

Who Shouts the Loudest? Predictors of Conflict-Oriented Behavior on Social Network Sites

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Abstract: Conflict-oriented behavior in the online environment is attracting increasing attention, mainly due to its widespread presence and the potential implications for shaping public opinion and attitudes. This study examines the factors that drive such behavior on social network sites and their potential implications for the online public sphere. The hierarchical binary logistic regression draws on data from a representative survey of Czech adult users of social network sites ($N = 2,187$; 55.3% female; mean age = 44.57, $SD = 16.45$), collected at the end of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (November–December 2020). The results indicate that conflict-oriented commenters, more likely to be less educated, younger men with low political interest, are highly active in online discussions driven by disagreement. Additionally, they are more likely than non-conflict-oriented commenters to unfriend others over differing opinions and express strong negativity toward opposing views. The study discusses implications for societal polarization and deliberative democracy.

Keywords: online discussions, cross-cutting discussions, conflict-oriented behavior, unfriending, political interest

INTRODUCTION

Engaging in (online) political discussions is a vital component of a democratic society because it allows individuals to express their opinions, encounter contrasting perspectives, and, ultimately, gain a better understanding of the world around them (Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2019). However, the way people currently engage in online communication often does not meet the desired standards of civil discourse. Instead of productive and respectful discussions, individuals frequently engage in toxic and uncivil online communication that is characterized by verbal fighting, vulgar words, and hostility. As a result, researchers are shifting their focus from achieving an ideal form of deliberative opinion exchange to exploring actual behavior and perceptions while engaging in uncivil online discussions that are perceived as violations of communication norms (see Coe et al., 2014; Bormann, 2022; Frischlich et al., 2021; Kenski et al., 2020; Rossini, 2022). Various types of norm violations in online discussions are often blamed for negatively impacting the dynamics of online environments, influencing public opinion, shaping attitudes, and discouraging citizens from participation (Mutz, 2002). These are the main reasons for the growing attention that is now being paid to online conflict-oriented behavior (see Chen, 2017; Frischlich et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019).

Previous research has primarily focused on the effects on individuals, their perceptions of such communication (Kenski et al., 2020; Mutz, 2016; Sydnor, 2019), and their reactions (Gervais, 2015; Goyanes et al., 2021) and their relation to polarization (Hwang et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019). Still, there is a lack of studies that attempt to understand the online behavior and attitudes of those who use conflict-oriented behavior (i.e., vulgar words, verbal fighting) in online discussions (but see Coe et al., 2014; Frischlich et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Beyond that, we assume that the issue of conflict-oriented behavior even gains importance during crises, when society and public opinion are fragile and when emotional reactions are intense and online discussions are uncivil and polarized (Novotná et al., 2023). Thus, we expect that a certain period of data collection might shape conflict-oriented behavior that was driven by emotions, and our data from the COVID-19 pandemic might provide essential insights into the role of harsh communication strategies in online discussions.

This study contributes to existing literature by delving into the potential predictors of conflict-oriented behavior, which are often overlooked (but see Rains et al., 2017; Vargo & Hopp, 2017). We extend the previous knowledge by examining the personal characteristics of those who use conflict-oriented online behavior (Coe et al., 2014; Koban et al., 2018), commenters' attitudes towards counter-attitudinal opinions and behavior on social network sites (SNS) – the frequency of engagement in online discussions (i.e., political and

cross-cutting discussions), and selective behavior (i.e., political unfriending). Focusing on predictors of conflict-oriented behavior, which is rather unexplored, can provide a deeper understanding of the motivations behind such behaviors and their implications for individuals who tend to avoid conflict. Furthermore, this investigation sheds light on dynamics within SNS by examining how certain online practices, types of online discussions, and personal characteristics are related to conflict-oriented behavior. Opinions expressed in a harsh communication style can spread rapidly and become prevalent, especially online. Problematic content is often circulated by a relatively small group of individuals, who can nevertheless exert a substantial influence on public opinion formation (Gao et al., 2024). Therefore, it is essential to consider who may be discouraged from participating in the conversation.

