

The Relationship between Incivility and Negative Emotions in Conversations about Immigrants on Reddit

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Abstract: Being characterized by a strong participatory culture, social media have revolutionized the way people communicate and exchange information, fostering important debates, acting as an extension of everyday talk between individuals and emerging as a new space for socialization. Conversations about health, entertainment, sports, politics, and more are actively held, offering insight into how online communities communicate and interact around various themes. Through this ongoing dialogue, online social media communities reveal how users negotiate differences and build collective narratives, making these digital platforms a vital ground for analysing contemporary discourse. This becomes increasingly important knowing how negative, prejudiced and toxic discourse can propagate online and how it affects not only users but society at large. In this article, we examine debates on immigration in Portugal and Europe on Reddit, focusing on sentiment, emotion, and the level of incivility in this context. Analysing a database of 2,167 posts and comments on a Portuguese-language subreddit, we adopt a mixed-methods approach to explore how emotions are linked to incivility towards immigration and immigrants, especially from Brazil. Patterns of incivility and negative emotions are identified, revealing a high frequency of communication norm violations accompanied by feelings of anger in discussions about immigration. We found considerable overlaps between negative emotions, particularly anger, and breaches of the contextual norm and the relational norm, whereas emotions like sadness, fear, and even pleasure only seldom seem to be indicative of the presence of incivility. Overall, our analysis illustrates how different emotions affect the maintenance or breach of communication norms in online interactions. This article not only contributes to the scientific literature on online behaviour in Portuguese-speaking environments but also informs policymakers and online platform moderators on strategies to manage and mitigate incivility in virtual debates, particularly by understanding the role emotions play in fostering or curbing disrespectful discourse.

Keywords: Incivility, Emotion Analysis, Sentiment Analysis, Reddit, Immigration

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has profoundly altered how individuals engage with social and political issues. In an era of post-truth tendencies, sentiment and emotions dominate user interactions, shaping conversations on controversial topics like immigration. While social media was initially celebrated for its democratizing power, it has increasingly become a space for incivility—characterized by disrespectful and hostile language—particularly toward marginalized groups, including immigrants. Understanding the intersections of sentiment, emotions, and incivility in social media comments is therefore crucial to addressing the societal implications of digital communication.

Sentiment reflects underlying attitudes in social media discourse. Combined with emotions such as anger or fear, sentiment amplifies reactions to immigration-related topics (Nasuto and Rowe 2024, Gerbaudo et al. 2023, Erisen et al. 2020). Fear-based narratives often elicit negative sentiments and heightened incivility (Ahmed et al. 2024, Ekman 2019, D’Errico and Paciello 2018, Conzo et al. 2021), while empathetic framing fosters more supportive discourse (Paciello et al. 2019). These emotional drivers significantly influence the tone and civility of online conversations.

Incivility on social media poses challenges to public discourse and the well-being of targeted individuals. Uncivil comments heighten anger, reinforce stereotypes, polarize discussions, and discourage substantive engagement (Hwang et al. 2014, Chen and Lu 2017, Ordoñez and Nekmat 2019, Ekman 2019, Roden and Saleem 2022). Immigration, as a polarizing issue, often attracts emotionally charged and uncivil comments that reflect broader societal tensions (Gadarian and Albertson 2014, Thiele and Turnšek 2022, Nasuto and Rowe 2024). Analyzing the sentiments and emotions driving these interactions sheds light on dynamics of prejudice, discrimination, and hate speech on digital platforms.

This study explores the relationship between sentiment, emotions, and incivility in Reddit comments about immigration in Portugal. Reddit is selected due to its distinct framework, which promotes in-depth conversations and user-created content, rendering it a suitable site for examining sentiment and incivility within immigration discussions. Moreover, although it has a worldwide audience, Reddit is still a lesser-explored platform for immigration discussions, especially among Portuguese-speaking users. By focusing on Portuguese, this study

provides insight into how the unique cultural and political landscape of Portugal shape online discussions about immigration. This fills the gap in research that usually emphasizes English-language platforms, providing a broader viewpoint on the emotional and attitudinal aspects of incivility. This study enhances comprehension of how digital communication influences views of marginalized communities in Portuguese society, culture, and language.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Participatory Culture and Digital Communities

