, this does not mean that people will voluntarily seek out future exposure to negatively valenced stimuli. On the contrary, people generally prefer to avoid such experiences and may even avoid news altogether to minimize their exposure to uncivil news-related comments (see Gross, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2011; Toff & Palmer, 2018).

We also found empirical support for the indirect association between uncivil news comments and political knowledge through news avoidance (fully mediated relationship): Those who are more frequently exposed to uncivil news comments tend to avoid news at higher rates, which in turn reduces their levels of political knowledge. However, our data do not support the prediction that gender moderates the direct relationship between exposure to uncivil comments and news avoidance. This may indicate that avoidant behaviors regarding political conflict in online comments are comparable between men and women. Future studies could aim to verify this aspect in a laboratory setting to better evaluate the causality component.

On the one hand, our results may contribute to an understanding of the overall rise in news avoidance rates that has been observed in recent years (Newman et al., 2022). To provide additional evidence, future studies using content analysis should investigate whether there has been a concurrent increase in incivility in online news comments and political discussion environments over the past few years. If there has been no increase in incivility in news comments, it is also possible that more people have come in contact with uncivil environments of online discussion (e.g., due to an increase in the number of users participating in news comment sections or news-related discussions in social media). On the other hand, our findings do not support the claim that exposure to this type of uncivil content contributes to the documented gender gap in news avoidance and political knowledge.

This study adds to our understanding of how exposure to uncivil news-related environments can directly increase news avoidance and indirectly undermine political knowledge. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the study's design has inherent limitations. First, although our findings align with theoretical expectations, the correlational and cross-sectional nature of our data constrains our capacity to establish causality, test the directionality of the effects, or unequivocally dismiss alternative interpretations. External factors, commonly referred to as third variables, could potentially illuminate our results and introduce misleading associations in our models. Examples may encompass perceived societal polarization, or as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, political cynicism. Consider, for instance, respondents perceiving a highly polarized political environment (see Gil de Zúñiga, Marcos Marné, & Carty, 2023). Their preexisting perceptions may influence the way they seek news and interpret online comments as uncivil. They might be inclined to intentionally avoid political news while simultaneously *perceiving* a frequent encounter with uncivil comments online—even if, in reality, their overall exposure is lower due to their avoidance of news sources. Given that our models lack control for perceived polarization, and that the measurement of our mediating variable relies on survey items assessing *perceived* exposure to uncivil news comments, excluding this possibility entirely proves challenging. Second, while our sample is diverse and drawn from a panel of respondents from across Spain, it is not representative of the population as a whole. However, we believe that a convenience sample such as this is sufficient to test our hypotheses, considering that our study is explanatory rather than descriptive.

Overall, our study sheds light on some of the reasons why news avoidance may have increased in recent years across the board. Additionally, it highlights the potential indirect effects that exposure to uncivil news comments online may have on political knowledge. These findings reinforce the need to minimize the presence of certain uncivil messages online and in social media, as well as to reinforce the role of content moderation. A public sphere in which the exchange of views takes place in a less hostile environment, without insults, vulgarities, or the use of stereotypes against certain groups, could attract a larger number of people and contribute to a richer and more democratic debate. This, in turn, could lead to a more informed citizenry capable of engaging in higher-quality participation.

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