Additionally, we still face a significant lack of country-contextual variety within the studies that investigate the characteristics of online discussions, even though exploring various contexts shows different behavioral patterns, different dynamics for discussions, and a variety of country- and culture-related factors that determine the character of the conflict-oriented behavior and the perception of what is and what is not acceptable (see Hmielowski et al., 2014; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019). We test conflict-oriented behavior, its predictors, in the under-researched Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. Specifically, we focused on Czechia, a society with high levels of affective polarization (Orhan, 2022) and political skepticism. Negative feelings towards political elites, institutions, and immigrants are prevalent (Pospěch, 2021), often manifested in hostility, xenophobia, and racism in Czech online discussions (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019).

Based on survey data collected during the first year of the pandemic, we show that SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior in Czechia report more frequent engagement in online cross-cutting discussions and a strong tendency for politically motivated unfriending as a reaction to disagreement. Contrary to some of our more optimistic assumptions about online talk, those who use conflict-oriented behavior also have a rather negative attitude towards disagreement and the dissenting opinions of other commenters, despite (or because of) talking with them most often. Those who employ conflict-oriented behavior often contribute to political discussions, but surprisingly, they tend to have low political interest.

CONFLICT-ORIENTED BEHAVIOR IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Scholars have long been interested in online discussions as arenas of opinion exchange. This interest is grounded in the deliberative model of democracy (Elster, 1998; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), which views open, reasoned, and plural discussion as essential to upholding democratic principles (see Chen, 2017; Hwang et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2021). Exchanges of opposing opinions are often considered particularly valuable, as such interactions allow individuals to broaden their perspectives and foster critical thinking (Lu & Lee, 2021; Mutz, 2006). Nevertheless, empirical studies repeatedly show that interactions based on disagreement often diverge from deliberative ideals and exhibit various forms of conflict-oriented behavior leading to both positive and negative consequences. We understand this concept as encompassing communicative acts that express or escalate confrontation rather than mutual understanding.

Within this broader category, incivility—such as name-calling, personal attacks, or vulgar and insulting language—represents one prominent manifestation (Coe et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2021; Rossini, 2022; Stryker, 2016; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019). Another form is verbal fighting, defined as discursive exchanges characterized by hostility, reciprocal attacks, and affective escalation (Stryker, 2016). Such behaviors undermine inclusive and continuous political conversations and are often triggered by controversial or morally charged topics. In this article, we therefore use conflict-oriented behavior as an umbrella term that captures these communicative dynamics, particularly incivility and verbal fighting, as expressions of antagonistic interaction styles that stand in tension with deliberative ideals. Such conflict-oriented exchanges are particularly likely to emerge in discussions characterized by disagreement—often referred to as cross-cutting discussions—where opposing views can easily intensify and escalate into emotional confrontation. This tendency is especially common in debates over controversial or morally charged topics, such as immigration or vaccination (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019). Working with this concept allows us to capture not only the overt expressions of incivility and hostility but also their communicative role in undermining the deliberative quality of online discussions.

Among these manifestations, incivility stands out as one of the most visible and consequential forms of conflict-oriented behavior, widely discussed for its potential harmful effects on democratic discourse (Gervais, 2019; Papacharissi, 2004). Firstly, previous research shows that some people could view uncivil forms of expressions as an unacceptable discussion pattern that may lead to the avoidance of further discussions (Goyanes et al., 2021), whereas others might tend to be more resilient. According to research, personal traits, such as sex, age, and education, may impact how individuals respond to incivility in online

interactions. Research further indicates that men are more likely than women to use uncivil language (Frischlich et al., 2021; Proust & Saldaña, 2022) and that younger individuals may engage in such behavior more often, sometimes as a form of provocation (Vraga, 2015). Additionally, those with lower levels of education tend to exhibit more incivility in their online interactions (Vargo & Hopp, 2017). Harsh communication styles may discourage participation (Novotná et al., 2023; Vraga, 2015), but they can also encourage critical thinking (Chen, 2017) and be perceived as entertaining (Koban et al., 2018; Sydnor, 2019).