The advent of social media has brought about profound shifts in society, shaping communication and the way individuals engage and participate. Unlike traditional media, where communication was performed in an unidirectional fashion, with little to no participation from the public, the digital era has provided a space where barriers of time, geography and access are easily overcome and users are now part of a multidirectional style of communication. This interactive nature fosters participatory cultures where individuals not only consume but actively create and distribute content (Jenkins and Ito 2015). In this sense, participatory culture on social media has empowered users to collaborate, express opinions, and build communities around shared interests and causes. Examples of civic engagement, and digital activism on platforms like Facebook or Twitter have deeply marked popular culture in recent years, regarding movements like Black Lives Matter or #MeToo (Ostertag and Ortiz 2015, Soriano et al. 2016, De Choudhury et al. 2016, Ince et al. 2017, Miller and Demirbilek 2023).

However, the participatory culture of social media also has its downsides. Being dominated by algorithms that build the foundation for communities, social media can also contribute to the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, by exposing users predominantly to like-minded opinions. This environment can exacerbate polarization, reduce exposure to diverse viewpoints, and hinder meaningful dialogue (Cinelli et al. 2021, Sunstein 2018). Studies have shown that users in these environments are more likely to encounter and perpetuate extreme or divisive rhetoric (Barberá et al. 2015). In this sense, while social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for global connectivity and dialogue, they also serve as fertile ground for negative, toxic, and discriminatory discourse.

2.2 Incivility

Research shows that incivility online is often linked to anonymity and the lack of immediate consequences, leading to a higher likelihood of norm violations and aggressive interactions, which disseminate at a higher pace in online environment and fuel hostility (Coe et al. 2014, Zimmerman and Ybarra 2016, Brady et al. 2017). This toxicity not only affects individual users but also contributes to broader societal polarization and distrust (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). Rossini (2019) argues that it is not only incivility that poses a threat to democratic discourse, but the intolerance that often overlaps polarized conversations and that attacks groups of people or individuals. Hate speech, that targets people or groups based on race, religion, gender, or other attribute, is such a particularly insidious form of toxic discourse online. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become a hotbed for hate speech which is often targeted towards marginalised communities (Chetty and Alathur 2018). Algorithmic content moderation is utilized in these platforms and it often fails to detect nuanced forms of intolerance, which could be detrimental to democratic dialogue (Oh and Downey 2024). Discussions about immigration, for instance, often expose xenophobic tendencies in which immigrants are blamed for a host of societal ills (Musolff 2017, Nortio et al. 2021).

In these conversations, emotions often play a pivotal role. Among the range of emotions experienced online, negative emotions like anger, frustration, and resentment are most associated with incivility (Brady et al. 2017). These emotions often escalate tensions and provoke hostile responses, particularly in contentious debates. Anger is the emotion most frequently linked to uncivil online behaviour (Borah 2014, Gervais 2015, Chen and Ng 2017). In debates about sensitive topics such as immigration, anger can manifest as personal attacks, hate speech, or inflammatory language, contributing to the erosion of respectful dialogue (Calderón et al. 2020). Additionally, immigrants are often stereotyped as criminals or threats, showcasing how anger fuels inflammatory discourse (Paasch-Colberg et al. 2021). Aside from anger, swear words and negative sentiment are also linked to anti-immigrant rhetoric in social media (Ahmed et al. 2021).

Incivility in immigration discussions reflects broader societal tensions and underscores the challenges of fostering constructive discourse in online spaces. The intersection of emotions and incivility in online discourse offers valuable insights for understanding and mitigating toxic communication in digital spaces. By focusing on

emotionally charged discussions, particularly those around immigration, research can contribute to more inclusive and respectful online environments, benefiting both individual users and society.

3. Methodology

This study was developed in three stages. The first stage consisted of collecting and pre-processing the data (the interactions from the sub-forum), ensuring that they were valid for analysis, i.e. they related to the topic of immigration and were within the period from 09/06/2022 to 09/06/2023. For the sample size of a population of 4519 total comments, the criteria of 99% confidence and 2% margin of error were applied, resulting in the selection of 2167 random comments. In the second phase, we subjected this sample to coding by type of communication norm violated according to Bormann et al. (2022) operationalization, by type of emotion according to Ekman (1992) and sentiment.