Secondly, there are worries about the character of the opinion exchange. Uncivil expressions may threaten discussion quality because expressive language can overshadow the argument and hinder the understanding of different points of view (Anderson et al., 2014). Overall, incivility is problematic for delegitimizing arguments, and it lacks respectful opinion exchange (Coe et al., 2014), which triggers angry reactions and hostility directed toward others (Chen, 2017; Gervais, 2019; Sydnor, 2019). Therefore, uncivil discussions may broaden polarization through hostile interactions with others and the increased polarization of the issues (Anderson et al., 2014). During times of crisis, heated exchanges may further reduce willingness to listen to opposing views, reinforcing perceived differences and mutual mistrust (Novotná et al., 2023).

Furthermore, comments that lack civility are often given high ratings by social media algorithms, which can also increase their visibility (Gervais, 2015; Kim et al., 2021) and reach a large audience, including those who only read the comments. Although algorithmic operations remain largely a black box, moderation tools may also play a role, and Mark Zuckerberg's announcement of Meta's policy changes in January 2025 could further influence the circulation of such problematic content. Ultimately, uncivil comments often provoke additional uncivil responses, reinforcing cycles of hostility in online discussions (Gao et al., 2024). These dominant uncivil opinions can significantly impact beliefs and encourage extreme opinions (Rösner et al., 2016). Certain opinions might become more prevalent, although they can be held by a minority, but are widely seen by many. This can be more problematic, especially during crisis times when the need for accurate information increases, along with the rise in social media usage for news (Aelst et al., 2021), which could potentially amplify exposure to online opinions.

CONFLICT-ORIENTED BEHAVIOR AND UNFRIENDING AS COPING STRATEGIES FOR DISAGREEMENT

Conflict-oriented behavior as a communication style is closely related to disagreement. People who disagree with someone else in conversation are more likely to be disrespectful or express negative sentiments when they have to justify their arguments, contrary to like-minded discussions (Chen, 2017; Marchal, 2021; Rossini, 2022; Rossini & Maia, 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Conflict-oriented behavior might be used as a coping strategy to respond to disagreement, and it may also be evaluated as a common aspect of communication. Therefore, we focus on cross-cutting discussions that involve disagreement to understand the reasons behind conflict-oriented behavior and its impact on online discussions. Given that disagreement in cross-cutting discussions is often associated with negative emotions such as stress or angry feelings (Anderson & Auxier, 2020; Duggan & Smith, 2016) and given that it may lead to conflict-oriented behavior as a coping mechanism (Hmielowski et al., 2014), we hypothesize:

- H1: SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior in online discussions report a higher frequency of engagement in cross-cutting discussions than those who do not.

Another coping strategy for dealing with disagreement is by unfriending or blocking users. The unfriending feature in the online space allows people to avoid unpleasant content, potentially create a safe space to express their opinions (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). In addition, uncivil and conflicting disagreement seems to motivate people to unfriend others more than the actual disagreement itself (Goyanes et al., 2021; Neubaum et al., 2021; Peña & Brody, 2014). Unfriending options may be handy tools, especially for those with a higher level of conflict avoidance (see Goyanes et al., 2021; Vraga, 2015). According to this logic, we may see political unfriending that directly cuts the ties between people who have a different point of view as a reaction to a hostile environment that does not fulfill SNS users' expectations about the discussion.

Turning around the argument from previous studies that unfriending works as a strategy for avoiding disagreement and a harsher communication style (Goyanes et al., 2021; Neubaum et al., 2021; Peña & Brody, 2014), we might expect that people who often use conflict-oriented behavior would more frequently be exposed to disagreement and their environment on SNS would include more heterogeneous opinions. As they use harsh communication styles themselves, they may be more resistant to conflict and less likely to unfriend or block someone. Given that unfriending, on the contrary, limits heterogeneity, we assume that:

- H2: SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior in online discussions utilize political unfriending less than those who do not.

THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT-ORIENTED BEHAVIOR AND OPEN-MINDEDNESS TO TALK AND LISTEN TO THOSE FROM “THE OTHER SIDE”

Most Czech SNS users (57%) do not respond to disagreement with a comment similar to data from the United States (Duggan & Smith, 2016). That is a non-negligible number of people (Macková et al., 2021). While convincing others about the relevance of different opinions, attacks and argumentative fouls take place. Following the assumption that conflict-oriented behavior is likely connected to cross-cutting discussions, as we expect in Hypothesis 1, we need to consider that offensive comments and disagreements in an online environment might trigger negative emotions. Feelings of “freaking out” may lead to an unwillingness to join talks with someone who has a different point of view (Duggan & Smith, 2016), which applies to both offline and online environments (Chen, 2017). Moreover, exposure to a harsher communication style in combination with disagreement fuels closed-mindedness toward counter-attitudinal opinions (Hwang et al., 2016).

Based on the assumption that more assertive commenters who use conflict-oriented behavior perceive the harsher communication style differently than those who instead tend not to use such a communication style, one would expect that users who use conflict-oriented behavior are more open-minded to disagreement as part of a more heated discussion and this does not discourage their engagement. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

- H3: SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior within online discussions are more open-minded to counter-attitudinal opinions than those who do not.

POLITICAL INTEREST AND ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS FUEL CONFLICT-ORIENTED BEHAVIOR

Political interest is one of the key motivations for engagement in online discussions that many consider to be a form of civic (online) participation (Švelch & Vochocová, 2015). Politically interested people seek to understand issues and get exposure to different points of view (Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2019). The assumption is that politically interested (Kim et al., 2021), attentive, knowledgeable, and more vigorously partisan people are more active in online

discussions (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Equally important, research has found that individuals who frequently engage in online commenting are more prone to making uncivil remarks (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2021). This could be explained by the higher likelihood of being exposed to incivility and verbal fighting in the online environment (Goyanes et al., 2021; Koban et al., 2018), which consequently contributes to incivility (Frischlich et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021) because its presence can establish unwritten norms and set expectations about other users' behaviors and the dynamic of the SNS environment. To sum up, since politically interested people are most involved in online discussions, they are expected to be exposed to harsher communication styles, which can provoke the same conflicting reactions. Thus, we assume that:

- H4: SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior within online discussions are more interested in politics than those who do not.

In addition, conflict-oriented behavior seems to be more common in political discussions, especially in discussions focused on public affairs and political issues (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2021; Papacharissi, 2004; Sun et al., 2021). Though conversations about politics undoubtedly have many positive outcomes (Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2019), there exist concerns that engagement in online political talk might lead to the higher acceptance of incivility within the discussion, simply because it is commonplace (Hmielowski et al., 2014). In line with previous findings, we propose the following:

- H5: SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior in online discussions have a higher frequency of engagement in online political discussions than those who do not.

METHODOLOGY

DATA AND PARTICIPANTS

The study employs data from a Czech survey collected by the Focus (Marketing & Social Research) agency in November–December 2020, combining online interviews with respondents from Czech national panel data ($n = 2,538$) and personal interviews ($n = 1,225$). The representative dataset, which is based on quota sampling, includes responses from 3,763 Czech adults. The research agency follows the ICC/ESOMAR international research code to guarantee high research standards. The research was carried out under Czech laws, regulations, and the guidance of the Research Ethics Committee at Masaryk University.

The questionnaire consisted of measures for news consumption, media use and trust, polarization, political attitudes, and voting behavior. In this study, which is built on secondary data usage, we specifically employ a data subsample of SNS users who participated in or read discussions on SNS ($n = 2,187$). For this purpose, we filtered out those participants who answered “never” for the following two questions: (1) “How often are you involved in discussions on SNS?” and (2) “How often do you only read discussions on SNS without active participation?” Respondents rated their answers on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = very often). In this process, a total of 1,576 cases were removed.

Regarding our research topic, it is essential to highlight that the data were collected at the end of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was its second wave in Czechia. There was an apparent 2% increase in the use of SNS compared to the previous year, which is potentially related to the pandemic protective measures, lockdowns, and quarantines that pushed people to move most of their activities online (Macková et al., 2021). Different countries (Van Aelst et al., 2021) supported the growing trend of people using social media more often during the early stages of the pandemic.