All comments were classified according to the cooperative communication norm they violated, based on Bormann's operationalisation (2022). If more than one norm was violated, the comment was assigned to more than one subcategory. The 'No Incivility' category was created to include all comments that did not violate communication norms. The same applies to emotion, which follows Ekman's (1992) six basic emotions. The emotion 'Surprise' was suppressed in our model, since surprise has mainly physical manifestations that would be impossible to verify in this environment. In addition, the 'No Emotion' category was applied to accommodate all comments whose emotional value could not be determined or did not belong to one of the predefined subcategories. Finally, all the comments were subjected to an automatic sentiment analysis (Positive, Neutral or Negative) by the Buzzmonitor algorithm and then humanly reviewed. Finally, in the third phase, we proceeded to analyse the data.

4. Results

4.1 Incivility

Classifying the content of interactions according to the type of communication norm violated reveals trends in terms of the incivility present on the subreddit in conversations related to immigration. The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Incivility frequency

Norm	N	(%)
No Incivility	1395	64.37
Relation Norm	314	14.49
Contextual Norm	198	9.14
Modal Norm	116	5.35
Informational Norm	109	5.03
Process Norm	35	1.62

Although they do not represent most interactions, messages containing incivility account for 35.63% of the sample. The data reveals that violations of the Relation (14.49%) and Context (9.14%) norms are the most prominent within the sample. In terms of content, these messages share similarities, frequently featuring negative language and personal attacks. Interactions that breach contextual norms often include derogatory remarks and targeted attacks on specific immigrant groups. One example of this violation is found in an interaction under a post reblogging a news post about how more than 113.000 CPLP citizens have obtained residence permits in Portugal in two months. In the comment section users argued that these immigrants wouldn't contribute significantly to the country and only deplete public services. This user was accused of being racist, which provoked this response by another user: *"if we're so 'racist' why don't you go back to africa? no one brought you here and no one is forcing you to stay. lol. he knows very well that it's much better to live in a country of 'racist whites' than to live in Africa."* Such statements reinforce the notion that immigrants are "second-class citizens," undermining their rights and framing them as threats to public resources, despite immigrants significantly contributing to Social Security in Portugal, generating a surplus of €1.6 billion (Jornal de Negócios 2023).

When it comes to the Relation Norm, violations are seen in comment related to a video posted on the forum allegedly depicting youth from CPLP countries stealing from tourists in the centre of Lisbon. Users theorized they were Brazilian immigrants, which prompted Brazilian nationals in the comments to argue that these people were just taking back the wealth Portugal stole from Brazil during colonization. A user responded with the following comment: *“If theft means putting you to work and exploiting what you didn't exploit, then tell me how you call it that you're still killing indigenous people today and you say that the Portuguese were bad? You've had 500 years to develop and you still have a victim (...) those who are here for good (...) are welcome, those who come just to criticise go to hell”*. This reaction underscores how colonial legacies provoke emotionally charged, hostile debates, highlighting the sensitivity of this issue among Portuguese nationals and individuals from former colonies.

These examples illustrate the aggressive, uncivil discourse prevalent in the forum, with discussions often centring on immigrants as threats or drawing on colonial histories to justify hostility. The findings reflect broader societal tensions and prejudices, setting the stage for an analysis of sentiment trends in the sample.

4.2 Sentiment

Sentiment analysis helps us uncover trends in the tone of conversations between users, which paints a clearer picture of the community. Table 4 shows the representativeness of negative, neutral, and positive sentiment in the sample.

Table 2: Sentiment frequency

Sentiment	N	%
Neutral	1337	61.70
Negative	820	37.84
Positive	10	0.46

Building on our previous findings that civility was present in most interactions, sentiment analysis further confirms the dominance of a neutral tone. Nevertheless, an evident trend towards negative interactions highlights the emergence of a more critical and aggressive communication environment, characterized by tense and hostile debates. These findings are consistent with earlier results indicating heightened levels of incivility. The presence of incivility frequently correlates with the prevalence of negative sentiment, further amplifying this dynamic. This communication climate becomes even more pronounced when examining trends in emotional expressions.

4.3 Emotions

Emotion analysis sustains latter findings, while also presenting a scenario of aggression in interaction between users, further explaining the results seen regarding Incivility and Sentiment.