MEASURES

To identify participants with *conflict-oriented behavior*, we created a binary variable combining two essential characteristics of problematic communication style – incivility as a representation of utterances and verbal fighting, capturing the discursive character of incivility (Stryker, 2016). Both of these manifestations of conflict behavior refer to a communication style that represents a more assertive way of expressing oneself during an exchange of opinions. The first item was inspired by measures used by Rainie and Smith to assess perceived negativity (2012). To identify those who tend to use incivility in online discussions, we asked the following question: “I add negative comments in discussions, including hostile or vulgar words, in answer to other comments or posts shared by someone else” ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.89$). Verbal fighting was assessed by: “I fight in online discussions with someone who has an opposite opinion to me” ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.90$). Original items were measured with a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = very often). To obtain the binary dependent variable, we created a group of those who (0; 41.4%) have never participated in any of the activities (i.e., selected 1 = *never* for both questions). Those who (1; 58.6%) have at least once participated in one of the activities (i.e., selected 2–5 for at least one of the questions) formed the second group. The original variables were severely skewed toward the *never* option, and recoding them into a binary variable allowed us to obtain two relatively equal groups. Consequently, the recoded variable still informed our research aims and performed better in statistical procedures than the original variables.

Engagement in Cross-Cutting Discussions on SNS was measured by the item: “Based on your experience when you discuss (topics) on social network sites with people with whom you disagree or with whom you have different opinions, or you just read such discussions, how often is this valid for you: I react to those posts or comments with my own comment or by publishing my own content.” Respondents rated their answers on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = very often), which we reduced to a 4-point scale by merging the values of 4 and 5 due to low occurrence of the highest category ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.88$).

Political Unfriending on SNS as a reaction to disagreement in the online environment was captured with an index, including three items. All items were measured as binary (0 = no, 1 = yes), and the score was computed as the sum of values, ranging from 0–3 ($M = 0.52$, $SD = 0.92$; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$). We asked: “Did you delete, block, or hide someone from your social network site because: (1) They shared something you disagreed with about politics or public affairs (17.7% = yes); (2) They argued about politics or public affairs on your social network site with you or someone you know (15.3% = yes); or (3) They disagreed with something you shared about politics or public affairs (17.5% = yes).”

Open-mindedness to Counter-attitudinal Opinions consisted of an index ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.90$; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$) with two items that addressed attitudes toward cross-cutting discussions. Firstly, we asked people: “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement, which is connected to sharing opinions or political content on Facebook and other social network sites: It is unpleasant for me when my friends and people I know share political content and opinions that I do not agree with.” This was measured with a 5-point scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). Secondly, we measured the level of agreement on the same 5-point scale with the following statement: “It does not make any sense to be friends with or to talk to someone who has a different point of view than me.” We recoded the values for a final index to capture that a higher value means higher open-mindedness to counter-attitudinal opinions, and the index was computed as a mean of the two items.

Political interest was measured on an 11-point scale (0 = not at all interested, 10 = very interested) with the question: “How much would you say you are interested in politics?” ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 2.73$).

The statement that measured the *Frequency of Engagement in Political Discussions on SNS* was: “I discuss politics and public affairs on online social network sites.” The variable was measured with a 5-point scale ranging from “never” to “very often” ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.16$).

Lastly, the socio-demographic characteristics we examined were sex (female = 55.3%), age ($M = 44.57$, $SD = 16.45$), and education (primary education = 10.54%, vocational certificate = 34.57%, high school = 34.73%, university degree = 20.16%).

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

After handling the variables, we first obtained descriptive statistics and correlations of all of the variables (Table 1). In the assumptions check, all correlations were lower than 0.5, the variance inflation factors (VIF) of all variables were 2.00, and tolerance was no lower than 0.5, suggesting that the assumptions were met. Then, we ran a binary regression with conflict-oriented behavior as the dependent variable. Independent variables were added in three blocks to control for the effect of each block and see how much the blocks contribute to the prediction of the dependent variable. Block 1 comprised sociodemographic variables (sex, age, education), Block 2 included variables applicable to a broader, not only SNS context (political interest, open-mindedness to counter-attitudinal opinions), and Block 3 included SNS behavior (engagement in cross-cutting discussions, frequency of engagement in political discussions, political unfriending on SNS). IBM SPSS Statistics 30 was used in all steps of the analysis, and the ggplot2 package in R was used to visualize the results (R Core Team, 2014; Wickham, 2009).

Table 1. Correlations of All Study Variables

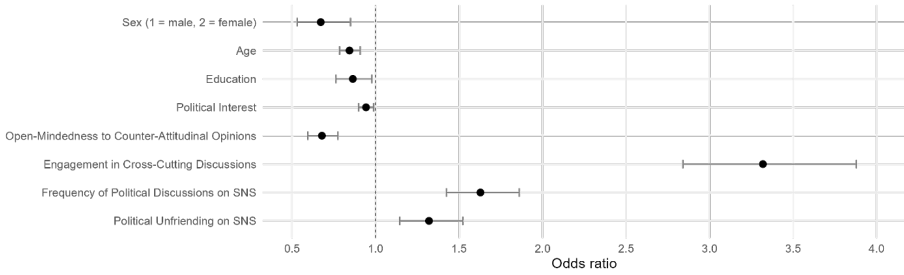
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Conflict-Oriented Behavior	—							
2. Sex (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.121***	—						
3. Age	-.058**	-.184***	—					
4. Education	-.115***	.027	-.009	—				
5. Political Interest	.083***	-.285***	.238***	.124***	—			
6. Open-Mindedness to Counter-Attitudinal Opinions	-.168***	.004	-.090***	.062**	.041	—		
7. Engagement in Cross-Cutting Discussions	.498***	-.112***	.033	-.088***	.153***	-.090***	—	
8. Frequency of Engagement in Political Discussions on SNS	.384***	-.187***	.068**	-.049*	.440***	-.110***	.476***	—
9. Political Unfriending on SNS	.229***	-.070**	.027	-.043	.166***	-.198***	.235***	.307***

Note. Two-tailed correlations are reported. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$.

Results

After excluding cases with missing values, 1,927 cases were entered in the analysis. All three blocks significantly improved the model, with the third block improving it the most (Δ Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.326$), leading to Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.415$ in the full model. Figure 1 summarizes the results of the full model, and the model summaries and coefficients for each block entered are reported in full in Table 2.

Figure 1. Results of the model



The analysis showed that those engaging in cross-cutting discussions have the highest odds of participating in conflict-oriented behavior ($OR = 3.319, p < .001, 95\% CI [2.840, 3.879]$), followed by a higher frequency of political discussions on SNS ($OR = 1.628, p < .001, 95\% CI [1.424, 1.860]$) and performing political unfriending ($OR = 1.320, p < .001, 95\% CI [1.145, 1.522]$). Therefore, we found evidence in favor of both H1 and H5 and contrary to H2. All other study variables were negatively associated with conflict-oriented behavior. In other words, it was more common among those who did not participate in conflict-oriented behavior to be more open-minded to counter-attitudinal opinions ($OR = 0.679, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.595, 0.775]$). Thus, no support was found for H3.

Additionally, being male also proved to be associated with higher odds of behaving in a conflict-oriented way in SNS discussions ($OR = 0.672, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.531, 0.850]$), while women are less likely to engage in such discussions, possibly due to their tendency to avoid hostility. Being more educated ($OR = 0.864, p = .021, 95\% CI [0.763, 0.978]$), older ($OR = 0.844, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.784, 0.908]$), and interested in politics ($OR = 0.943, p = .016, 95\% CI [0.899, 0.989]$) were less articulated in terms of odds ratios, but still significant for those who do not participate in conflict-oriented behavior. These results suggest that men and younger individuals with lower levels of education and low interest in politics

are more likely to engage in heated or confrontational online exchanges. Lastly, H4 was not supported.