Table 3: Emotion frequency

Emotion	N	%
No Emotion	1680	77.57
Anger	323	14.91
Disgust	83	3.83
Sadness	44	2.03
Fear	28	1.29
Joy	8	0.37

The neutrality of messages is reflected in 77.57% of interactions, which were found to convey no significant emotion. However, the most frequent emotion identified in the sample is Anger (14.91%), further emphasizing the contentious communication environment within this forum. From personal opinions on immigration to

heated exchanges between users, the debate often lacks markers of quality discourse. Notably, the presence of Disgust (3.83%), Sadness (2.03%), and Fear (1.29%) also contributes to the negative tone dominating discussions. The near absence of Joy (0.37%) underscores the predominantly critical and sombre nature of user conversations about immigration.

In this context, it becomes essential to examine how incivility, sentiment, and emotion intersect and what these findings reveal about users’ attitudes toward immigration.

4.4 The Interplay of Incivility, Sentiment and Emotion

In the following table, we observe the interplay of sentiment with violations of cooperative communication norms.

Table 4: Incivility and Sentiment

Incivility	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Context Norm	198	0	0
Information Norm	68	41	0
Modality Norm	70	45	0
No Incivility	154	1233	8
Process Norm	16	18	0
Relation Norm	314	0	0

Most interactions do not contain emotions or violations of communication norms, which suggests that many interactions are neutral or respect communication norms. However, we observed significant overlaps of negative sentiment with violations of contextual and relational norms. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed for the relationship between Incivility and Sentiment, revealing a coefficient (r) of -0.47 , which indicates that there is a moderate and statistically significant negative correlation ($p < 0.0001$), suggesting that negative feelings are associated with a greater occurrence of incivility. Additionally, the relationship between Sentiment and Emotions revealed a correlation coefficient (r) of -0.53 ($p < 0.0001$). The moderate negative correlation suggests that negative feelings are strongly associated with negative emotions, while positive feelings are related to the absence of emotion.

The analysis of these trends regarding emotion further clarifies and support these results. The following heat map portrays these relationships (Figure 1).

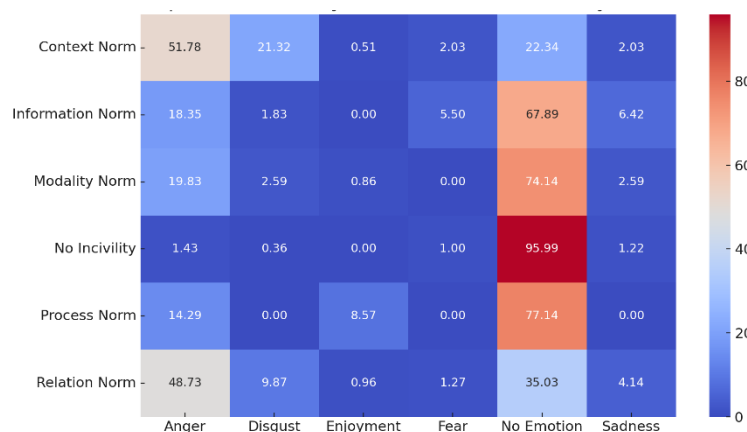


Figure 1: Incivility and Emotions (heat map)

The heat map reveals that most interactions without incivility (96%) are associated with ‘No Emotion’. However, the Relation Norm has a very high association with anger (48.7%). Context Norm also has a high association with anger (51.8%). Additionally, the Relation Norm and Context Norm have considerable proportions of disgust (9.9% and 21.3% respectively) associated with them. Other types of incivility have lower proportions. This

suggests that these categories of incivility can intensify conflicts or be direct expressions of dissatisfaction in discussions about immigration.

Interestingly, types of incivility, such as Modality Norm and Process Norm, also have a high association with 'No Emotion' (74% and 77%, respectively). This could be explained by the frequent use of sarcasm and slang, which frequently indicate a negative sentiment, but not necessarily a feeling of anger, sadness or fear. Furthermore, emotions such as 'Fear' and 'Sadness' have lower associations, but appear more frequently in interactions with Information Norm and Relation Norm.

The relationship between Incivility and Emotions produced a Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of 0.28 ($p < 0.0001$). Although weaker, the positive correlation is statistically significant, confirming that the presence of incivility is associated with an increase in the expression of negative emotions. This pattern indicates that specific types of incivility are strongly linked to intense negative emotions, especially anger and disgust. This reinforces the hypothesis that uncivil interactions often evoke or reflect negative emotions.

4.5 Differences in Nationalities

Analysing the interactions shows that users refer not only to immigration as a phenomenon, but also to the different nationalities that immigrate most to Portugal. It is important to explore the prevalence of references to specific nationalities to understand their prevalence in our sample, and how they are charged with more or less hate. Table 6 shows the frequency of references to the five most mentioned nationalities.