Table 2. Results of the Hierarchical Binary Logistic Regression

	95% CI for OR				95% CI for OR				95% CI for OR						
	B	P	OR	Lower	Upper	B	P	OR	Lower	Upper	B	P	OR	Lower	Upper
Sex (1 = male, 2 = female)	-0.539	<.001	0.583	0.483	0.705	-0.469	<.001	0.626	0.513	0.764	-0.398	<.001	0.672	0.531	0.850
Age	-0.091	.002	0.913	0.860	0.968	-0.146	<.001	0.864	0.812	0.920	-0.170	<.001	0.844	0.784	0.908
Education	-0.240	<.001	0.787	0.711	0.871	-0.257	<.001	0.773	0.696	0.859	-0.146	.021	0.864	0.763	0.978
Political Interest						0.078	<.001	1.081	1.041	1.122	-0.059	.016	0.943	0.899	0.989
Open-Mindedness to Counter-Attitudinal Opinions						-0.422	<.001	0.656	0.588	0.731	-0.387	<.001	0.679	0.595	0.775
Engagement in Cross-Cutting Discussions											1.200	<.001	3.319	2.840	3.879
Frequency of Engagement in Political Discussions on SNS											0.487	<.001	1.628	1.424	1.860
Political Unfriending on SNS											0.278	<.001	1.320	1.145	1.522
Constant	2.082	<.001	8.020			3.133	<.001	22.947			-0.469	.413	0.625		
Hosmer and Lemeshow Test															
Nagelkerke R ²			.040					.089							.415

DISCUSSION

Building on prior research and theoretical assumptions that address the consequences of a harsher communication style in the online public sphere, we investigated predictors of the usage of conflict-oriented behavior in discussions on SNS. Some scholars (e.g., Chen, 2017; Rossini & Maia, 2021; Rossini, 2022) view such behavior, including incivility and verbal confrontation, as a natural element of online discourse that can foster deliberation. Others, however, emphasize its potential democratic risks, such as radicalization and polarization (Hwang et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019). These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but represent two sides of the same coin. While for some people harsh communication is essential for engagement in online discussions, others see it as a barrier to deliberation (Novotná et al., 2023).

Firstly, in line with previous research (Chen, 2017; Rossini & Maia, 2021), we found that conflict-oriented users tend to be more active in cross-cutting discussions. Such exchanges, grounded in disagreement, often involve incivility and verbal fighting that can help overcome communicative barriers between differing perspectives (Chen, 2017; Marchal, 2021; Rossini, 2022; Rossini & Maia, 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Similarly, conflict-oriented commenters might be fascinated by disagreement, and cross-cutting discussions can provide them with a discussion arena to enjoy heated discussions (Vraga, 2015). However, a harsher communication style may discourage participation among less assertive individuals who prefer to avoid conflict (Mutz, 2002; Kim et al., 2021). Consequently, those who refrain from conflict-oriented behavior tend to participate less in online political discussions, possibly due to their sensitivity to hostility and doubts about the effectiveness of online dialogue for meaningful exchange or public awareness.

Secondly, we examined political unfriending as a less pro-deliberative response to disagreement, as it can reduce exposure to diverse perspectives (Goyanes et al., 2021). Contrary to our expectations, SNS users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior are more likely to unfriend others. Previous research indicates that one of the key drivers of political unfriending is the avoidance of confrontation and uncivil discussions (Goyanes et al., 2021). Our findings extend this understanding by showing that even conflict-oriented users may use unfriending as a strategy to manage their online environment. By engaging in uncivil exchanges more often, they may be more likely to experience escalations that prompt boundary-setting when content is perceived as norm-violating, leading to selective behavior. Thus, even though they are active in cross-cutting discussions, they simultaneously constrain heterogeneous exposure.

Thirdly, contrary to our assumptions that conflict-oriented users could be more open-minded to cross-cutting discussions, we found that those who use a harsher communication style tend to be less tolerant of disagreement than those who

are not conflict-oriented. This suggests that conflict-oriented users in Czechia tend to hold undemocratic and negative attitudes toward deliberative dialogue. The optimistic view that incivility can serve as an expressive form of argument, fostering mutual understanding (Rossini, 2022), appears to be only partially supported, as these users often perceive cross-cutting discussions as meaningless. Although they engage more frequently in such exchanges, they lack openness and hope for mutual understanding – key benefits typically associated with dialogue based on disagreement (Chen, 2017).