Table 6: Frequency of mentions of nationalities

Nationality	N	%
Portuguese	297	53.04
Brazilian	170	30.36
Indian	42	7.50
African	39	6.96
French	12	2.14

Table 6 highlights that the most frequently mentioned nationality is Portuguese, which aligns with the focus of the subreddit on Portugal. The language associated with 'Portuguese' spans a range of tones, from neutral discussions on cultural and social issues in Portugal to expressions of frustration with societal and governmental matters, as well as declarations of national pride. This is followed by notable mentions of Brazilian nationality, reflecting Brazil's status as one of the largest sources of immigration to Portugal. The following heat map (Figure 2) portrays the interplay of incivility, emotions and sentiment in discussions about Brazilians.

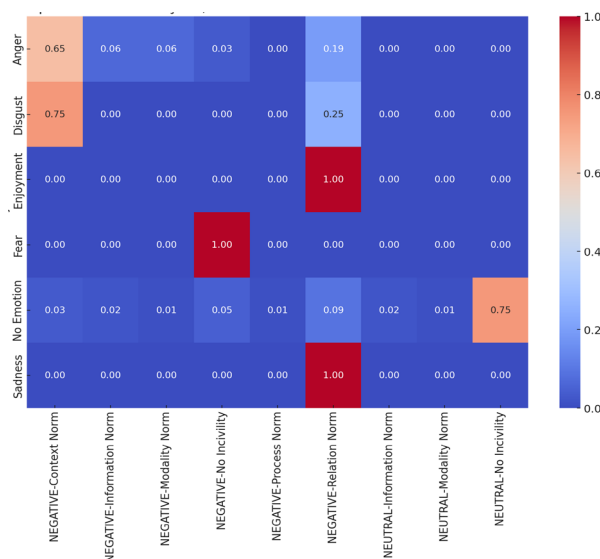


Figure 2: Heat Map - Incivility, Emotion and Sentiment about Brazilian Nationality

The analysis of the graph reveals that ‘No Emotion’ is the most prevalent emotion, which suggests a predominantly neutral tone in the statements, regardless of whether they are associated with feelings or manifestations of incivility. On the other hand, the presence of emotions such as ‘Anger’ or ‘Fear’ associated with high levels of incivility points to more hostile interactions. A predominance of negative sentiment linked to the Relation Norm and the Context Norm indicates the occurrence of stigmatisation, targeted criticism and use of vulgar language and personal attacks. The correlation between negative feelings and high levels of incivility points to the presence of prejudice or hostility in interactions about Brazilians.

As far as the language used is concerned, the most discussed topics in the sample reveal issues related to the legality of Brazilian citizens entering Portuguese territory, as well as concerns about visa management. We also see comparisons between Brazilian and Portuguese culture, with frequent stereotyping.

Further references include Indians, whose immigration flux has been growing in the last decade, and Africans, a trend strongly influenced by Portugal’s historical ties with its former colonies, where migration processes are often facilitated (Figure 3).

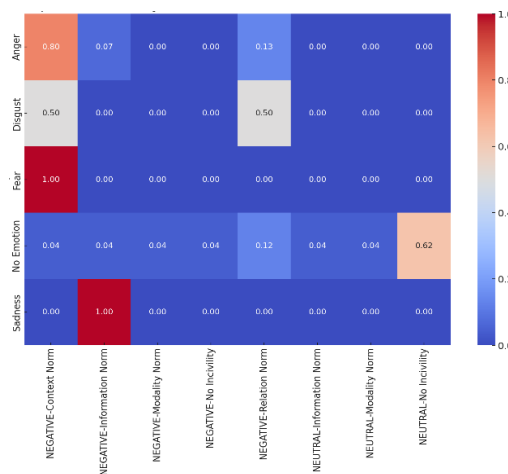


Figure 3: Heat Map - Incivility, Emotion and Sentiment about Indian Nationality

Analysing intersections in the heat map reveals important patterns. High values of negative emotions, such as ‘Anger,’ associated with negative feelings and high levels of incivility indicate social tensions or hostile discourse directed at Indians. In the case of interactions about Indians, we observe the strong occurrence of ‘Fear’ and the “Context Norm”, which reveals that racist remarks are often accompanied by negative fearful reactions. This is mainly due to reports of sex crimes, which the forum users’ habitually link to “Indians” as an all-encompassing term for individuals of South Asian descent. We also encounter a high frequency of violations of the Information Norm and negative sentiment, revealing a low-quality debate where exaggerations and misrepresentations of the truth are frequent. Lastly, we analyse the confluences of incivility, sentiment and emotion towards African individuals (Figure 4).

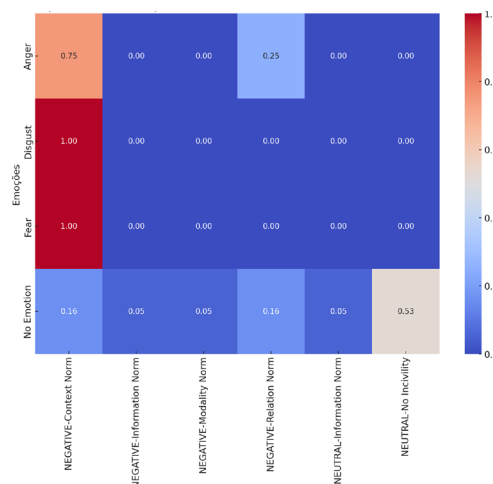


Figure 4: Heat Map - Incivility, Emotion and Sentiment about African Individuals

Once more, users on the forum use the term “African” as an all-encompassing term for individuals of African descent, no matter what country they are from. When the sentiments are analysed, the negative sentiment is often associated with categories of incivility such as ‘Relation Norm’ or ‘Context Norm,’ which reflect critical or hostile discourse directed at Africans. These patterns can indicate prejudice, stigmatisation or specific social tensions, particularly targeted at individuals from CPLP (Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries), whose immigration processes are facilitated and therefore more frequent. Incivility categories such as ‘Relation Norm,’ ‘Modality Norm’ and ‘Context Norm’ help to qualify the tone of interactions. The incivility associated with ‘Relation Norm’ often reflected interpersonal disrespect and more hostile interactions, while ‘Context Norm’ points to inappropriate behaviour related to the general topic, which include prejudice and racism.

All in all, the analysis of the intersections of incivility, sentiment and emotion regarding particular nationalities helps to unveil the uncivil, emotional and prejudiced discourse perpetrated in the forum, revealing an environment where co-operative debate is seldom, and personal attacks and vulgar language are frequent.

5. Conclusion

The present study delves into the communication environment of a sub-reddit dedicated to Portugal to better understand the conversations being held about immigration in the country. We have demonstrated that incivility frequently manifests in specific patterns linked to negative sentiment in conversations about immigrants. We have also revealed how communication norms are violated and how these behaviours align with emotional expression.

The significant overlap between negative emotions, especially anger, and violations of relational and contextual communication norms highlights the challenges of fostering constructive online discourse. Anger-fuelled incivility erodes trust and inclusivity within digital communities, deterring marginalized voices and limiting diverse perspectives. These dynamic risks transforming online forums into echo chambers, reinforcing existing biases and deepening societal polarization. These findings suggest an urgent need for platform-specific strategies to promote civil discourse, such as enhanced moderation tools, community guidelines emphasizing empathy, and educational campaigns about digital etiquette. The prevalence of anger and incivility in discussions about immigration reveals a societal undercurrent of frustration and prejudice, often targeting specific nationalities. This trend risks perpetuating xenophobic narratives and legitimizing discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants. Policymakers can draw from these insights to design interventions that counteract prejudice. For instance, public campaigns emphasizing the economic and cultural contributions of immigrants, alongside stricter regulations against hate speech, can mitigate the negative impact of such discourse. Additionally, governments should prioritize transparent communication around immigration policies to address fears and misinformation, which often fuel negative emotions online.

The interplay of emotion, sentiment, and incivility also raises concerns about the societal impact of digital communication. The amplification of anger and hostility in online spaces risks normalizing aggressive discourse, which may translate into offline interactions and exacerbate social tensions. Educators, social workers, and community leaders should address these dynamics by fostering digital literacy and promoting constructive communication skills, particularly among younger generations who are most active on social media platforms.

These findings open avenues for future research. It would be relevant to explore how incivility and negative emotions vary between different topics related to immigration, such as the labour market, security and cultural integration. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine the impact of the social media context, analysing how different platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, influence levels of incivility and emotions, considering differences in design, target audience and moderation policies.

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