People's negative views towards discussions that involve different perspectives may stem from their skepticism, which could be a result of negative encounters that they had in online conversations with people who hold opposing views. Such a strong and negative experience can lead to concerns about the value and purpose of engaging in dialogue with individuals who hold different beliefs. This assumption stems from negative affective responses, including frustration and stress, which often accompany engagement in online cross-cutting discussions (Anderson & Auxier, 2020; Rosenberg, 2024).

Fourthly, while the frequency of engagement in political discussions is positively related to conflict-oriented behavior, political interest is evidently not. We built our hypotheses on the expectation that users who engage in conflict-oriented behavior are also more interested in politics. However, we found evidence for the opposite direction, as conflict-oriented behavior relates to lower political interest. Moreover, this finding weakens the deliberative potential of conflict behavior usage, and it must be carefully reconsidered that, although conflict-oriented users encounter dialogue and political discussions, their interest in politics is lower.

Looking from the other side, participants with non-conflict-oriented behavior in discussions who are politically interested avoid participation in political discussions, which could be caused by their senseless or uncivil character (see Goyanes et al., 2021). While political interest involves actively learning about public affairs, participating in discussions requires no such knowledge. Research shows that online disagreement tends to attract people who are less politically interested but enjoy conflict (Vraga, 2015). As a result, the absence of informed participants can lower the quality of debate and foster uncivil exchanges marked by limited understanding. This is especially concerning during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia–Ukraine war, or other global issues, like the climate crisis or migration waves, when discussions become highly polarized (Schmid et al., 2022). Ultimately, discouraging participation by politically aware individuals risks deepening polarization and amplifying one-sided views.

Lastly, consistent with prior research, conflict-oriented behavior is more typical among men (Proust & Saldaña, 2022), whereas women, who often avoid hostility in political discussions, engage less in such exchanges (Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021). Participants displaying conflict-oriented behavior also

tend to be younger and have lower education levels, groups that have previously been found to enjoy heated debates more and show less concern about incivility (Min & Shen, 2023). Also, young adults usually enjoy heated discussions more and find them joyful (Vraga, 2015).

Our study is not without limits. The measurement of conflict-oriented behavior is broadly defined and assessed by only two items. These items have their own limitations, such as lower reliability due to the difficulty of recalling online discussions and the different perceptions of what is considered uncivil. More precisely, we admit that various types of conflict-oriented behavior should be examined (e.g., intolerance, hate speech, toxicity) regarding participation in online discussions. Additionally, recoding the two items of conflict-oriented behavior into one variable that captures only the performance and non-performance of such a behavior limits nuances in interpretation, especially if the aim was to look at the differences in intensity of this behavior. We believe that our study makes a valuable contribution to the field because it highlights specific trends related to conflict-oriented behavior in the under-researched CEE region, particularly in a country shaped by a post-communist legacy. This historical background may shape how citizens engage in conflict-oriented discussions, perceive disagreement in the public sphere, and participate in civic and online communication during times of crisis. Our findings may be transferable to countries with similar post-communist legacies and low institutional trust (Pospěch, 2021). As the data were collected during a crisis, conflict behavior may have been context-dependent; future research should therefore examine how these patterns emerge in other crises or non-crisis settings. However, we cannot rule out the causal effects and their directions. Thus, we cannot say if particular activities fuel conflict-oriented behavior within SNS or if conflict-oriented participants seek certain activities – further research could be done. Additionally, exploring the barriers that prevent individuals who shy away from conflict from taking part in online discussions would be beneficial. This could explain why those with a strong political interest may not engage in these conversations, despite being open to different perspectives.

Our research highlights the double-edged sword of conflict-oriented behavior in online discussions. We argue that this finding adds an important dimension to scholarly debates that value high participation in cross-cutting discussions but often overlook how participants' perceptions of these exchanges can fundamentally shape their overall benefits and, consequently, influence the quality of deliberative democracy. This phenomenon underscores the need for strategies that balance open dialogue with respectful discourse to foster a healthier public sphere and call for problematic content moderation. Artificial intelligence has recently become a widely discussed tool in this process, although its role in online deliberation remains disputed. It can promote civility and filter harmful content,

but also risks reinforcing biases, overlooking context, and silencing underrepresented voices (Carstens & Friess, 2024), underscoring the importance of research on the predictors of incivility and other contributing factors.

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